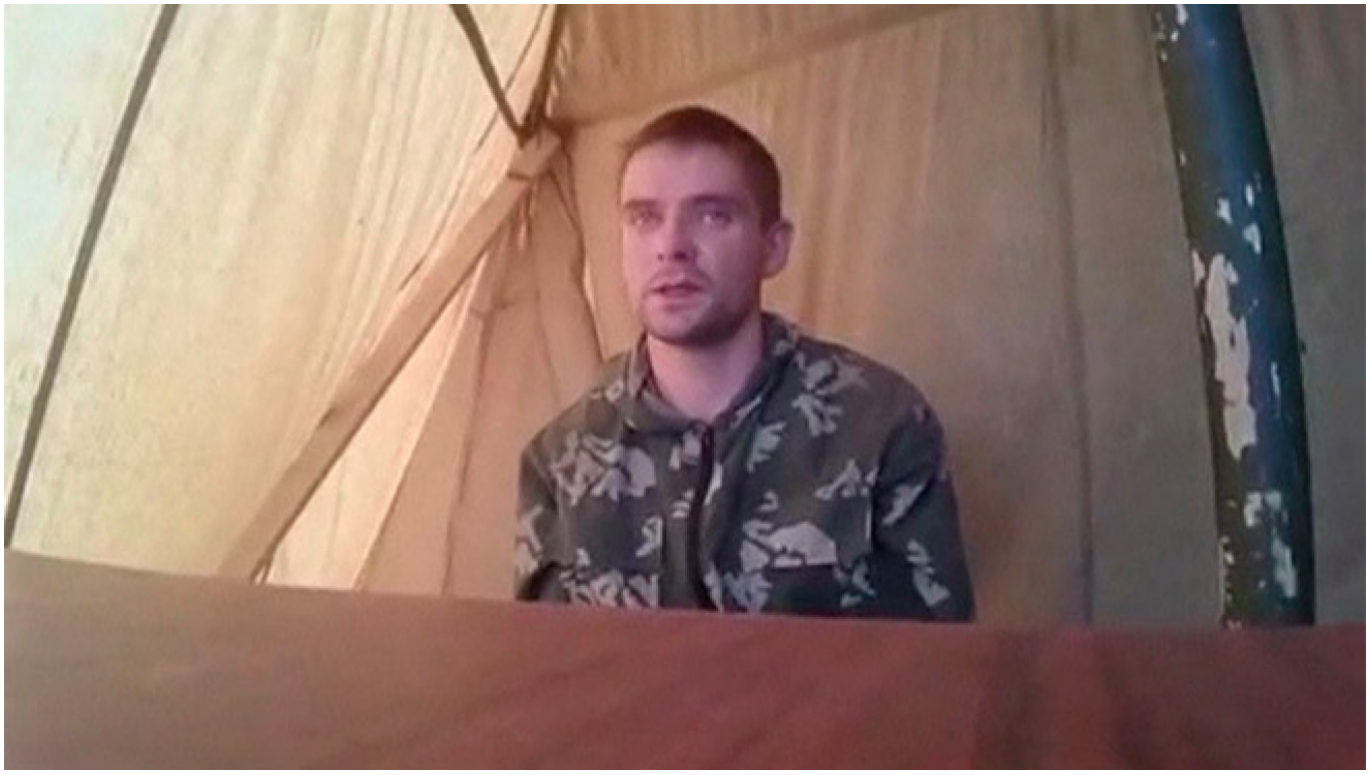
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Paratroops in Ukraine: Lost in a Game of Thrones (Video)

By Alexey Eremenko

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A still from a video claiming to show a Russian serviceman in Ukraine.

A slew of reports about Russian paratroopers slain or captured in Ukraine have reignited fears of a Russian invasion in the war-torn country, but confusion reigned supreme, indicating that the stories are above all part of the propaganda battle.

The reports came ahead of a long-awaited meeting of the Russian and Ukrainian presidents in Minsk, and both sides were ramping up psychological pressure ahead of the event as part of the media war, experts said.

The reports may be based on facts, but one thing was clear: A military intervention was out of the question, analysts on both sides told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

"The truth is extremely hard to determine ... but this [reports of Russian soldiers captured in Ukraine] is an isolated incident, in any case," said Mikhail Pogrebinsky of the Center

of Political and Conflict Studies in Kiev.

This an edited version of one of four videos published on the official website of the Ukrainian security service on Tuesday claiming to show testimonies from Russian servicemen captured in Ukraine.

Stories and Questions

Two incidents involving Russian paratroopers have been reported: One concerned a platoon of Russian paratroopers that allegedly perished last week in a clash in Ukraine's Luhansk region. The other involved 10 alleged Russian soldiers captured in Ukraine, four of them interrogated on camera.

Evidence in both cases is murky and to a large extent circumstantial. Below, The Moscow Times offers a summary of both incidents, complete with sources and unanswered questions.

Story 1: Casualties

A handful of Russian paratroopers were interred in Russia recently, the circumstances of death unclear. Officials are reluctant to comment, and so are relatives — possibly under non-disclosure agreements or threat of losing state pensions or other means of support. Critics say the paratroopers were sent to support the pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine and died fighting the Ukrainian army.

Proof and Sources:

• At least two paratroopers were confirmed to have been buried Monday in Russia's Pskov region.

• Ukrainian journalist Roman Bochkala last week published photos of Russian IDs and military documents allegedly found on paratroopers' bodies.

• Some relatives confirmed the deaths on social networks and in comments to the opposition paper Novaya Gazeta and independent news site Fontanka.ru.

Questions:

• Defense Ministry spokespeople denied Russia had sent or lost any troops in Ukraine, said Bochkala's documents were fakes and claimed the dead paratroopers had been killed in an accident during a military exercise in the Pskov region.

• Some relatives said the online statements purportedly written by them confirming the paratroopers' deaths had been fabricated by hackers.

• The identities of other relatives, including a man cited by Novaya Gazeta and Fontanka.ru, could not be independently verified.

Story 2: Captives

The press service of Ukraine's "counterterrorist operation," as Kiev terms its campaign against the insurgents, on Tuesday released videos of four men who identify themselves on camera as Russian paratroopers. The men say their command sent them on a 70-kilometer

march without explaining its purpose or warning that they would be in Ukrainian territory, where they were apprehended by Ukrainian forces and surrendered without a fight.

Proof and Sources:

• Interviews of the four men's interrogations. In one case, the video shows a captive wearing Russian dog tags.

• Unnamed Russian military sources confirmed the soldiers' capture to Interfax and ITAR-Tass (the Defense Ministry did not return repeated requests for comment by The Moscow Times on Tuesday), but said the soldiers had lost their way and "accidentally" strayed into Ukraine during a mission on the Russian border.

Questions:

• The point of contention is why and how the paratroopers ended up in Ukraine.

• Ukraine's supporters say the incident proves Russia's direct military support for the insurgents.

• Russia says it was an unintentional incursion.

Separately, the Kremlin's rights council said Tuesday that a Russian military recon group of nine people had been killed "on the Ukrainian border."

The advisory body, whose outspoken criticism of the Kremlin usually goes unheeded, cited a committee of soldiers' mothers as its source and asked the Investigative Committee to look into the alleged deaths. The committee did not comment Tuesday, while the Defense Ministry denied the report, Gazeta.ru reported.

No Invasion Before Talks

Military and political experts polled by The Moscow Times said the evidence available did not make it possible to say with any degree of certainty whether any Russian paratroops have really fought in Ukraine recently.

But the scandal benefitted the Ukrainian leadership while harming Russia's position in the Minsk talks, said Alexander Khramchikhin of the Institute for Political and Military Analysis in Moscow.

"Russia is extremely unlikely to go for a serious escalation ahead of the all-important Minsk meeting," said Anton Lavrov, a military expert working with the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.

Moscow and Kiev effectively ended dialogue with the outbreak of a pro-Russian insurgency in eastern Ukraine last spring, but the meeting between Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin was anticipated as a chance to resume direct talks.

The rebels recently reported launching a counteroffensive after weeks of retreat, claims that many experts also said seemed to be propaganda aimed at strengthening Moscow's position ahead of the talks.

Ukraine has accused official Moscow of providing the rebels with money, equipment and possibly troops.

But all experts interviewed for this story said that while many Russian volunteers were confirmed to be fighting in Ukraine, hard evidence of Russia's direct military involvement was lacking.

Game of Thrones

The paratrooper reports are part of the heated media battle being waged in parallel to real-life hostilities, Lavrov said.

"The information war has reached uncharted heights," Khramchikhin said.

Media and officials on both sides have been locked in a mutual smear campaign for months, trading exaggerations and outright fakes about casualties and atrocities committed by the enemy.

Direct Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine remains the most powerful accusation on the Ukrainian side, repeatedly reported but never confirmed.

Russia has been more creative, with state media vilifying the Ukrainian army and authorities with zeal and inventiveness.

The most notorious example came in July, when state-run Channel One said Ukrainian "fascists" had crucified the child of a Russia supporter in a town square. The story was eventually debunked as a fake based on a scene from the hit fantasy TV show "Game of Thrones."

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