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Paratroopers' Grave Markings Vanish as Rumors Circulate They Were Killed in Ukraine

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A day after Russian journalists claimed they were attacked at a Pskov cemetery while investigating reports that paratroopers recently buried there had been killed in Ukraine, the grave markers featuring the troops' names have been mysteriously removed, Russian media reported.

Wreaths and other decorations marking the spot have also been removed, according to the independent Dozhd television channel. It was unclear who might have removed the markings.

Prior to the apparent gravesite tampering, Russian journalists Vladimir Romensky of Dozhd TV and Ilya Vasyunin of the Russkaya Planeta news site said they were attacked, threatened and told to leave town when they arrived Tuesday at a cemetery in Russia's Pskov region where at least two of the paratroopers had been buried a day earlier. Other journalists reported similar incidents throughout the day.

The accounts added to the enigma surrounding the circumstances of the paratroopers' deaths

and the broader issue of the extent of Russia's involvement in Ukraine.

In a fierce war of rhetoric in which few things can be proven as fact, Ukraine claims that the paratroopers were killed in its eastern town of Luhansk after being dispatched there by Moscow to help pro-Russian separatists. Russia denies having lost any troops in Ukraine and dismisses as fake any evidence of paratroopers' deaths in Luhansk, such as military documents allegedly found at the scene.

Video footage from the Pskov cemetery broadcast by Dozhd on Tuesday showed two young men in hooded jackets apparently trying to block the way of the journalists' car and banging against its windows.

The attackers slashed the car's tires, but the news crew managed to drive away, Romensky said in a newscast carried by his employer. Besides Romensky and Vasyunin, journalists from the Novaya Gazeta newspaper and St. Petersburg's Fontanka news agency were also in the car, Dozhd reported.

The scrap followed another incident earlier in the day, when Romensky and others tried to talk with paratroopers' families — only to be approached by unidentified young men and told to leave town, Romensky said, adding that the families had refused to speak to reporters.

The men told journalists to "head to the train station and take the first train back to Moscow," Romensky said.

Instead, the news crew headed to the cemetery, only to run into another group of young men who appeared to have been waiting for them there and started making threats, he said.

Vasyunin said in a Twitter message that he and his colleagues "just got promised that if we don't leave Pskov, 'there are many swamps here,' 'we won't be found,' and 'no need to look into anything.'"

Police have collected fingerprints from the outside of the car and are investigating, Romensky told Dozhd.

In yet another incident, chief editor of St. Petersburg's Telegraf news agency, Sergei Kovalchenko, also reported having been attacked in Pskov by unidentified men, Slon.ru reported.

"There were two attackers. They took my camera," Kovalchenko was quoted as saying, adding that he filed a police report. The identity of the alleged attackers remains uncertain.

Ekho Moskvy radio host and deputy chief editor Vladimir Varfolomeyev said in a Twitter message that the "attack by bandits against journalists in Pskov only confirms suspicions about local paratroop divisions' participation in the war against Ukraine."

In a separate case also involving Russian paratroopers, Ukraine has announced capturing 10 Russian soldiers on its territory and published video interrogations with the men.

Following reports by unidentified officials in the Russian military that the captured troops

had strayed into Ukraine by "accident," President Vladimir Putin said the men may have crossed into Ukraine while patrolling the border, and expressed hope that the incident would soon be resolved, Interfax reported Wednesday.

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