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Putin Downplays Reports of Russian Soldiers Captured in Ukraine

By Alexey Eremenko

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Russian servicemen that were detained by Ukrainian authorities speaking to reporters in Kiev on Wednesday.

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday made light of reports on the capture of 10 Russian paratroopers by Ukraine's security services— saying they were likely a stray border patrol— but struck back by saying Russia had never caused a fuss about Ukraine servicemen crossing over to the Russian side.

"What I've heard is that they were patrolling the border and could have ended up on Ukrainian territory," Putin told journalists in Minsk, Interfax reported Wednesday, in line with a statement made earlier by an unidentified source at the Defense Ministry saying the men had crossed the border "by accident."

Putin conceded he had not been informed yet on the issue by the Defense Ministry or the General Staff while making his statement.

But the president also said that Ukrainian soldiers have frequently strayed onto Russian territory, citing an instance of a 450-strong unit crossing the border.

"They've [Ukrainian military] entered our territory, even with armored vehicles. There were no problems with it. I hope there will be no problems this time either," Putin was cited as saying.

Ukrainian security services on Tuesday reported detaining 10 Russian paratroopers in eastern Ukraine, a territory in the grip of a pro-Russian insurgency that reportedly counts many Russian volunteers in its ranks.

The men have since been moved to a detention center in Kiev, Ukraine defense spokesman Andriy Lysenko said Wednesday, Interfax news agency reported.

Russian business daily RBC cited a deputy commander of the battalion that wound up in Ukraine, identified in the report as Alexander Khotulovy, as saying at least two of the troops had died in "accidental" clashes there.

The report said several others had been wounded. Khotulovy reportedly announced the news to relatives of the troops at a meeting Wednesday, though the relatives were prohibited from releasing any personal information to the press, RBC reported.

In footage published on the security service's website on Tuesday morning, four of the captured soldiers said their commanders had sent them on a lengthy march during a border exercise without warning it would take them into Ukrainian territory. The paratroopers say in the videos they surrendered without a fight when apprehended by Ukrainian forces.

The capture was confirmed by military sources speaking to Russia's leading news agencies, but no military authorities in Russia made any official statements on the case.

The story reignited speculation about Russia's possible direct military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, which have been ongoing ever since the ousting of Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych last spring.

See also:

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Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

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