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Russian Captured Paratroops Claim Innocence in Kiev News Conference

By The Moscow Times

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Ukrainian servicemen are seen during fighting with pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Ukrainian town of Ilovaysk Aug. 26, 2014.

A group of Russian paratroopers captured by Ukrainian forces gave a news conference on Wednesday in which they maintained their innocence.

Kiev has accused the servicemen of conducting a "special mission" in support of a separatist pro-Russian insurgency in its eastern regions. Moscow denies the charge, saying the troops had strayed across the border by mistake.

Nine of the 10 captured soldiers told a news conference in Kiev they had received very little information before setting off on their patrol and that they had no previous combat experience. The 10th soldier was wounded and is now in hospital.

"We are not informed at all ... We either got lost or not, we were sent there, we didn't know

the way or where we were going," said serviceman Ivan Romantsev, the self-appointed leader of the group.

"We understood that we were on Ukraine's territory when we entered camp, when we were captured and they explained that we were on Ukrainian territory," said Sergeant Vladimir Savosteyev, who was sporting a black eye he said was the result of shelling.

"We went on training like this lots of times. We did the same things. The only difference is they were held in other places," he said.

It was not clear from their answers if their superiors in the Russian military had given them clear orders to cross the border. They were detained on Monday with personal documents and weapons in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine's military said more Russian soldiers had entered its territory on Wednesday in a fresh incursion, though the charge could not be immediately verified.

The accusation quickly dented any sense of cautious optimism about the situation one day after the presidents of Russia and Ukraine agreed to work towards ending the war.

"Good Lads"

The captured Russian soldiers, who are being held by Ukraine's security service, or SBU, said they had been treated well by their captors and that their views of the months-long conflict had changed after they experienced it for themselves.

"We saw with our own eyes what is going on here. We were here, we talked to your lads. They talked to us. We realized they are good lads," said Romantsev, who together with most of the other paratroopers was dressed in green camouflage fatigues.

"We understand that what is shown on television does not correspond to reality," he said.

Television news has played a vital role in shaping public perceptions of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, where many of the largely Russian-speaking population watch Russian news.

Russian media tend to project the Kremlin view that the ousting of Ukraine's previous Moscow-backed president, Viktor Yanukovych, in February was the work of a "fascist junta" and that the separatist rebellions are a response to unjust practices and military action by Kiev against Russian speakers.

"It is war indeed. We are ordinary soldiers and we don't want to fight. It is the high command that is fighting," Romantsev said.

Moscow denies Kiev's charges that it is sending weapons and fighters to help the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

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