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Poll: Majority of Russians Don't Think Their Troops Are Fighting in Ukraine

By The Moscow Times

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Most Russians do not believe that soldiers from the country's army are helping rebels in Ukraine.

A majority of Russians believe their country's troops are not fighting in eastern Ukraine, but nearly half would be glad if it turned out they were, an opinion poll showed Thursday.

The poll by the independent Levada research group suggested 25 percent of respondents did not believe the Kremlin's denials that Russia has sent soldiers to back separatists fighting Ukrainian government forces in the eastern regions.

The survey of 1,600 people, carried out from Nov. 14-17, showed 53 percent did believe the Kremlin although 45 percent would react positively if they found out their soldiers are fighting there. The poll said 34 percent would disapprove.

NATO's top military commander said Wednesday that Russian soldiers provided the "backbone" to the rebels.

Russia also initially denied having troops in the Crimea Peninsula, which it annexed in March, until President Vladimir Putin acknowledged weeks later that they had been there.

Groups bringing together soldiers' mothers in Russia have quoted cases of servicemen being wounded or killed in east Ukraine. Kiev and the West say an injection of Russian forces turned the tables on the advancing Ukrainian army there in August.

In an interview with the right-wing newspaper Zavtra, Igor Strelkov, formerly the top rebel military commander, said Russian soldiers "on leave" had carried out that offensive.

"Separate divisions of the [separatist] militia were subordinated to them," he said, adding that soldiers "on leave" led an advance on the strategic southeastern city of Mariupol.

The West accuses Moscow of providing money, arms and serving troops to support the pro-Russian rebels to try to split the eastern regions from Kiev and tie them closer to Russia.

Russia backs the separatists but denies being part of the armed conflict and state media have backed that line. Moscow has said any Russians fighting in east Ukraine are volunteers.

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