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Putin Refused Poroshenko's Offer to 'Take Donbass' — Forbes

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Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko

President Vladimir Putin in February turned down an offer from his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko to "take the Donbass" — the area in the country's east that is currently partly controlled by pro-Russian insurgents — and asked Poroshenko whether he was "out of his mind," Forbes magazine reported Monday.

Putin reportedly told a closed-door meeting with senior board members of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs on March 19 that Poroshenko had offered him eastern Ukraine's Donbass region — which includes the war-torn Donetsk and Luhansk regions — at peace talks in Minsk at which a cease-fire was agreed in February, according to an unidentified source cited by Forbes who participated in the meeting.

According to the source, Putin recounted the overnight Minsk negotiations, saying: "[Poroshenko] told me directly: 'Take the Donbass.' I replied: 'Are you out of your mind? I

don't need the Donbass. If you don't need it, declare it independent,'" Forbes reported.

The source said Poroshenko had asked Putin to take financial responsibility for the region. Putin replied that would only be possible if the Donbass joined Russia and that as long as the region remained part of Ukraine, Ukrainian authorities were tasked with such matters.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Monday declined to comment in detail on the Forbes report, saying only: "It isn't right that some participants of this event [the board meeting with Putin] spoke about the content of their conversation with the president. Let it be on their own consciences, whether they told the truth or not," Interfax news agency reported.

The head of the board of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, Alexander Shokhin, said Monday the comments published by Forbes were "a distortion" of Putin's words, RIA Novosti reported.

"The topic of discussion was relations between Russia and Ukraine and the implementation of the Minsk agreements, but I am not going to repeat [Putin's] words. ... [The Forbes report] is an incorrect interpretation," Shokhin said.

A spokesman for Ukraine's Foreign Affairs Ministry, Yevhen Perebyinis, blamed a linguistic misunderstanding for the report, apparently suggesting Poroshenko had spoken in Ukrainian and Putin had misunderstood him.

"Poroshenko did not tell Putin to 'take the Donbass' but told him to 'get out of it,'" Perebyinis said Monday on his Twitter account.

The senior board of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs consists of 26 executives of Russia's top companies, as well as board head Shokhin.

During a news conference a day after the meeting with Putin on March 20, Shokhin said the participants had discussed economic issues but did not mention any discussion of the situation in Ukraine.

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