

Captured 'Russian Major' Pardoned by Kiev

December 01, 2015



Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has pardoned Vladimir Starkov — a Russian officer detained in July while reportedly smuggling ammunition into rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine — in order to exchange him for an Ukrainian soldier held by pro-Russian separatists, Russian and Ukrainian media reported on Tuesday morning.

Starkov, nicknamed “the Russian major” by Ukrainian media, had previously been sentenced to 14 years in prison for “waging aggressive war against Ukraine.” The court claimed he had been doing so “on the orders of the Russian Chief of General Staff [Valery] Gerasimov,” Russian news website RBC wrote Tuesday.

Footage of Starkov's interrogation — which shows him saying that Russian servicemen were transferred to Ukraine without their prior knowledge — was uploaded on YouTube by Ukrainian security forces in July.

In August, he was quoted as saying in an interview with the Euronews channel that he had been a regular Russian serviceman, transferred to the border region of Rostov and subsequently to eastern Ukraine.

“Senior officers gathered us in a conference room and announced that our positions would be the same, but we should do military service in Ukraine: in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. It was forbidden to inform our relatives about this,” he said, the Euronews website reported.

Starkov has been swapped for the Ukrainian soldier Andriy Hrechanov, one of the former defenders of the Donetsk airport, who, according to the Kiev-based Ukrainian Independent Information Agency UNIAN, had been held by pro-Russian militants in Donetsk.

Russian newspaper Vedomosti wrote Tuesday that the authorities in Kiev had made 17 previous attempts to liberate Hrechanov.

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