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Putin Admits Military Presence in Ukraine During Marathon Presser

By The Moscow Times

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Journalists attend an annual end-of-year news conference held by Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Russia, Dec. 17, 2015.

President Vladimir Putin admitted for the first time to the presence of Russian military personnel in east Ukraine during his annual press conference on Thursday.

Asked by an Ukrainian reporter about an hour into the conference about two captured Russian military intelligence officers currently on trial in Ukraine, Putin responded: "We never said there were not people there who carried out certain tasks, including in the military sphere."

He insisted, however, that these were not regular Russian troops.

After the same correspondent inquired whether a prisoner exchange was possible, perhaps involving the Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, who is being tried in Rostov in southern Russia, Putin replied that prisoner swaps "will have to be negotiated."

“We support [Ukrainian President Petro] Poroshenko's approach — exchange all for all,” he said.

Russia had repeatedly denied military involvement in the conflict in east Ukraine, despite what most news outlets consider mounting evidence to the contrary.

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