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Incursion, Desertion, Skirmish: What Really Happened in Crimea?

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Andrew Kravchenko / Reuters

Some time between Aug. 6 and 8, something was definitely up around the disputed Ukraine-Crimea border. There was some kind of incident —

possibly gunfire, possibly even shelling, locals were not sure in the early hours of Aug. 7. There was unconfirmed information about one Russian soldier dead and three wounded. That same day, Russia shut down its cross border controls. Reports of military build-up behind the border meanwhile filled up social networks.

On Aug. 10, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said in a statement that it had "averted three attempts by Ukrainian military units to enter Crimean territory." According

to
the
Russian
side,
these
incursions
resulted
in
armed
confrontations
and
the
deaths
of
two
Russian
servicemen.
Seven
people
were
arrested,
it
was
claimed.

Soon after
the statement
followed an
unexpected
press
conference,
in
which⊠P
resident
Vladimir
Putin
accused
Ukrainian
authorities⊠of
resorting
to
terrorism.
He⊠said that
Ukraine's⊠“
actions
would

not be left unanswered.” These words immediately sparked a media storm, and speculation that a military operation against Ukraine was about to begin.

But what really happened in Crimea, and can the FSB's claims be trusted? The Moscow Times reviews several versions of events in the

disputed region.

Version 1. Incursion Planned and Sanctioned by the Ukrainian Government

According to the FSB, the confrontation with Ukrainian special forces in Crimea occurred on Aug. 6 near to the disputed border in Armyansk. The version goes thus: on Aug. 8, the Ukrainians organized two

incursion attempts“ under the cover of fire support and armored vehicles operated by the Ukrainian military.” Two Russian soldiers were shot dead during the operation. FSB officers detained a group of seven Ukrainian“ saboteurs” in possession of 20 improvised explosive devices, anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, as well as some special forces equipment said to

be used by the Ukrainian military. A former pro-Kiev volunteer fighter from eastern Ukraine, Yevgeny Panov, was supposedly among those detained.

According to unidentified sources cited by the Kommersant newspaper, the arrested group had planned several explosions in Crimea in order to damage the region's tourism industry.

Version 2. Incursions Sanctioned

by the U.S. State Department

With typical swagger, the head of Crimea declared that Ukrainian authorities would not “have the guts” to carry out terror attacks in Crimea. Instead, he put the blame squarely on the U.S. State Department.

“You can see the path [Ukrainian government] has chosen – the path of terror. ... But I am sure that it is not their own actions or incentives — the U.S. State Department is all over it, because Ukrainian officials wouldn't have the guts to carry out something like that,” Sergei Aksyonov said.

At the same time, Aksyonov later moved away from his anti-American claims, and called on his compatriots to “kill Ukrainian saboteurs” and “hang them along the border.”

Version 3. No Attacks from Ukraine

As expected, Ukraine dismissed the accusations, and described them as a “provocation” from the Russian side. Not a single intelligence officer has been detained by Russian law enforcement, said a spokesman for Ukrainian intelligence service, Vadim Skibitsky.

Claims of military support were scarcely credible, Skibitsky added: “If [Ukraine] had used heavy military hardware, armored transports, artillery batteries, trust me — Russia would have reported it immediately on Aug. 8, but there was no reaction.”

The U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, sided with Kiev.

“The U.S. government has seen nothing so far that corroborates Russian allegations of a 'Crimea incursion,' and Ukraine has strongly refuted them,” Pyatt wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. “And Russia has a record of frequently levying false accusations at Ukraine to deflect attention from its own illegal actions.”

Version 4. Russians Shooting Other Russians

According to the controversial Ukrainian politician and Interior Ministry advisor Anton Gerashchenko, there was indeed a law enforcement operation in Crimea. However, the cause was not Ukrainian insurgents, but Russian law enforcement who had targeted deserting Russian soldiers.

“A bunch of armed soldiers from a Russian military station have deserted, there was a skirmish, and now [Russians] are trying to catch them,” Gerashchenko told 112.Ukraine. television. “The Russians are worried that the deserters may get to Ukraine and reveal valuable intelligence about the situation in Crimea and the level of morale in local military,” he said.

Moreover, some local media reported Crimean law enforcement distributing wanted notices for five “criminals” wearing military uniform with a Russian flag on it. The men had “committed a high-level crime in the town of Armyansk,” according to the reports. Other outlets, however, published similar wanted notices, supposedly looking for insurgents from the Ukrainian intelligence services.

On Thursday Aug. 11, the head of Ukrainian intelligence, Viktor Kondratyuk, confirmed that a shootout had taken place in Crimea, but said that it was between members of the Russian armed forces and the FSB's border guard service. Kondratyuk’s version did not specify whether it had anything to do with deserted soldiers.

Version 5. Kidnapping

While both Russia and Ukraine were busy arguing their version of events, Igor Kotelyanets, brother of Yevgeny Panov, one of the arrestees, told journalists he believed his brother had been kidnapped and transferred to Crimea against his will. Panov had nothing to do with the Ukrainian Defense Ministry or intelligence services, his brother said. Last week, he had taken several days off to visit friends in the Zaporozhye region in eastern Ukraine. “Crimea was off-limits to him,” Kotelyanets told the Krym Realii news outlet. “He always said he would go only when it had been returned to Ukraine.”

Several hours after his interview, Russian state media reported that Panov had already confessed and pleaded guilty to charges of terrorism.

Meanwhile, both Russia and Ukraine announced they would be building up security military presence around the disputed Crimean border.

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