

Donbass Escalation Would Be ‘Beginning of the End’ for Ukraine – Putin Aide

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Mikhail Sokolov / TASS

The outbreak of major hostilities in eastern Ukraine would mark “the beginning of the end” for Kiev, a top Kremlin official [warned](#) Thursday as alarm continues to grow over troop buildup in the region.

“I support the assessments that also exist inside Ukraine that the beginning of hostilities is the beginning of the end of Ukraine,” President Vladimir Putin’s deputy chief of staff Dmitry Kozak said.

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“It’s a self-inflicted wound, a shot not in the leg but in the face,” the state-run RIA Novosti news agency quoted Kozak, the Kremlin's pointman on relations with Ukraine and pro-Russia

separatists, as saying at online talks.

The senior Putin aide added that Moscow “would have to come to the defense” of Russian citizens in eastern Ukraine “depending on the scale of the fire.”

Kozak’s warnings follow Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s recent appeal for support from Kiev’s Western allies and visit to the front line amid the Russian buildup near its border.

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Russia is widely believed to provide backing for the separatists, which the Kremlin has repeatedly denied.

The Ukrainian military estimates that Russia has deployed 28 battalion tactical groups in at least four regions including annexed Crimea. Russian military analysts [reported](#), citing online wagon tracking services, satellite imagery and TikTok videos, that Russian military units have set up camp some 250 kilometers from the Ukrainian border.

The Kremlin has acknowledged the troop movements but insists that they do not pose a threat to anyone.

Western leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel who held phone talks with Putin on Thursday, have called for restraint over the Russian buildup.

Putin accused Ukraine of provoking tensions in the phone call with Merkel.

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