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Czech Police Detain 5 Suspected of Fighting for Pro-Russian Rebels in Ukraine

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Czech police have ruled out any connection between the five arrests and its investigation into a fatal 2014 Czech arms depot explosion. **Sébastien Avenet / Flickr (CC BY 2.0)**

Czech police have detained five of its nationals suspected of fighting alongside pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, Czech prosecutors announced Wednesday as ties between the countries eroded over allegations of Moscow's involvement in a 2014 explosion.

The Prague High Public Prosecutor's Office said on its website that the suspects taken into custody are suspected of terror-related offenses and of fighting on the side of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

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"The police authority has detained five individuals, so far no one has been charged,"

supervising prosecutor Martin Bílý said in a statement.

Radio Prague International reported, citing local media, that the five suspects are alleged members of paramilitary groups who organized trips for Czech citizens to fight for pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine.

Russia, which has granted citizenship to half a million eastern Ukrainians and recently vowed to come to their defense amid heightened border tensions, has been accused of providing material support to the rebels. Moscow denies those accusations.

Czech police ruled out in a separate statement any connection between the five arrests and its investigation into the fatal Czech arms depot explosion. The alleged culprits have been identified as suspects in the 2018 poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal.

Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis has referred to the 2014 Vrbětice incident that killed two people as "an unprecedented terror attack."

Prague accused Russia's SVR and GRU secret services of orchestrating the explosion, expelling 18 diplomats believed to be secret agents and calling on its EU and NATO allies to take similar steps.

Moscow, which denied the "provocative" allegations and argued that the claims originated in the United States, sent back 20 Czech diplomats in a move that the Czech foreign minister hinted could result in further actions.

In a pointed shift for one of Russia's closest allies in the European Union and NATO, Czechia has this week ruled out Russia's participation in a nuclear power plant project and rejected plans to buy Russia's coronavirus vaccine before EU approval.

The latest tensions have flared in the wake of Russia's troop buildup near Ukraine, as well as tit-for-tat sanctions and diplomatic expulsions with the U.S., Poland and Bulgaria.

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