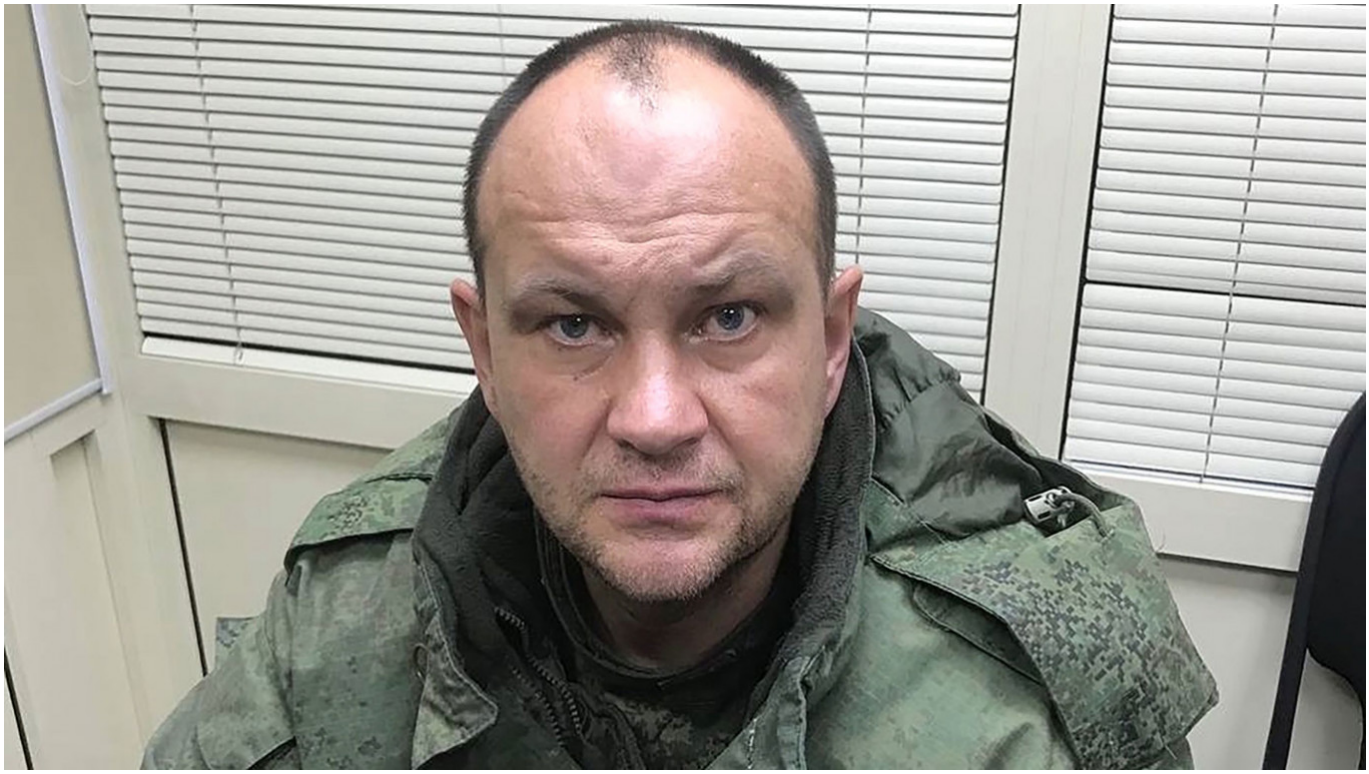
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Russia Says Arrests Ukrainian Spy Trio Amid Mounting Tensions

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Zinoviy Koval, one of the suspected Ukrainian agents, photographed upon his arrest by the Russian FSB.
Video screen grab / FSB / TASS

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said Thursday it has detained three alleged Ukrainian spies gathering secrets and plotting terrorist attacks as tensions between the countries escalate over Kiev's accusations of Russian military buildup and planned invasions.

All three Ukrainian nationals had confessed to being recruited by Ukraine's military and security services, Interfax quoted the FSB as saying.

Ukraine's security service, the SBU, denied the incident, saying the accusation was "fake" and part of a "hybrid war" effort.

The Russian intelligence service said one of those detained had planned to detonate two explosive devices at an undisclosed location. The FSB identified the alleged spy as Oleksandr Tsilyk, who had reportedly confessed to being recruited by the Ukrainian defense ministry's main intelligence directorate.

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"I was recruited in May 2021," he was quoted as saying, adding that Ukrainian intelligence had trained him to "work with dead drops and special communications."

A father-and-son pair identified as Zinoviy and Ihor Koval also confessed to being ordered by the Security Service of Ukraine to "photograph road and railway bridges as well as a thermal plant" in exchange for a $10,000 reward, Interfax reported.

The FSB's anti-terrorist unit said it had uncovered "short-barrelled automatic weapons and personal protective equipment" in the pair's vehicle that were sent for forensic review.

The FSB did not disclose where in Russia or when the alleged spies had been detained.

Its announcement of arrests comes amid growing warnings from Ukraine and its Western allies that Russia may be gearing up for an early 2022 invasion of Ukraine with a fresh troop buildup.

Moscow has in return blamed Kiev for massing tens of thousands of troops near pro-Russia separatist-held territory in southeast Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy this week called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to explicitly deny plans to move Russian troops across the Ukrainian border, which Putin declined to do.

Zelenskiy previously disclosed that Ukrainian intelligence services uncovered discussions between Ukrainian and Russian nationals of a Dec. 1-2 coup. The Kremlin denied any involvement.

AFP contributed reporting.

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