

Fraud Conviction Appears to Reveal Russian Troop Deployment in East Ukraine

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Moscow has always denied the presence of Russian Armed Forces soldiers in the Donbass. **Russian Defense Ministry**

A Russian court's fraud conviction may have inadvertently revealed the deployment of Russian troops in separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine.

A district court in Russia's Rostov region located on the Ukrainian border [disclosed](#) that a convicted senior manager was in charge of buying, stocking and selling food to Russian troops stationed in eastern Ukraine.

"This food was intended to be sent to military units of the Russian Armed Forces stationed on the territory of the DNR and LNR," the court said in its verdict.

The ruling was no longer visible on the court's website as of Thursday afternoon.

Moscow denies the presence of Russian Armed Forces soldiers in the Donbass, the rebel-held

region which has been locked in a protracted war with Ukrainian forces since 2014. It has maintained that any Russian nationals fighting in the conflict-torn region were there on a voluntary basis and not in any official capacity.

Western countries accuse Russia of providing troops, equipment and funding to the separatists and have sanctioned Moscow over its role in the conflict.

The Kremlin on Thursday called the November verdict's information on Russian troops a "mistake," reiterating the official line that Russian troops are not stationed in eastern Ukraine.

DNR and LNR refer to the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" in eastern Ukraine.

The U.S. RFE/RL news organization estimated that the bi-weekly supplies of 1,300 tons of products mentioned in the court documents would feed around 26,000 Russian troops.

The defendant, identified as V.N. Zabaluev, deputy regional manager for military nutrition of the local company "Tekhnologiya," admitted to have bribed officials up to four times in 2019. RFE/RL's Russian bureau Svoboda reported, citing the verdict, that there may be other companies engaged in supplying Russian troops in eastern Ukraine with food.

The court sentenced Zabaluev to five years in prison on charges of transferring 990,000 rubles (\$13,500) from his boss to a military epidemiological official to gain favor with the authorities and avoid disruptions in the supply chain.

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