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Russia Deploys 'Defensive' Mercenaries to Eastern Ukraine – Reuters

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Ukrainian servicemen walk in a trench on the front line with pro-Russia separatists near the small town of Svitlodarsk in the Donetsk region. **Anatolii Stepanov / AFP**

Russia has in recent weeks deployed mercenaries to eastern Ukraine to help pro-Moscow separatists defend against Ukrainian government forces, Reuters reported Thursday, citing four unnamed fighters who had been recruited.

President Vladimir Putin said earlier Thursday that Russia "must react" to what he alleged are Ukrainian plans to attack the pro-Moscow territories in eastern Ukraine known as the Donbass. Putin's claims follow weeks of Western warnings that Russia could invade Ukraine as early as January.

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The independent Meduza news website reported earlier this week that recruiters in Russia had started gathering groups of mercenaries for a "combat mission" in Donbass, but that the

scope of their work was unknown.

According to Reuters, recruited Russian mercenaries are undergoing special training for defensive and sabotage purposes in the Donbass.

“They are gathering everybody with combat experience,” the news agency quoted one of the recruited mercenaries as saying.

The fighters said they were unaware of Russian attack plans or preparations, Reuters reported. One of the unnamed mercenaries reportedly said he was planning to join fellow fighters on the Russian side of the border with Ukraine’s separatist-controlled Luhansk region.

Separatist leaders said they were either unaware of or not involved in the latest recruitment drive, Reuters reported.

The Kremlin, which maintains that any Russian nationals on the ground are there voluntarily, denied official links with Russian private military contractors in eastern Ukraine.

“It's the first we've heard of this and we don't know how reliable these assertions are,” Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted as saying.

The reports follow Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu’s claims that U.S. private military companies have stationed troops in eastern Ukraine for “provocations with unidentified chemical components.”

At the same time, Russia and the United States have signaled readiness to launch talks over Moscow’s sweeping security demands as soon as early January.

Faced with accusations of massing tens of thousands troops near Ukraine's border, Russia last week sent a draft list of its demands to the U.S., which among others includes a call to block Ukraine from future NATO membership.

Washington has signaled readiness to discuss some of the issues raised by Russia, but stressed that it “will never agree to” Moscow’s other demands.

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