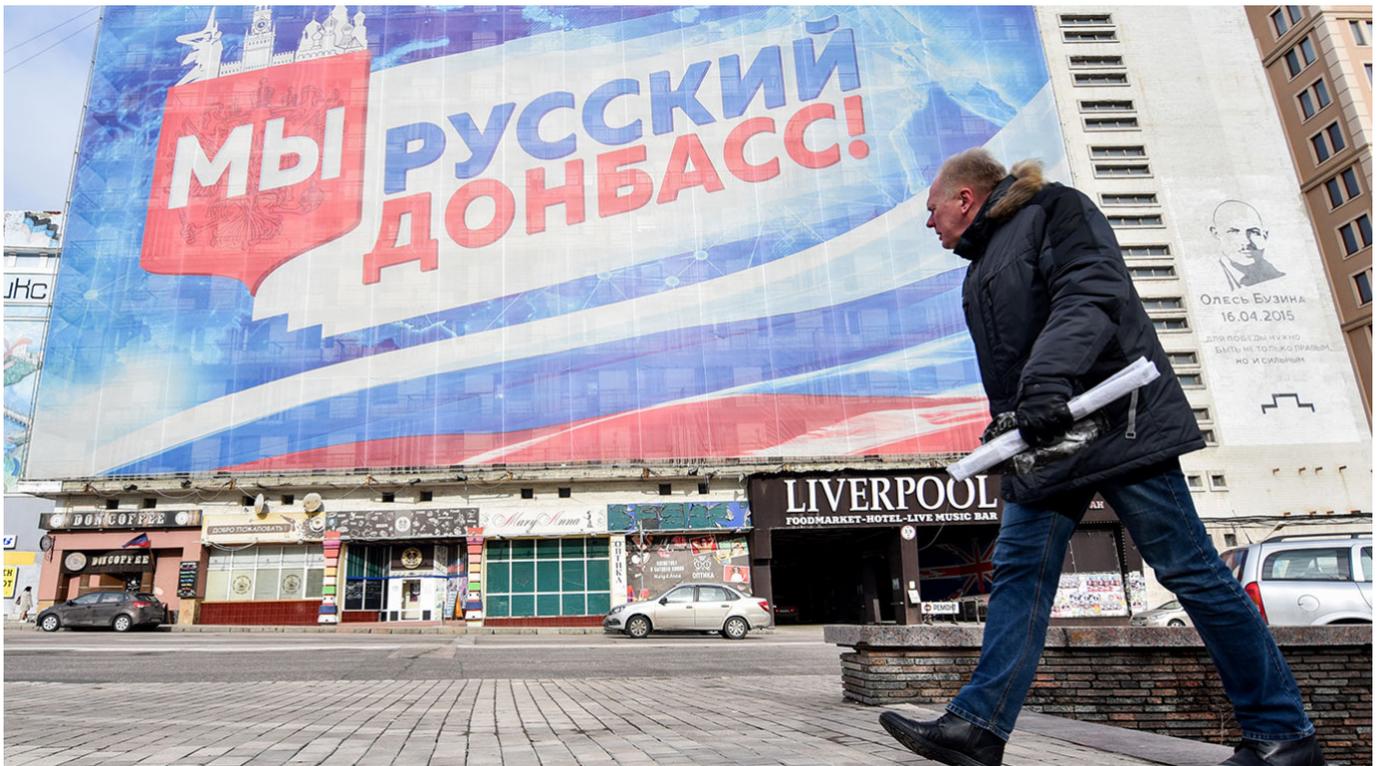


# East Ukraine Separatist Regions to Evacuate Civilians to Russia

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Several hundred thousand citizens in the breakaway republics have been issued Russian passports in recent years. **Nikolai Trishin / TASS**

The two pro-Moscow separatist regions in eastern Ukraine will [launch](#) a “mass evacuation” of civilians into Russia starting Friday, accusing Kyiv of planning to invade the breakaway territory.

Denis Pushilin, leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, said in a televised address that the evacuation into the neighboring Rostov region has been coordinated with “Russian leadership.”

“Women, children and the elderly are to be evacuated first,” Pushilin said.

Luhansk People's Republic leader Leonid Pasechnik [followed up](#) with orders to evacuate into Russia shortly afterward.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said after the announcements that the Russian government

will pay 10,000 rubles (\$130) to every “refugee” arriving in the country from the Donbas. Putin also ordered the head of the ministry for emergency situations to fly to Russia’s southern Rostov region immediately to organize the evacuation and arrival.

Several hundred thousand citizens of the breakaway states have been issued Russian passports in recent years.

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Donetsk leader Pushilin claimed that Ukraine was planning to launch an offensive against the breakaway region, pointing to Kyiv's alleged build-up of troops and weapons near the line of contact between the opposing sides.

“The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, will soon order the military to go on the offensive, implement a plan to invade the territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics,” Pushilin said.

“Their weapons are pointed at civilians today.”

Ukraine’s foreign minister quickly [denied](#) having plans to attack, calling the claims "Russian disinformation reports."

Before Putin’s pledge of financial support to the new arrivals, both the Kremlin and regional leaders in Rostov, the Russian region which borders the breakaway states, said they had no information or prior warning about the evacuation.

Images posted to social media appear to show long lines of buses waiting to evacuate civilians as well as residents queuing outside of ATMs shortly after the evacuation announcements. Meanwhile, screenshots posted to social media show automated text messages ordering citizens to evacuate and advising them not to panic.

Officials in Donetsk said late Friday they plan to evacuate a total of “around 700,000 residents” over several days.

A day earlier, Ukraine accused the Russian-backed rebels of shelling a kindergarten in the Kyiv-controlled town of Stanytsia Luhanska, injuring two teachers.

Ukraine’s government and the separatists in the region known as the Donbas have traded blame for the latest flare-up in fighting.

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The U.S. government Friday said the evacuation was a "cynical" move by Moscow.

"Announcements like these are further attempts to obscure through lies and disinformation that Russia is the aggressor in this conflict," a State Department spokesperson told reporters on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. "It is also cynical and cruel to use human

beings as pawns to distract the world from the fact that Russia is building up its forces in preparation for an attack."

Russian President Vladimir Putin, despite signaling willingness to continue talks with Western leaders over the Ukraine crisis, claimed this week that Kyiv was committing "genocide" in the Donbas.

Russia's parliament passed a vote Tuesday calling on Putin to [recognize](#) the breakaway regions as independent states. Putin has not yet taken that step and the West has signaled Russian recognition of the republics would only escalate tensions.

The U.S. — which says its intelligence indicates a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine with over 100,000 troops surrounding its western neighbor — has warned that Russia may be plotting a false-flag operation as a "pretext" to launch an offensive.

"All Kyiv has to do is sit down at the negotiation table with representatives of the Donbas and agree on political, military, economic and humanitarian measures to end the conflict," Putin [said](#) Friday following Pushilin's announcement, referring to the 2015 Minsk agreements that Kyiv is reluctant to pursue.

*AFP contributed reporting.*

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