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Eastern Ukraine Situation 'Deteriorating,' Warns Putin

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Russian President Vladimir Putin said Friday that the situation in eastern Ukraine was "deteriorating" and called on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy to launch negotiations with Russian-backed separatists.

The comments came as separatists leaders in the Donbas announced mass evacuations of civilians into Russia on claims that Kyiv was planning an imminent attack.

"All that Kyiv needs to do is sit at the negotiating table with representatives of the Donbas and agree on political, military and economic measures to end the conflict," Putin said, speaking at a press conference in Moscow alongside Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko.

"Unfortunately, right now we see a deterioration of the situation in the Donbas," he added.

Putin has repeatedly telegraphed that Moscow wants Kyiv to implement the 2015 Minsk agreements, a ceasefire deal that is the only existing framework for ending the war in eastern

Ukraine.

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Pro-Moscow separatists have controlled the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics since conflict broke out in the Donbas following Ukraine's 2014 Maidan revolution, which ousted its pro-Russian president and sparked Moscow's annexation of Crimea.

Putin has regularly criticized Ukraine's alignment toward the West since then, repeatedly alleging discrimination toward Russian speakers in Ukraine and criticizing the closure of pro-Russian media outlets. Earlier this week, he claimed that Kyiv was committing "genocide" in the Donbas.

"In general in Ukraine there is a massive violation of human rights. On a legislative level, discrimination towards Russian speakers is being consolidated," Putin said Friday.

Russia has issued several hundred thousand passports to residents in the breakaway states in recent years.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday he was not aware of the Donetsk or Luhansk republics' evacuation plans.

Despite Moscow's announcements earlier this week that it was drawing down troops around its border with Ukraine, Western leaders say they have seen no proof of any pullback by Russian forces.

The U.S. estimated Friday that Russia has now amassed "between 169,000-190,000 personnel in and near Ukraine" — up from around 100,000 at the end of January.

Washington has repeatedly warned that Russia could stage a "false-flag" operation to use as pretext to invade.

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