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Zelensky Categorically Denies Ukrainian Involvement in Kremlin Drone Attack

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Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Wednesday denied Moscow's claims that Kyiv had attempted to assassinate Russian President Vladimir Putin, after Russia said two drones were shot down at the Kremlin.

"We didn't attack Putin. We leave it to the tribunal. We fight on our territory, we are defending our villages and cities," Zelensky told reporters at a joint press conference with Nordic leaders in Helsinki.

Earlier on Wednesday Russia's presidential press service said a pair of Ukrainian drones had attempted to strike at President Vladimir Putin's residence in the Kremlin overnight, calling the incident a "terrorist act."

"Last night, the Kyiv regime made an attempt to strike with unmanned aerial vehicles on the Kremlin residence of the President of the Russian Federation," the state-run TASS news agency quoted the Kremlin as saying in a statement.

The alleged drone strike came as Ukraine prepares to launch a significant counteroffensive against Russian forces 14 months into Moscow's invasion.

It also follows a string of reported drone strikes and sabotage incidents inside Russia in the lead-up to May 9, when Russia celebrates the Soviet victory in World War II with a massive military parade on Red Square.

The Kremlin called Wednesday's incident “a planned terrorist act and an attempt on the life of the President of the Russian Federation, carried out on the eve of Victory Day, the May 9 Parade, at which the presence of foreign guests is also planned.”

“The Russian side reserves the right to take retaliatory measures where and when it sees fit,” the statement continued.

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"Ukraine does not attack the Kremlin because, firstly, that does not solve any military aims," Ukrainian presidential adviser Mikhaylo Podolyak said, suggesting that the attack had been "staged" by Moscow.

"Such staged reports by Russia should be considered solely as an attempt to prepare ... for a large-scale terrorist attack on Ukraine."

According to the Kremlin, the drones were shot down by the Russian military and special services. Putin, who was not in the building at the time, was unharmed and the incident did not affect his work schedule, it added.

“From the [drone] fragments' fall and the scattering across the territory of the Kremlin, no one was injured, and there was no material damage,” the statement said.

Reacting to the Kremlin claims, State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin called for the Ukrainian government to be destroyed.

"We will demand the use of weapons capable of stopping and destroying the Kyiv terrorist regime," Volodin, a close Putin ally, said, adding that it was now impossible to negotiate with what he called "the Zelensky regime."

Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev reacted by calling for the "physical elimination of Zelenksy and his clique" in a now typically bizarre rant in which he said the Ukrainian leader was not even needed to sign an act of unconditional surrender, noting that Hitler hadn't surrendered either.

Embed:

Unverified video footage published online appears to show a drone descending toward the Kremlin Senate before bursting into flames.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the May 9 parade will go on as planned despite Wednesday's incident.

Also on Wednesday, Moscow officials announced a ban on the use of drones in the Russian capital.

Authorities previously called off the Immortal Regiment procession, which sees tens of thousands of Russians nationwide march with images of relatives who fought in World War II and which takes place after the Victory Day parade, citing security concerns.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he was highly skeptical of any allegations made by Russia.

"I've seen the reports. I cannot validate them, we simply don't know," Blinken said at an event in Washington. "I would take anything coming out of the Kremlin with a very large shaker of salt."

Security analyst Mark Galeotti of the London-based consultancy Mayak Intelligence tweeted that even if Ukraine had targeted Putin in a drone strike, its chances of success were minimal given the high level of security around the Kremlin. He also argued that calling the incident an assassination attempt was simply playing to the Kremlin's talking points.

"[Putin] notoriously rarely goes to the Kremlin, let alone stays there overnight," Galeotti said, adding that while "not quite a bunker," Putin's apartment was "quite well protected."

AFP contributed reporting.

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