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Russia Slams Repatriation of Ukrainian Troops From Turkey

By AFP

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Commanders of Ukrainian forces who held Mariupol's resistance in the city's Azovstal steel plant hug their relatives in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv on 8 July. **Yuriy Dyachyshyn / AFP**

The Kremlin on Saturday slammed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's decision to repatriate several Ukrainian commanders who should have remained in Turkey until the end of the conflict under a deal.

The Ukrainian presidency confirmed that it had secured the return of members of the crack Azov regiment, which is despised in Russia, after "negotiations with the Turkish side."

They were greeted at Istanbul airport by Zelensky, who was on a visit to Turkey.

"The return of Azov commanders from Turkey to Ukraine is nothing but a direct violation of the terms of existing agreements," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted as saying by Russian news agencies.

He said both Ukraine and Turkey had violated the terms of the agreement, under which the men were supposed to remain in Turkey until the end of the conflict.

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Peskov said the return was linked to the "failure of the counter-offensive" launched by Ukraine, and Ankara's desire to show its "solidarity" ahead of a July 11-12 NATO summit in Vilnius.

"Preparations for the NATO summit are underway and of course there has been a lot of pressure on Turkey," he said.

Part of the Azov regiment of the Ukrainian army, formed on the basis of the ultranationalist battalion of the same name, was captured by Russian forces after the fall of Mariupol in May 2022.

Celebrated as heroes in Ukraine for their stiff resistance within the Azovstal factory during the siege of Mariupol, Azov's fighters are reviled in Russia for their links with Ukrainian ultranationalists.

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