

Russia and Ukraine Exchange Hundreds of POWs

By [Daria Andriievska for AFP](#)

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[@ZelenskyyUA / Twitter](#)

Russia and Ukraine traded hundreds of prisoners of war on Wednesday, just a week after Moscow said Kyiv had shot down a plane carrying captured Ukrainian soldiers to an exchange.

The crash of a Russian military cargo plane near the border with Ukraine — which Russia said killed 65 Ukrainian POWs — had thrown doubt on future prisoner swaps between the two sides.

President Vladimir Putin said it was "obvious" Ukraine shot it down, and on Wednesday claimed Kyiv's forces used a US Patriot system to do so.

"This has already been established by forensics," Putin said in a televised appearance.

Despite the tension, both sides made simultaneous announcements hailing the latest

agreement on Wednesday to free more than 400 people captured during the course of the two-year war.

Embed:

Our people are back. 207 of them. We return them home no matter what.

We remember each Ukrainian in captivity. Both warriors and civilians. We must bring all of them back. We are working on it.

The Ukrainian team has done another excellent job. Budanov, Yermak, Usov, Maliuk,... pic.twitter.com/ZNNdTz3mKO

— Volodymyr Zelenskyy / Володимир Зеленський (@ZelenskyyUa) [January 31, 2024](#)

Russia's Defense Ministry said 195 of its soldiers were freed, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said 207 people — both soldiers and civilians — had returned to Ukraine.

"Our people are back. 207 of them. We return them home no matter what," Zelensky said in a social media post.

'We will release all our people'

In his daily evening address, Zelensky added that a total of over 3,000 Ukrainian POWs have now returned home.

"They have different ranks and experience. All are equally important for Ukraine," Zelensky stressed.

"We will release all our people in the same way. And this is our duty," he added.

The exchange was brokered by the United Arab Emirates — which has played a role in several previous swaps — Moscow said.

Ukraine said the youngest soldier returning home was 20, while the oldest was 61.

The freed Ukrainians include those who fought in Mariupol and on Snake Island — a scrubby rock in the Black Sea that secured worldwide fame when the Ukrainians stationed there issued an expletive-laden radio message to Russian attackers.

50th swap

The announcement of the swap — in a flurry of statements and photos released simultaneously by Moscow and Kyiv — contrasted sharply with the rhetoric surrounding last week's crash.

Zelensky has accused Moscow of "playing with the lives of Ukrainian prisoners" while Moscow says Ukraine committed a "terrorist act."

Uncertainty remains after the Russian plane crashed in a fireball in the western Belgorod region on Jan. 24.

Moscow says it was ferrying 65 Ukrainian POWs on the way to a scheduled exchange.

Putin claimed last week Kyiv knew dozens of its soldiers could have been on board, an accusation Ukraine has fiercely rejected.

Ukraine has not outright denied Moscow's version of events, but questioned whether captured Ukrainian soldiers were actually on board and said Moscow never told it in advance that POWs would be flown near the border.

Officials in Kyiv have called for Moscow to publish photos of the dead POWs' bodies or provide other evidence to back up its claims.

Wednesday's exchange — which took place exactly a week after the plane was shot down — was the 50th swap between the two sides since Russia invaded in February 2022, Kyiv said.

Ukraine said more than 3,000 POWs have now been returned. A similar number of Russians have also been freed, with most exchanges based on a one-for-one format.

Thousands who have been captured or surrendered throughout the nearly two-year war are thought to still be in captivity.

'Not stopping'

On the battlefield, both sides reported ongoing fights for territory across the sprawling frontline.

Oleksandr Shtupun, a spokesman for Ukraine's army, said Ukraine's forces were "firmly on the defensive" in the eastern Donetsk region.

"The enemy has not stopped trying to surround Avdiivka," he said in an interview with state TV.

Russian forces have been trying to capture the strategic town — which Ukrainians see as a symbol of resistance — for months.

Putin on Wednesday appeared to confirm Russia was moving in on the town, claiming Moscow's troops had captured 19 houses on its outskirts.

Its forces fired a barrage of drones and missiles across Ukraine overnight in another round of aerial bombardment.

On the diplomatic front, Kyiv is hoping for a breakthrough this week over unlocking 50 billion euros (\$54.2 billion) of aid from the EU.

EU leaders will meet on Thursday to discuss future support for Kyiv, hoping to reach a final agreement over a massive four-year financial aid package that was blocked by Hungary last year.

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