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Everything We Know About the Deadly Ukrainian Strike in Occupied Luhansk

By Moscow Times Reporter

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glava_lnr_info / MAX

The Kremlin on Monday condemned a Ukrainian strike on a college in the Russian-occupied town of Starobilsk in eastern Ukraine, calling it a "barbaric terrorist attack on young people."

Russia said at least 21 people were killed in the overnight strike, which hit a college dormitory housing 86 teenagers aged 14 to 18, and described it as one of the deadliest Ukrainian drone barrages in months.

Ukraine denied targeting civilians, saying it had hit a Russian drone unit stationed near the town.

Here is what we know about what happened — and the competing claims that surround it.

The attack

The strike took place overnight on Thursday to Friday in Starobilsk, a town in the Russia-annexed Luhansk region with a population of around 16,500 people located about 65 kilometers from the front line.

The four-hour attack caused the collapse of the academic building and dormitory of Starobilsk College, part of Luhansk Pedagogical University, Russia said.

Video published by the Foreign Ministry showed what remained of a section of the five-story college building.

The victims were born between 2003 and 2008, according to a casualty list released by the ministry.

Embed:

> Кадры из Старобельска — иностранные журналисты наблюдают разрушения, вызванные атакой киевского режима на общежитие и корпус колледжа Луганского государственного педагогического университета в г.Старобельске (ЛНР).
>
> Погиб 21 человек, более 40 ранены.#БезСрокаДавности pic.twitter.com/ambWcyGLPw
>
> — МИД России (@MID_RF) May 24, 2026

Eyewitnesses interviewed by the Kommersant business daily described "drones buzzing in the sky" and said that "explosions were constantly rumbling."

Yelena, a 31-year-old teacher at the college, recalled telling students that "our only goal is to survive" as she led around 30 teenagers out of the building.

Maxim, 17, who was hospitalized with injuries after the attack, told Kommersant that he had been studying with four other people in his dorm room on the fifth floor on the night of the strike.

He said he and his classmates went out into the hallway, which is considered a safer part of the building, when the drone attack started.

"I was covered by debris from the first strike. I got out on my own, saw girls trapped under rubble and started helping," he said. "I fell from the fifth floor down to the second. Just as I tried to stand up, a brick fell on my head. Then I heard the drone again. I suddenly stood up, took one step and a blast wave threw me outside."

Russian-installed authorities in the Luhansk region declared Sunday and Monday days of

mourning.

Moscow's reaction

Russia's Foreign Ministry said "the strike could not have been accidental" and that there were no military facilities near the college.

"It was a deliberate attack against the civilian population, carried out in a manner reminiscent of German Nazis," the ministry said in a statement on Friday, invoking the Kremlin talking point that compares Kyiv's leadership to Nazi Germany.

Newly appointed human rights commissioner Yana Lantratova, who visited Starobilsk after the attack, said the building was attacked by 16 drones and claimed that the Ukrainian Armed Forces "waited for the children to run out" as they tried to escape and "struck again and again."

Related article: Russian Foreign Ministry Issues Fresh Warning of Retaliatory Strikes on Kyiv

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Sunday that Russia organized a visit for 50 accredited foreign correspondents to the site of the attack in Starobilsk.

Zakharova added the trip was made to prevent spreading what she called "blatant Western lies" about the attack.

Moscow has passed wartime censorship laws since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and it is virtually impossible for Russian and foreign independent journalists to report in the occupied territories.

The Kremlin said Monday that it "has noted that a number of Western media outlets have decided not to go there for various reasons."

"This does not add credibility to the information they are preparing, and of course does not allow them to call themselves objective media in covering what is happening around [the war in] Ukraine," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

"We have not heard any official statements condemning Kyiv" regarding the strike, Peskov said.

On Sunday, Russia pounded Kyiv with a large-scale attack, with Moscow unleashing its nuclear-capable hypersonic Oreshnik missile.

The Ukrainian Air Force said the raid involved 600 drones and 90 missiles, of which 549 drones and 55 missiles were intercepted. Local officials said four people were killed and more than 100 were wounded in Kyiv and the surrounding region.

On Monday, the Foreign Ministry said the Starobilsk attack "was the final straw" and Russia was beginning "a series of systematic strikes on Ukraine's military-industrial infrastructure, decision-making centers and command posts.

It advised foreign nationals, including diplomatic staff and employees of international organizations, to leave the city “as soon as possible.”

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> Уполномоченная по правам человека в России Я.В.Лантратова на месте трагедии в Старобельске:
>
> С точки зрения международного гуманитарного права это военное преступление.
>
> Надеюсь на объективную оценку со стороны международной общественности
>
> Комментарий: https://t.co/ATfdhrdvp4 pic.twitter.com/vrrFIP2XF7
>
> — МИД России (@MID_RF) May 24, 2026

Ukraine denies targeting civilians

Kyiv has denied targeting civilians in Starobilsk.

“The Armed Forces of Ukraine strike military infrastructure and facilities used for military purposes,” the Ukrainian military said in a statement.

It added that Ukraine’s army was “strictly observing the norms of international humanitarian law, the laws and customs of war."

Ukraine also said it hit a number of Russian facilities overnight on Thursday to Friday, including an oil refinery, ammunition depots and air defense systems.

It said its intended target in Starobilsk was Russia’s Rubicon Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies — a Defense Ministry unit for advanced drone technology involved in drone operations against Ukraine.

International reaction

The attack has prompted international concern, although Ukraine’s allies noted that Russia has routinely struck cities and civilian sites during the four-year full-scale invasion.

At an emergency UN Security Council meeting requested by Moscow, the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict said that “civilians, children, humanitarian personnel and civilian infrastructure — including schools and hospitals — must never be targeted.”

France likewise said that “the deaths of innocent children are always unacceptable,” calling

for an independent inquiry while also accusing Moscow of bombarding Ukrainian cities daily with "utter disregard for civilian life."

Other Western countries noted that it is impossible to independently verify alleged violations of international humanitarian law in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

At the UN meeting, Latvia stressed that "the UN can verify casualties and international law violations only on Ukrainian-controlled territory" and said that Moscow denies UN access to the territories it occupies.

Britain said that "the incident has not been objectively or independently verified" and added that "there would be no civilian deaths if Russia had not launched its illegal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine."

AFP contributed reporting.

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