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## RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN EASTERN UKRAINE: SELECTED EVIDENCE

### A staff contribution on the basis of open sources\*

#### *Introduction: Kremlin's duplicity over Crimea*

The denial by the Kremlin of any military involvement in Eastern Ukraine in the face of presented evidence to the contrary was rehearsed a year ago in the context of events leading to the annexation of Crimea. For weeks and months, the Russian leaders denied Russian military involvement there. In early March 2014, President Putin stated that his country had not recently deployed any troops to Crimea and had no plans to annex the peninsula. When asked about the identity of the troops that had appeared in Crimea and were generally assumed to be clandestine Russian soldiers without insignia, President Putin told a press conference that they were “local militias” wearing Russian-style fatigues because such attire is available in army shops across the former Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

In April 2014, however, President Putin admitted that the armed men in military uniform without insignia, dubbed “*the little green men*” or “*the polite people*,” were present in Crimea before and during the farcical referendum held on 16 March 2014. Contradicting his earlier statements, President Putin claimed that he never concealed this fact from his foreign counterparts, and explained to them that it was the only way to ensure that the referendum on the region’s status would be carried out peacefully. “*Crimean self-defense forces were of course backed by Russian servicemen*,” President Putin said. “*They acted very appropriately, but as I’ve already said decisively and professionally.*”

**\*Disclaimer:** The objective of this paper is not to capture all available evidence but rather to draw upon sources from various aspects. It is a living document, subject to further updates and amendments.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20140304/188087074/Putin-Denies-Sending-Russian-Troops-to-Crimea.html#ixzz3TPT13b1Y>

Despite his own statements to the contrary, President Putin recently admitted that he initiated the plan to annex Crimea right after the ouster of President Yanukovich on 22 February 2014, long before the illegal referendum held in Crimea on 16 March.<sup>2</sup>

A similar approach to the one taken in Crimea is now being pursued in Eastern Ukraine where Russian representatives are flatly denying any military involvement. “As for Russian tanks, allegedly crossing Russian-Ukrainian border, we've commented on this before -- there are no Russian tanks or army in Ukraine, such accusations are not true,” Dmitry Peskov, the spokesperson of President Putin, told CNN in early February 2015.<sup>3</sup> When admitting in August 2014 that Russian troops may have been on Ukrainian territory, President Putin implausibly claimed that they were there either by mistake or as volunteers.<sup>4</sup>

### **Eastern Ukraine: Selected Eyewitness Accounts and Media Reports**

The Kremlin rhetoric suggesting that the Russian military has had no role in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is contradicted by available evidence from both open and classified sources that confirms that Russian army units have been and continue to be deployed in Eastern Ukraine. The following eyewitness/media accounts and circumstantial evidence are available, among others:

- A report by Ilya Barabanov in Kommersant on 19 February 2015. According to Barabanov, Russian soldiers “without insignia” similar to the little green men were fighting in Debaltseve and other locations in Ukraine’s disputed territory. The soldiers are not volunteers but regular troops on a “perpetual mission.” Soldiers are brainwashed to believe they are defending “freedom-loving Donbass” from “Western aggression” and “Ukrainian fascists.” Measures are also apparently taken to conceal any evidence of the Russian military presence in Ukraine by, for example, deploying local coal miners to stand as guards at roadblocks before journalists are allowed to enter separatist-controlled areas.<sup>5</sup>

- On 2 March, the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, one of Russia's few remaining sources of independent journalism, published an interview with Dordzhi Batomunkuyev, a Russian soldier assigned to a tank unit sent with his battalion to regain Russian control of Debaltseve. A conscript on a three-year contract, Batomunkuyev was injured on 19 February in the village of Logvinovo, a key point on the Artemivsk-Debaltseve highway and part of the so-called “Debaltseve boiler.” According to Batomunkuyev, although his commanders told him and his fellow soldiers that they would be taking part in a training exercise and did not explicitly mention Ukraine, everyone knew where they would go. In Ulan-Ude, the soldiers painted over identifying symbols on the tanks and later, patches identifying them as Russian soldiers were removed from their uniforms. According to Batomunkuyev, the battalion he was with that crossed the border into Ukraine consisted of 31 tanks and around 120 men.<sup>6</sup> The story was verified by the Bellingcat group.<sup>7</sup> The Novaya Gazeta report suggests a pattern

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<sup>2</sup> Documentary Film 'Crimea: Road to the motherland' broadcast on Rossiya 1 Television on 15 March 2015. The trailer can be watched at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=rCIGAE-Vv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=rCIGAE-Vv); see also <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-31796226>

<sup>3</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/05/europe/ukraine-conflict/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.interfax.ru/world/393407>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2671088>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/monitoring/siberians-join-the-fight-in-ukraine>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/67490.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/03/11/vreditel-sobaka/>

of soldiers from Russian military formations being sent to military drills in the Rostov Oblast and then ending up in Ukraine a few days later.<sup>8</sup>

- Some of the separatist leaders have in fact been quite open about the presence of Russian soldiers in Ukraine while implausibly claiming that they are freelancers. [In a reported interview](#) with a Russian state television station, self-proclaimed prime minister of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic Alexander Zakharchenko said "Among us are fighting serving [Russian] soldiers, who would rather take their vacation not on a beach but with us, among brothers, who are fighting for their freedom."<sup>9</sup>

- The stories confirming a Russian military presence in Ukraine have been indirectly corroborated by the reported deaths of Russian soldiers and the efforts by the Russian authorities to cover up their secret burials. For example, Russian journalists investigating the burials of troopers from the Pskov-based 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division were threatened and then assaulted when they entered a cemetery where the soldiers were reportedly buried.<sup>10</sup> When requested by Pskov Duma Deputy Lev Schlosberg to provide information into the deaths of the Pskov soldiers, the Russian Chief Military Prosecutor General confirmed that a number of troops from the Pskov division had recently perished "outside of their base" but refused to elaborate on the circumstances of their deaths as such information was deemed to be a state secret.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, President Putin honored the Pskov division with the Suvorov medal in August 2014 – an award given only for achievements in combat. According to Valentina Melnikova, Head of the Soldiers' Mothers' Committee, by September 2014, 3500 Russian soldiers had perished in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

## Satellite Imagery

In April 2014, NATO provided satellite imagery of a build-up of Russian troops and equipment along the Ukrainian border. Russia reacted to the imagery by dismissing it as showing a military exercise from 2013 – a claim that was debunked by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a non-profit organization.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, when NATO ACO published satellite imagery in August of a Russian military convoy that had crossed into Ukraine, Russia ridiculed it by suggesting it had been taken from a computer game.<sup>14</sup>

Analyzing satellite images as well as videos from social media, local media reports and the shifting maps of the ongoing conflict, the *Bellingcat investigation team* has determined that there is compelling evidence that the artillery attacks on Ukrainian territory and against Ukrainian armed forces that occurred in the summer of 2014 originated from the territory of Russia.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/02/10/2014/542c0dcfcbb20f5d06c1d87a>; <http://www.dw.de/evidence-mounting-of-russian-troops-in-ukraine/a-18294255>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/28/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-soldiers-idUSKBN0GS0N120140828>; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/28/russians-troops-fighting-in-ukraine-now-just-on-vacation/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28949582>

<sup>11</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pskov\\_deaths.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pskov_deaths.jpg)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.interpretermag.com/3500-russian-soldiers-died-in-putins-war-in-ukraine-rights-activists-say/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.aaas.org/news/aaas-analysis-confirms-nato-findings-russian-buildup-near-ukraine-border>

<sup>14</sup> <http://aco.nato.int/new-satellite-imagery-exposes-russian-combat-troops-inside-ukraine.aspx>;

<http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/kremlin-satellite-images-russian-troops-computer-games-n191771>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/02/17/origin-of-artillery-attacks/>

## Ukrainian Sources

The Ukrainian authorities have presented a great deal of evidence pointing to the presence of Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

In a joint operation with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, SBU military counterintelligence succeeded in detaining a Russian mercenary working with the separatist militia after the T-64 tank he was operating was destroyed near the village of Sanzharivka in the Luhansk region. The tank driver, Gadzhiev, was determined to be a Russian citizen born in 1973 from the village of Levokumskoie in the Levokumskii district of Russia's Stavropol Krai. According to his own confession, Gadzhiev was recruited by Russian law enforcement officers, illegally brought into the territory of Ukraine with the help of Russian border guards, and then enlisted in an illegal separatist military formation under the command of Russian officers, where he was provided with arms.<sup>16</sup>

At the Munich Security Conference in February, President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko presented military IDs and passports captured from Russian soldiers fighting on Ukrainian territory.<sup>17</sup>

The Ukrainian media has also publicized a significant amount of proof of the Russian presence in Ukraine. Censor.net created a database containing evidence of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. As of 16 March, 372 news pieces, 19 articles, 244 photo stories, and 119 video reports both in Russian and English can be accessed on the site. The Censor.net database is constantly updated.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the latest stories documented by Censor.net:

11 March 2015: "MajGen Alexei Zavizjon of Russian Armed Forces commanded the shelling of Mariupol."<sup>19</sup>

10 March 2015: "Russian grenade launcher operator Gleb Sokolov of Ekaterinburg is fighting in Donbass."<sup>20</sup>

27 February 2015: "Destroyed Russian Grenade launchers Grad used in Donbass were found near Murmansk, Russia."<sup>21</sup>

## Western Sources

The Western media has likewise extensively offered or covered evidence of Russia's presence in Ukraine. Following are excerpts from recent examples:

- "Struggle to pierce wall of silence on Russian casualties in Ukraine" (Financial Times, 6 March 2015): "Several months after Russian soldiers appeared in Ukraine's Donbass regions, President Vladimir Putin continues to deny that his country is at war... Increasingly this wall of silence is being pierced by photos and videos from the battlefield, by soldiers' anonymous accounts shared on social media, and even by the occasional Russian media report."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.sbu.gov.ua/sbu/control/uk/publish/article?art\\_id=136669&cat\\_id=39574](http://www.sbu.gov.ua/sbu/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=136669&cat_id=39574)

<sup>17</sup> <http://112.ua/politika/poroshenko-v-myunhene-pokazal-pasporta-rossiyskih-soldat-kotorye-zabludilis-v-ukraine-186420.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://en.censor.net.ua/theme/399/Evidence+of+Russian+aggression+in+Ukraine>

<sup>19</sup> [http://censor.net.ua/photo\\_news/328074/obstrelami\\_kramatorska\\_i\\_mariupolya\\_rukovodil\\_generalmayior\\_ar\\_mii\\_rf\\_alekseji\\_zavizon\\_sbu\\_foto](http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/328074/obstrelami_kramatorska_i_mariupolya_rukovodil_generalmayior_ar_mii_rf_alekseji_zavizon_sbu_foto)

<sup>20</sup> [http://censor.net.ua/photo\\_news/327897/rossiyiskiyi\\_granatometchik\\_gleb\\_sokolov\\_iz\\_ekaterinburga\\_voyuet\\_na\\_donbasse\\_fotoreportaj](http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/327897/rossiyiskiyi_granatometchik_gleb_sokolov_iz_ekaterinburga_voyuet_na_donbasse_fotoreportaj)

<sup>21</sup> [http://censor.net.ua/photo\\_news/326467/razbitye\\_rossiyiskie\\_grady\\_s\\_donbassa\\_nashlis\\_pod\\_murmanskom\\_fotoreportaj](http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/326467/razbitye_rossiyiskie_grady_s_donbassa_nashlis_pod_murmanskom_fotoreportaj)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/32fba6ee-c31a-11e4-9c27-00144feab7de.html#axzz3UBPv47bX>

- “‘It is a Government Crime’: The Coffins of Russia’s Ghost Soldiers in Ukraine are Coming Home” (Vice News, 3 March 2015): “‘When were they planning to tell us what happened?’ asked one furious mother... ‘After a week? Two weeks? If it weren’t for the internet, we would have never found out...’ A group of tearful mothers held a press conference, begging Putin to bring home their sons.”<sup>23</sup>

## **International Organizations**

The view that Russia is directly involved in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has been shared by a number of international organizations.

In its February 2015 report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights stated: “Credible reports indicate a continuing flow of heavy weaponry and foreign fighters throughout the reporting period, including from the Russian Federation, into areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions controlled by armed groups. This has sustained and enhanced the capacity of armed groups of the self-proclaimed ‘Donetsk people’s republic’ and ‘Luhansk people’s republic’ to resist Government armed forces and to launch new offensives in some areas, including around the Donetsk airport, Mariupol and Debaltseve.”<sup>24</sup>

On 30 August, Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council said: “The European Council is extremely concerned by the intense fighting, the flows of fighters and weapons coming from Russia into Eastern Ukraine, and the presence and actions of Russian armed forces on Ukrainian soil.” On 16 February 2015, the European Council added Russian Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov to the list of persons subject to sanctions for his involvement “in supporting the deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine. According to the present Russian Ministry of Defence structure, in that capacity, he participates in shaping and implementing the policy of the Russian Government. These policies threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.”

On 5 March 2015, the European Union issued a statement on Russia’s Aggression against Ukraine and Violations of OSCE Principles and Commitments that reads: “... We call for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign armed formations, military equipment, as well as mercenaries from the territory of Ukraine under monitoring of the OSCE as well as disarmament of all illegal groups. We underline Russia’s responsibility in this regard...”<sup>25</sup>

## **Third Parties**

A number of independent organizations share the view that the Russian armed forces are heavily involved in the Ukraine conflict. While blaming all sides in the conflict for committing atrocities, Amnesty International in September 2014 stated that “according to the available information, Russia stirs up the conflict in Eastern Ukraine both by direct participation and support to the separatists.”<sup>26</sup>

In its report entitled “Eastern Ukraine: A Dangerous Winter”, the International Crisis Group states that in the summer of 2014, “the fears of total separatist defeat, which the Russian

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<sup>23</sup> <https://news.vice.com/article/it-is-a-government-crime-the-coffins-of-russias-ghost-soldiers-in-ukraine-are-coming-home>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/9thOHCHRreportUkraine.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna/documents/eu\\_osce/permanent\\_council/2015/pc\\_1042\\_eu\\_on\\_ukraine\\_revised.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna/documents/eu_osce/permanent_council/2015/pc_1042_eu_on_ukraine_revised.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> <http://amnesty.org.ru/node/3055/>

specialists have likened to the 1995 destruction of the Serbian enclave of Krajina, triggered a major Russian military response.<sup>27</sup>

According to a comprehensive paper penned by Igor Sutyagin of the Royal United Services Institute, a large-scale intervention in Eastern Ukraine by regular Russian troops began last August, reaching a peak in December. The report says that a total of 42,000 Russian troops from 117 combat and combat-support units have been involved in the Ukraine conflict.<sup>28</sup>

### **Selected Material Evidence of Russian Military Presence in Ukraine**

The following pieces of equipment, among others, pointing to a Russian presence have been identified on Ukrainian territory:<sup>29</sup>

- Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) such as Orlan (used by the Russian Army since 2013), Tachion (planned to be introduced in the Russian armed forces in 2014 and is still being tested) and Granat (Granat 1 and Granat 4) that only the Russian army possesses;
- Air defence system Pantsir (SA-22 Greyhound) was identified as being used by the separatists in November 2014 and again in January and February 2015. The system is in the possession of the Russian armed forces as well as those of Algeria, Syria and the United Arab Emirates;
- Armoured personnel vehicles BRT82A and BRT82AM used by the separatists as captured in video footage dating back to August 2014. These vehicles are only used by Russia and Kazakhstan;
- Versions of T-72 tanks in quantities that would only be available to the Russian armed forces. There is little evidence supporting the claim that the separatists had any tanks prior to the August offensive in which Russian troops were heavily involved. While the Ukrainian armed forces do have some T-72s (and this could in theory support the claim that some had been seized by the separatists), these were not in active use and were mainly either mothballed or sold abroad. The backbone of the Ukrainian armed forces consists of T-64 tanks (which are no longer used by the Russians). In particular, the very identifiable version T-72B3 (used only by the Russian armed forces) was captured in video footage dating from August 2014. A number of T-72B3s with white stripes (used by the separatists) were destroyed by Ukrainian forces on Ukrainian territory. T-72B3 tanks were also captured in footage made by Graham Phillips around Debaltsevo in February 2015;
- In addition, on 20 August 2014, an airborne combat vehicle (ACV), number 275, was captured near Luhansk. According to documents, it belongs to the 1st company (or the 7th) of the Russian 76th Airborne Troops division;
- While assaulting the Donetsk airport on 14 January 2015, separatist militants used the "Meteorite" (УР-77 "Метеорит"/ "Meteorite" UR-77) explosive mine clearing system. Meteorite" UR-77 is a soviet mine clearing system created on the basis of the

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<sup>27</sup><http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2014/europe/eastern-ukraine-a-dangerous-winter.aspx>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201503\\_BP\\_Russian\\_Forces\\_in\\_Ukraine\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201503_BP_Russian_Forces_in_Ukraine_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.armadinoviny.cz/dukazy-ruske-vojenske-intervence-na-ukrajine.html>;

<https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/2015/02/03/ukraine-conflict-vehicle-tracking-launch/>;

<http://www.janes.com/article/48685/russian-tos-1-and-pantsyr-s1-systems-reported-in-east-ukraine>;

<http://www.armamentresearch.com/russian-96k6-pantsir-s1-air-defence-system-in-ukraine/>

self-propelled howitzer 2С1 "Gvozdika" (2С1 «Гвоздика»/ 2S1 Gvozdika). The system is possessed only by the Russian armed forces;<sup>30</sup>

- Two multifunctional electronic intelligence collection systems and electronic warfare system МКТК-1А "Dzyudoyst" (МКТК-1А Judoist ECM vehicle) were spotted in the area of the city of Luhansk on 14 February 2015. A mobile automated system of technical control, electronic simulation and jamming countermeasures, the "Dzyudoyst" (Judoist) is designed to analyze and assess the electromagnetic environment, search for interference sources, assess the level of security of objects from information leaks by technical channels, and monitor the protection level against radio intelligence collection and electronic intelligence. The system was adopted by the Russian armed forces (Strategic Missile Forces and Airborne Forces troupes) in 2013.<sup>31</sup>

On 21 February, an exhibition entitled "Presence. Proofs of Russian troops' aggression on the territory of Ukraine" was opened in Kyiv. The exhibition presents many items mentioned above such as drones and grenade launchers captured by Ukrainian militaries in the course of the operation in Debaltseve.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://inforesist.org/rossiyane-ispolzuyut-ur-77-meteorit-vo-vremya-shturma-doneckogo-aeroporto-ekspert/>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.military-informant.com/news/7884-v-luganske-obnaruzhili-kompleks-radioelektronnoj-borby-mktk-1a-dzyudoist.html>