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WORLD

Ukrainian-Backed Troops Stage Cross-Border Incursion Into Russia

Ukrainian military intelligence identifies fighters as two volunteer groups of Russian citizens

By *Matthew Luxmoore* [Follow](#) and *Georgi Kantchev* [Follow](#)

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KYIV, Ukraine—Russia said that its military and security forces were fighting against Ukrainian units that had crossed into its southern Belgorod region, the largest such incursion into Russian territory since the war began.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was briefed on the situation by the military and security services, according to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, as Moscow appeared to be caught off guard.

Peskov said Russia had sufficient forces to eject what he described as a commando unit. Regional authorities said they were evacuating civilians from border villages and announced emergency security measures known as a “counter-terrorist operation.”

Ukraine’s military intelligence directorate, known as HUR, identified the troops as two volunteer groups of Russian citizens who work closely with HUR and said that the incident was a consequence of the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine.

The extent of the incursion couldn’t immediately be established, but videos of armed men and armored vehicles that spread online appeared to indicate that the troops had taken control of several villages along the border. One grainy shot, which appeared to have been filmed in front of a sign marking the entrance to a village in the Belgorod region, showed four soldiers who identified themselves as members of the Russian Volunteer Corps.

“Russia will soon be free,” one of them says. The video couldn’t immediately be verified.

The incursion is a stunning reversal for Russia, which launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February last year with the aim of seizing control of the country in days.

The events on Monday echoed Russia's covert invasion of Ukraine in 2014 when Russian troops without insignia appeared on Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Putin denied they were Russians and said at the time that all the equipment they had could easily be bought in a military hardware store.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, appeared to mock that statement on Twitter in a post denying Ukrainian government involvement in the Belgorod incursion.

"As you know, tanks are sold at any Russian military store, and underground guerrilla groups are composed of Russian citizens," he tweeted.



Medics help a wounded Ukrainian soldier near Bakhmut. PHOTO: LIBKOS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

One of the clips posted on Monday showed two men clad in military fatigues bearing the logo of the Russian Volunteer Corps, a paramilitary group fighting on Kyiv's side in Ukraine.

"The key to the border is broken in half," one of the men says, quoting the lyrics of a cult Russian song. "And grandpa Putin will soon turn into linden honey."

A spokesman for HUR, Andriy Chernyak, said the aim of the operation was to create a buffer zone to protect Ukrainian civilians.

"We expect that such actions will become more frequent," he said.

Belgorod announced emergency measures including restrictions on free movement aimed at ensuring the safety of residents, the region's governor, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said. Gladkov said most residents had left areas where fighting was taking place, and those who had no means to leave were being evacuated by the state.

Kremlin spokesman Peskov said the purpose of the incident was to divert attention from the situation in the city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine, which Moscow claimed to have fully captured over the weekend.

The incursion comes as Ukraine gears up for an offensive aimed at taking back some of its territory that has been occupied by Russia and has in recent weeks taken measures to gain an edge, including by striking Russian military barracks and supply depots well behind the front lines. Military strategists say Ukraine is likely to pursue operations that would knock Russia off balance and force them to divert forces that would otherwise be used to man defensive lines in Ukraine.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the G-7 meeting in Japan over the weekend. PHOTO: POU/ZUMA PRESS

The surprise attack appears to be a larger operation than an incursion in March by a group of soldiers calling themselves Russian volunteers who took videos of themselves in a Russian village. Russia said two civilians were killed during that attack. Podolyak denied Kyiv's complicity.

As Russian forces sought on Monday to consolidate control of Bakhmut, their main target in recent months, Ukrainian troops mounted new offensives to the north and south aimed at encircling the city's new occupiers.

Moscow announced the capture of Bakhmut on Sunday, with state TV channels in Russia hailing it as "an event of historic proportions." But the city has been turned into ruins, leaving Russian troops taking up positions in bombed-out apartment blocks exposed to Ukrainian forces that have retreated to higher ground in and around the town of Chasiv Yar to the west.

Russia said Monday that it had begun demining operations in Bakhmut, and state newswire TASS reported that only several dozen residents remained in the city, once

home to more than 70,000 people. Ukraine said Russia was bringing reinforcements into the city.

“The defense of Bakhmut is fulfilling its goals,” said Hanna Maliar, Ukraine’s deputy defense minister. “The enemy’s offensive potential has significantly fallen and it has suffered enormous losses. We have won time for certain operations.”

Ukraine’s ground forces commander, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskiy, said his forces would re-enter Bakhmut if the situation there changes, and touted recent Ukrainian advances on the flanks that had captured areas of high ground and brought Kyiv’s military closer to a tactical encirclement of Russia’s forces in the city.

“Thanks to this we can control all high-rise buildings taken by the enemy, and gradually destroy them. That will deprive the enemy of control over entrances into the city,” Syrskiy said.

Gen. Serhiy Cherevatiy, the spokesman for the Eastern Group of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, said Monday that Ukraine is actively advancing on the southern and northern flanks and had captured between 250 and 400 meters in several directions overnight into Monday. It now holds several areas of high ground, especially to the southwest.

“We are moving forward carefully. We don’t have an advantage in manpower,” he said.

Ukraine had made a decision to hold on to Bakhmut despite calls from military experts and some of its own troops in February and March to withdraw from the city to save lives. Both sides have suffered thousands of casualties in the battle for Bakhmut, a city of limited strategic significance that has emerged in Ukraine as a symbol of the country’s defiance in the face of Russia’s invasion.

Russia made the capture of the entire Donbas area of eastern Ukraine its military priority, but has failed to make significant advances since stepping up a winter offensive at the start of the year. The U.K.’s Ministry of Defense on Monday said Russia was creating a new attack aviation group to operate jet fighters and attack helicopters over Ukraine, predominantly to conduct ground attack missions against Ukrainian forces.

The U.K. said the creation of such a group, alongside a parallel effort to attract highly skilled and motivated pilots by offering large pay incentives, shows that Russia assesses that its regular air force has severely underperformed in Ukraine.

On Monday, the International Atomic Energy Agency said that power to the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, Europe’s largest, had been cut off for the seventh time, forcing it to rely on diesel generators. Residents in the nearby town of Enerhodar,

which is close to the front line, said there had been shelling overnight. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said in a tweet that the nuclear-safety situation at the plant was “extremely vulnerable.” Energoatom, Ukraine’s state nuclear company, later said the plant had been reconnected.

Syrskiy and other Ukrainian commanders have made statements justifying the decision to keep fighting for Bakhmut, saying that continuing to defend the city would exhaust and deplete Russian forces, and prevent them from launching offensives elsewhere.

On Monday, Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner paramilitary group that spearheaded Russia’s campaign in Bakhmut, said all of his forces would leave the city by June 1 and urged the Russian Defense Ministry to find units to replace them.

“If there’s not enough manpower in the Defense Ministry, we have thousands of generals,” he said, continuing his war of words with the military top brass. “Create one regiment under a general, give them arms, and everything will be fine.”

Prigozhin has previously said tens of thousands of Wagner soldiers had been wounded or killed in Bakhmut. The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank that publishes daily analyses of the front-line situation in Ukraine, said on Sunday that it is unlikely Wagner could continue fighting beyond Bakhmut in its current depleted state.

“Their two main problems are heavy losses and an inability to replace them. If they don’t manage to replace them, they’ll have no other choice but to be destroyed,” said Cherevatiy.

With Ukrainian forces now occupying higher ground and Bakhmut in ruins, Russian forces stationed there will struggle to defend themselves against Ukrainian artillery and will need additional reinforcements to hold the city, according to defense analysts.

Mykola Bielieskov, a research fellow at the Kyiv-based National Institute for Strategic Studies, a government-backed think tank, said Ukraine now has a major advantage in holding higher ground overlooking Bakhmut but Russia’s use of drones can help it surveil Ukrainian formations otherwise out of view of Russian units in the city.

Write to Matthew Luxmoore at matthew.luxmoore@wsj.com and Georgi Kantchev at georgi.kantchev@wsj.com

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