

Ukrainian Paratroopers Found 'Fraternizing' in Crimea

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A Ukrainian paratrooper fires an anti-tank grenade launcher during a military drill near Zhytomyr.

Three Ukrainian paratroopers who had gone missing from their base near Crimea have turned up in the Russian-held peninsula, where they had supposedly traveled to “fraternize” with their Russian counterparts and treat them to watermelon and a few drinks, Moscow's Federal Security Service (FSB) said Monday.

Employees of the FSB border department detained the three soldiers on the peninsula under suspicions of illegally crossing the border, the FSB said Monday in a statement to Russian state-run TASS news agency.

The paratroopers — who served at a Ukrainian military base near Lake Sivash on the border with Crimea before they went missing this weekend — held no identification papers when they were detained, but said they carried “exceptionally peaceful” intentions, the statement

quoted them as saying.

“The Ukrainian servicemen reported that the decision to interact with Russian marines, whom they had repeatedly seen on the opposite shore of Sivash, came to them a day earlier while they were consuming alcoholic drinks,” the Russian border department said in its statement, TASS reported.

“Having woken up the next morning and having nothing else to do, the Ukrainian paratroopers fetched a watermelon, a slab of salo, and alcohol, which they buy from local residents, and went over to 'fraternize,'” the statement said.

Salo, or cured pork fat, is a traditional dish popular in both Russia and Ukraine.

Russian tabloid LifeNews published a video interview on Monday with the captured Ukrainian soldiers, in which one of the men says they had simply “walked up and wanted to chat” with Russian troops, indicating his weariness of the war.

“Who wants to go fight for nobody knows what?” the man, speaking Russian with a Ukrainian accent, told LifeNews. The Moscow Times could not verify the authenticity of the video.

The Ukrainian General Staff reported the soldiers missing on Sunday, saying in a statement that they had disappeared in the early hours of Saturday, after being relieved from their post and telling their comrades they intended to swim in a reservoir near the border.

Ukraine's military suggested the soldiers may have been abducted, saying in a statement that on the night of the disappearance, two unspecified Russian-made UAZ and Ural vehicles approached the border from the Crimean side and “probably illegally detained our servicemen,” reported Ukrainian news agency UNN

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry is still investigating the possibility of an “illegal transportation of our citizens to Crimea,” Yury Tandit, an adviser to the head of Ukraine's Security Service, was quoted by UNN as saying Monday.

He also expressed hope that Russia would “return our boys,” 112 Ukraina television station reported.

“The boys had no weapons on them,” Tandit told 112 Ukraina. “They have committed no crimes against Russian citizens, and it's impossible to accuse them of anything.”

Deputy prime minister of the Moscow-backed Crimean regional government Ruslan Balbek called for Russian investigators to look into whether the soldiers may have crossed the border

“for a meeting with agents or for planting a sabotage cache,” Russian state-run news agency RIA Novosti reported Monday.

Russia's FSB said the Ukrainian paratroopers wanted to eat, drink and “complain about the hardships of serving in the Ukrainian armed forces” to their Russian counterparts, TASS reported.

“This fact objectively demonstrates the senselessness of Ukrainian army units' presence on the border with Crimea, and [demonstrates] the lack of order on the Ukrainian border,” the statement said.

Russian annexed Crimea from Ukraine last year, and supports pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The conflict soured relations between Moscow and Kiev, and ties between Russia and the West are at their lowest level since the Cold War.

As the violence in Ukraine drags on for over a year, killing more than 6,800 people, according to a UN tally, and as the country's economy falls into disrepair, even Ukrainian paratroopers grow weary of continued conflict.

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