

Incursion, Desertion, Skirmish: What Really Happened in Crimea?

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Andrew Kravchenko / Reuters

Some time between Aug. 6 and 8, something was definitely up around the disputed Ukraine-Crimea border. There was some kind of incident — ❏

possibly gunfire,
possibly even
shelling, locals
were not
sure in
the early
hours of
Aug. 7.
There was
unconfirmed
information about
one Russian
soldier dead
and three
wounded. That
same day,
Russia shut
down its
cross border
controls. Reports
of military
build-up behind
the border
meanwhile filled
up social
networks.

On Aug.
10, Russia's
Federal
Security
Service
(FSB) [said in a statement](#) that
it
had "⊠"
averted
three
attempts
by
Ukrainian
military
units
to
enter
Crimean
territory." ⊠
According

to
the
Russian
side,
these
incursions
resulted
in
armed
confrontations
and
the
deaths
of
two
Russian
servicemen.
Seven
people
were
arrested,
it
was
claimed.

Soon after
the statement
followed an
unexpected
press
conference,
in
which P
resident
Vladimir
Putin
accused
Ukrainian
authorities of
resorting
to
terrorism.
He said that
Ukraine's
actions
would

not
be
left
unanswered.”
These
words
immediately
sparked
a
media
storm,
and
speculation
that
a
military
operation
against
Ukraine
was
about
to
begin.

But
what
really
happened
in
Crimea,
and
can
the
FSB's
claims
be
trusted?
The
Moscow
Times
reviews
several
versions
of
events
in
the

disputed
region.

Version

1. Incursion Planned and Sanctioned by the Ukrainian Government

According to
the FSB,
the confrontation
with Ukrainian
special forces
in Crimea
occurred
on
Aug.
6
near
to
the
disputed
border
in
Armyansk.
The
version
goes
thus:
on
Aug. 8,
the
Ukrainians
organized
two

incursion
attempts”
under
the
cover
of
fire
support
and
armored
vehicles
operated
by
the
Ukrainian
military.”
Two
Russian
soldiers
were shot
dead during
the operation.
FSB officers
detained a
group of
seven
Ukrainian
saboteurs”
in
possession
of
20
improvised
explosive
devices,
anti-personnel
and
anti-tank
mines,
as
well
as
some
special
forces
equipment
said
to

be
used
by
the
Ukrainian
military.
A
former
pro-Kiev
volunteer
fighter
from
eastern
Ukraine,
Yevgeny
Panov,
was
supposedly
among
those de
tained.

According to
unidentified
sources cited by
the Kommersant
newspaper, the
arrested group
had planned
several
explosions in
Crimea in
order to
damage the
region's
tourism industry.

Version

2.

Incursions

Sanctioned

by the U.S. State Department

With typical swagger, the head of Crimea declared that Ukrainian authorities would not “have the guts” to carry out terror attacks in Crimea. Instead, he put the blame squarely on the U.S. State Department.

“You can see the path [Ukrainian government] has chosen – the path of terror. ... But I am sure that it is not their own actions or incentives — the U.S. State Department is all over it, because Ukrainian officials wouldn't have the guts to carry out something like that,” Sergei Aksyonov said.

At the same time, Aksyonov later moved away from his anti-American claims, and called on his compatriots to “kill Ukrainian saboteurs” and “hang them along the border.”

Version 3. No Attacks from Ukraine

As expected, Ukraine dismissed the accusations, and described them as a “provocation” from the Russian side. Not a single intelligence officer has been detained by Russian law enforcement, said a spokesman for Ukrainian intelligence service, Vadim Skibitsky.

Claims of military support were scarcely credible, Skibitsky added: “If [Ukraine] had used heavy military hardware, armored transports, artillery batteries, trust me — Russia would have reported it immediately on Aug. 8, but there was no reaction.”

The U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, sided with Kiev.

“The U.S. government has seen nothing so far that corroborates Russian allegations of a 'Crimea incursion,' and Ukraine has strongly refuted them,” Pyatt wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. “And Russia has a record of frequently levying false accusations at Ukraine to deflect attention from its own illegal actions.”

Version

4. Russians Shooting Other Russians

According to the controversial Ukrainian politician and Interior Ministry advisor Anton Gerashchenko, there was indeed a law enforcement operation in Crimea. However, the cause was not Ukrainian insurgents, but Russian law enforcement who had targeted deserting Russian soldiers.

“A bunch of armed soldiers from a Russian military station have deserted, there was a skirmish, and now [Russians] are trying to catch them,” Gerashchenko told 112.Ukraine television. “The Russians are worried that the deserters may get to Ukraine and reveal valuable intelligence about the situation in Crimea and the level of morale in local military,” he said.

Moreover, some local media reported Crimean law enforcement distributing wanted notices for five “criminals” wearing military uniform with a Russian flag on it. The men had “committed a high-level crime in the town of Armyansk,” according to the reports. Other outlets, however, published similar wanted notices, supposedly looking for insurgents from the Ukrainian intelligence services.

On Thursday Aug. 11, the head of Ukrainian intelligence, Viktor Kondratyuk, confirmed that a shootout had taken place in Crimea, but said that it was between members of the Russian armed forces and the FSB's border guard service. Kondratyuk's version did not specify whether it had anything to do with deserted soldiers.

Version

5. Kidnapping

While both Russia and Ukraine were busy arguing their version of events, Igor Kotelyanets, brother of Yevgeny Panov, one of the arrestees, told journalists he believed his brother had been kidnapped and transferred to Crimea against his will. Panov had nothing to do with the Ukrainian Defense Ministry or intelligence services, his brother said. Last week, he had taken several days off to visit friends in the Zaporozhye region in eastern Ukraine. “Crimea was off-limits to him,” Kotelyanets told the Krym Reali news outlet. “He always said he would go only when it had been returned to Ukraine.”

Several hours after his interview, Russian state media reported that Panov had already confessed and pleaded guilty to charges of terrorism.

Meanwhile, both Russia and Ukraine announced they would be building up security military presence around the disputed Crimean border.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/08/11/crimea-a54963>