

Shootout in Crimea: Russia's "Anti-terrorism Agency" (FSB) vs Ukrainian Saboteurs

The FSB interception of Ukrainian sabotage groups attempting to infiltrate Crimea raise tensions.

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Anyone who has been following Ukraine related news over the last few days will be aware of reports of Russian troop movements in Crimea, of a shoot out there between the Russian security forces and alleged Ukrainian infiltrators which left several people dead, and of claims that Ukrainian sabotage groups had attempted to infiltrate the peninsula.

On 10th August 2016 came final confirmation of the incident from Russia's counterintelligence and anti terrorism agency, the FSB (full statement attached below). It reported separate incidents involving three Ukrainian sabotage groups connected to the Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine's Defence Ministry, shoot outs between FSB operatives and the Russian military and the Ukrainian military across the border line, and the deaths of one FSB operative and of one Russian soldier caught up in the shoot outs.

Other reports speak of the death of at least two Ukrainian infiltrators, and of the capture of several others, which claims however the FSB report does not confirm. The FSB report does however speak of twenty improvised explosive devices containing more than 40 kilograms of TNT equivalent, ammunition, fuses, antipersonnel and magnetic bombs, grenades and the Ukrainian armed forces' standard special weapons being found in one of the locations involved in the incident.

The FSB report also says that several Ukrainian and Russian citizens belonging to an undercover spy ring operating inside Crimea have been arrested on charges of planning to help the saboteurs. The FSB has named the ringleader as Yevgeny Panov, a resident of Ukraine's Zaporozhye region born in 1977, who the FSB says is an employee of the Ukrainian Defence Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate. Presumably he has been working in Crimea for some time under cover. The FSB says it has arrested him and that he is "giving evidence".

The FSB has not identified the targets of the saboteurs other than saying that they were "critical infrastructure and life support facilities on the peninsula". Some Russian media reports have suggested that the intention was to create "false flag" incidents that would set Crimea's Tatar and Russian communities against each other. The reference to "critical infrastructure and life support facilities on the peninsula" does not however support this. Rather it suggests an attempt to disrupt power supplies and possibly water treatment plants at the height of Crimea's tourist season and on the eve of the elections.

The Ukrainians for their part deny all these allegations, claiming that the whole incident has

been invented by the Russians. The Western media, predictably enough, is following the Ukrainian line with [wild speculations that the Russians have fabricated the whole incident in order to justify a Russian invasion of Ukraine](#) during the Olympic Games.

Whilst the full truth of this incident will only become known over time – when or if people like Panov are put on trial – there is actually no reason to doubt that the Russian account is true. The Russians are hardly likely to arrange the death of one of their own FSB operatives and of one of their soldiers in order to fabricate an incident like this, and the report of the capture of several of the saboteurs, and the confirmation of the arrest of the members of the spy ring which was created to support them, all but confirms that the Russian claims about this incident are true. Indeed given that Ukrainian leaders frequently speak of Ukraine being at war with Russia it is not difficult to see why they might authorise a sabotage mission of this sort in order to disrupt elections which would confirm the extent of Crimea's integration into Russia. Presumably the Ukrainian plan was to claim that the attacks were the result of local anti-Russian resistance cells, thereby fostering the fiction that there is opposition within Crimea to its unification with Russia. It has been a cause of serious embarrassment to the Ukrainian leadership and its Western backers that there has been no real evidence of such opposition up to now. The sabotage mission appears to have been intended to “correct” this.

Two days ago [I reported about a meeting Putin had with his security chiefs](#) which appeared to have been hurriedly convened in a secret location. I speculated that the meeting was held to discuss the situation in Aleppo. Whilst Aleppo undoubtedly was discussed at this meeting as shown by the presence of Foreign Minister Lavrov and the Kremlin's account of the meeting – which referred to Putin's forthcoming meetings with foreign leaders, of whom the two most important were President Erdogan of Turkey and President Rouhani of Iran with whom the topic of Syria and Aleppo would certainly be discussed – the meeting between Putin and his security chiefs undoubtedly also discussed the situation in Crimea, and the reports of the Ukrainian sabotage mission there.

Might there have been any other purpose to this Ukrainian sabotage mission other than to create the appearance of instability in Crimea during the tourist season and during the coming election season? Putin in [the joint press conference](#) he held in Moscow following his meeting with Armenia's President Sargsyan linked the incident to [the attempted murder of Igor Plotnitsky](#), the leader of the Lugansk People's Republic. If true that would suggest that having despaired of a military victory the government in Kiev is now turning to assassination and sabotage tactics in order to keep the struggle with Russia going and to achieve its political goals. Alternatively it could be that the Ukrainians have carried out these operations in preparation for the summer offensive in the Donbass that has been much talked about but which has yet to happen, though it is not clear how planting bombs in Crimea could aid a military offensive in the Donbass. Yet another explanation is that the Ukrainians might be sensing a weakening in European support and might have launched the operation in order to heighten tensions and to rally support and to further undermine the Minsk II peace process.

My own opinion is that the most likely explanation for this frankly reckless action – which will cause serious embarrassment to some of Ukraine's European backers even if they are not prepared to say so publicly – is the chaotic condition of the Ukrainian power structure and the perennial infighting that goes on there. Given the luridly romantic language many members of the Maidan movement customarily like to indulge in I can easily see how the

sabotage operation in Crimea and the murder attempt on Plotnitsky - if the two are indeed connected - might have been planned by individuals in Kiev who might think that the success of such operations would increase their credibility and popularity within the Maidan movement and therefore their chances of achieving political success in Ukraine.

Whatever the precise motivations behind this incident Putin has made it very clear that the Russians are taking it extremely seriously. He has already said that there will no Normandy Four meeting with Merkel, Hollande and Poroshenko at the forthcoming G20 summit in China. Moreover and in contrast to what happened following the trial of [Savchenko](#), whose actions were carried out in the Donbass and therefore in territory the Russians continue to recognise as Ukrainian, I expect the Russians to be much slower to agree to prisoner exchanges of the Ukrainian operatives who were involved in this mission and who they accuse of carrying out or planning to carry out violent actions on Russian territory.

Here is [the text of the statement](#) describing the incidents which has been provided by the FSB:

“The Russian FSB averted terrorist acts in the Republic of Crimea that were being prepared by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine.

The Russian FSB averted terrorist acts in the Republic of Crimea that were being prepared by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, and which targeted certain critical infrastructure and life support facilities on the peninsula.

The goal of the attacks was the destabilisation of the socio-political situation on the peninsula prior to the approaching elections to the federal and regional governmental institutions.

The search operations carried out during the night of 6/7 August 2016 in the vicinity of the city of Armyansk, Republic of Crimea, uncovered a group of saboteurs. While attempting to detain the terrorists, an FSB operative was killed by enemy gunfire. The following was discovered on the scene: 20 improvised explosive devices with a total explosive power of 40kg TNT, munitions, special detonators, standard-issue anti-personnel and magnetic land mines, grenades, and special-issue weapons used by Ukrainian armed forces' special operations units.

The follow-on measures on the territory of the Republic of Crimea eliminated a network of agents operated by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Ukrainian and Russian citizens, engaged in the preparation of terrorist attacks, were arrested, and are now giving evidence. One of the organisers is Yevgeniy Aleksandrovich Panov, born 1977, an inhabitant of the Zaporozhye Region of Ukraine, an operative of the Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukrainian MOD, who has also been arrested and is giving evidence.

During the night of August 8, 2016, Ukrainian MOD special operations units attempted two more infiltrations by saboteur units which were prevented by the armed units of the FSB and collaborating entities. The infiltration effort was covered by heavy fire from the adjacent country, including by armored vehicles belonging to Ukrainian military. A Russian soldier was killed by the fire.

On the basis of the investigative and combat actions, the Crimea FSB Directorate's investigations department has launched a criminal case.

Additional investigative measures are being implemented. Places where large groups of tourists are concentrating and resting, and critically important infrastructure and life support facilities have been taken under additional security. A strengthened border control regime has been introduced on the border with Ukraine.”

(Translated by J. Hawk, as previously published on [South Front](#))

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