

Still no evidence of Russia's alleged military incursion into Ukraine

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On August 14, two British newspapers, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, reported sighting a column of Russian military vehicles crossing into Ukraine. The convoy supposedly crossed from the Rostov Oblast at 10 p.m. through a gap in a barbed wire fence and included some 23 armoured personnel carriers, supported by logistics vehicles.

The *Guardian* report was very specific. Shaun Walker wrote: “The *Guardian* saw a column of 23 armoured personnel carriers, supported by fuel trucks and other logistics vehicles with official Russian military plates, travelling towards the border near the Russian town of Donetsk—about 200 km away from Donetsk, Ukraine.

“After pausing by the side of the road until nightfall, the convoy crossed into Ukrainian territory, using a rough dirt track and clearly crossing through a gap in a barbed wire fence that demarcates the border. Armed men were visible in the gloom by the border fence as the column moved into Ukraine. Kiev has lost control of its side of the border in this area.”

The *Telegraph* wrote of the sighting's significance, stating: “The Ukrainian and Western governments have long accused Russia of filtering arms and men across the border to fuel the separatist insurgency in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but such an incident has never before been witnessed by Western journalists.”

The newspaper continued: “The convoy, which included at least 23 vehicles, appeared to be waiting until sunset near a refugee camp just outside Donetsk before moving towards the crossing without turning off headlights or making any other attempt to conceal itself.”

Partially contradicting the *Guardian*'s report, it added, “While it was not immediately clear whether all of that convoy crossed the border, the *Telegraph* did see a substantial number of vehicles pass through a check point manned by gunmen after shadowing the convoy down narrow country lanes near the frontier.”

To shadow such a military convoy is clearly no mean feat and one that would normally warrant more than a single line mention by such intrepid reporters.

In any event, at least initially, the reported sighting was a gift to the Ukrainian regime and its Western backers who were looking for something to back up their claims that the aid convoy of 270 trucks bound for eastern Ukraine was being used as a front for a possible invasion, or at least the arming of pro-Russian separatist forces.

Another reporter working for Reuters said he saw two dozen armoured personnel carriers *moving near the border* with Ukraine on Thursday night.

On Friday, the secretary general of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, told journalists in Copenhagen, “I can confirm that last night we saw a Russian incursion, crossing of the Ukrainian border.” This confirmed long-held suspicions of “a continuous flow of weapons and fighters from Russia into eastern Ukraine,” he added.

Also Friday, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko released a statement claiming that his forces had launched an attack and successfully destroyed part of the alleged Russian military convoy. A statement on Poroshenko's web site said “the given information was trustworthy and confirmed because the majority of the vehicles were destroyed by Ukrainian artillery at night.”

He wrote on Twitter, “At night much of the armoured vehicles which entered Ukraine have been destroyed by the Ukrainian artillery. We won't tolerate any invasion!”

In a phone call with British Prime Minister David Cameron, Poroshenko alleged that a Russian military convoy had entered Ukraine, but said most of it had been “eliminated” by an artillery strike.

The European Union then released a statement calling on Russia to “to put an immediate stop to any form of border hostilities, in particular to the flow of arms, military advisors and armed personnel into the conflict region, and to withdraw its forces from the border.”

British Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond summoned the Russian ambassador and warned that “if there are any Russian military personnel or vehicles in eastern Ukraine, they need to be withdrawn immediately or the consequences could be very serious.”

What is extraordinary in all of this is the fact that, to date, not a single piece of evidence proving the existence of a military convoy has been produced—let alone evidence of its destruction.

Experienced journalists from two major newspapers apparently stood by and watched a large column of trucks enter Ukraine—the possible *casus belli* for all-out war in Europe—without taking a photograph to record the event. Instead, every press report has featured pictures of Russian vehicles on the Russian side of the border, while TV has featured stock footage of fighting.

To add to the curious accounts, a spokesman for the US National Security Council said Washington, in contradistinction to NATO, had been unable to verify the latest Ukrainian allegations.

On Saturday, Col. Andriy Lysenko, the Ukrainian government’s security spokesman, said Ukrainian artillery had destroyed most of a Russian column of military vehicles that had entered the country. A large portion of the armoured column that passed into Ukraine late Thursday “no longer existed,” he said, claiming that Ukraine could not stop Russia sending military material through a rebel-controlled border zone and had adopted a strategy of “allowing the columns deeper into Ukrainian territory where they can be destroyed.”

Somewhat bizarrely, he then described this as a fairly unremarkable and routine incident. “This was a traditional route of movement of armoured convoys to the territory of Ukraine, and the Ukraine military were able to destroy most of those convoys,” he said. Once again, no details were provided—no photos of the engagement, no Russian bodies or dogtags.

Significantly, the *Telegraph* commented that though it had “witnessed a convoy of Russian armoured vehicles and military trucks crossing the border on Thursday night... it was not clear whether it was the same convoy Ukraine claimed to have attacked.”

In a similar downplaying of the incursion’s significance, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the incursion was “unfortunately normal.” His reticence was in part motivated by attempts on the part of Berlin to prepare peace negotiations that began Sunday between Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France.

But this would have been given additional urgency by

the more than 1 percent fall on the German stock exchange the afternoon Ukraine claimed to have destroyed part of the convoy. This took place amid sharp falls on all European stock markets. German markets had already been hit hard by concerns that sanctions against Russia could lead to a pan-European and even global slump. If, to quote Rasmussen at his Copenhagen press conference, the incursion of an armed convoy is “the continuation of what we have seen for some time,” this only raises the question more starkly: Why is there no evidence of the only reported sighting of such an incursion? On Friday, Russia’s Defence Ministry dismissed the reports as “some kind of fantasy.” The convoy that allegedly crossed the border into Ukraine did not exist, and statements based on fantasy and assumptions should not be seriously discussed, the Defence Ministry said in a statement.

The Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia’s secret police, which is responsible for guarding its border, said the column the *Telegraph* reported may have been a patrol to protect local civilians from fighting spilling across the border, and that these patrols only operate on Russian territory.

Despite subsequent efforts to downplay the reports of an incursion, European Union foreign ministers have used it to warn Russia that “Any unilateral military actions on the part of the Russian Federation in Ukraine under any pretext, including humanitarian, will be considered by the European Union as a blatant violation of international law,” and possibly prompt “further steps” against Moscow.

In addition, the White House announced Friday that President Barack Obama will travel to Estonia next month to discuss “collective defence” with the Baltic States. “In light of recent developments in Ukraine, the United States has taken steps to reassure allies in Central and Eastern Europe, and this trip is a chance to reaffirm our ironclad commitment to Article V as the foundation of NATO,” said a spokesperson for the National Security Council.



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