

# Shoigu, Lavrov Deny that Crimean Forces are Russian

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Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu denied that Russian forces are currently deployed in Ukraine's Crimea region. / Denis Abramov / Vedomosti

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on Wednesday denied that Russian forces are currently deployed in Ukraine's Crimea region and said that video footage showing Russian license plates on the military vehicles was "complete nonsense."

Shoigu stuck to the Russian authorities' official line, saying that troops occupying Crimea were not Russian and describing footage that suggests otherwise as a "provocation," Interfax reported.

A video from the Ukrainian outlet UkrStream.Tv published Tuesday featured an unidentified soldier in the Crimean town of Kerch saying he is Russian. President Vladimir Putin got approval from the Federation Council on Saturday to send Russian forces into Ukraine, but said Tuesday at a news conference that he had not done so and that the armed men in Crimea,

which has a large ethnic Russian population, were local pro-Russian self-defense groups.

Shoigu responded to journalists' questions Wednesday by saying that he did not know how the unidentified forces came to possess the Lynx and Tiger armored cars that are used by the Russian military.

His comments came the same day that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia could not order the so-called self-defense forces back to base because they were not Russian and added that his country's Navy personnel in Ukraine were at their normal positions.

Lavrov spoke at a joint press conference in Madrid with Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo ahead of a planned meeting in Paris with European and U.S. diplomats who have accused Russia of invading Crimea and have threatened to impose economic sanctions.

Russian officials have criticized the West's acceptance of the Ukrainian government in Kiev, which took power after ousted President Viktor Yanukovich fled the capital in the face of violence between anti-government protesters and police.

Putin said Tuesday that the acting Ukrainian government and president were illegitimate and Lavrov said Wednesday that "If we indulge those who are trying to rule our great, kind historic neighbor, we must understand that a bad example is infectious."

Lavrov said that the Crimean authorities, who recently refused to enter talks with authorities in Kiev, should be allowed to decide whether to let international monitors into the region.

U.S. President Barack Obama said Monday that Putin must allow international monitors to mediate a deal in Ukraine acceptable to all Ukrainian people, Reuters reported. German Chancellor Angela Merkel had suggested setting up a "fact-finding mission" to facilitate political dialogue, a proposal Putin supposedly agreed to.

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