

Russia Says Invasion to 'Free Ukrainians From Oppression'

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Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. **MFA Russia (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)**

President Vladimir Putin ordered an invasion of Ukraine to “free Ukrainians from oppression,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [said](#) Friday, reflecting Moscow’s stark interpretation of the bombing and airstrike campaign against its pro-Western neighbor.

“President Putin has decided to conduct a special military operation to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, so that, freed from this oppression, Ukrainians could freely determine their future,” Lavrov said.

Lavrov's comments echo Putin’s characterization of the campaign as a “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine.

"We are ready for negotiations at any moment, as soon as the armed forces of Ukraine respond to our call and lay down their arms," Lavrov said.

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The veteran diplomat spoke during an event establishing diplomatic relations with the two breakaway republics in eastern Ukraine which Putin recognized as independent earlier this week.

In a carefully choreographed sequence of events, the Kremlin had said later that self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk republics requested Putin's military support.

Hours after, Putin announced of a "special military operation" in eastern Ukraine, with a full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched before dawn Thursday. Ukraine reported 137 casualties on the first day of armed hostilities.

Western governments announced a series of harsh economic sanctions.

The Kremlin said Friday that Russia will retaliate against the new sanctions.

"It goes without saying that retaliatory measures will follow," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"Just how symmetrical or asymmetrical they will be depends on the analysis, the restrictions have yet to be analyzed," he added.

AFP contributed reporting.

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