

THOSE ARE LOCAL SELF-DEFENCE FORCES

From the first days in Crimea to the eve of the full-scale invasion, Russia's answer to every question about its soldiers in Ukraine was the same: there are none. The men in unmarked uniforms were "local militias"; the captured paratroopers had "lost their way"; the dead were "volunteers". Russia's own President, decrees and medals said otherwise, and in 2024 and 2025 the European Court of Human Rights fixed the dates: effective Russian control of Crimea from 27 February 2014 and of the "DPR/LPR" areas from 11 May 2014. Seven claims, the record, and what each concedes.

UKRAINE EVIDENCE HUB
VERIFIED RECORD
2014 - 2015

6 weeks

between "local militias" (Putin, 4 Mar 2014) and "our military personnel was behind the backs of Crimea's self-defense" (Putin, 17 Apr 2014) RU

RIA Novosti English, 4 Mar and 17 Apr 2014

11 May 2014

date from which Russia exercised effective control over the separatist-held areas of eastern Ukraine — jurisdiction found by the ECtHR Grand Chamber A

ECtHR, Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia, admissibility decision 25 Jan 2023; judgment 9 Jul 2025

100 - 11 - 58

General Assembly vote on resolution 68/262 "Territorial integrity of Ukraine", declaring the Crimea referendum invalid, 27 Mar 2014 A

GA/11493, 80th plenary meeting

28 May 2015

Putin's decree classifying military deaths "in peacetime during special operations" as a state secret — one week after Peskov's "no Russian soldiers in Donbass" RU

Decree of 28 May 2015 (Meduza, 28 May 2015)

BOTTOM LINE

The denial was withdrawn by its author. Putin said on 4 March 2014 that the armed men in Crimea were local self-defence units in uniforms anyone could buy; on 17 April 2014 he said Russian servicemen had stood behind them; on 15 March 2015 he described ordering the operation on the night of 22–23 February 2014. The Crimea claim does not need the Hub to refute it.

Donbas: the courts have fixed the dates. The ECtHR found Russian military personnel in eastern Ukraine from April 2014, Russian effective control over the "DPR/LPR" areas from 11 May 2014 and "large-scale deployment of Russian troops from August 2014 at the very latest". The District Court of The Hague found that from mid-May 2014 the "DPR" "in fact took directions from the Russian Federation". These are findings in contested proceedings in which Russia had the right to appear.

Russia's own acts contradicted its words. Captured paratroopers acknowledged as Russian servicemen (Aug 2014); a decree making "peacetime" military deaths secret (May 2015); a medal "For the Return of Crimea" dated 20 Feb 2014; the President's admission that "people... dealing with certain matters, including in the military sphere" were in Donbas (Dec 2015).

The distinction Russia drew has no legal weight. "Volunteers", "people on leave" or "self-defence" acting under Russian direction engage Russia's responsibility; it is control, not the label on the uniform, that counts (ECtHR; Dutch court). Russia's insistence that the "DPR" was not part of its forces was used by the Hague court to deny the MH17 accused combatant immunity.

Fair to say. Local people did take part on the separatist side in 2014; the OSCE SMM reported what it saw and did not draw conclusions; and the Russian regular-army presence in Donbas between 2015 and 2021 was intermittent and partly covert. None of this is "no Russian troops".

THE SEVEN CLAIMS

Vladimir Putin · press conference, Novo-Ogaryovo, 4 Mar 2014	"[The armed men in Crimea were] local militias... [Russian-style fatigues are] available in army shops across the former Soviet Union. [RIA Novosti's English report of the press conference]"	Contradicted by Russia's own President
Vladimir Putin · Direct Line, Moscow, 17 Apr 2014	"Therefore, our military personnel was behind the backs of Crimea's self-defense. [They acted] very correctly, decisively, and professionally. [RIA Novosti English]"	Self-incriminating
Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs · Rossiya 1, Vladivostok, 11 Apr 2014 · Dmitry Peskov, 15 Apr 2014	"There are no Russian troops or agents there. ... [Peskov:] This is an absurd statement. There are no Russian troops there."	Already adjudicated
Russian Ministry of Defence source to RIA Novosti · 26 Aug 2014 · Vladimir Putin, Ulan-Bator, 26 Aug 2014	"[The paratroopers] were patrolling the Russian-Ukrainian border, and crossed it, probably, accidentally, at an unmarked border point. ... [Putin: they may have strayed into Ukraine unintentionally; Ukrainian forces had cro...]"	Contradicted by the ECtHR record
Dmitry Peskov · Moscow, 18 May 2015	"We along with the Defense Ministry have repeatedly said that there are no Russian soldiers in Donbass."	Contradicted by Russia's own decree
Vladimir Putin · annual press conference, Moscow, 17 Dec 2015	"We have never said that there are no people there involved in resolving some certain issues, including those related to the military sphere. But this does not mean that there are regular Russian troops there. Feel the di..."	Concedes presence; the distinction has no legal weight
Vitaly Churkin · UN General Assembly, 80th plenary meeting, 27 Mar 2014	"We call on everyone to respect that voluntary choice. [The draft is] confrontational in nature [and its adoption] was not necessary."	Rejected by 100 states

WHAT WE ASK

Date the aggression from 27 Feb 2014 (Crimea) and 11 May 2014 (Donbas) in all accountability texts, citing the ECtHR judgments of 25 Jun 2024 and 9 Jul 2025 · restate resolution 68/262 and the non-recognition of any change in Crimea's status · support execution of both inter-state judgments at the Committee of Ministers and the just-satisfaction stage · ask Russia to publish the names of its servicemen killed in Ukraine 2014–2021, as the 28 May 2015 decree prevents · use Russia's own admissions (17 Apr 2014; 15 Mar 2015; 17 Dec 2015) rather than contested figures when rebutting "no Russian troops".

WHO SAID IT, WHERE, AND TO WHOM

Where each claim was made, who made it, how the others in the room answered, and what the statements left out.

UKRAINE EVIDENCE HUB

VERIFIED RECORD

2014 - 2015

THE OCCASION AND THE RECORD	
Occasion	Seizure of Crimea (27 Feb – 18 Mar 2014) and the armed conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk regions from April 2014 — the period Russia later called a "civil war" in which it was "not a party"
Where the claims were made	Putin press conferences, Novo-Ogaryovo (4 Mar 2014) and Moscow (17 Dec 2015); Direct Line (17 Apr 2014); Lavrov, Rossiya 1, Vladivostok (11 Apr 2014); Peskov to the press (15 Apr 2014; 18 May 2015); MoD source to RIA Novosti (26 Aug 2014); Churkin at the General Assembly (27 Mar 2014)
Record	UNGA res. 68/262 (27 Mar 2014) · OSCE SMM spot report 8 Nov 2014 and daily reports 2014–2016 · ECtHR GC Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea), admissibility 16 Dec 2020 / judgment 25 Jun 2024 · ECtHR GC Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia, admissibility 25 Jan 2023 / judgment 9 Jul 2025 (HUDOC 001-244292) · District Court of The Hague, MH17 judgment 17 Nov 2022 · Putin decree of 28 May 2015 · documentary "Crimea. The Way Home", Rossiya 1, 15 Mar 2015
What happened next	Minsk agreements (Sep 2014, Feb 2015) with Russia as "guarantor, not party" · Russia recognised the "DPR/LPR" on 21 Feb 2022 and invaded on 24 Feb 2022 · ECtHR found Russia's non-cooperation a breach of Art. 38 in both inter-state cases · ICC warrants for crimes committed in occupied territory (2023–24)

THE SPEAKERS		
Vladimir Putin	President of the Russian Federation · ICC arrest warrant 17 Mar 2023 (Ukrainian children); EU/US/UK sanctions since 2022	Denied (4 Mar 2014), admitted (17 Apr 2014, 15 Mar 2015), re-defined (17 Dec 2015)
Sergey Lavrov	Minister of Foreign Affairs · EU/US/UK sanctions since 25 Feb 2022	"There are no Russian troops or agents there" (11 Apr 2014); led the "Russia is not a party to the Minsk agreements" line 2015–2021
Dmitry Peskov	Presidential press secretary	"Absurd... there are no Russian troops there" (15 Apr 2014); "no Russian soldiers in Donbass" (18 May 2015)
Vitaly Churkin	Permanent Representative to the UN, 2006–2017	Told the General Assembly the Crimea referendum was a "voluntary choice" (27 Mar 2014)

WHAT OTHERS SAID	
General Assembly, 27 Mar 2014	100 states voted for resolution 68/262; 11 against (Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, DPRK, Nicaragua, Russia, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe); 58 abstained.
NATO, 28 Aug 2014	Released satellite images of Russian combat forces inside Ukraine and said "well over 1,000 Russian troops" were operating there (Brig.-Gen. Nico Tak, as reported by Channel 4 News and CBS).
OSCE Special Monitoring Mission	Reported unmarked convoys and personnel without insignia from autumn 2014; Deputy Chief Monitor Hug (25 Mar 2016): people with Russian insignia seen "since the beginning of the conflict", prisoners who said they were Russian soldiers.
Council of Europe / PACE	Suspended the Russian delegation's voting rights in April 2014 over Crimea; the ECtHR later found Russia in breach of Art. 38 for refusing to cooperate in both inter-state cases.
European Union, 2014	Adopted sectoral sanctions on 31 Jul 2014 (Regulation 833/2014) and listed entities including the Buk maker Almaz-Antey in July 2014.
Netherlands (District Court of The Hague), 17 Nov 2022	Found the "DPR" took directions from Russia from mid-May 2014 — a judicial rejection of the "civil war" characterisation.

WHAT THE STATEMENTS LEFT OUT
- That the General Assembly declared the 16 March 2014 referendum invalid by 100 votes to 11, with 58 abstentions, and called on all states not to recognise any change in the status of Crimea (res. 68/262, 27 Mar 2014). - That the ECtHR, in the Crimea admissibility decision of 16 Dec 2020, found "sufficient evidence" that Russia "had exercised effective control over Crimea" in the period from 27 Feb to 18 Mar 2014 — before the "referendum" and the "accession". - That the OSCE SMM, the monitors Russia itself approved, recorded on 8 Nov 2014 a convoy of more than 40 unmarked trucks — 19 towing 122 mm howitzers, personnel in dark-green uniforms without insignia — moving west on the H-21 at Makiivka, and nine unmarked tanks in Donetsk the same afternoon; and on 2 Aug 2015 an armed man at a heavy-weapons site who said his unit was "the 16th airborne brigade from Orenburg, Russian Federation". - That the Dutch court found the "DPR" took directions from Russia from mid-May 2014 — which made the conflict international and removed the "civil war" label Russia used for eight years (17 Nov 2022). - That the decree of 28 May 2015 made deaths of servicemen "in peacetime during special operations" a state secret, after graves of Pskov paratroopers appeared in August 2014 and after Russia had declared there were no Russian soldiers in Donbas (Meduza; Moscow Times, 28 May 2015).

HOW IT TRAVELS
The denial ran as a single line through state media for eight years: RIA Novosti, "Putin denies sending Russian troops to Crimea" (4 Mar 2014); "Allegations of Russian troops in East Ukraine 'absurd' — Kremlin" (15 Apr 2014); Sputnik, "No Russian troops in Donbass — Kremlin" (18 May 2015); and, as late as 2021–2022, "There are no Russian troops in Donbas" and "OSCE has repeatedly stated that there is no Russian army in LDNR" (EUvsDisinfo case files). The admissions travelled far less: the 17 Apr 2014 Direct Line sentence was reported by RIA as a tribute to troops who had acted "very correctly, decisively and professionally", and the 2015 documentary was marketed as a celebration.

Sources: Putin, 4 Mar, 17 Apr 2014, 17 Dec 2015 via RIA/RFE/RL · Lavrov, Rossiya 1, 11 Apr 2014 · Peskov 15 Apr 2014, 18 May 2015 · RIA/Moscow Times 26–28 Aug 2014 · VOA on "Crimea. The Way Home", Mar 2015 · GA/11493 · OSCE SMM 8 Nov 2014, 3 Aug 2015; Hug 25 Mar 2016 · ECtHR 25 Jan 2023, 25 Jun 2024, 9 Jul 2025 · District Court of The Hague 17 Nov 2022 · Meduza 28 May 2015 · Zavtra/Girkin Nov 2014 · EUvsDisinfo · full list on page 6



CLAIM, RECORD, CONCESSION (1-4)

Each claim as made, with the date, the venue and a link; the record it runs into, with the tier of the evidence; and what it concedes. Words in square brackets are the Hub's.

UKRAINE EVIDENCE HUB

VERIFIED RECORD

2014 - 2015

CLAIM 1 · VLADIMIR PUTIN · PRESS CONFERENCE, NOVO-OGARYOVO, 4 MAR 2014

“[The armed men in Crimea were] local militias... [Russian-style fatigues are] available in army shops across the former Soviet Union. [RIA Novosti's English report of the press conference]”

Press conference, Novo-Ogaryovo, 4 Mar 2014, as reported by RIA Novosti, "Putin denies sending Russian troops to Crimea", 4 Mar 2014 (GlobalSecurity mirror)
www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/ukraine/2014/ukraine-140304-rianovosti04.h

CLAIM 2 · VLADIMIR PUTIN · DIRECT LINE, MOSCOW, 17 APR 2014

“Therefore, our military personnel was behind the backs of Crimea's self-defense. [They acted] very correctly, decisively, and professionally. [RIA Novosti English]”

Direct Line, 17 Apr 2014, as reported by RIA Novosti English (GlobalSecurity mirror) and The Moscow Times, "Putin says Russian forces were deployed to Crimea", 17 Apr 2014
www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/17/putin-says-russian-forces-were-deployed-to-crime

CLAIM 3 · SERGEY LAVROV, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS · ROSSIYA 1, VLADIVOSTOK, 11 APR 2014 · DMITRY PESKOV, 15 APR 2014

“There are no Russian troops or agents there. ... [Peskov:] This is an absurd statement. There are no Russian troops there.”

Lavrov: Kyiv Post (archive) citing Rossiya 1, 11 Apr 2014 · Peskov: RIA Novosti, 15 Apr 2014
archive.kyivpost.com/article/content/war-against-ukraine/lavrov-there-are-no-russi

CLAIM 4 · RUSSIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENCE SOURCE TO RIA NOVOSTI · 26 AUG 2014 · VLADIMIR PUTIN, ULAN-BATOR, 26 AUG 2014

“[The paratroopers] were patrolling the Russian-Ukrainian border, and crossed it, probably, accidentally, at an unmarked border point. ... [Putin: they may have strayed into Ukraine unintentionally; Ukrainian forces had crossed into Russia in larger numbers.]”

RIA Novosti, 26 Aug 2014 (Moscow Times, "Russia claims captured soldiers crossed Ukraine border by accident"); Putin via RIA, 28 Aug 2014 (GlobalSecurity mirror); Chizhov on Rossiya 24: "nine... paratroopers who accidentally crossed into Ukraine"
www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/ukraine/2014/ukraine-140828-rianovosti04.h

CONTRADICTED BY RUSSIA'S OWN PRESIDENT

Evidence

A

Putin, Direct Line, 17 Apr 2014: "our military personnel was behind the backs of Crimea's self-defence" (RIA English); Putin in "Crimea. The Way Home", Rossiya 1, 15 Mar 2015: at the end of an all-night Kremlin meeting on 22–23 Feb 2014 he told the heads of the security services, "We are obliged to start working to return Crimea to Russia". The ECtHR found that Russia exercised effective control over Crimea in the period from 27 Feb 2014, before the "referendum" (admissibility decision, 16 Dec 2020; judgment, 25 Jun 2024), and that courts applying Russian law in Crimea are not "established by law" because an occupying power may not replace local law with its own.

What the claim concedes: That armed men in Russian-pattern uniforms without insignia had taken control of Crimea's institutions — the fact Russia was explaining away.

SELF-INCRIMINATING

Evidence

A

The statement reverses claim 1 six weeks later and is the basis on which the ECtHR and the General Assembly's position rest: a change of territory brought about by the armed forces of another state is not an exercise of self-determination (res. 68/262; Art. 2(4) UN Charter). Putin's same answer denied any presence in the east: the article records only that Russia wanted to avoid "events like those in southeastern Ukraine" — the claim examined in claims 3–6.

What the claim concedes: Everything claim 1 denied: that Russian servicemen were deployed in Crimea, under orders, during the "referendum".

ALREADY ADJUDICATED

Evidence

A

C

ECtHR admissibility decision, 25 Jan 2023: the Court relied on evidence of Russian military personnel in eastern Ukraine from April 2014, the extensive provision of Russian weapons, and "the large-scale deployment of Russian troops from August 2014 at the very latest"; Russia exercised effective control over the areas held by the "DPR/LPR" from 11 May 2014 (confirmed in the judgment of 9 Jul 2025). The man who took Sloviansk on 12 Apr 2014 — one day after Lavrov's statement — was Igor Girkin, a serving FSB colonel until 2013 who had come from Crimea; he said in Zavtra (Nov 2014): "I was the one who pulled the trigger of this war... If our unit had not crossed the border, it would have all fizzled out." The Dutch court convicted Girkin for MH17 as a "functional perpetrator" and found the "DPR" took directions from Russia from mid-May 2014.

What the claim concedes: The standard Russia set for itself: that the presence of Russian "troops or agents" would be wrongful. Girkin's own account answers it.

CONTRADICTED BY THE ECTHR RECORD

Evidence

A

C

Ten servicemen of military unit 71211 (331st Regiment, 98th Airborne Division, Kostroma) were detained near Dzerkalne, Donetsk region, on 25 Aug 2014 — about 20 km inside Ukraine. The MoD confirmed they were Russian. Within days Ukrainian forces were encircled at Ilovaisk; the ECtHR placed "the large-scale deployment of Russian troops from August 2014 at the very latest" (25 Jan 2023). On 8 Nov 2014 the OSCE SMM recorded a convoy of more than 40 unmarked military trucks — 19 towing 122 mm howitzers, crews in dark-green uniforms without insignia — moving west at Makiivka, and nine unmarked tanks in Donetsk (spot report, 8 Nov 2014). Graves of paratroopers of the 76th Division appeared near Pskov in the same week as the capture; their markings were removed (Moscow Times, 27 Aug 2014; Tier C).

What the claim concedes: That the ten men were serving Russian soldiers, armed and in Ukraine — the fact in dispute. The Chizhov figure ("nine") is itself an admission of presence.



CLAIM, RECORD, CONCESSION (5-7)

Each claim as made, with the date, the venue and a link; the record it runs into, with the tier of the evidence; and what it concedes. Words in square brackets are the Hub's.

UKRAINE EVIDENCE HUB
VERIFIED RECORD
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CLAIM 5 · DMITRY PESKOV · MOSCOW, 18 MAY 2015

“We along with the Defense Ministry have repeatedly said that there are no Russian soldiers in Donbass.”

Sputnik, "No Russian troops in Donbass — Kremlin", 18 May 2015 (responding to the capture of Yerofeyev and Aleksandrov near Shchastia on 16 May 2015)
www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/ukraine/2015/ukraine-150518-sputnik02.htm

CONTRADICTED BY RUSSIA'S OWN DECREE

Evidence A C

Ten days later, on 28 May 2015, Putin signed a decree adding to the list of state secrets information on losses of personnel "in peacetime during special operations"; until then only wartime losses were secret (Meduza, 28 May 2015). The two captured men, Yevgeny Yerofeyev and Aleksandr Aleksandrov, said they were serving in the 3rd GRU Spetsnaz Brigade (Tolyatti); they were convicted in Kyiv in April 2016 and exchanged for Nadiya Savchenko in May 2016. On 2 Aug 2015 an armed man guarding a heavy-weapons holding site told the SMM his unit was "the 16th airborne brigade from Orenburg, Russian Federation" (SMM daily report, 3 Aug 2015). The ECtHR's finding of effective control covers the whole period from 11 May 2014 to at least 26 Jan 2022.

What the claim concedes: That the question had been asked "repeatedly" — because Russian soldiers kept being captured, buried and photographed.

CLAIM 6 · VLADIMIR PUTIN · ANNUAL PRESS CONFERENCE, MOSCOW, 17 DEC 2015

“We have never said that there are no people there involved in resolving some certain issues, including those related to the military sphere. But this does not mean that there are regular Russian troops there. Feel the difference.”

RFE/RL, 17 Dec 2015 (GlobalSecurity mirror)
www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/russia/2015/russia-151217-rferl02.htm

CONCEDES PRESENCE; THE DISTINCTION HAS NO LEGAL WEIGHT

Evidence A C

"People... in the military sphere" is an admission that claims 3 and 5 were untrue. International law attributes conduct to a state that directs or controls it, whatever the formal status of the persons (ILC Articles on State Responsibility, art. 8). The ECtHR did not require proof of regular units: effective control through "military, political and economic support" to the separatist entities sufficed for Russian jurisdiction from 11 May 2014 (25 Jan 2023; 9 Jul 2025). The Dutch court applied the same logic: because the "DPR" took Russia's directions, the conflict was international from mid-May 2014; because Russia denied the "DPR" was part of its forces, its fighters could not claim combatant immunity (17 Nov 2022).

What the claim concedes: That Russians "in the military sphere" were in Donbas with the Kremlin's knowledge — twenty months after "there are no Russian troops there".

CLAIM 7 · VITALY CHURKIN · UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 80TH PLENARY MEETING, 27 MAR 2014

“We call on everyone to respect that voluntary choice. [The draft is] confrontational in nature [and its adoption] was not necessary.”

UN press release GA/11493, 27 Mar 2014 (UN Meetings Coverage summary)
press.un.org/en/node/170363

REJECTED BY 100 STATES

Evidence A

Resolution 68/262 "Territorial integrity of Ukraine": 100 in favour, 11 against, 58 abstentions. It underscores "the invalidity of the 16 March referendum" and calls on states not to recognise any change in the status of Crimea or Sevastopol. The "voluntary choice" was made with Russian servicemen "behind the backs" of the self-defence forces, as Putin confirmed three weeks later (claim 2). Every General Assembly resolution on Crimea since (73/263, 74/17, 75/192 and others) has restated the position; the ECtHR treats Crimea as occupied territory under international humanitarian law (25 Jun 2024).

What the claim concedes: That the lawfulness of the referendum depended on its being free of foreign armed force — the condition Russia's own President later said was not met.

Sources: Putin, 4 Mar, 17 Apr 2014, 17 Dec 2015 via RIA/RFE/RL · Lavrov, Rossiya 1, 11 Apr 2014 · Peskov 15 Apr 2014, 18 May 2015 · RIA/Moscow Times 26–28 Aug 2014 · VOA on "Crimea. The Way Home", Mar 2015 · GA/11493 · OSCE SMM 8 Nov 2014, 3 Aug 2015; Hug 25 Mar 2016 · ECtHR 25 Jan 2023, 25 Jun 2024, 9 Jul 2025 · District Court of The Hague 17 Nov 2022 · Meduza 28 May 2015 · Zavtra/Girkin Nov 2014 · EUvsDisinfo · full list on page 6



THE RECORD			
QUESTION	WHAT RUSSIA SAYS	WHAT THE RECORD SHOWS	SOURCE
Russian servicemen in Crimea, Feb–Mar 2014	None — "local militias" (4 Mar 2014)	"Our military personnel was behind the backs of Crimea's self-defence" (17 Apr 2014); operation ordered 22–23 Feb 2014 (15 Mar 2015)	Kremlin transcripts; Rossiya 1 documentary
Russian jurisdiction over Crimea	From 18 Mar 2014 ("accession")	Effective control from 27 Feb 2014	ECtHR admissibility 16 Dec 2020; judgment 25 Jun 2024
Russian troops in Donbas	"No Russian troops or agents" (Apr 2014); "no Russian soldiers" (May 2015); "people... in the military sphere" but no "regular troops" (Dec 2015)	Military personnel from Apr 2014; effective control from 11 May 2014; large-scale deployment from Aug 2014 "at the very latest"	ECtHR 25 Jan 2023; 9 Jul 2025
Nature of the conflict	Internal Ukrainian conflict; Russia "not a party"	International armed conflict from mid-May 2014: the "DPR" "in fact took directions from the Russian Federation"	District Court of The Hague, 17 Nov 2022
Captured servicemen, Aug 2014	"Nine... paratroopers who accidentally crossed" at an "unmarked border point"	Ten servicemen of unit 71211 (98th Airborne Division) detained about 20 km inside Ukraine; convoy of 40+ unmarked trucks and 19 howitzers recorded by the SMM on 8 Nov 2014	RIA/Moscow Times 26 Aug 2014; OSCE SMM spot report 8 Nov 2014
Military deaths	No Russian soldiers in Donbas (18 May 2015)	Decree classifying "peacetime" losses during special operations (28 May 2015)	Meduza, 28 May 2015
Crimea referendum	"Voluntary choice"	Invalid; 100–11–58	UNGA res. 68/262, 27 Mar 2014

FAIR TO SAY

Local residents did serve in separatist formations in Donbas in 2014–2015, and the "DPR/LPR" leaderships included Ukrainian citizens; the ECtHR's finding is of Russian control over those entities, not that every fighter was a Russian soldier. The Hub should not say "all were Russian troops".

The OSCE SMM, whose mandate Russia approved, reported observations and did not attribute: its reports record unmarked convoys, insignia-less personnel, and individuals who said they were Russian soldiers; the conclusion is the Court's, not the Mission's. Deputy Chief Monitor Hug said in March 2016 that the SMM had seen people with Russian insignia "since the beginning of the conflict" and prisoners who said they were Russian soldiers, and tyre tracks at the border, but not the vehicles themselves.

The Crimea judgment of 25 Jun 2024 concerns Russia's conduct inside Crimea under the Convention; it does not rule on the lawfulness of the annexation as such, which is a matter for the General Assembly and general international law. The effective-control period from 27 Feb 2014 comes from the 2020 admissibility decision.

ESTABLISHED, PATTERN, POSITION

What mandated bodies have established, what the record shows as a pattern, and what is a position — kept apart. Then the lines to take and the questions to expect.

UKRAINE EVIDENCE HUB
VERIFIED RECORD
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THE LAW

UN Charter, Art. 2(4): no threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of any state. Resolution 68/262 applied it to Crimea; the admission that Russian servicemen were deployed during the "referendum" removes the "self-determination" defence.

Geneva Conventions, common Art. 2; Hague Regulations, Art. 42: occupation exists when territory is actually placed under the authority of a hostile army — regardless of insignia. The ECtHR treats Crimea as occupied and Russian-law courts there as not "established by law" (25 Jun 2024).

ILC Articles on State Responsibility, Art. 8: conduct of persons acting on the instructions, or under the direction or control, of a state is attributable to it. "Volunteers", "people on leave" and "self-defence forces" under Russian direction are Russia's conduct; the ECtHR's effective-control finding (from 11 May 2014) rests on this.

Three layers. *Established:* Russian control of Crimea from 27 Feb 2014 and of the "DPR/LPR" areas from 11 May 2014 (ECtHR); Russian direction of the "DPR" from mid-May 2014 (Dutch court). *Pattern:* unmarked convoys, insignia-less personnel, captured servicemen, secret burials, the 2015 secrecy decree. *Position:* exact Russian troop numbers and losses in Donbas 2014–2021 — not established by any mandated body.

LINES TO TAKE

- "Russia said the men in Crimea were local self-defence forces. Six weeks later its President said Russian servicemen stood behind them."
- "The European Court of Human Rights has fixed the date: Russian control of eastern Ukraine from 11 May 2014. That is eight years before the war Russia says began in 2022."
- "Ten days after the Kremlin said there were no Russian soldiers in Donbas, the President classified their deaths as a state secret."
- "When the captured paratroopers were Russian, they had 'lost their way'; when the dead were Russian, they were 'volunteers'; when the Court looked, it found a state."
- "Ask the Russian delegation: if there were no Russian troops in Donbas, who was the Hague court describing when it said the DPR took directions from Moscow?"

Q&A

"Crimea chose Russia in a referendum."

A vote held under the guns of a foreign army is not a free choice — the General Assembly said so by 100 votes to 11, and Russia's President confirmed three weeks later that its servicemen were deployed. The ECtHR dates Russian control from 27 Feb 2014, before the vote.

"Donbas was a civil war; Russia was only a guarantor of Minsk."

The ECtHR found Russian effective control from 11 May 2014; the Dutch court found the "DPR" took Russia's directions from mid-May 2014 and called the conflict international. Those are judicial findings, not Ukrainian claims.

"The OSCE never confirmed Russian troops."

The SMM reported what it saw: unmarked convoys with howitzers and tanks (8 Nov 2014), personnel without insignia, a guard who said he was from "the 16th airborne brigade from Orenburg, Russian Federation" (Aug 2015), prisoners who said they were Russian soldiers. Monitors describe; courts conclude. The courts did.

"Russian volunteers went to Donbas on their own."

Putin himself moved from "no troops" to "people in the military sphere". Under the law of state responsibility, persons acting under a state's direction are that state — and the deaths of "volunteers" would not have needed a presidential secrecy decree.

"Why does it matter now?"

Because the dates fix the beginning of the occupation and of Russia's responsibility — for MH17, for Ilovaisk, for the children taken in 2014 — and because the same method was used in 2022: deny, then admit, then re-define.

WHAT WE ASK

Date the aggression from 27 Feb 2014 (Crimea) and 11 May 2014 (Donbas) in all accountability texts, citing the ECtHR judgments of 25 Jun 2024 and 9 Jul 2025 · restate resolution 68/262 and the non-recognition of any change in Crimea's status · support execution of both inter-state judgments at the Committee of Ministers and the just-satisfaction stage · ask Russia to publish the names of its servicemen killed in Ukraine 2014–2021, as the 28 May 2015 decree prevents · use Russia's own admissions (17 Apr 2014; 15 Mar 2015; 17 Dec 2015) rather than contested figures when rebutting "no Russian troops".

Sources: Putin, 4 Mar, 17 Apr 2014, 17 Dec 2015 via RIA/RFE/RL · Lavrov, Rossiya 1, 11 Apr 2014 · Peskov 15 Apr 2014, 18 May 2015 · RIA/Moscow Times 26–28 Aug 2014 · VOA on "Crimea. The Way Home", Mar 2015 · GA/11493 · OSCE SMM 8 Nov 2014, 3 Aug 2015; Hug 25 Mar 2016 · ECtHR 25 Jan 2023, 25 Jun 2024, 9 Jul 2025 · District Court of The Hague 17 Nov 2022 · Meduza 28 May 2015 · Zavtra/Girkin Nov 2014 · EUvsDisinfo · full list on page 6



WHERE EVERY LINE COMES FROM

All sources were checked on 21 October 2026. Russian statements are listed as the position under review, not as evidence.

UKRAINE EVIDENCE HUB

VERIFIED RECORD

2014 - 2015

SOURCES		
RIA Novosti (GlobalSecurity mirror)	Putin denies sending Russian troops to Crimea, 4 Mar 2014 https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/ukraine/2014/ukraine-140304-rianovosti04.htm	RU
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The Moscow Times	Putin says Russian forces were deployed to Crimea, 17 Apr 2014 https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/17/putin-says-russian-forces-were-deployed-to-crimea	C
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METHOD

Russian statements are quoted from the English texts of Russian state agencies (RIA Novosti, Sputnik) and from Western reports (The Moscow Times, RFE/RL); kremlin.ru and mid.ru could not be opened from outside Russia, so the official Kremlin English wording is not used. The General Assembly item is quoted from the UN Meetings Coverage summary GA/11493. Words in square brackets are the Hub's.

Each claim is checked against judicial and monitoring records (Tier A): the ECtHR inter-state decisions and judgments, the District Court of The Hague, the General Assembly, OSCE SMM reports. Tier C (Moscow Times, Meduza, RFE/RL, Bellingcat-type open-source work) is used for the Pskov graves, the secrecy decree's context and the Orenburg observation's carrier, and is labelled. No Ukrainian official source is used to rebut a Russian claim.

Reactions of states are taken from the General Assembly vote of 27 Mar 2014 and the Council of Europe record; they are summarised. Girkin's statements are Russian self-admissions and are treated as such, not as independent evidence.

Tiers: **A** — UN-mandated bodies, international courts and organisations (OHCHR/HRMMU, Commission of Inquiry, ICC, ECtHR, IAEA, OSCE, OPCW, Security Council record); **B** — Ukrainian official bodies, marked "according to Ukraine"; **C** — independent investigators and media; **RU** — Russian official statements, the position under review. Tiers are never combined in one figure.

