

Russian military in Eastern Partnership countries

A strong military presence helps Russia to maintain control over the ex-Soviet republics of eastern Europe, which it sees as its legitimate sphere of influence. Some troops are stationed in agreement with the country concerned, whereas others operate in pro-Russian separatist territories in defiance of the internationally recognised authorities. The main recent changes are the military build-up in the occupied territory of Crimea and an alleged Russian presence in the Donbass.



Data in map and text, unless otherwise stated: [The Military Balance](#), IISS, 2016.

Russian armed forces stationed in allied countries

Belarus

Troops and weapons. Since [2006](#) and [2013](#) respectively, Russia has four air defence units equipped with S-300 missiles, and four SU-27 fighter planes, all stationed at the Baranovichi base of the Belarus air force. It also has a 25-year [lease](#) on the Vileyka transmitter station used by Russian submarines, expiring in 2020.

In September 2015, Russia [announced](#) negotiations with Belarus to set up its own airbase in the country, but one month later Belarus President Lukashenko [stated](#) that he was not interested. The two countries are also in talks on the [response to the US missile shield](#) recently activated in Romania, though it is not clear whether this will involve stationing Russian short-range Iskander missiles on Belarus territory.

Strategic interest. Belarus is strategically important as it borders Poland, one of the countries likely to see an [increased NATO presence](#). For its part, Belarus, which has decommissioned some of its planes and lacks money to buy new ones, also benefits from cooperation with Russia's air force.

Armenia

Troops and weapons. Since Russia signed a [lease](#) on the Gyumri base in 1995 ([extended](#) in 2010 until 2044) it has kept around 3 300 troops in Armenia, equipped with 72 tanks, 2 batteries of S-300 air defence missiles and helicopters. A [squadron of 18 MIG-29s](#) has been based at Erebuni airport near Yerevan for several years.

Strategic interest. Close military cooperation with Armenia has helped to keep the country in Moscow's orbit. On the other hand, it could hurt Russian relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia's adversary in a long-



standing conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh. Recent weapons deliveries to Gyumri, including drones to monitor the Turkish border (just 10 km from the base) could be part of a strategy to contain Turkey, at loggerheads with Russia since downing a Russian plane in October 2015.

Russian military presence in annexed/separatist territories

Crimea (Ukraine): Russia's Black Sea base and a heavy military presence

Troops and weapons. Russia's Black Sea fleet already had 13 000 troops at its Sevastopol naval base while it was still leased from Ukraine. Since annexing Crimea, Russia has stepped up its military presence, to 20 000 troops in 2014 and 28 000 in 2015. Equipment includes some 40 ships, 5 submarines and 40 tanks based at Sevastopol and eight other locations. In June 2015 Russia [defended its right](#) to deploy nuclear weapons to Crimea, but there is no evidence that it has done so.

Strategic interest. With the peninsula now fully under Russian control, former Ukrainian restrictions on access to the Sevastopol base have been lifted, enabling it to play a [crucial role](#) in projecting Russian naval power throughout the Black Sea and beyond (for example, supporting the Russian air campaign in Syria).

Donbass – Donetsk/Luhansk People's Republic (Ukraine): undercover Russian presence

In March 2015 US Army Europe Commander Ben Hodges estimated that as many as [12 000 Russian troops](#), equipped with heavy weapons and 100 tanks, may have been present in eastern Ukraine; it is not known how many are still there. For months the Kremlin denied sending combat troops into the Donbass, insisting that any Russians fighting in Ukraine were volunteers. In December 2015, Vladimir Putin finally [admitted](#) that Russian personnel had been sent there to deal with 'military tasks', but denied that they were regular forces, and did not give details of their activities or numbers.

Transnistria (Moldova)

Troops and weapons. Since the 1990s, 350 Russian soldiers have served alongside Moldovans and Transnistrians in the trilateral [Joint Control Commission](#) peacekeeping force. Also since the 1990s, a further 1 200 troops of the [Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova](#) have been stationed in the region, many at Kolbasna military depot, where they guard over 100 Soviet-era tanks and armoured vehicles.

Strategic interest. Ukraine blocked land access by the Russian armed forces to Transnistria in 2015, and the enclave has no operational airports, [severely limiting its potential](#) as a military foothold in the region. On the other hand, Russian troops guarantee the continued de facto independence of pro-Russian Transnistria, thus maintaining pressure on Moldova (for example, Russia can use the threat of formally recognising Transnistrian independence to deter Moldova from seeking NATO membership).

Abkhazia, South Ossetia (Georgia)

Troops and weapons. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war some 7 000 troops have been shared in roughly equal numbers between the two enclaves, stationed at Djava and Tskhinvali in South Ossetia, and Gudauta in Abkhazia. Russia's lease on [these facilities](#) runs until 2060. Plans to construct a [new naval base](#) in the Abkhazian port of Ochamchire were announced in 2009 but have since been [abandoned](#).

Strategic interest. Russian military presence on Georgian territory guarantees the continued de facto independence of the two enclaves and is a means of exerting pressure on Georgia.

Military presence in other Eastern Partnership countries and territories

Azerbaijan

Russia's military presence ended with the [expiry of its lease](#) of the Gabala radar station in 2012. Although Russia is more closely allied to Azerbaijan's adversary Armenia, it still supplies most ([64%](#)) of the country's weapons, and a [military cooperation plan](#) was signed in December 2015.

Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan, under Armenian control)

Russia has [offered to lead a peacekeeping mission](#) in the disputed region; neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia has expressed support for this proposal.

Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine (excluding areas controlled by pro-Russian rebels)

Russia does not have military bases in these countries, nor is it a major arms supplier.

The European Parliament has repeatedly [called on Russia](#) 'to end its occupation of Crimea, and to put an immediate end to all direct or indirect involvement in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, as well as in the frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova'.