

Russia Starts Military Exercises Near Ukraine

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russia announced on Thursday it had started military exercises near the border with Ukraine, in what is likely to be seen as a show of force in the standoff with Kiev and the West over Crimea.

The Defense Ministry confirmed exercises had begun in the Southern Military District, involving 8,500 artillery men, after pictures appeared on social media showing military vehicles on the move in the area.

The exercise includes a large number of artillery and Grad, Hurricane and Tornado multiple-rocket launchers, the Defense Ministry said in a statement on its website.

Also involved are Howitzers, Nona self-propelled artillery and Rapier anti-tank guns, and the aim is to improve cooperation with motorized infantry, tank, air-assault and marine units.

One of the exercises will involve firing at a conventional enemy up to 15 kilometers away and half of the training will be at night, it said.

Russian forces' takeover of Ukraine's Crimea region has been bloodless but tensions are high there following the pro-Russian regional parliament's decision to hold a referendum on Sunday on joining Russia. Kiev and the West say the referendum is illegal.

Russia's armed forces also held much larger exercises in its Central and Western military districts last month, alarming the West and Kiev and causing concern in eastern regions of Ukraine where most people are Russian speakers.

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