

Eastern Europe Turns From Russian Arms as Sanctions Bite

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The EU's embargo on Russian arms imports has affected Bulgaria's ability to service its MIG-29 fighter jets.

BRATISLAVA / SOFIA — A European Union embargo on arms imports from Russia, imposed last year in response to a pro-Russian rebellion in Ukraine, is speeding the demise of central Europe's remaining military ties to its former overlord.

The sanctions have also driven a limited regional market in locally manufactured Russian spares to help tide central European armed forces over in an accelerated transition to Western weaponry.

Slovakia's Defense Ministry says it has to buy new air defense radars because it is unable to service its Russian-made models for lack of spares.

Bulgaria says it will have to take its Soviet-made jet fighters out of use because it cannot

service them, and its defense minister has said he may have to ask allies to help patrol Bulgarian airspace.

Former Warsaw Pact members now in NATO, once heavily reliant on Soviet military equipment, had already been gradually switching to non-Russian supplies, a trend that reduces the impact of disruption caused by sanctions.

However, the sanctions mean Russia has lost supply deals earlier than anticipated, inflicting pain on an economy for which weapons exports are a major source of revenue.

"While not a decisive factor for central and eastern Europe's military integration with the West, as this began many years ago, the EU sanctions on Russian weapons and parts are certainly speeding the process up," said IHS Jane's defense analyst Konrad Muzyka.

Although the terms of the ban allow EU members to buy Russian parts and services needed to maintain "existing capabilities," this only applies to contracts signed before the sanctions were imposed, and which have not expired.

"Slovakia is currently using [air defense] radars made by a Russian company Almaz-Antey," Defense Ministry spokesman Martin Cambalik said.

"With new spare parts, their expiration date could have been pushed to 2020. Because of sanctions, the ministry can't buy spare parts so we'll have to launch a tender for new radars."

"EU sanctions against Russia have not necessarily changed our priorities — we have planned to reduce dependence on Russian arms for a long time — but they moved certain things higher on our list of priorities," the spokesman said.

In April, Slovakia said it had agreed to buy nine U.S.-made Black Hawk helicopters for \$261 million, replacing its outdated Russian Mi-17 fleet which it was unable to service due to lack of spares.

Bulgaria's Defense Minister Nikolay Nenchev also said that the EU embargo affected the supply of spare parts for Russian-made weapons, and the country's ability to service its MiG-29 fighter jets, once the cutting edge of Warsaw Pact air forces.

"If [the repairs] stop, MiG-29 fighters cannot perform training and combat tasks," Nenchev told Reuters.

"This would severely hamper ... security of the airspace and would force Bulgaria to invite allies to participate with their forces," he said, adding that for now Bulgaria may seek Poland's help in servicing the jets.

Asked why Bulgaria did not seek a renewal of the servicing contract with Russia despite being allowed to under the terms of sanctions, the Defense Ministry spokesman said it was advised by the Foreign Ministry there could be diplomatic hurdles.

Many firms shy away even from deals not covered by sanctions because of the risk that, if the scope of sanctions is later expanded, their agreement will be affected.

Western states have not ruled out such an extension, accusing Russia of backing Ukrainian rebels with arms and troops and flouting a cease-fire. Russia denies the accusation.

Poland's Gain

Moscow remains confident about its overall arms exports, which have recovered strongly since loss of the Pact market.

Russia says it exported \$15 billion of weapons in 2014 and has an order book worth \$40 billion over the next three-four years, with the biggest buyers from India, China, the Middle East and Latin America.

No figures are available specifically for Russian arms exports to former Pact states. But Russia has been keen to keep sales going to those countries for as long as possible.

Dmitry Rogozin, Russian deputy prime minister in charge of the arms industry, has held repeated meetings with Slovak officials.

But as Russia loses trade to former satellites, Poland may be set to gain what its former overlord has lost.

Until 1989, Poland's defense industry was closely linked to the Soviet Union, manufacturing weapons and parts based mostly on Soviet technologies. While the industry has been realigning with the West since Warsaw joined NATO in 1999, a significant capacity to service an array of Soviet-made weapons, including fighter-bombers and helicopters, remains.

"The Polish industry is able to provide services for other Eastern Bloc countries falling under the ...embargo and still using post-Soviet equipment," a Defense Ministry spokesman said.

But the EU embargo has caused shortages of spare parts even on that already depleted market, Defense Ministry sources said.

Poland itself sometimes resorts to shopping around for second-hand parts, available both in the region and sometimes as far afield as India.

The EU sanctions hasten a transition that has been inevitable since Russia's ex-allies rallied to former foe NATO. While perhaps politically desirable, that development will for some time force central European states to become increasingly inventive in maintaining defenses strained at the edges.

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