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Are Russian Troops in Ukraine Using Elon Musk's Internet Satellites?

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A Starlink satellite-based broadband system. **Yasuyoshi Chiba / AFP**

Ukrainian military intelligence claims that Russian forces in occupied areas of the country are using Starlink satellite technology to communicate.

The GUR said Sunday that they had intercepted radio transmissions from the Donetsk region in which Russian soldiers discussed using Starlink terminals.

Activated after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Starlink satellite internet replaced conventional internet and other communication infrastructure destroyed by cyberattacks and advancing Russian forces. Russia had no equivalent technology, which gave Ukraine a competitive advantage in coordinating troops and arranging humanitarian efforts.

Reports that Russia has started to use this technology are yet to be independently verified. If true, it would seriously hamper Ukraine's war effort, which is already grappling with undersupplied and outnumbered troops. Here is what we know so far.

– Starlink uses a low-orbit network of satellites to communicate with terminals, which can be bought for less than $600. By October 2022, over 200,000 units had been sent to Ukraine.

– The satellites' proximity to the Earth and the frequencies they use to communicate make their signals difficult to block.

– Starlink terminals are supposed to be geofenced so they don't work in unauthorized locations, which includes Russia and deep into occupied territories.

– But access is not restricted along the frontline, meaning Russian forces could theoretically use the satellite network to coordinate attacks. Blocking access in these regions would also hit Ukrainian forces.

– Starlink has denied doing business with the Russian government or military. They also claim never to have sold terminals in Dubai, which was accused of acting as an intermediary.

Embed:

> A number of false news reports claim that SpaceX is selling Starlink terminals to Russia.
>
> This is categorically false.
>
> To the best of our knowledge, no Starlinks have been sold directly or indirectly to Russia.
>
> — Elon Musk (@elonmusk) February 11, 2024

– Multiple Russian companies purport to sell Starlink terminals. Starlink claims these retailers are scamming customers.

– Neither Musk nor Starlink have addressed whether Russian soldiers have obtained Starlink terminals, or whether they are being used in occupied Ukraine.

Related article: Elon Musk Has Ukraine, and the Future of the World, at His Mercy

– Starlink has refused to extend connectivity over occupied regions of Ukraine. This has angered Kyiv, as it makes it harder for them to operate in these areas.

– A 2023 biography of Musk revealed that he refused a request by the Ukrainian government to activate Starlink over Crimea to attack Russian warships in the port of Sevastopol.

– Mikhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, described Musk's refusal as "committing evil and encouraging evil."

– Musk wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that switching on connectivity would have amounted to

“a major act of war and conflict escalation.”

– Musk has complained about the costs of providing Starlink access to Ukraine. The U.S. Defense Department started shouldering the costs in July 2023.

– Commentators have criticized how Starlink’s importance to the Ukrainian war effort gives Musk – who has been accused of behaving erratically – undue influence over the course of the war.

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