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Russia Shows Modern Military in Ukraine Crisis

by Andre de Nesnera

4/30/2014

An estimated 40,000 Russian troops are deployed on the Ukrainian border, poised to invade if the order comes from Moscow.

These forces are part of a much larger military that has been modernizing its forces over the past several years.

Western estimates say the Russian Defense Ministry has between 800,000 and one million men under arms. These include strategic rocket forces as well as the various uniformed services: air, air defense, ground and naval. And there are various kinds of special forces, such as the Spetsnaz belonging to Russia's military intelligence or GRU.

Stephen Blank, an expert on the Russian military at the American Foreign Policy Council, said there are also paramilitary forces.

“The other forces belong to other ministries: the Ministry of the Interior, which are the internal forces of the MVD. The FSB has forces - that's the intelligence [service],” said Blank. “There are border troops and then there are paramilitaries like the Cossack formations. So there are lots of people involved here, probably something like one million men total in the regular armed forces, several hundred thousand more in these auxiliaries of the MVD, FSB, Cossacks and so

on.”

Russia learned lessons from 2008 war with Georgia

Ian Brzezinski, from the Atlantic Council, said the Russian government is spending a lot of money to modernize its armed forces.

“\$750 billion between now and the next decade to replenish their maritime fleet, replenish their air force to bring in fifth-generation aircraft, even more sophisticated air missile defense systems. They continue to robustly test and develop new ballistic missile capabilities and they continue their modernization of their ground forces.”

Brzezinski and others say Russia’s effort to modernize its military was prompted by poor performance in Moscow’s 2008, five-day war with Georgia over two separatist regions.

“You may recall the pictures of drunk soldiers straggling in the rear, trying to catch up to the frontline troops. And the fact that the Russians had a bit of difficulty taking on the Georgians, which didn’t put on that strong a defense - and they were able to press forward simply by pure mass rather than skill.”

Russia modernizes its military

Experts say one reform was to make the Russian military more mobile, better geared for rapid response and for local conflicts, rather than with the massive Soviet-style army.

Keir Giles, head of Conflict Studies Research Center in Oxford, England, said during the Georgian war, coordination between the different armed service branches was a problem for the Russians.

“They didn’t, for example, have the kind of embedded forward air controllers with their ground units in order to actually communicate with air power. So some of the air losses in the Georgia war were actually shot down by their own side, by the Russians.”

New Russian military on display

Ian Brzezinski said the results of the reforms were on display during Russia’s annexation last month of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula.

“You see the way they have been performing in Crimea, where you had 20,000 to 30,000 Russian troops fan across the peninsula,” he said. “Pretty slick uniforms, well-maintained equipment, and real stunningly or impressive discipline and communication silence, communications discipline. They are certainly far more capable than they were six years ago.”

Stephen Blank from the American Foreign Policy Council said Russia used its forces “in an

extraordinarily disciplined, bloodless, swift way, in conjunction with information warfare against Ukraine, saturation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine with Russian propaganda, and the deployment of highly-trained, modernized combined forces on the western strategic direction, to intimidate, divert and immobilize NATO and the Ukrainian armed forces.”

Blank said members of the Russian military leadership believe that the end of the Cold War was an American special operation to take down the Soviet Union without firing a shot - and it succeeded. Blank said the Russian military tried to do the same, with success, in Crimea.