

Starlink in Operation: Press and Internet Update

Virtual Workgroups · Coverage to 15 October 2026

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Summary. In the past few days Starlink has been in the news chiefly for one reason: Ukraine says its armed forces lost full use of Starshield, the military version of Starlink, when a speed limit was applied without warning to terminals on drones and aircraft. Elon Musk says the limits are set by the US military and ultimately the US President, not by SpaceX. The episode shows in practice the central question of our investigation: who controls a privately owned network that has become part of a war. Section 2 sets out what is known: SpaceX runs all the satellites day to day, including the military ones the US government owns. At the same time Iran has declared Starlink a "tool of war" and stepped up penalties for using it, and Europe and Ukraine are pressing ahead with their own satellite networks to reduce dependence on it.

1. Ukraine: speed limit on Starshield terminals

- **What happened.** Reported on 14 October: Ukrainian forces found that Starshield terminals moving faster than about 160 km/h (100 mph) had lost service, without prior warning. Ukrainian officials say they learned of the limit through SpaceX customer support after complaining of faults.
- **Effect.** Ukraine uses the service to fly drones, including the interceptor drones it relies on against Russian Shahed drones, and for aircraft, helicopters and frontline logistics. President Zelensky called the restriction a big mistake that would cost lives. One adviser said Ukraine had been deprived of a means to defend itself.
- **Musk's response.** On X, Musk said Starshield systems are owned and controlled by the US government, and that any limits on speed or use are decided by the US military and ultimately the President. He described commercial Starlink as limited to civilian or defensive use.
- **US government.** The White House has neither confirmed nor denied Musk's account. Two US officials told reporters it was not a high-level policy decision, and a US official told Axios the administration was not involved. President Trump said the US had not stopped sharing intelligence.
- **Partial restoration.** Late on 14 October Mykhailo Fedorov said connectivity was being restored for speeds up to 160 km/h and that removing the limit entirely was critical. Ukraine's Defence Ministry says a limit of about 161 km/h remains. Sources do not fully agree on the current position.
- **Wider context.** The restriction came during a crisis in US–Ukraine relations. Reports say Ukraine also went without its usual Western missile warnings for two days, and Reuters sources said the US threatened to cut early-warning intelligence unless Kyiv stopped attacks on Russian oil refineries. Some Ukrainian officials suspect retaliation; this is unproven.
- **Reactions.** US Senator Jeanne Shaheen called for the restrictions to stop immediately and noted the Pentagon must notify Congress of pauses in intelligence support. Poland, which pays for Ukraine's Starlink subscriptions, criticised Musk for possibly playing politics with his products.

2. Who controls the satellites?

Musk's statement raises the question of whether the US government controls any of the satellites directly. Combining this week's coverage with our investigation, the short answer is: **SpaceX owns and runs the commercial Starlink satellites. Some military satellites are owned by the US government, but in every case we found, SpaceX staff still run them day to day.** Neither source gives a confirmed example of government staff directly flying any of these satellites.

Commercial Starlink (about 11,100 satellites): owned and run by SpaceX. SpaceX controls everything centrally: the satellites, each terminal, whole geographic areas, and what the service may be used for. Governments influence it only through agreements:

- Since a Pentagon contract in June 2023, the US military has decided *where* Starlink works in Ukraine.
- Since February 2026, Ukraine's Ministry of Defence has run a whitelist (an approved list) deciding *which terminals* work. This controls ground equipment, not satellites.

Starshield (the military product line): ownership is mixed. Starshield satellites use the same design and launch on the same rockets, sometimes alongside ordinary Starlink satellites.

System	Owner / customer	Who runs it
Starshield communications	US Department of Defense, buying the service	SpaceX
NRO spy satellites (150+ in orbit)	National Reconnaissance Office	Not public (classified contract)
MILNET (480 satellites, starting 2026–27)	US Space Force: “government-owned, contractor-operated”	SpaceX staff, under military oversight
Golden Dome missile defence	US Space Force	Still being built

MILNET is the clearest case: the government owns it, but SpaceX operates it. US senators have criticised the work going to SpaceX without competition.

How this week fits. Musk says the government owns and controls Starshield and that the military, and ultimately the President, decide any limits. This is unconfirmed: the White House has neither confirmed nor denied it, and US officials said the Ukraine limit was not a high-level decision. It matches the pattern above, in which the government may own the system or set the rules while SpaceX operates it. That split lets each side point to the other. Note also that the speed limit was a network setting applied to terminals, not a change to the satellites themselves.

Still unknown. Our investigation lists two open questions that matter here: how separate Starshield's control systems really are from commercial Starlink's, and whether Starshield uses any government-owned ground stations. The defence contract terms are also secret. So it cannot yet be shown whether the government can act on any satellite without SpaceX doing it.

3. Iran: Starlink called a "tool of war"

- The secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace, Mohammad Amin Aghamiri, has called Starlink a tool for enemy command, control and espionage, and earlier in October said satellite internet could become a legitimate military target.

- Using or possessing Starlink carries sentences of six months to two years; importing or distributing terminals up to five years; and, if combined with security or espionage charges, potentially the death penalty.
- Reported counter-measures include jammers, GPS spoofing, detecting Starlink traffic, patrols, drone searches and raids on sellers. The intelligence ministry claims to have confiscated hundreds of terminals; this has not been independently verified.
- On 4 October Iran summoned Norway's ambassador over unauthorised Starlink use (some Starlink satellite filings with the International Telecommunication Union were made through Norway, and Iran has pressed the ITU against both the US and Norway since 2023).
Background: an 88-day internet shutdown followed the start of the US–Israeli war with Iran on 28 February 2026, after a near three-week shutdown during the January protests, when Starlink was a main route for getting footage out of the country.

4. The network itself

- Launches continue at pace: a Falcon 9 carried 27 more Starlink satellites from California on 12 October (mission 15-25).
- As of late September roughly 12,900 Starlink satellites had been launched, about 9,700 of them operational.
- SpaceX reported about 12 million Starlink subscribers at the end of June 2026, nearly three times the end-2024 figure. Starlink was about 61% of SpaceX revenue in 2025 (\$11.4 billion). Government and enterprise revenue is growing fastest (roughly doubling year on year), while average revenue per user is falling as cheaper plans spread. (Latest published figures; no new numbers this week.)

5. Alternatives and sovereignty

- **Ukraine** is building its own constellation, UASAT, to reduce reliance on foreign networks. Its first satellite is reported to have launched this month, with about 120 planned by 2027.
- **European Union:** the IRIS² secure satellite network moved from planning to deployment in August, when the Commission signed the implementation agreement. About 290–348 satellites are planned, with first launches in 2029 and service around 2030. It aims at security and resilience rather than matching Starlink's consumer scale.

6. Relevance to our investigation

- **Control.** The Ukraine episode shows that service can be changed overnight, without notice, by a decision whose author is disputed: the company points to the US government, and US officials point elsewhere. This is the control risk set out in our findings, now seen in practice.
- **Military use.** The line between commercial Starlink (civilian and defensive) and Starshield (government-controlled military use) is now central to public debate, and it determines who can switch what off.
- **Dependence.** Ukraine, Poland (as payer) and the EU are all responding by funding alternatives. Iran shows the reverse risk: a state treating the network as a hostile military asset.
- **Suggested follow-up:** track whether the US government confirms who ordered the limit, whether Congress takes it up, and whether the limit is lifted.

Notes on sources

Events were still developing on 15 October; details, especially the current speed limit, may change. Figures from Iranian authorities are government claims. Financial figures come from SpaceX's filings and results as reported by financial press. Some articles (CNBC, Axios) could not be read in full and are summarised from search results.

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