

SpecialREPORT

Russian Drone Incursions EUROPE FOCUS

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Report Details

Russian Drone Incursions: A Test for European Unity and Responsiveness

Report Date: Nov 3, 2025

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Table of Contents

Report Details..... 2

1. Key Findings..... 3

2. Summary..... 3

3. Current Events/Major Issue..... 4

4. Background..... 6

5. Analysis and Future Outlook..... 6

 5.1 Stability Factors..... 9

 - Degrading Factors..... 9

 - Stabilization Factors..... 10

6. Impact and Recommendations..... 10

1. Key Findings

- Over 20 Russian drones were detected entering Polish airspace in an incident in early September. The first of many reported drone-inclusion incidents across Europe and Eurasia.
- The drone incursions led to consultations under Article Four of NATO. Operation Eastern Sentry was launched a few days later as a consequence.
- Denmark was the country impacted most besides Poland, with several large drones causing major flight disruptions.
- Russia denies any responsibility, accusing Europe of finding a reason to boost defense spending and portraying Russia as a threat.
- These hybrid actions align well with Russian tactics of employing means below the threshold of open war, while still allowing the country to deny involvement.
- Russia is testing Europe's and NATO's unity by trying to shift the focus from Ukraine to domestic security concerns and aiming to raise the costs for European defense.
- The EU has created a goal for establishing a "drone wall" by 2027 that would defend EU members from future drone incursions from countries like Russia.
- NATO is expediting the creation of more effective counter-drone initiatives while also establishing its own drone capabilities.

2. Summary

Recent drone incursions have marked a clear escalation in Russian aggressions and severe gaps in NATO's air defense preparedness. The coordinate violations across Poland, Romania and other European countries demonstrated Russia's growing capacity to project instability deep into EU and NATO territory. European officials have [warned](#) that these are not isolated events but part of a broader hybrid warfare strategy designed to disrupt, confuse and test alliance cohesion.

These incidents [underscored](#) the widening asymmetry between Russia's use of the disparity between cheap, expandable drones and the West's reliance on costly and sophisticated countermeasures. This imbalance has forced NATO to reassess its deterrence posture and the EU to accelerate the development of collective defense mechanisms. Operation Eastern Sentry, [launched](#) in response to Poland's Article Four consultations, represents an initial step toward greater regional coordination. Meanwhile, discussions around establishing a European "[drone wall](#)" signal a strategic shift toward long-term resilience and integrated airspace protection across the continent.

Further incursions remain likely, keeping airspace security at the core of Europe's strategic agenda.

3. Current Events/Major Issue

Europe has experienced a significant escalation in suspected Russian aerial incursions into its airspace. This represents a new and dangerous phase of hybrid warfare, with Russia testing the readiness and resolve of the European Union and NATO to counter the influx of unmanned drones and the fighter jet violations.

The recent escalation started with a [swarm of drones](#) violating Polish airspace on September 10. Poland's military, in cooperation with NATO, destroyed 19 drones, but it remained unclear how many had escaped the countermeasures. Prime Minister Tusk activated Article Four of NATO's treaty, demanding immediate consultation with other NATO members. In response to the consultations, [NATO launched Operation Eastern Sentry](#) shortly after, intending to strengthen NATO's capabilities in the air, at sea, and on the ground to defend the eastern border against Russian threats with a particular focus on intercepting drones.

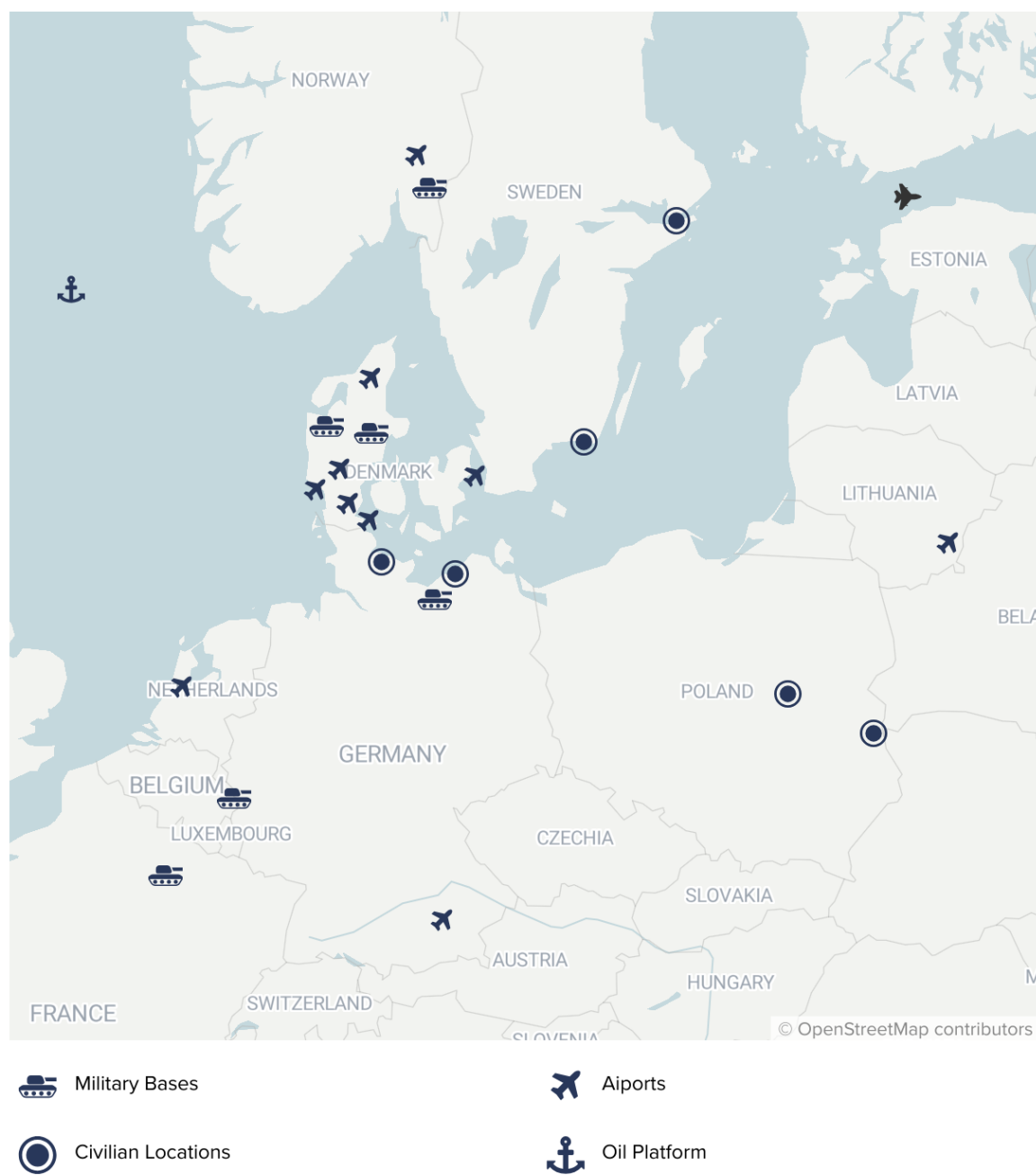
Twelve days later, Denmark became the hotspot of drone incursions. Several [large drones flew over Copenhagen Airport](#) for many hours, causing major flight disruptions. Officials called it the "most serious attack on Danish critical infrastructure to date." At the same time, another drone was sighted over Oslo Airport, forcing all traffic to one runway. [Between September 24 and 25](#), more drones were spotted at airports in Aalborg, Esbjerg, and Sonderborg, as well as at the Skrydstrup air base. The Defense Ministry did not confirm media reports of one or more drones at Karup air base for security reasons.

Between the drone incursions in Poland, Denmark, and Norway, and afterward, more incidents occurred in Romania, Estonia, France, Germany, Belgium, Lithuania, and — allegedly — the Netherlands and Finland. [The Kremlin](#) has denied any responsibility for the drone incursions and mocks the European "hysteria". These provocations have triggered a combination of immediate defensive reactions and a more profound re-evaluation of Europe's long-term security architecture, leading to the plans for a "[drone wall](#)".

Figure 1. Locations of reported drone incidents between September 9 and October 6, 2025

Reported Drone Incidents

Between September 9 - October 6, 2025



Map: Sarah Krajewski/Hiene Brekke/Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)

Source: Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), [Reported Drone Incidents](#)

4. Background

The recent drone incursions and other airspace violations into European sovereign territory occur within a security environment that many officials perceive as [the most dangerous and challenging situation](#) since the end of the Second World War, surpassing even the Cold War era. European leaders acknowledge that the period of peace is over and that [they face an existential challenge](#) due to Russia's ongoing full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. These recent incidents fit the picture of Russia's hybrid warfare against Europe and the cyberattacks and sabotage acts on critical infrastructure since 2014. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, clearly [called out Russia's strategy](#), stating that it was "not random harassment ... this is hybrid warfare". She called the recent events a ["targeted gray zone campaign"](#) waged by Russia against Europe, and called for firm responses to deter Russia from expanding the gray zone.

The hybrid actions deployed by Russia [exploit the threshold of armed aggression](#), intending to slow European decision-making through ambiguity, divide public opinions, and paralyze effective reaction. At the same time, Russia sows doubt by sending contradictory signals while maintaining plausible deniability. Yet, it is apparent that the aerial incursions targeted those countries that belong to Ukraine's strongest supporters. These actions seem like something out of the Russian playbook for hybrid warfare that Europe has seen in play for the last decade, since Russia annexed Crimea and supported pro-Russian groups in eastern Ukraine. Drones are an opportunistic tool for Russia to test the waters and to try to grow opposition to increasing defense budgets, as there is a significant [imbalance of cost-effectiveness](#). While Russia employs cheap UAVs or decoys, NATO scrambles expensive fighter jets and is required to use missiles that cost \$1m to shoot down drones that cost \$10,000 or less. Russia also intends to divert European attention and defense budgets toward internal air defense, thereby [shifting the focus away from Ukraine](#). That aligns perfectly with their goals of hybrid warfare.

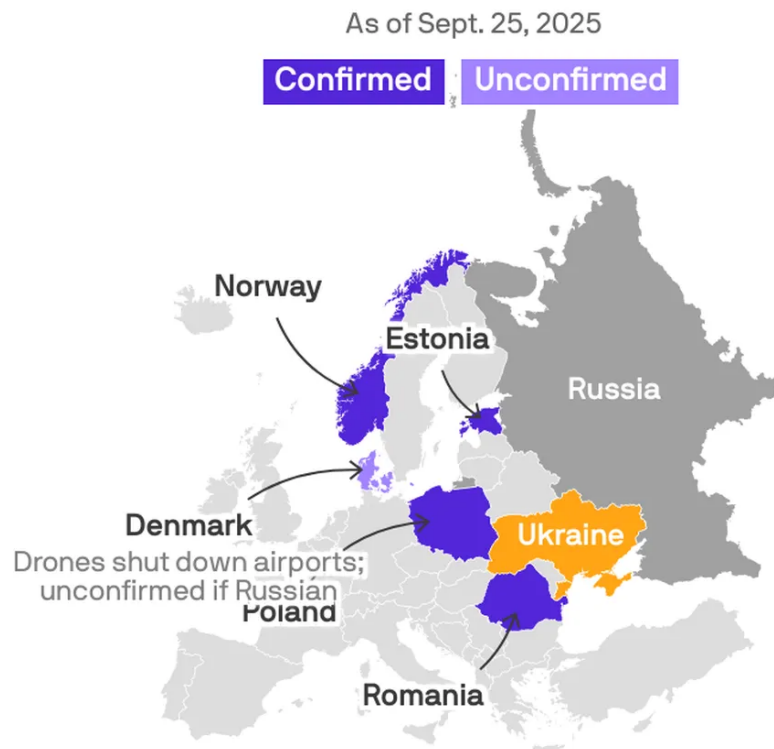
5. Analysis and Future Outlook

The Russian drone incursions into European countries' airspace have been a targeted process by Russia towards NATO countries in an effort to create disruption and confusion in the Europe and Eurasia region. Russian drones have been shot down throughout the last few weeks, but other drones have continued to fly deeper into Poland with a target of reaching the Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport, which is a central NATO hub.

Other NATO countries like Romania and Estonia have reported other drone incursions. NATO has declared these drone incidents as intentional to create disorder and intimidation by Russia towards the West.

NATO has increased surveillance and response levels through air policing and the new [EU "drone wall"](#) in an effort to combat Russia's drone incursions. This section discusses the key actors in the drone incursions, their motivations, and possible outcomes.

Figure 2. Countries affected by aerial incursions



Source: Axios, [Russia Dares NATO to Shoot](#), 2025

Key Actors and their Motivations:

Russia is at the forefront of key actors in the drone incursion discussions. Russia has not officially declared its true motivations with the drones, but the incursions are likely to be part of a larger hybrid warfare strategy. Russia's actions are possibly aimed at creating concern and worry for European countries as well as obtaining information and intelligence about NATO countries, especially those supporting Ukraine. Drones are fascinating tools for [collecting SIGINT, IMINT, and GEOINT](#), which Russia could leverage to enhance its aggression capabilities. Russia likely wants to test how strong the European alliances are and whether they are willing to defend one another or avoid getting drawn into hybrid warfare.

Pro-Russian Supporters have expressed a desire to promote a positive picture of Russia and their actions. They have [blamed NATO and the West for exaggerating](#) what the drone incursions entailed and using the incursions to boost their political agenda in the fight against Russia. These supporters have stated that Poland is experiencing government instability, and this is the perfect opportunity to use an outside source to cover up the government's dysfunction. The

pro-Russian supporters are pursuing campaigns to express their backing of Russia and state that the drone incursions were simply accidental.

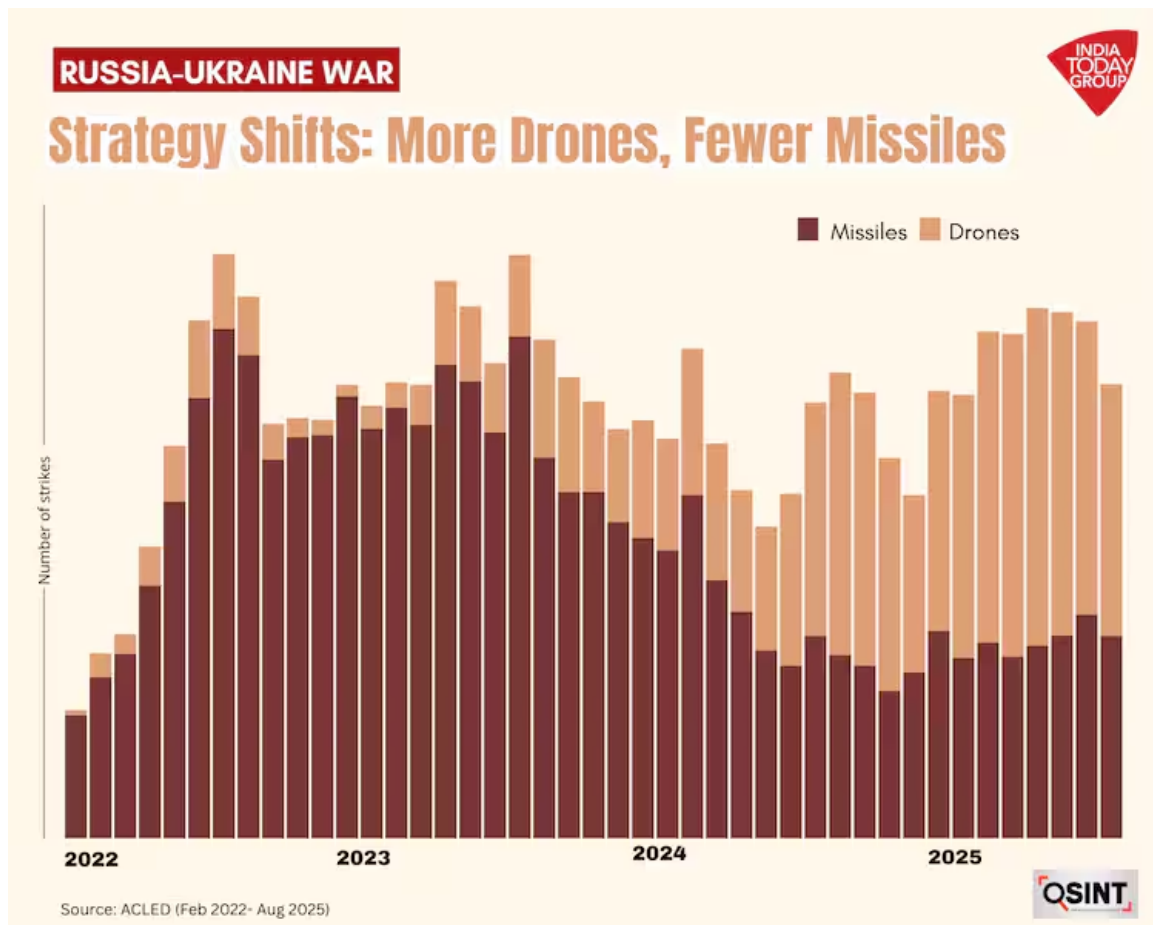
NATO has a responsibility to protect its member states from aggression and to avoid any increasing violence from countries outside of the NATO alliance. NATO feels Russia has attacked it in an effort to create a divide among allies. Hence, NATO intends to prevent future escalation and to ensure the alliance's strength. NATO fighters have already pursued tactics to combat the Russian drones, as shown by NATO fighters shooting down multiple Russian drones that entered Polish airspace. NATO has fully recognized that drones have exploited its air-space vulnerabilities, so it is expediting the development of [more effective drone and counter-drone capabilities](#).

The European Union has stated that drone incursions are a direct threat to critical infrastructure within member states. This includes military sites, energy grids, and airports. EU member states are feeling the economic toll that drone incursions have caused due to defense responses and constant airspace disruptions. The EU has reiterated its continued commitment to supporting its member states and Ukraine in the fight against Russia. The EU is spearheading a plan to build a ["drone wall"](#), which is the main priority of the EU's Defense Readiness Roadmap 2030.

Possible Scenarios:

1. The EU has set 2027 as the goal for the establishment of an [anti-drone system](#) that would defend itself against future Russian drone attacks. The system would be fully ready for any potential conflict by 2030. Drone defense is no longer an option; it is a necessity, as the EU foreign policy chief stated. The EU also wants to strengthen its eastern borders and construct air and space shields.
2. Russia continues its expansion and advancements in drone production and technological capabilities. The Kremlin is increasing its industrial bases to maximize production of drones with the intention of drone strikes and decoy drones. [Swarm attacks](#) by Russia would become more prevalent against European and Eurasian air defense systems. Russia continues to use artificial intelligence to construct future attacks.
3. Western countries are increasing their resources into drone warfare capabilities in a shift in military priorities and strategy. The [change in military focus](#) will emphasize evolving countermeasures to aggression and the drone arms race. Drones will become the forefront of military strategy and intelligence.

Figure 3. The shift in the use of drones vs missiles



Source: India Today, Behind Poland Drone Inclusion: [A Shifting Russia Strategy](#), 2025

5.1 Stability Factors

- Degrading Factors

- Russian aggression towards Europe could signal that they are not satisfied with their intention towards Ukraine and may attack other countries
- NATO members are having to increase their drone expenses, as Russia does. The budgets of NATO countries will be strained the longer this tension lasts.
- Public confidence in airports in NATO countries will be a significant issue as planes continue to be grounded over concerns about drones entering the airspace
- Even without direct military force, Russia is disrupting while also exploiting NATO's vulnerabilities in its air defense systems

- Stabilization Factors

- The UK military has been granted the ability to shoot down any drones that pose a threat to military bases. This only applies to military sites, but could lead to civilian locations in the future
- NATO and other European countries are increasing their air policing strategies and capabilities, especially along the European eastern flank
- An increase in European support for Ukraine and a strengthening partnership between the two parties.
- The European Drone Wall displays the collaboration of European leaders to prioritize support and protection for European countries

6. Impact and Recommendations

- **Integrate Airspace Risk into Aid Logistics:** Humanitarian organizations operating along the Ukraine–Poland corridor should incorporate airspace disruption scenarios into their logistics and contingency planning, ensuring alternative ground routes and storage hubs for critical aid deliveries.
- **Enhance Coordination with Civil Aviation Authorities:** NGOs and international partners should establish liaison mechanisms with Polish and Ukrainian civil aviation agencies to receive real-time updates on airspace closures, drone activity, and emergency flight restrictions affecting humanitarian transport.
- **Develop Crisis-Response Protocols for Air Disruptions:** Implement operational protocols and staff training for responding to sudden airspace closures or drone-related incidents, minimizing delays and maintaining continuity of aid operations across affected regions.
- **Strengthen Critical Infrastructure Protection:** Drone incursions pose a threat to critical infrastructure, including power plants, telecommunications networks, transportation systems, and cargo hubs. Private operators should reassess defense and business continuity by devising prevention and response plans for aviation disruptions, such as diversifying routes or carriers to ensure an effective supply chain despite intermittent disruptions.
- **Anticipate Economic Impact on Air and Cargo Sectors:** Air carriers are likely to adopt longer routes, pursue contingency planning (including higher insurance premiums), and experience elevated operational costs across both passenger and cargo sectors. NGOs and private companies relying on air transport should account for these factors in budgeting and delivery timelines.

- **Raise Awareness and Support Defensive Preparedness:** Promote awareness among NGOs and logistics partners of the emerging threat to civilian airspace and infrastructure, and advocate for the inclusion of humanitarian operations in national or EU-level defensive planning and information-sharing frameworks.
- **Stimulate Innovation in Counter-Drone Technologies:** Rising airspace threats will likely accelerate investment in UAVs, counter-drone systems, and surveillance systems. This creates opportunities for European defense firms and startups to develop platforms and dual-use technologies.
- **Promote Cross-Border R&D and Joint Procurement:** The shared need for aerial monitoring and defence mechanisms can foster joint R&D initiatives and procurement frameworks among EU and NATO members.

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