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Shadow Fleet to Gray Zone - Russia's Expanding Threat to European Security

By

Lāsma Kokina



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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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Lāsma Kokina

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Executive Summary

- Multiple European officials warn that Russian hybrid warfare could expand deeper into EU territory through sabotage, cyberattacks, and drone incursions.
- Intelligence assessments suggest Russia aims to test NATO resolve and expose the alliance's mutual defence commitments as ineffective. Unverified reports allege potential Russian drone strikes directed at Southern and Western European nations.
- Czech intelligence chief Michal Koudelka cautioned that a limited Russian incursion backed by drones, propaganda, and false-flag operations could unfold within months rather than years.
- Baltic leaders assess an immediate invasion as less probable because Russian forces remain overextended in Ukraine.
- US troop reduction plans and sanctions rollbacks have raised doubts about American security guarantees, particularly following backlash over a deal to import Russian diesel.
- Ursula von der Leyen has proposed a European Security Council to formally integrate key non-EU allies such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Canada, and Ukraine into high-level defence formats.
- Proposed European initiatives include an Emergency Security Protocol and a Strategic Enablers Instrument to coordinate industrial capacity and fund critical assets, including airlift, intelligence, refuelling, and satellites.
- The European Union's proposed Emergency Security Protocol would activate a unified bloc-wide response under the EU mutual defense clause whenever a member state encounters hostile action.
- Policy experts recommend adopting deterrence by punishment to impose tangible costs on Moscow rather than absorbing ongoing gray-zone strikes.

Key Picture: Mapping Russian Hybrid-Warfare Activity Across Europe



Source: Congress.Gov

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The Expanding Russian Hybrid Threat and the European Defence Response

Rising Gray-Zone Escalation and Fragile Transatlantic Deterrence

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine approaches its fifth year of regional instability, intelligence assessments point to an alarming possibility: a broader conflict in which Russia's hybrid attacks reach deep into EU territory.[1] The terms "hybrid warfare" and "hybrid attacks" generally refer to unconventional tactics, such as cyberattacks, sabotage, and disinformation campaigns that used to weaken and destabilise an opponent without open military conflict.[2]

Recently, several European officials have voiced heightened concern regarding Russia's covert hostilities. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk cited unnamed intelligence to warn of potential Russian attacks across Europe, while French President Emmanuel Macron cautioned that nobody is out of reach. British Prime Minister Andy Burnham described an "industrial-scale" wave of hostile information operations targeting the UK, while a Danish defence intelligence report warned that intensifying Russian threats toward NATO members would carry far heavier impacts than before.[3] Similarly, German officials have consistently stated that Russia is waging a hybrid campaign using cyber operations and drones. Berlin also pointed to Moscow as the culprit behind an August drone incident targeting Leipzig airport.[4]

Concerns are increasing over a potential escalation of the Russian conflict into Western Europe following an El Mundo report detailing an alleged CIA assessment. According to the Spanish publication, Russia may be planning drone strikes targeting Spain, France, and Italy, potentially deploying them from international waters in the Mediterranean via its shadow fleet. While these claims remain officially unverified, with French President Emmanuel Macron noting that Paris had not been briefed on the intelligence, Macron acknowledged that a Russian strike against European territory remains a plausible threat.[5]

Indeed, multiple European intelligence leaders have warned that Moscow might escalate operations to probe NATO's resolve in backing Ukraine, though assessments vary on how quickly this could happen.[6] The warnings follow Tusk's alert to parliament that Russia may soon launch missile or drone strikes against NATO territory to expose Article 5 as ineffective in practice. Similarly, Michal Koudelka, head of Czech intelligence, warned that Russia could soon escalate threats by launching a limited incursion into a neighbouring NATO state, supported by drones, false-flag operations, and massive propaganda. While he cautioned this scenario could unfold within months rather than years, he emphasised that extensive efforts are underway to deter such actions. Conversely, Baltic leaders view an invasion or severe escalation as less likely due to Russia's overextended military in Ukraine, warning that exaggerated fears directly serve Russian interests.[7]

The United States has sent conflicting signals regarding European defence. While CIA Director John Ratcliffe cautioned Moscow against targeting NATO allies during an August trip, the administration's credibility has been eroded by a defence posture review considering substantial troop reductions across Europe. Further straining relations, President Donald Trump followed a disagreement with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz by declaring plans to pull thousands of service members out of Germany and cancel an anticipated long-range missile deployment.[8]

Observers worry this wavering commitment could encourage Russian President Vladimir Putin to provoke a broader European crisis, potentially escalating past incidents like the September 2025 cross-border drone incursions into Poland.[9] These concerns are further amplified by Trump's recent agreement with Putin to bring Russian diesel into the US, drawing backlash for rolling back sanctions intended to cut Russia off from the global economy.[10]

Building Strategic Autonomy and Counter-Hybrid Frameworks

While direct war between Russia and NATO is still unlikely, experts expect Russian aggression to keep growing. It is believed that Moscow wants to divide NATO and make European countries feel unsafe by showing that the

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alliance might not protect them. By doing this, Russia hopes Europe will stop supporting Ukraine. Thus, experts argue that Europe also needs to advance efforts to build a new defence framework. In her September State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen advocated for establishing a European Security Council that would unite EU member nations with key allies such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Canada, and Ukraine. This proposal offers a constructive path forward, potentially enabling Europe to present a stronger, more coordinated front against Russia's gray-zone tactics.[11]

Among von der Leyen's key initiatives is the creation of a European Security Council, an expanded summit configuration designed to formally integrate non-EU allies, including Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Canada into high-level European defence talks. Von der Leyen emphasised that escalating continental threats have made establishing a dedicated security format an urgent priority. However, the path to implementation remains vague, as von der Leyen provided neither a timeline nor concrete deliverables beyond a broad commitment to European security.[12]

Hybrid warfare emerged as a critical issue. In response, von der Leyen urged the European Union to establish its own counter-hybrid strategy and agree on unified measures for threats that fall below the threshold of armed conflict yet still compromise national security. To complement NATO's Article 4 consultations, she proposed an Emergency Security Protocol grounded in the EU's mutual defence clause, ensuring collective European assistance whenever a member nation faces hostile action. Von der Leyen explained that if an individual nation were to activate the protocol, the entire bloc would assemble to create a unified response, de-escalate tensions, and limit the fallout.[13]

The European Union is moving urgently to address critical vulnerabilities in its strategic enablers - vital logistical assets like intelligence, airlift, refuelling, and satellite support. Von der Leyen stressed that Europe must unite its industrial capacity to supply these indispensable systems, introducing the European Instrument for Strategic Enablers to direct sustained funding toward NATO-aligned capabilities.[14]

Should subsequent strikes on critical infrastructure lead to casualties, managing the ensuing crisis could become far more difficult. Consequently, European leaders could consider shifting toward deterrence by punishment through the imposition of concrete costs. Such measures would aim to alter Russia’s strategic calculus and challenge the assumption that European nations can be targeted without facing significant repercussions. Although Russian activities may appear as distinct operations spanning various borders, they form part of a unified campaign targeting the West. Accordingly, addressing them effectively is often seen as requiring a collaborative, unified response among European nations.[15]

Recent US intelligence reports indicated that Russia might be planning a restricted offensive against a NATO member in the future, prompting CIA Director John Ratcliffe to caution Russian authorities against escalating tensions with Baltic nations. However, uncertainty surrounds whether these alarms stem from recent findings, as Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys noted that related intelligence on a potential false-flag operation dated back to July, viewing the public remarks as an effort to deter Russian miscalculation. While NATO diplomats confirm that member states have not received formal briefings on new findings and the alliance maintains that no attack is imminent, officials continue to stress the necessity of vigilance and sustained collective defense.[16]

Views vary on how far Putin will escalate his covert campaign against Europe, yet any easing of tensions appears improbable as long as the war in Ukraine persists. Because Russia poses an enduring danger, European leadership must boost homeland defences and display credible strength capable of deterring Russia.[17]

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