

The Russian Military Campaign Against Europe: Current Objectives and Efforts



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Introduction

Russia is operating within a war framework against Europe while Europe continues to function within a peace framework. It does not follow that a full-scale war between Russia and NATO is inevitable, let alone imminent. NATO and European states must recognize the framework the Kremlin is using in order to enable European states to make appropriate, calm, but determined efforts to deter Russian escalation and avoid full-scale war. It is difficult to strike the necessary balance between openly acknowledging Russia's war framework and hyperbole or alarmism. European leaders have — with some exceptions — gone too far in obfuscating the reality of the Russian approach, however, to the detriment of Europe's ability to develop coherent and sensible policy responses. This report does not aim to stoke war fever in Europe, still less to encourage European states to seek conflict with Russia. It instead aims to present the suite of Russian actions in Europe within the framework ISW assesses that the Kremlin is using. Europe can develop and execute policy responses to deter and, if necessary, defeat Russian escalation and war. Europe can only do so, however, if it recognizes the coherence binding Russian actions together and speaks frankly but deliberately about the challenge it faces.

NATO and European states must orient their policy planning on the coherence of the Kremlin's kinetic and informational campaigns against Europe and the objectives of these campaigns, instead of seeing a disconnected series of various sorts of Russian kinetic and cognitive actions. The Kremlin is conducting several mutually supporting campaigns against Europe in order to support its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and advance its longstanding grand strategic objectives of breaking NATO and reestablishing dominant influence over former Soviet states. Each of the Kremlin's individual lines of effort — such as airspace incursions or sabotage against European industrial base facilities — supports several Kremlin campaigns. NATO and European states must understand the overall objectives of Russia's campaigns in order to understand the context of individual Russian actions and develop and execute appropriate responses. This report presents an initial assessment of the objectives of Russia's military campaign against Europe and their constituent lines of effort, expanding on ISW's September 16 report "The Russian Military Campaign Against Europe: Defining the Threat." [1] ISW will assess each of Russia's campaigns against Europe in forthcoming reports building on this report.

Russian Grand Strategic Objectives Toward Europe

The Kremlin has long considered itself to be in a protracted conflict with the West and is waging this conflict in support of several longstanding grand strategic aims, which have remained largely the same throughout Putin's rule.[2] The Kremlin is conducting its full-scale

invasion of Ukraine and its ongoing kinetic campaigns against Europe to advance these grand strategic objectives. The Kremlin's individual campaigns against Ukraine and NATO do not each nest one-to-one under the Kremlin's grand strategic objectives, but understanding the long-term end state Putin is working towards is essential to properly assessing the Kremlin's campaigns against Europe and planning proper policy responses to them.

ISW assesses that the Kremlin has four primary strategic objectives:

Reestablish Russia as a great power, which requires subjugating Ukraine and Belarus: For all the Kremlin's varied justifications for its invasion of Ukraine and soft annexation of Belarus, the Kremlin rejects the reality that Belarus and Ukraine are legitimate states and independent peoples, and its efforts proceed from the conviction that Russia will not be whole until Ukraine and Belarus are brought back under Moscow's control.[3] Putin's worldview contains a circular argument — Russia cannot be a great power without control of its “ancestral” lands in Belarus and Ukraine; Russia is a great power, so it has the right to control Belarus and Ukraine. The Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine is fundamentally an imperial project. Putin has made his war with Ukraine an existential issue for his regime's survival and Russia's place in the world, and he regards Russia's status as a superpower and his regime's survival as inextricably linked. Many of the Kremlin's ongoing campaigns against Europe directly support its war in Ukraine as well as the pursuit of its larger objectives, as discussed below, and thus support achieving this objective.

Regain dominant influence over the former Soviet states, specifically including the Baltics and Moldova: Putin desires dominant influence over the former Soviet states. His aims go beyond suzerainty — the control of the foreign affairs of a vassal state while allowing it sovereign internal authority — and into direct influence over aspects of the internal policies of post-Soviet states, which the Kremlin views as rightful parts of its sphere of influence.[4] The Kremlin does not inherently seek to regain full, sovereign control over every former constituent entity of the Soviet Union or former Warsaw Pact member states. The Kremlin rather intends to establish the norm that these states have only truncated sovereignty and should at most be “neutral,” by which the Kremlin means that they cannot join alliances such as NATO or economic blocs such as the EU; and that Russia has a special right to protect “Russian speakers” (a nebulous, Kremlin-defined category not recognized under international law) using military force.[5] The Kremlin is therefore working to divide NATO and the EU. It specifically aims to separate the Baltic States and Poland from the rest of Europe to strip them of the protections and benefits of NATO and EU membership.

Establish a world order in which US influence is diminished, NATO's unity is broken, and Russia has decisive influence: The Kremlin desires to create a multipolar world order in which it is one of a few key poles, crucially by diminishing US influence and ensuring that NATO and the EU — which collectively *vastly* overmatch Russia's economic and military potential — cannot act as unified blocs. The Kremlin is therefore striving to ensure that the United States largely withdraws from Europe; to break NATO as a cohesive alliance; to end Russia's partial diplomatic and economic isolation; and to establish the norm that Russia must at minimum be consulted on all major geopolitical issues around the world.[6]

Preserve Putin's regime: Putin is an autocrat, and his paramount strategic objective is his own personal survival — and by extension, the survival of his regime. Putin relies on a complex series of narratives to justify his continued rule and to deflect criticism of Russia's problems onto the West by claiming that the West is waging a coherent, aggressive campaign to keep Russia down, and to argue that Putin himself is the only man who can lead Russia in this conflict.[7] Putin and many senior Russian political and military officials additionally *genuinely* believe their own narratives that the West is actively plotting a “color revolution” in Russia and that NATO could conduct a preemptive war against Russia, and

therefore the Kremlin must break NATO as an Alliance.[8] This report is in no way intended to support this Kremlin framing or even to treat it as understandable, but it is important for European policymakers to keep in mind Putin's decision making framework based on a deeply flawed view of history and current reality.

Russian Objectives Against Europe and Current Lines of Effort

The Kremlin is conducting a series of coordinated, mutually supporting kinetic and cognitive campaigns against Europe in pursuit of its strategic objectives. ISW assesses that the Kremlin is conducting a series of overlapping campaigns to achieve at least two overarching strategic objectives in the Ukrainian and European theaters:

- Reduce or eliminate European military and diplomatic support for Ukraine to enable the Kremlin to achieve its military objectives in Ukraine; and
- Neutralize NATO as a unified alliance capable of opposing Russia to regain dominant influence over the post-Soviet space and establish a multipolar world order.

The Kremlin is conducting numerous lines of effort in support of these campaigns. Many Russian lines of effort support multiple objectives — the Kremlin's campaign to sabotage Polish railways is intended to interdict Western aid to Ukraine as well as to raise the threshold of what NATO considers "normal" Russian kinetic actions, for example, and this report discusses some Russian lines of effort in the context of multiple Russian objectives. This report presents ISW's assessment of the Kremlin's objectives vis-à-vis Europe and surveys the Kremlin's lines of effort in support of these objectives, which ISW's recently launched Defense of Europe Project will assess in greater detail in forthcoming reports.

Reduce or eliminate European military and diplomatic support for Ukraine

The Kremlin's theory of victory in Ukraine is dependent on Russia outlasting Western support for Ukraine, which the Kremlin correctly assesses is essential to enable Ukraine to militarily defeat Russia's full-scale invasion and achieve an end to the war acceptable for Kyiv and its supporters.[9] The Kremlin seeks to reduce or eliminate European support for Ukraine by physically impeding Europe's means and ability to provide those means to Ukraine and to coerce European states into halting their support for Ukraine with cognitive effects.

Physically impede Europe's ability to provide military support to Ukraine

The Kremlin is conducting a campaign of sabotage efforts, primarily arson attacks, targeting European defense factories and warehouses to degrade the ability of European defense companies and governments to produce aid and transport it to Ukraine. Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal announced on August 18, for example, that Estonian investigators were examining a possible Russian-linked arson attack on August 14 against Estonian defense technology company Milrem Robotics, which provides drones to Ukraine's Armed Forces.[10] Lithuanian authorities arrested six suspects in January 2026 linked to Russia's Main Directorate (GRU, Russia's military intelligence service) for a September 17, 2024, arson attack against a facility operated by Lithuanian defense company TVC Solutions, which produces signals intelligence systems for Ukraine's Armed Forces.[11] Russian intelligence services predominantly execute these actions by recruiting disposable proxies through online platforms and local criminal networks, rather than through direct action by Russian personnel. Russian handlers often target financially vulnerable individuals, low-level local criminals, Ukrainian refugees, or local youths looking for a quick way to make money.[12] Russian intelligence services use these disposable proxies to achieve

effects at low risk to Russian personnel, to maintain the pretense of plausible deniability, and as an adaptation to Europe's previous mass expulsions of Russian intelligence agents operating under diplomatic cover.[13] Russian-instigated arson attacks and other sabotage efforts provide the Kremlin a low-cost method of disrupting the production and transport of Western aid to Ukraine (particularly drones) and are functionally tactical activities that are part of a larger disruption campaign. These attacks additionally force European companies to spend more time and effort protecting their facilities.

The Kremlin is taking advantage of the fact that European states are treating these activities as primarily law enforcement problems. Europe's lengthy timelines for investigating, prosecuting, and attributing individual actions to the Kremlin additionally increase the difficulty of designing and executing effective European responses. European states must of course uphold the rule of law and provide due process to individuals accused of crimes, but they must also develop coherent mechanisms for assessing these activities in a timely fashion as part of the concerted Russian campaign to disrupt European defense industrial support to Ukraine and design appropriate countermeasures.

Kremlin-linked agents are also conducting higher profile efforts to disrupt Europe's defense industrial base, such as drone attacks, attempts to plant explosives on civilian aircraft, and plots to assassinate European defense industry executives — all predominantly tied to European support for Ukraine. The August 5 drone attack against a Ukrainian cargo plane at Germany's Leipzig/Halle airport was intended to directly target a nexus of European aid to Ukraine.[14] Russian-linked operators previously attempted to smuggle incendiary devices onto US and Canadian cargo and passenger planes in Europe in July 2024, which caused fires at logistics hubs in Poland, the UK, and Germany, including at Leipzig/Halle airport.[15] Both the July 2024 and August 2026 incidents showcase Russia's willingness to target the civilian aviation network in ways that risk civilian casualties. European intelligence agencies and European defense companies have warned of repeated Russian-linked efforts to assassinate executives of European defense companies that produce material supplied to Ukraine. The most notable of these was the US intelligence community's disclosure of a 2024 plot by Russian intelligence agencies to assassinate the CEO of German defense company Rheinmetall, Armin Papperger.[16] None of Russia's higher profile attacks or assassination attempts have fully succeeded to date, but the Kremlin is clearly willing to take actions that — if they achieved their intended effects — would result in civilian casualties in a NATO member state. NATO member states are generally downplaying these Russian actions because they have not fully succeeded, but NATO must not wait for a large-scale Russian sabotage or assassination attempt to succeed, potentially with civilian casualties, before it formulates and executes a response. NATO officials, including Secretary General Mark Rutte, have said that NATO has, in fact, responded, but covertly.[17] NATO's covert responses so far have apparently been insufficient to deter continued Russian escalation in attacks of these kinds.

The Kremlin has extended its military strike campaign from Ukraine to other operational theaters in Europe in three coordinated military campaigns that aim to interdict aid and to preclude Ukraine's use of drone routes near Baltic airspace. These three military campaigns target the airspace and territory of NATO member states and Moldova but are primarily planned and conducted as elements and, in some cases, extensions of the Russian military's strike campaign against Ukraine (and efforts to defend against Ukrainian strikes), unlike the other Russian campaigns discussed in this report.

First, the Kremlin's campaign of strikes on the Polish/Ukrainian border and sabotage efforts against Polish railways are coordinated elements of the Russian military's campaign to interdict Western aid to Ukraine. The Kremlin has sought to interdict Western aid to Ukraine *within* Ukraine since 2022 and is increasingly expanding this campaign beyond Ukraine itself. Russian-directed networks have repeatedly targeted key Polish rail networks that transport Western military deliveries to Ukraine. Russian-linked actors most

notably targeted Polish train tracks along the Dorohusk Poland-Ukraine crossing using explosives and physical barriers on November 15, 2025.[18] Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated that the targeted rail line is crucially important for delivering aid to Ukraine and called the attack an unprecedented act of sabotage aimed at the security of the Polish state and its citizens.[19] Russia has increasingly hit Ukrainian border crossings and targets along the Ukrainian-Polish border with drone strikes in September 2026.[20] Russia conducted a drone strike against a passenger train in Volyn Oblast, Ukraine, two kilometers from the Polish border on September 13, 2026, likely intending to injure or kill European officials who were crossing the border at the same time in another train.[21] All three of these lines of effort — sabotage against Polish railways; strikes on the Ukrainian/Polish border; and the Kremlin's willingness to injure or kill Western officials entering or leaving Ukraine, or at minimum intimidate them into reducing their travel to Ukraine — are part of the Kremlin's campaign to interdict Ukraine's ground lines of communication with Europe.

Second, the Russian military is conducting a coordinated campaign of strikes against Ukraine's borders with Romania and Moldova. Russia has increasingly targeted Ukrainian-Moldovan border infrastructure along key import and export routes since August 2026, likely in an effort to isolate Ukraine from Europe and to deter Romania and Moldova from supporting Ukraine.[22] Russian forces struck crossings along the Moldova-Odesa Oblast border three times from August 20 to August 25.[23] ISW assesses that the Kremlin has at minimum accepted the risk that drones and other munitions used in these strikes would enter NATO airspace and potentially injure or kill NATO civilians, and some of these incidents are almost certainly intentional to advance the wider objectives of Russian aerial incursions discussed below. A Russian military drone most notably entered Romanian airspace on May 29 and crashed into an apartment building in Galati, Romania, injuring two civilians.[24] Russia has repeatedly struck targets in Ukraine near the Moldovan border and has risked Moldovan civilian casualties, including on July 13 when a Russian military drone armed with 40 kilograms of explosives violated Moldovan airspace.[25] These strikes increase regional political and commercial risks and are intended to deter Romania and Moldova from supporting Ukraine.

Third, the Kremlin is conducting a campaign of airspace violations against the Baltic states and Finland as part of its effort to reduce the impact of Ukrainian strikes against targets in Russia. The Kremlin assesses that the Baltic states are at minimum facilitating Ukraine's campaign of strikes against targets in Russia, particularly around St. Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast. The Kremlin is taking advantage of Ukraine's strike campaign against Russia to redirect Ukrainian drones into Baltic and Finnish airspace with electronic warfare (EW). More than a dozen Ukrainian drones have entered Baltic or Finnish airspace since March 2026 due to Russian EW.[26] These Russian efforts to redirect Ukrainian drones result in airspace violations that advance Russia's Europe-focused objectives discussed below, but they are also a direct component of Russian air defense efforts. The Kremlin seeks to coerce Baltic and Scandinavian states into forcing restrictions on Ukrainian strikes in order to mitigate the risk of Ukrainian drones entering NATO airspace — or to coerce Ukraine to do so itself in order to avoid angering its partners. The Baltic states and Finland are maintaining strong responses to these instances, however, correctly blaming them on Russia and declining to overtly criticize Ukraine, but the Kremlin seeks to create further tensions.[27]

Coerce European states into reducing or halting support for Ukraine

The Kremlin is conducting a cognitive campaign to convince the West that Russian victory against Ukraine is inevitable and that the United States and Europe should force Ukraine to accept a Kremlin favorable settlement and re-normalize relations with Russia on the Kremlin's terms, a series of false narratives that ISW has repeatedly documented and debunked.[28] The Kremlin conducts many of its kinetic actions to support informational objectives, and individual Russian kinetic attacks should be

understood in the context of the information campaigns they support, rather than as scattered individual events. The Kremlin seeks to coerce European states to reduce aid to Ukraine by achieving three effects: fix European air defenses in place; encourage the existing tendency for Western states to reserve equipment and capabilities for a future war with Russia instead of providing it to Ukraine immediately; and facilitate Russia-amenable European actors who claim that Europe, and European aid to Ukraine, is provoking Russia. These Russian cognitive campaigns pose a particular challenge, as NATO states must walk a fine line — Russian airspace violations *do* impose a requirement for more robust air defenses in the Baltic States, Poland, and Romania, for example, and NATO states must think about their own capabilities — but the Kremlin is successfully keeping the amount of aid European states provide Ukraine far below what Europe could comfortably provide.

Ukraine desperately needs additional air defenses and munitions stockpiles, particularly prior to what will be a challenging Russian strike campaign in Winter 2026-2027, and the Kremlin seeks to functionally achieve the military effects of fixing these European capabilities in place through a low-cost series of airspace incursions in European states. Russian drone incursions into NATO airspaces (and Russian efforts to redirect Ukrainian drones into NATO airspace using electronic warfare) are in part intended to put the governments and populations of frontline NATO states on edge and spur them to withhold air defenses and munitions. Airspace incursions have already imposed costs on Baltic states and have been effective in shaping frontline states' priorities. Lithuanian Defense Minister Robertas Kaunas confirmed that Lithuania is prioritizing air defense procurement in an interview on September 20, 2026, five days after a NATO fighter jet shot down a drone in Lithuanian territory.[29] The Kremlin is successfully imposing a conundrum on NATO, as frontline states *do* need to prioritize their own air defenses in response to Russian aerial incursions while NATO as a whole continues to support Ukraine. The Baltic States are meeting this challenge admirably, however, and no Baltic official has stated they need to retain systems for their own use at the expense of Ukraine. The Polish response to this Russian effort has been particularly prudent — Polish leaders have repeatedly noted that strengthening Ukrainian air and missile defense is the best way to protect Poland, even as the Polish military has raised its air defense alert status and lowered its threshold for scrambling air defense aircraft.[30]

Russia's campaign of threats to Europe, both kinetic and informational, is also intended to coerce the United States and non-frontline NATO states into withholding capabilities from Ukraine in order to reserve them for a potential NATO war with Russia. This Russian campaign has unfortunately achieved substantial successes delaying Western aid to Ukraine since 2022, as ISW has documented.[31] The United States and NATO justified withholding crucial aid to Ukraine for long stretches of the war by arguing that NATO needed to retain that equipment to fight a potential war with Russia — ignoring the reality that Ukraine is actively fighting a war with Russia, and that the best way to limit the Russian military threat to Europe is to enable Ukraine to defeat the Russian military now. This Russian campaign continues to have effects in 2026. Bulgarian Defense Minister Dimitar Stoyanov announced in early June 2026 that Bulgaria will stop donating weapons to Ukraine from its military stockpiles, citing in part concerns about the Bulgarian Armed Forces' own inventory.[32] The global shortage of US-supplied air defense interceptors and other munitions is also having compounding effects that the Kremlin is exploiting, as many European states are prioritizing withholding increasingly scarce interceptors for their own use.[33] German Brigadier General Jurgen Schrod, Deputy Chief of Staff Strategic Plans and Policy in the Supreme Allied Command Transformation, stated at a July 9 panel hosted by the German Atlantic Society that Germany is "really reaching our limits here" in terms of providing Ukraine more of Germany's stockpile of Patriot interceptors and must also ensure its own protection.[34]

Finally, the Kremlin's kinetic actions and narratives support a cognitive campaign to intimidate European states by showing them that they are under threat (such as from drone incursions) due to their support for Ukraine, and that the threat will end if they stop supporting Ukraine. The Kremlin relies on Russia-

amenable or overtly pro-Russian parties in Europe to espouse and magnify these messages. The governments of the Baltic States and Poland have correctly unified around the framing that drone incursions, even by Ukrainian drones under the effect of Russian electronic warfare (EW), are consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and that the quickest way to halt these threats is for Putin to end his war.[35] Russia's actions have supported the narrative in some European states, however, that European states are under threat due to their support for Ukraine, and that the quickest way to end the threat is to coerce Ukraine to accept Moscow's terms. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico warned on September 17, 2026 that a drone could enter NATO territory and kill civilians and stated that he does not want Slovakia drawn into a war "because of some Article 5." [36] Kremlin propagandists intentionally advance this narrative, such as when Russian Deputy Security Council Chairman Dmitry Medvedev amplified a Russian Ministry of Defense list of European factories and locations that produce drones for Ukraine and said on April 17, 2026, "when strikes become a reality depends on what comes next. Sleep well, European partners." [37]

Russia's incursions are also eroding public confidence in NATO's ability to protect frontline populations. A POLITICO poll from December 2025 found that more French and German respondents wanted their governments to decrease rather than increase aid to Ukraine.[38] Respondents listed domestic issues, fears that providing support to Ukraine risks provoking Russia, and concerns that providing aid to Ukraine negatively impacts domestic security as reasons to decrease support.[39] After a Russian drone struck an apartment building in Galati, Romania, on May 29, 2026, one resident told the BBC that "they told us we are protected by NATO, not to worry. But look where we are now!" [40] The vast majority of European governments remain committed to supporting Ukraine, but the Kremlin hopes that popular perceptions such as these will generate European apathy and enable the election of Russia-amenable parties — an explicit Russian line of effort discussed further below.

Neutralize NATO as a unified alliance capable of opposing Russia

The Kremlin seeks to divide and neutralize NATO, facilitate a US withdrawal from Europe, and fragment the European Union to grant itself a free hand in the post-Soviet space and create a global state of multipolarity. The Kremlin is setting conditions to potentially wage a future conventional war with one or more NATO member states, though ISW does not assess that the Kremlin has decided that a conventional war would be the best — or even necessarily a favorable — method to achieve its strategic objectives. The Kremlin's calculus at this time differs from that in summer 2021, when Putin seemingly decided that invading and occupying Ukraine would more effectively achieve his objectives than his then-ongoing information and pressure campaigns against Ukraine.[41] The Kremlin seeks to achieve its objectives against NATO and Europe at low cost by fragmenting the Alliance without a substantial conventional escalation, as well as to set conditions for potential future limited or full-scale conventional aggression against NATO.

Divide and delay intra-European policymaking against Russia

The Kremlin's primary campaign against Europe is its efforts to ensure that NATO cannot promptly and cohesively respond to Russian actions and ideally to fragment NATO entirely by neutralizing Article 5. The Kremlin seeks to create differing perceptions of risk and urgency between NATO states (and within the political discourses of individual states) and to exacerbate policy divides through targeted information campaigns and carefully scoped kinetic actions. The Kremlin's kinetic lines of effort, including airspace violations by drones; aggressive posturing by Russian military aircraft; sabotage and arson attacks; and information campaigns, mutually support this objective, and this report focuses on assessing the holistic intent of Russian actions rather than examining each type of Russian action in detail, which ISW will do in forthcoming reports.

The growing pace of Russian kinetic actions against Europe is intended to cause two cognitive effects: to raise NATO's threshold of what actions are considered worthy of a response by individual states or NATO as a whole versus what constitutes "normal" Russian actions; and to inure NATO governments and populations to constant alerts to increase the likelihood that they do not respond to any individual Russian action seriously, potentially granting the Kremlin greater freedom to escalate without triggering a NATO response. European officials increasingly treat escalating Russian activity (such as airspace incursions, discussed further below) as normal while avoiding defining what would warrant a collective response. Finnish President Alexander Stubb, for example, explicitly characterized increased Russian attacks as the "new normal" in January 2025.[42] Lithuanian presidential advisor Deividas Matulionis stated on September 4 that NATO's Article 5 threshold is difficult to predict.[43] German Chancellor Friedrich Merz stated on July 15 that Europe is "not yet living in a state of war, but we are already not in peace." [44] Unnamed NATO diplomats similarly told POLITICO in early September 2026 that the Alliance has no formal response plans for "sub-threshold" incidents and no consensus on whether a series of such attacks could justify invoking Article 5.[45] Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk warned on September 17 that Russia may attempt to exploit this ambiguity in order to show that Article 5 is more "theoretical than practical." [46] NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte said on September 22 that the alliance is being deliberately ambiguous to avoid greenlighting Russian actions below a certain threshold.[47] That argument makes sense, except that it has apparently left the Russians considerable latitude to push the Kremlin's perception of NATO's limits in a dangerous escalation pattern.

The Kremlin also intends to accustom NATO militaries and governments to a baseline level of Russian activity and airspace violations in an effort to create tactical surprise if or when the Kremlin conducts further escalations — such as direct drone strikes on NATO targets. The clearest historical comparison is Egypt's actions in the leadup to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when it conducted regular military exercises near the Israeli border that initially prompted Israeli reactions but were gradually treated as routine — with the result that the Israeli military partially dismissed Egypt's *actual* deployments to invade as just another exercise.[48] The Russian military is not conducting a rapid military buildup on NATO's borders, to be clear, and this is an inexact analogy — but NATO must ensure that it does not relax into treating Russian drone incursions and aggressive flight paths by Russian military aircraft as routine and unimportant occurrences, either in terms of raising the threshold of what Russian action merits a NATO response (a fight the Kremlin has unfortunately already partially won) or in terms of reducing the urgency with which NATO states and populations respond to individual Russian actions.

The Kremlin's kinetic actions and supporting information operations are also intended to exacerbate existing debates among NATO members on the nature of the Russian threat and necessary responses. Officials from several states, notably Poland, have begun to directly label Russian actions as part of a war with Europe, but most NATO state officials use euphemistic and unclear language to refer to Russian actions.[49] Lithuanian Prime Minister Mindaugas Sinkevičius stated on July 6, 2026, that "Russian aggression continues, we see various situations not only in Lithuania, we also see them in Germany, at the airport, drones, explosives." [50] Latvian Defense Minister Raivis Melnis stated on July 29 that Latvia is "preparing our forces for both provocations and for defending the country," explicitly bifurcating Russian actions into "provocations" and a conventional attack that would require defense activities.[51] UK Member of Parliament Graeme Downie stated on July 8 that the UK is in a "sustained confrontation" with Russia, describing it as a "prolonged campaign of hostile activity" rather than "a conventional shooting war." [52] ISW will assess the implications of different European perceptions of the Russian threat and the language used to discuss it in a forthcoming report.

The Kremlin is conducting numerous lines of effort intended simply to disrupt European civilian life and to cause anxiety and unease in European populations. Russian electronic warfare activity consistently disrupts civil aviation and public transport and degrades mobile networks and GPS services across Poland

and the Baltic states.[53] Russian and pro-Russian hackers consistently target European civilian infrastructure and public services. Various Russian-linked hacking groups attacked Polish heating and power plants in December 2025, conducted a cyber-attack against a Danish water utility in 2024, and attacked Norwegian government digital services in August 2026, for example.[54]

Increasingly frequent Russian actions are additionally designed to make NATO civilians and governments grow accustomed to regular alerts, in the hope that they will not respond to potential future Russian actions with sufficient urgency. Between September 1 and September 21, 2026, frontline NATO states have issued a substantial number of alerts related to potential airspace threats. For example, Poland issued emergency warnings to residents in eastern Poland on September 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, and 21; and Romania issued RO-alert (emergency alert) warnings on September 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, and 21 in response to air threats in Ukraine that approached or crossed into Romanian or Polish national airspace.[55] Romanian public broadcaster Radio Romania News published a report on August 17 stating that many residents of Tulcea county, Romania, where most RO-ALERT messages have been issued, have disabled the alerts and have told reporters that they no longer care about the warnings.[56]

The Kremlin is creating a conundrum for frontline governments, who must keep their civilians at the proper state of readiness to respond to Russian actions without (as frontline governments see it) overly alarming their populations and creating panic or unwanted economic shocks. Western analysts and policymakers must similarly ensure they treat the Russian threat with urgency but not scaremongering, and the Kremlin seeks to polarize perceptions of its own actions. Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna warned in April 2026 that speculation about a Russian attack on the Baltics served Moscow's goal of stoking fear.[57] It is a reductionist argument, however, to assert that discussing Russian attacks advances the Kremlin's objectives, creating a circular logic that Europe should not frankly discuss the Russian threat out of fear of stoking fear. It is certainly true that the Kremlin seeks to provoke alarmist warnings of an imminent Russian invasion. The Kremlin *also* benefits, however, from European underreaction to the Kremlin's ongoing campaigns, and particularly from the analysts and public officials who reject any discussion of ongoing Russian kinetic campaigns against Europe or warnings of the near-term Russian threat out of hand. The Finnish government is working hard to message the need for concern and preparation without panic: President Alexander Stubb told the Finnish public on September 18 to "prepare mentally" for the possibility of Russian drone incursions into Finland and increased "hybrid operations," but also reminded the public in a separate statement on September 21 that Russia will "continue to intimidate and we just have to be... calm and collected." [58] Finding a balance between these two poles will be incredibly challenging in the face of both Russian information operations and good faith policy disagreements, but it must be addressed.

The Kremlin seeks to create and exploit divisions over politically charged issues to cause crises in NATO governments. Many European leaders and parties are unfortunately already aligned with the Kremlin's desired end state of NATO skepticism, such as Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, who said on September 17 that he does not want Slovakia drawn into a conflict "because of some Article 5" and stated on September 20 that the West's "military rhetoric and the search for a pretext for a military conflict with Russia" represent Western attempts to distract from "basic challenges" like gas prices.[59] Debates over air defense responses to Russian and stray Ukrainian drones have also cost Baltic officials their positions: Latvian Defense Minister Andris Spruds resigned on May 10, 2026, after two drones struck an oil storage facility in Rezekne, Latvia; and Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina resigned several days later due to political fallout.[60] Baltic states have also struggled to contain weaponized migration from Belarus throughout 2026, a campaign that supports Russian objectives by straining resources and testing burden-sharing among the affected frontline states.[61] Latvian Interior Minister Janis Dombrava asked Lithuania in late July 2026 to deploy roughly 100 border guards to Latvia's border with Belarus.[62] Lithuania declined, citing insufficient capacity.[63] Lithuania has sent limited rotations of Lithuanian

personnel to the Latvian border since July 1 and has argued that Latvia must first commit more of its own resources, including Latvian military personnel, to support its own border guard.[64]

The Kremlin additionally seeks to provide Russia-amenable European officials and political parties (such as the German political party the Alternative for Deutschland [AfD] or Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico) opportunities and arguments with which to criticize and impede NATO efforts to defend against Russia.[65] Kinetic Russian actions are primarily intended to support other objectives, to be sure, but secondarily provide Russia-amenable parties rhetorical ammunition to advance the Kremlin's objectives. AfD party members have stated that Germany should reconsider its NATO membership, falsely asserted that Russia has already won the war in Ukraine, and advocated that Europe should stop supporting Ukraine and remove sanctions targeting Russia.[66] Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico stated on September 19 that a drone incursion could start a war between NATO and Russia and asserted that "certain war hawks within NATO are trying, any cost, to turn this war [in Ukraine] into a conflict between Russia and NATO." [67] The Kremlin's efforts to exacerbate political divisions have limits, however. French politician Marine Le Pen and members of her National Rally party are campaigning on drastically cutting aid to Ukraine, but Le Pen and her political partner Jordan Bardella released a formal statement on September 19 that "these debates [over aid to Ukraine] are legitimate" but "foreign pressure is not," and asserted that "we will never tolerate a foreign power, in this case Russia, hoping to dictate our country's policy directly or indirectly." [68] Le Pen and Bardella reaffirmed French unity with allied European states "that have been the targets of hostile acts or stabilization campaigns," even while disagreeing on the scale of aid to Ukraine.

Finally, the Kremlin is conducting information campaigns targeting European electoral processes that have long been documented.[69] The Kremlin is currently focusing on influencing the Latvian 2026 parliamentary elections, French 2027 presidential election, and Estonian 2027 parliamentary election, in addition to expending significant effort on the recent German regional elections.[70] Russian information operations have targeted the Latvian public in the run-up to the October 3, 2026 election by asserting that Latvian independence is illegitimate and stating that Latvia has failed since moving away from Russia.[71] French authorities have publicly disclosed information campaigns targeting specific French candidates and linked the efforts to Russia with a high degree of confidence.[72] The Kremlin's efforts are intended to get Russia-favorable candidates elected, as well as simply to cast doubt on the efficacy of European democratic processes.

Set conditions for a potential future conventional war between Russia and one or more NATO member states

The Kremlin's kinetic campaigns against Europe are also intended to set conditions for a potential conventional war with one or more NATO states. ISW does not currently assess that the Kremlin has explicitly decided that it is in its best interests to fight a conventional war with NATO, to be clear, but the Kremlin is undoubtedly setting conditions to do so in the future if it so chooses. Many of the Kremlin's lines of effort discussed previously — namely its efforts to fragment NATO and sabotage attacks against defense industrial base targets — secondarily support preparations for a future conventional war, but the Kremlin is additionally conducting several lines of effort more directly intended to support a future war.

Kremlin-linked agents conduct regular land and air reconnaissance of sensitive European locations such as military bases or defense industrial base infrastructure. An Estonian court found dual Estonian and Russian citizen Nikita Kuzmin guilty of espionage on August 25, 2026, for collecting information on military and civilian objects in and around Narva, Estonia, on behalf of the GRU during an unspecified time period during and after 2024, for example.[73] Moldovan police announced that they detained an Azerbaijani citizen on September 8 for illegally collecting information on military facilities in Moldova on

behalf of Russian intelligence services.[74] European authorities regularly report overflights by unidentified drones near military facilities and defense industrial base facilities, including an explosive laden drone that crashed near the German Bundeswehr's Wunstorf Air Base on September 14; a drone that was identified near USA Naval Support Activity Naples' Support Site on August 13; and at least two drones identified flying over a German Bundeswehr site in Mechernich on August 6.[75] European states have not publicly attributed all of these actions to Russian, but the pattern indicates that an actor — almost certainly Russia — is using drones to obtain information on European military and military support assets. These reconnaissance efforts set conditions for Russian strikes against these targets in a future conventional war and additionally support further near-term sabotage efforts.

The Kremlin's ongoing campaigns of drone incursions and aggressive actions by Russian military aircraft and naval vessels near NATO airspace are intended to test NATO reactions and defenses, in addition to advancing the previously discussed objectives of dividing NATO policymaking.[76] The UK Ministry of Defense reported a 25 percent increase in Russian ship activity in UK territorial waters and the North Atlantic from January 1, 2026, to July 31, 2026, compared to the same period in 2025.[77] Russian drones violated Romanian airspace at least 23 times between January 1, 2026, and August 17, 2026, compared to only 18 violations between the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the end of 2025.[78] NATO Military Committee Chairman Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone stated on September 7 that NATO fighter jets scrambled approximately 700 times to intercept Russian aircraft from September 2024 to September 2026, almost once per day.[79] Every time NATO aircraft conduct an "alpha scramble," NATO forces activate air defense radars, or conduct other military actions, the Russian military can collect data on responses. The Russian military likely already knows the locations and capabilities of the vast majority of frontline NATO systems but can gather valuable intelligence on response thresholds and communication patterns of NATO air defenses, as well as additional data to enable low-altitude drone strikes as opposed to missile or airstrikes. The need to respond to Russian actions also runs up NATO's operational tempo, though this is likely an added benefit to the Kremlin rather than the main objective of its actions.

The Kremlin's campaign of sabotage against critical infrastructure targets is likely primarily intended to set conditions for potential attacks in the future, either as individual escalations or as part of a conventional war, though it partially supports the Kremlin's previously discussed efforts to disrupt European civilian life and test NATO's response thresholds. Efforts by Russia-linked agents to damage European power stations and other civilian infrastructure are unlikely to have an immediate kinetic effect on either NATO capabilities or Europe's ability to support Ukraine. These attacks are likely probing actions to set conditions for more expansive attacks in the future, such as putting capabilities in place to take down European power grids either as major escalatory actions or as part of a conventional war. European and US authorities have repeatedly identified Russian efforts to conduct reconnaissance and sabotage related to undersea cables.[80] The US Congressional Research Service identified six suspected undersea cable disruptions in the Baltic Sea from December 2025 to January 2026.[81] These Russian actions are likely intended to enable Russia to target European communications on day zero of a conventional war, rather than trying to fully disrupt European communications at this time. Chairman of the board of the Latvian Transatlantic Organization, Jānis Karlsbergs, stated on July 23 that NATO has recorded a significant decrease in undersea cable damage in the Baltic Sea since the beginning of NATO enhanced vigilance activity Baltic Sentry, however.[82] Previously discussed Russian efforts against European defense industrial base targets naturally indirectly degrade NATO's capabilities as well, but ISW assesses these ongoing efforts are primarily focused on interdicting support to Ukraine rather than directly degrading NATO's ability to rearm its own militaries.

Conclusion

Europe has the resources to handle the Russian threat at this stage. Russian ground forces cannot conduct a large-scale invasion of a European state while the war in Ukraine continues and for some time after it concludes. Even then, European states have the wherewithal needed to defeat a Russian invasion if they cannot deter it. It is common to criticize Europe in general or particular European states for lacking the will or willingness to mobilize the resources necessary to deter and defeat Russian aggression, but that criticism (which is not entirely accurate) misses an important point. A state cannot effectively mobilize resources to confront an adversary without understanding what the adversary is actually trying to do and how. An essential first step is understanding the coherence of the efforts Russia is directing at Europe and the objectives those efforts are meant to achieve. Europe must take that step now.

The difficulty European governments face in acknowledging that Russia is operating within a war framework and pursuing actual military lines of effort against and within European states is proof of the success of Russian cognitive warfare efforts. It now requires great courage for European leaders, especially leaders of states that do not border Russia directly, to say that Russia is engaging in a military campaign against them. Russian cognitive warfare efforts have created antibodies to any such statements. European leaders who call Russian actions what they are are called warmongers, accused of scaremongering to distract from domestic failures, blamed for “provoking” Russia, or charged with trying to go to war with Russia. European political parties and populations must understand the degree to which they have been conditioned by extensive Russian efforts to avoid calling Russian actions what they are — parts of a military campaign intended to achieve discrete effects.

No one desires a war with Russia. The purpose of describing the Russian war framework and advocating for responses to it is to avoid escalation and conventional war. Europe (and the United States) must find a way to open their discourse to the idea that they must recognize the war framework under which Russia is operating in order to pursue peace.

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