Hybrid Threats from Russia and the EU's Counter-Defense Strategy

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On February 24, 2022, in parallel with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow significantly intensified its hybrid warfare against Europe. This article examines the tools of the current hybrid warfare and their similarities to the hybrid warfare tools deployed by Russia in Georgia before 2008. The paper highlights the fact that Moscow has been using the same types of techniques against Europe for years, which have not received due attention from Europe. The second part of the article focuses on the EU's counter-defense strategy, which is currently under discussion, and its changed attitude toward security and defense policy priorities. Particular attention is paid to the development of the idea of a "wall of drones" and its final form. The paper concludes that, despite the EU's proactive approach to a new defense policy, which should be considered a distinctly positive development, fragmentation among states remains a major challenge to developing a unified and strong defense policy.

Russia's Hybrid Warfare Against Europe and Parallels to the Techniques Tested in Georgia

Since February 24, 2022, after Russia invaded Ukraine, Moscow has further intensified its hybrid warfare[2] against Europe. The instruments[3] of hybrid warfare used by Russia include but are not limited to cyberattacks, violations of airspace near the borders of NATO member states by military aviation, economic and energy leverage, information warfare near Europe's borders, and military exercises.

Simultaneously with the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russian cyberattacks on critical infrastructure in Europe, especially in Eastern European countries, such as gas pipelines, power plants, and communication cables, have significantly increased. Among the EU member states, Poland has become the most frequently targeted by Russia-related cyberattacks. In addition, one pro-Russian hacking group has claimed

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[2] There is no precise definition of hybrid warfare. According to a widely accepted definition, hybrid warfare involves the simultaneous use or combination of both conventional and unconventional instruments of force and subversive means. Source: https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html

[3] Hybrid warfare tools include military, political, economic, civic and information techniques. Source: https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2024/04/26/russias-hybrid-war-against-the-west/index.html#:~:text=Despite%20state%2Ddriven%20hybrid%20warfare,threshold%20of%20a%20conventional%20war

responsibility for 6,600 attacks since 2022, 96 percent of which were directed against European countries. The attacks focused not only on causing technical damage but also on manipulating public opinion, destabilizing societies and undermining trust in institutions.

As for vandalism and sabotage, according to a joint report by GLOBSEC and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, these hybrid operations by Moscow are not an additional tactic but a central pillar of its strategy. Russia uses socially marginalized individuals, often Russian-speaking men with previous criminal records, to organize sabotage and various attacks on European territory. According to the study, since 2022, 110 incidents (including arson and vandalism), have been linked to Russia, most of which were recorded in Poland and France.

In addition to the described hybrid warfare tools, it is worth noting that from September 12 to 16, 2025, the joint Russian Belarusian military exercises "Zapad 2025" (West 2025) were held in Belarus. This exercise has been held every four years since 2009. The exercises are significant because they took place for the first time since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to Jacek Marcin Raubo, head of the analytical department of the security and defense publication Defence 24, "Zapad 2025" was a political tool and a means of demonstrating power for Russia, consistent with how Moscow has historically used military exercises to create a sense of threat on NATO's eastern flank. According to his assessment, the main task of "Zapad 2025" was to spread Russian propaganda, instill fear and demonstrate Russia's aspiration to position itself as a major regional power. However, in combination with the above-mentioned tools, "Zapad 2025" could be perceived as preparation for military aggression which is on the verge of war.[4]

According to experts from the Institute for Defense and Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute, the exercises were conducted on a reduced scale, which is linked to the significant human and material losses caused by the war in Ukraine. According to them, "Zapad 2021" was distinguished by its large scale and served as a preparatory exercise for the 2022 war. "Zapad 2025", although conducted on a reduced scale, focused on refining and testing current war scenarios. It should also be noted that the military format of the exercises was narrowed, with emphasis placed on highly effective capabilities such as integrated air and missile defense, long-range precision strikes, and electronic warfare. Russian-Belarusian military personnel were also trained in the use of drones and robotic systems, aimed at eliminating systemic weaknesses identified in the current war in Ukraine. However, experts note that the

[4] Jacek Marcin Raubo (September 12, 2025). Maneuvers "Zapad 2025" kicks off, meaning Russian politics is all about a show of force. Defence 24. Accessible at https://defence24.com/geopolitics/maneuvers-zapad-2025-kicks-off-meaning-russian-politics-is-all-about-a-show-of-force

narrow focus of the exercises should not mislead NATO. The exercises show that, while the war has inflicted significant losses on Russia, it is ready to adapt to new technology and continues to pose a long-term threat to the alliance.[5]

In 2025, several incidents involving Russian linked drones were recorded in the EU. These incidents further intensified the dialogue on European security. On 10 and 28 July, Lithuania reported that a drone launched from Russia had entered its airspace. According to Defense Minister Dovilė Šakalienė, the drone was likely launched from Russia toward Ukraine but ended up in Lithuanian territory. Further incidents occurred on 8 September, when Russian drones violated the airspace of Romania and then Latvia. On 13 September, another Russian drone was observed over Romanian territory. Of particular concern was the flight of up to 19 Russian drones into Polish airspace on 9 September, which the country described as an "act of aggression". This incident was also notable because the Polish armed forces shot down the drones that repeatedly violated its airspace. It was the first time since February 2022 that another country had been directly involved in a confrontation with Russian military equipment. The incident in Polish airspace was repeated on 15 September, when a drone flew over the presidential palace in Warsaw. The drone was again neutralized by the Polish State Security Service. In addition, drones of unconfirmed origin were observed in the airspace of Denmark and Norway. In these cases, Danish and NATO officials did not rule out Russian involvement. Unidentified drones were also observed in two more countries, Germany and France. On 22 September, unidentified drones were seen over the French military base at Mourmelon-le-Grand, and on 26 September, unidentified drones appeared in northern Germany near the Danish border. In these cases as well, officials suspected that Russia was involved.

These methods of hybrid warfare from Moscow are not new. Russia had been testing these techniques against Georgia long before the August 2008 war, yet the West did not give them due attention. As early as August 6, 2004, a military aircraft flew into the Tskhinvali region from Russia, violated Georgian airspace for 20 minutes and then returned to Russia. A similar incident occurred in June 2006, when a small passenger plane, without coordination with the Georgian side, entered the territory of Abkhazia and landed near Sokhumi. At the time, it was the fourth violation of Georgian airspace in two months. Airspace violations continued in 2007 and took on a more serious form. According to the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on May 10, 2007, two Russian aircraft illegally violated Georgian airspace near

[5] Fabrizio Minniti and Dr Giangiuseppe Pili (September 22, 2025). Wartime Zapad 2025 Exercise: Russia's Strategic Adaptation and NATO. The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. Accessible at https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/wartime-zapad-2025-exercise-russias-strategic-adaptation-and-nato

Stepantsminda, on the border section. On August 6 of the same year, two Russian SU-24 aircraft crossed 75 kilometers into Georgian territory and fired a missile near the village of Tsitelubani, which did not explode. The Georgian side immediately assessed these actions as a violation of the UN Charter prohibiting the use of force and as an act of aggression under General Assembly Resolution 3314. Georgia also called on the UN Security Council to investigate the violation of Georgian territory by two Russian aircraft and invited the European Union and other partners to confirm the fact of the use of unprovoked force. Russia denied the allegations and claimed that Georgia may have launched the missile itself to create tension in the region.

At that time, the first group of international independent experts, which included representatives from Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden and the U.S., as well as the second group, which included the British, Estonian and Polish sides, established that on August 6, 2007, Georgian airspace was violated three times by an aircraft flying from Russian airspace. The missile used was a Russian-made anti-radar, air-to-surface Kh-58U. Although the international expert groups could not determine the type of aircraft or the country of origin, they confirmed that Georgia did not have the capability to operate such a missile.

Nevertheless, the OSCE stated in its report that the arguments presented by the parties were contradictory and that it was “very difficult to provide an accurate picture” on this issue. Despite Georgia’s request, the European Union did not send a group of experts to the site. Ultimately, both the OSCE and the EU refrained from holding Russia responsible and instead called on Georgia and Russia to de-escalate tensions and exercise restraint.

It is also worth noting that disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and sabotage were tested in Georgia before and during the 2008 war, but these actions failed to attract the attention of the West. For example, in January 2006, two gas pipelines exploded in North Ossetia, cutting off gas supplies from Russia to Georgia. Georgia accused Russia of sabotage, which the Russian Foreign Ministry dismissed as a “hysterical” reaction. During the 2008 war, Russia also tested the use of cyberattacks in an armed conflict for the first time.

Despite these examples, Europe has not properly assessed the threat of Russia’s hybrid war against Georgia, nor has it responded adequately to the August 2008 war. Specifically, (1) there was no unified perception of the threat in Europe – Eastern European states saw Russia as a real and immediate threat, while Western European states, due to their economic ties with Russia, did not perceive Moscow as a challenge to European security. This fragmented attitude hindered the development of a common European security strategy. In addition, (2) instead of increasing defense spending and capabilities, Europe

continued to cut spending in response to the 2008 global financial crisis, weakening the Union's military readiness. After Russia's apparent aggression, (3) the EU did not revise the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), (4) did not impose sanctions, and did not reduce its energy dependence on Russia. Given these factors, Europe was unprepared for Moscow's next military aggression in 2014. Unlike in 2008, the West responded to Russia's annexation of Crimea with sanctions; however, there were no immediate changes in security and defense policy.

EU's Response to Russia's Hybrid Warfare

As already noted, the West, despite its previous negative experience, has shown an appropriate response to Russian aggression only since February 24, 2022. The war has significantly changed the rhetoric and actions of European leaders toward Russia, as well as their approach to European defense and security. At the initial stage of the war, the then High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, described this period as the "moment of the birth of a geopolitical Europe." It is also worth noting the Versailles Declaration, adopted at the summit on March 11, 2022, in which the European Union expressed its readiness to take greater responsibility for its own security and to enhance its capabilities to act more autonomously. On March 21, 2022, the European Council adopted the "Strategic Compass," a guide to strengthening the European Union's security and defense policy through 2030. The Compass aims to position the European Union as a stronger actor in defense and security while remaining a complementary partner to NATO.

With the second term of the Donald Trump administration in the United States, discussions about a new European security architecture intensified. Within weeks of Trump's inauguration, Europe received clear signals[6] that America was reducing its responsibility for the continent's defense and security, and that existing European policies required a fundamental rethink. On March 4, 2025, European Commission

[6] The American Presidency Project (February 14, 2025). *Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference.* Via link https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-vice-president-the-munich-security-conference-0
Guardian (March 7, 2025). *Trump casts doubt on willingness to defend Nato allies 'if they don't pay'.* Via link https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/07/donald-trump-nato-alliance-us-security-support
Guardian (March 4, 2025). *US suspends all military aid to Ukraine in wake of Trump-Zelenskyy row.* Via link https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/04/us-military-aid-ukraine-pause-trump-zelenskyy-updates

President Ursula von der Leyen stated[7] that Europe, facing a critical and dangerous period, needed to take greater responsibility for its own security.

To achieve this goal, she presented a plan to re-arm Europe (ReArm Europe), which includes:

1. The possibility of increasing national defense spending by relaxing budgetary rules;
2. The allocation of EUR 150 billion in EU loans for common defense investments;
3. Using the EU budget to increase defense spending;
4. Mobilizing private capital through financial mechanisms;
5. Involving the European Investment Bank in financing defense projects.

According to von der Leyen's plan, which was agreed upon by all EU member states,[8] it should be possible to mobilize approximately EUR 800 billion. It is also worth noting that, although the Commission President focused on promoting the EU's role in security and defense, she did not neglect the need for close cooperation with NATO members.[9]

Despite these efforts, it is noteworthy that almost three years after the start of the war, on February 3, 2025, a meeting of EU leaders was held in Brussels that, for the first time in history, was entirely devoted to defense issues. The aim of the meeting was to make progress in discussions on building European defense. The main topics discussed were: (i) defense capabilities, (ii) financing EU defense priorities, and (iii) strengthening EU defense partnerships, with particular focus on NATO, the transatlantic partnership, and relations with the United Kingdom. The purpose of the meeting was not to adopt formal conclusions, but to provide the President of the European Commission and the High Representative with the necessary political guidance for the preparation of the so-called "White Paper" on Defense (this document, developed by the European Commission, contains proposals for an EU action plan in specific areas. The purpose of the "White Paper" is to facilitate debate with the public, stakeholders, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union in order to achieve political consensus).

[7] European Commission (March 4, 2025). *Press statement by President von der Leyen on the defence package.* Via link https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_673
[8] Le Monde (March 7, 2025). *Europe decides to take its security into its own hands, without breaking with US.* Via link https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/03/07/europe-decides-to-take-its-security-into-its-own-hands-without-breaking-with-us_6738910_4.html
[9] European Commission (March 4, 2025). *Press statement by President von der Leyen on the defence package.* Via link https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_673

In the months following the meeting, Russia intensified its incursions into EU airspace, bringing the need to review Europe's defense and security strategy back onto the agenda.

After Russian drones entered the airspace of Poland and Estonia, both countries called for the activation of NATO's Article 4, which requires member states to consult each other if they believe the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of a member state is under threat.

As regard to the EU's response, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated that it was time to build a "drone wall" to protect Europe's eastern flank. The "drone wall" would involve a network of sensors, electronic systems, and weapons stretching from the Baltics to the Black Sea. Shortly after the announcement, drone incidents in other European countries further convinced leaders that the issue required urgent attention. It is also worth noting that, according to the Estonian border guard, the idea of a "drone wall" was proposed to the European Commission last year by Poland and Finland. However, the issue was not discussed at the EU level at the time, and the idea remained unimplemented. This further illustrates that the EU, even after February 2022, when drone attacks on Ukraine became a key Russian tactic, had not given sufficient attention to a strategy for defending against drones. According to EU officials, as reported by Reuters, the idea was revisited after Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov presented a briefing to the European Commission President in April 2025 on how Ukraine is repelling Russian drone attacks.

However, the "drone wall" proposal has remained controversial among EU leaders. Southern and Western European governments have opposed the idea, arguing that it focuses too narrowly on the bloc's eastern borders, while drones can pose a threat across the entire continent. In an interview with Reuters, some EU leaders questioned the term "drone wall," warning that it creates a false sense of security, as no single system can repel all drones. To gain broader support, the European Commission expanded the original concept from protecting only the eastern borders to a continental-scale network of anti-drone systems. France and Germany remain the main opponents of the initiative, arguing that if implemented, it would be overseen and coordinated by the European Commission, limiting their national scope. Moreover, President Macron stated that the threat posed by drones is more complex than the proposed "drone wall" concept.

Finally, in the document published on October 16, Preserving Peace – A Roadmap to Defence Readiness 2030, the Commission and the High Representative proposed the European Readiness Flagships initiative, which addresses the entire European continent rather than only Eastern Europe. The document avoids using the term "drone wall" and directly identifies Russia and Belarus as threats. It proposes four main

directions to counter these threats: (i) the European Drone Defense Initiative (a modified version of the "drone wall"), (ii) Eastern Flank Watch, (iii) European Air Shield, and (iv) European Space Shield.

According to the document, the European Drone Defense Initiative will be a comprehensive, multi-layered system designed to detect, track, and neutralize drones using advanced technologies. It will also have the capability to carry out precision strikes on ground targets. The system is intended to be fully compatible with the defense structures of EU member states and NATO.

The document states that this system is a key component of Eastern Flank Watch, which aims to enhance the capabilities of countries on the eastern border to counter a wide range of threats, including hybrid operations, the Russian shadow fleet, and the risk of armed aggression. Its goal is to strengthen the European Union's eastern borders on land, in the air, and at sea, thereby contributing to the security of the Union as a whole. Eastern Flank Watch is expected to be fully integrated with the EU Black Sea Maritime Security Centre, NATO's Integrated Command and Control Structure, and to complement Operation Eastern Guardian, the Baltic Air Policing, and forward-deployed forces.

These developments in the EU should be seen as positive. However, it should be emphasized that Europe could have learned the lessons of the hybrid warfare methods tested by Russia in Georgia long ago and properly assessed the Russian threat. Fragmentation among EU states remains a major challenge, complicating the development of a common defense and security policy. This fragmentation is illustrated by Spain's categorical refusal to meet NATO's new target of 5% of GDP on defense. The main reason for Spain's opposition is domestic politics, as a large part of the population believes the country should prioritize security issues such as migration and instability in the Sahel region. Spain currently spends only 1.3% of its GDP on defense.

Summary

Russia's hybrid warfare against Europe is not merely a continuation of the ongoing war in Ukraine, but part of a strategy planned and tested over many years. Moscow's actions—cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, vandalism, sabotage, and drone strikes—are designed to deepen distrust within Europe and undermine its sense of security. The fact that these tools of hybrid warfare were used before the 2008 war demonstrates that Russia's aggressive tactics could have been anticipated long ago, yet the West's response was delayed and inadequate.

The lack of a common perception of Russia as a threat, the EU's reduction in defense spending, and continued dependence on Russian energy together left Europe unprepared for the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Despite Russia's subsequent aggression, significant changes in European defense policy did not occur until 2022, when defense and security issues became central to the European political agenda. Since then, the EU has strengthened its joint defense plans, adopted a Strategic Compass, and launched initiatives such as "ReArm Europe" and the "European Drone Defence Initiative." Despite these positive developments, the absence of political consensus and divergent priorities among member states continue to hinder the creation of a unified and effective European defense system.