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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 10.09.2025 www.osw.waw.pl

Weaken, divide and deter: the aims of Russia's provocation against Poland

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On the night of 9–10 September, several Russian drones entering from Ukrainian and Belarusian airspace violated Polish airspace.

Vladimir Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, refused to comment, stating that the Polish authorities had not contacted Moscow over the incident, and claiming that the EU and NATO were, as usual, levelling accusations against Russia without presenting any evidence. In a statement released on the afternoon of 10 September, the Russian Ministry of Defence stressed that no targets for destruction had been designated on Polish territory. It noted that the maximum range of the Russian unmanned aerial vehicles allegedly involved in the incursion did not exceed 700 kilometres. The ministry also declared its readiness to consult with Poland's Ministry of National Defence on the matter.

Russian news agencies reported extensively on the consequences of the incident and the reactions in Poland and other Western states, while deliberately omitting any mention of the drones' origin. They noted that Poland had been forced to temporarily close some airports and had convened an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers. The state media also echoed Belarusian statements – including comments from the Chief of the Belarusian General Staff, Pavel Muraveiko, who claimed that Belarusian air defences had tracked the drones during the night after they entered its airspace as a result of [Ukrainian] electronic warfare measures. He said Belarus had informed Poland of the threat, enabling it to respond effectively with its own air defences.

Speaking to Russia's state news agency RIA Novosti, Andrei Ordash, chargé d'affaires at the Russian Embassy in Warsaw – who had been summoned to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs – said Warsaw's claims regarding the Russian origin of the drones shot down over Polish territory were baseless. He asserted that no evidence had been presented and reminded reporters that the only case when the origin of a foreign aerial object violating Polish airspace was confirmed concerned a Ukrainian missile in November 2022, which 'killed two Poles". This narrative quickly gained traction in the Russian media and social networks. State outlets promoted the theory that the drones had been deliberately launched by Ukraine to provoke Poland into joining the war against Russia. Russian state television also suggested that the incident had been orchestrated by 'European warmongers' seeking – against the will of the US President – to derail the 'peace process'. Commentators emphasised that the key factor would be the response from the Trump administration.

Russia's objective in these aggressive actions is to destabilise the internal situation in Poland and other Western countries supporting Kyiv. Moscow aims in particular to stoke anti-Ukrainian sentiment, undermine public trust in the civilian and military leadership, and to weaken the belief in allied solidarity. The Kremlin is banking on internal political divisions – both within countries and between European states – as well as in transatlantic relations. Ultimately, this is intended to reduce Western support for Ukraine, pushing it towards de facto capitulation, and to prompt a shift in the Western policy towards Russia by encouraging an end to the sanctions pressure and a return to so-called 'pragmatic' relations.

Commentary

- **Russia has already repeatedly tested the airspace of Poland and other neighbours of Ukraine. It appears to have concluded that the restrained response from these countries and NATO reflects a fear of escalation, and also provides fertile ground for deepening political polarisation and internal divisions.** The Kremlin seeks to stir anxiety within Polish society, undermine trust in the government, the military and Poland's allies by portraying them as incapable of ensuring the safety of the country's citizens, and to inflame domestic political disputes – both over the incident itself and in relation to Poland's stance on the war.
- **Moscow believes that war fatigue and dissatisfaction with its consequences are growing in Western countries, leading to waning enthusiasm for supporting Kyiv and rising fears of a direct confrontation with Russia.** The Kremlin perceives that political crises are intensifying across the West, and that political forces inclined to adopt a 'pragmatic' approach – favourable to Russian interests – are gaining ground. These interests primarily include the de facto capitulation of Ukraine, the dismantling of the current European security architecture (including NATO) and opening the door to Russian economic and political influence. However, Moscow currently sees the main challenge to be the determination of key European governments to strengthen their own defences, increase pressure on Russia and continue supporting Kyiv. It also believes that the US President has a different outlook, seeking a swift end to the war in Ukraine and lacking readiness for a broader political and economic confrontation with Moscow. This perception has led the Kremlin to a clear escalation of provocative actions.
- **Once again, Russia has denied responsibility for the incidents and attempted to attribute them to Ukraine.** By promoting the narrative that Ukraine is seeking to draw its NATO neighbours into a war with Russia, Moscow aims to discredit the government in Kyiv and to fuel anti-Ukrainian sentiment in European countries. Its objective is to destabilise the internal situation across Europe and generate public pressure on governments to end the political, economic and especially military support for Ukraine in its fight against the Russian invasion.
- **Moscow is also seeking to demonstrate to the West, NATO and the Trump administration the growing costs they are paying for supporting Kyiv and continuing the war.** The Kremlin is sending a warning signal that further assistance to Ukraine – particularly military assistance – will raise the stakes, increase security risks and amplify the political costs of this approach. It suggests that this could lead, among other things, to a geographical expansion of the conflict to include the territories of NATO's eastern

flank. At the same time, Russia aims to show that the alliance is incapable of effectively protecting its member states, while provoking internal disputes over how to respond to Russian actions. In Moscow's view, this is intended to strengthen the 'peace camp' within Western states and exert pressure on Trump to hasten efforts to impose a settlement on Ukraine – one based on Russian terms.

- **Further escalation of similar provocative actions can be expected if Russia concludes that its increasingly aggressive moves do not provoke a firm and united response from the West,** but instead – as intended – deepen divisions within and between Western countries.