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More resolve than resources: Romania and the drone threat

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In recent months, the number of violations of Romanian airspace and territorial waters by Russian drones, and occasionally also by Ukrainian ones, has increased markedly. Between 1 January and 27 September this year, Romania's Ministry of National Defence recorded 30 such incidents, accounting for more than 60% of all incursions into Romanian territory since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine more than four and a half years ago and three times the number recorded in the whole of 2025 (nine). Seven incidents occurred between late July and late August alone. Russian strikes on Ukrainian targets near the Romanian border have also become significantly more frequent: by 25 September, 78 had been recorded, compared with 28 in the whole of last year. These attacks are also having increasingly serious consequences for Romania itself: on 29 May, a Russian Geran-2 drone hit a residential block in Galați, causing a fire and injuring two people.

This incident, coupled with the NATO summit held in Ankara shortly afterwards on 7–8 July, prompted Bucharest to change the way it responds to such situations. Until then, the authorities had largely confined themselves to political statements and diplomatic action, but they subsequently shifted towards active defence. On 24 July, a Romanian Air Force F-16 shot down a Russian drone over Romanian territory for the first time, followed by two more over the next two days. A fourth was downed on 16 August by a Spanish F-18 belonging to the contingent deployed at the air base near Constanța. Four days later, Romanian fighter jets opened fire on a naval drone near the Neptun Alpha offshore gas platform currently under construction. Once operational in 2027, this flagship energy project is expected to almost double Romania's domestic gas output to around 17 bcm, making it by far the EU's largest producer and an important supplier to the wider region.

Despite the authorities' growing resolve, Romania's ability to counter the threat effectively and at a sustainable cost remains limited. The burden of combating drones still falls almost entirely on the air force, while the ground-based counter-drone systems ordered by Bucharest are not expected to begin entering service until mid-2027.

Politically driven caution

Romania is particularly exposed to incursions by Russian drones and missiles. This is largely due to its proximity to Izmail and Reni, Ukrainian ports on the Danube close to the Romanian border that Russia has repeatedly targeted since 2023. These strikes pose a threat to communities on the Romanian side even when no border violation occurs: on 17 November 2025, a drone hit a Turkish gas carrier moored in Izmail, causing a fire. Fearing an explosion, the Romanian authorities evacuated nearby villages. Romania also plays an important role in the system of support for Ukraine, which makes it a potential target for

attack: Western military equipment is transported through its territory, Ukrainian F-16 pilots are among those trained at Fetești, and the port of Constanța, alongside Gdańsk, is one of the main gateways for Ukrainian exports.

Despite these risks and the steadily growing number of incidents, Bucharest was slow and hesitant to put in place an effective system for defending its airspace. One of the main obstacles was the absence of legislation allowing the armed forces to shoot down foreign objects without a state of war or one of the constitutionally defined states of emergency being declared. This gap was only addressed in June 2025, while the implementing regulations for the new law were not adopted until September. In 2026, the authorities also began to bring greater consistency to their public messaging, having previously failed to communicate incidents in a consistently transparent manner. When debris from Russian drones first fell on Romanian territory in autumn 2023, Bucharest categorically denied that this had happened, only for local residents to find fragments of the UAVs shortly afterwards. In subsequent years, the Ministry of National Defence's communication remained chaotic and the figures it released were sometimes inconsistent. In July 2026, for example, it reported a total of 15 incursions in 2023–2025, while a month later it put the figure at 18. No official, publicly available statistics were provided either.

This cautious approach was driven primarily by political considerations. The government was reluctant to hand further ammunition to the increasingly influential radical right, which criticises Romania's support for Ukraine and accuses the authorities of dragging the country into the war. It therefore sought to play down, without dismissing, the threat and portrayed successive incursions as accidental. It was also reluctant to shoot down Russian objects, partly for fear that the opposition would present such action as a provocation against Moscow. Uncertainty over the response of Romania's allies, particularly the Trump administration, was another factor.

Galați and Ankara: a turning point

The incident in Galați shook confidence in the state's ability to protect the public. Although the F-16 pilots scrambled to intercept it had been authorised to shoot the drone down, they did not have enough time to engage it and were reluctant to open fire over a populated area. The opposition was quick to exploit the incident. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), the largest opposition party, accused the government of failing to prepare the country for such threats, despite having itself voted against the law allowing drones to be shot down. Diana Șoșoacă, leader of the pro-Russian S.O.S. Romania party, meanwhile suggested that the drone had been launched by Ukraine and accused NATO and the EU of trying to drag Romania into a conflict with Russia.

Despite their earlier concerns, the authorities therefore decided to change their approach. The NATO summit in Ankara appears to have been an important factor, with Bucharest most likely securing allied backing for firmer action. The series of shoot-downs in July was intended to demonstrate clearly both Romania's resolve and its ability to defend its territory. The response also became progressively faster: the first drone was downed 80 minutes after entering Romanian airspace, prompting criticism, while the second was destroyed after 11 minutes and the third after just five. Public communication improved as well: since August, the Ministry of National Defence has been publishing continuously updated statistics on such incidents.

A shield in the making

Fighter aircraft nevertheless remain Romania's main means of countering drones. The country has substantially expanded its fleet: the number of F-16s in service rose from 20 in 2023 to 38 by the end of 2025, with further deliveries from Norway continuing in 2026. Romania is ultimately expected to operate 49 aircraft of this type, excluding the 18 transferred by the Netherlands in 2025 for training purposes. The Ministry of National Defence itself acknowledges that it has fewer pilots than aircraft. Deploying fighter jets against drones is also costly and not always effective against slow, low-flying targets. Other capabilities remain limited. Very short-range air defence relies on 35 mm gun systems, including 43 ageing Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns. These are supplemented by IAR-330 Puma SOCAT helicopters, although their use depends on good visibility.

The development of dedicated counter-drone capabilities, meanwhile, is significantly behind schedule. An implementing contract with Israel's Rafael for SPYDER short- and very short-range air-defence systems was signed only in June 2026, six years after parliament approved the programme and almost three years after the procurement process began; the first deliveries are expected around 2029. Rheinmetall's modernisation of Romania's Oerlikon guns, commissioned in December 2023, has also been delayed: the first two systems, originally due in April this year, failed acceptance tests and had still not been delivered by the end of September despite assurances from the manufacturer. In late May, Romania also signed contracts under the SAFE instrument for additional equipment, including 35 mm Skynex stationary and Skyranger self-propelled anti-aircraft gun systems and Mistral very short-range man-portable air-defence systems, with deliveries due to begin in mid-2027. The agreements also cover around 400,000 rounds of programmable 35 mm AHEAD ammunition, which detonates just before reaching the target and is particularly effective against drones. ReDrone systems ordered from Elbit Systems in late 2024, which are capable of jamming UAVs, are expected to be delivered to the armed forces within three years.

Under NATO's umbrella

Romania also relies on NATO allies to support the surveillance and defence of its airspace. Since 2017, allied fighter aircraft have been deployed to the country on a rotational basis under the enhanced Air Policing mission. Seven Spanish F-18M Hornets have been on duty since late July 2026, and three NH90 helicopters adapted for counter-drone operations are expected to join them in October. Bucharest is also seeking the temporary deployment of NATO counter-drone systems pending the delivery of its own equipment. Although the request was approved in February by NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, no allied country had committed such systems to Romania by the end of May; in early July, the Ministry of National Defence said only that advanced talks were under way with three unspecified countries. So far, only the United States has provided this type of support bilaterally: in June, a US-supplied MEROPS counter-drone system was integrated into Romania's air-defence network.

Maritime threats

The Romanian authorities are also paying increasing attention to maritime security, particularly the protection of ports and offshore energy infrastructure, which have likewise been affected by recurrent incidents. On the night of 20–21 July, the gas carrier Gas Lisbon,

en route to Reni, was struck around 20 nautical miles off the Romanian coast, most likely by Russia. On 5 June, a drifting Ukrainian naval drone exploded in the port of Constanța; according to Kyiv and the preliminary findings of Romanian investigators, it may have been hijacked by Russian forces. Against this backdrop, the firing on a drone near Neptun Alpha in August was intended to signal Romania's readiness to defend its waters.

Romania is, however, only beginning to build up its coastal counter-drone defences. The coastguard's existing maritime surveillance system is not designed to detect drones, while the June incident also exposed the need to clarify responsibility for the security of civilian ports. By the end of the year, the military ports in Constanța, Mangalia, Brăila and Tulcea are expected to receive BlackTalon systems, which have been tested jointly with the United States since September and are capable of countering both aerial and surface drones, as well as Sentinel underwater sensors. Critical infrastructure is also likely to be protected by Skynex and Millennium systems procured under SAFE, with the latter designed for installation on naval vessels. The Ministry of National Defence has not disclosed where these systems will be deployed.