

Policy Brief

DRONES AS INSTRUMENTS OF HYBRID PRESSURE: SECURING EUROPEAN AIRSPACE AGAINST RUSSIAN ATTACKS

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● INTRODUCTION

In recent years, military drones have become a leading instrument of asymmetric geopolitical pressure. Russian drone attacks in the war against Ukraine have disrupted the boundaries of European airspace, with dozens of European states reporting provocative incursions. NATO is currently assessing defensive measures, including the deployment of surveillance drones and the relaxation of rules of engagement for fighter jet pilots, while European leaders such as Emmanuel Macron have warned that any drone violating EU airspace “may be destroyed.”

Within the European Parliament, unauthorized Russian drone flights over Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have been flagged as part of the “hybrid war” waged by the Kremlin against the EU. In this tense context, the Republic of Moldova located between war-torn Ukraine and NATO member Romania has also reported several serious drone incidents, officially described as “grave threats to national security.”

Such events are not isolated. They confirm the urgent need to strengthen the air frontier of Eastern Europe and enhance security across the wider Black Sea region.

● DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

In the Republic of Moldova, repeated Russian drone intrusions have raised serious security concerns. According to the Ministry of Defense, since 2022 more than 29 cases of unauthorized overflights of missiles and drones over national territory have been reported, along with 14 instances involving the discovery of drone or missile fragments, including decoy drones. At least three Shahed-type drones carrying explosive payloads have crashed on Moldovan soil.

Authorities in Chișinău have responded firmly: in February 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Russian ambassador to protest after two drones exploded on Moldovan territory, while President Maia Sandu publicly acknowledged that the state currently lacks its own anti-drone defense systems.

These incursions undermine the sovereignty and declared neutrality of the Republic of Moldova, endangering both citizen safety and social cohesion. In an already tense political environment caught between Russia’s hybrid pressures and support for Ukraine such incidents risk destabilizing internal equilibrium and relations with external partners.

The ongoing war in Ukraine and rising tensions along NATO's eastern flank further amplify the phenomenon, as Russian forces continue testing Europe's response capabilities through hybrid means.

● OVERVIEW

Swarms of military drones flying in formation such as drone swarms can overwhelm air defense systems and illustrate how Russia is capable of directing hundreds of drones simultaneously in the war against Ukraine, using some of them to test and exhaust the response capacity of neighboring states.

At the core of this phenomenon lies Russia's expanded hybrid warfare strategy against the West. Moscow conducts massive drone attacks in October 2024 alone, over 2,000 drones were launched against Ukraine and deploys unarmed or decoy drones to compel adversary defenses to consume additional resources.

The main actors involved include: the Russian military and intelligence services coordinating operations; national security institutions (such as national Border Police and NATO-commanded Air Police units); as well as Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic allies, striving to respond in a coordinated manner.

The international community views these incursions as part of a systematic hybrid war. A European Parliament resolution accused Russia of deliberately orchestrating provocations in the airspaces of Poland, Romania, Estonia, and other countries, and endorsed the need for "coordinated and proportionate measures" to counter any aerial threats including the shooting down of hostile drones.

Across the region, the public perceives these events with growing alarm, while information campaigns often contradictory and amplified by disinformation networks reinforce the sentiment that Europe is "already at war."

HYBRID THREATS THROUGH DRONES TAKE SEVERAL CONCRETE FORMS:

- **Repeated Airspace Violations:** Unidentified Russian drones have provocatively crossed the borders of NATO/EU member states along the Eastern Flank (Poland, Romania, Estonia, etc.), prompting aerial interception responses.[15][14] More concerning, Russia has not limited itself to drone incursions in September 2025, there were documented cases of MIG-31 fighter jets (three in total) entering Estonian airspace. Such actions undermine NATO's airspace sovereignty, divert allied resources, and carry the risk of triggering a global military confrontation.
- **Drone Airstrikes:** Shahed drones (adapted by Russia and renamed *Geran-2*) equipped with explosives have been used in attacks targeting Ukrainian infrastructure — including ports, warehouses, and military bases. However, fragments of these drones have also fallen on the territory of the Republic of Moldova and Romania. These attacks directly target airports, power grids, and civilian sites.
- **Disruption of Civil Air Traffic:** "Shock drones" have flown over military bases and restricted zones, forcing the temporary suspension of commercial flights at airports in Belgium, Denmark, and Germany. Such tactics paralyze civilian transport and incite public panic across Europe, aiming to erode popular support for military assistance to Ukraine.
- **Psychological Warfare and Disinformation:** After each incident, conflicting narratives emerge. The Republic of Moldova and Western allies denounce Russia's "aggressive incursions," while Moscow officials accuse others of staging false or unproven provocations. This battle of narratives is an integral part of hybrid warfare, fostering confusion and distrust toward official information sources.

● CURRENT SITUATION

The Republic of Moldova and its partners are taking defensive measures, yet significant gaps remain. In 2023, a high-performance air surveillance radar (worth €14 million) was installed with the support of the French company Thales, and the European Union has announced that it will supply Moldova in 2025 with specialized drone interception equipment.

Although few details have been disclosed given the military nature of the contract it is likely that Chişinău will receive jamming systems and/or short-range air defense systems (SHORAD) capable of neutralizing Shahed-type drones.



The Ministry of Defense has proposed the first special law for the defense of airspace, which authorizes the interception and destruction of unauthorized drones.

The Border Police now patrol jointly with Ukraine and Romania to detect suspicious flights more efficiently, while NATO has launched the “Eastern Sentry” mission to strengthen the defense of countries along the Alliance’s eastern flank.

In addition, the European Union plans to fund the deployment of anti-drone defense systems in member states, and the European Parliament is promoting the idea of a European “anti-drone wall” across the eastern frontier.

However, major deficiencies remain, Moldova’s current anti-drone systems are only capable of intercepting small unmanned aircraft, but not long-range drones such as the Shahed models used by Russia. The country lacks its own air force for immediate response, relying instead on external support in the event of armed conflict.

While the law recently adopted by the Government represents a positive step, it must

be accompanied by the development of real defense capabilities, and the modernization of equipment will require both time and resources.

The situation has a direct impact on the population, as Moldovan citizens live with the fear that an aerial incident could have severe consequences. Limited public communication leaves room for speculation. For example, Reuters reported that the two drones from November 2024 “entered Moldovan airspace and landed deep within the territory, endangering the population,” while authorities condemned these acts as deliberate aggressions.

At the same time, contradictory statements from Russian officials (denying involvement) and the cautious communication policy of Moldovan authorities have only deepened public uncertainty.

● CONCLUSIONS

Failure to address the issue of drones as instruments of hybrid warfare would severely compromise the national security of the Republic of Moldova. Without an effective air defense system, Moldovan airspace remains vulnerable to intrusions and attacks, posing a real risk of casualties and significant damage.

On a social level, the situation may fuel public fear and undermine trust in state institutions. Therefore, an intersectoral approach is required involving close cooperation between the Ministries of Defense, Internal Affairs, and Foreign Affairs, as well as security services, civil society, and the academic community. All relevant actors must participate in preparing and communicating coordinated responses to such security incidents.

Moreover, accurate and transparent public communication, based on concrete data and behavioral guidance, is essential for maintaining social cohesion. As emphasized by the European Union, any violation of national airspace must be met with “coordinated and proportionate measures” a principle that should likewise be implemented at the national level.

● RECOMMENDATIONS

Governmental Level:

Strengthen the Airspace Defense Law, not only by clarifying interception mechanisms but also, where necessary, by ensuring the capacity to neutralize and destroy illegal drones. Increase the defense budget and procure modern anti-drone and air-defense systems (additional radars, surface-to-air missiles, and jamming technologies). Conduct inter-institutional exercises both military and civilian to improve preparedness for drone-related incidents.

Regional Cooperation:

Enhance collaboration with Ukraine and Romania on joint airspace monitoring. Participate actively in NATO missions on the Eastern Flank (e.g., Eastern Sentry) and access EU defense funding, including for air and anti-drone capabilities. Maintain continuous communication with the EU and NATO regarding aerial threats and contingency planning.

Local and Societal Level:

Train local authorities and emergency services to respond effectively to drone attacks through evacuation drills, extended RO-Alert-style early warning systems (which Moldovan authorities aim to adopt from Romania), and other preparedness measures. Launch public awareness campaigns in schools, media, and social networks about drone types and appropriate behavior (e.g., avoiding impact zones). Involve civil society and academic institutions in incident monitoring and countering disinformation including security-focused NGOs and local think tanks.

Partnerships and Best Practices:

Adopt the “anti-drone wall” concept for the Eastern Flank of Europe, in cooperation with the EU. Develop partnerships with technology firms and research institutions for the creation of advanced detection tools (intelligent radar systems, radio-jamming technologies) and long-term strategic analysis. Cooperate with countries experienced in counter-drone operations such as Denmark (with specialized port protection teams) and Poland (expanding radar networks). Promote real-time information sharing among EU and NATO states in the region to ensure rapid, coordinated responses to aerial threats.

Through coherent policies and concerted action across multiple levels — government, local administration, education, and society — the Republic of Moldova can strengthen its aerial resilience. Integrated measures and proper public awareness are essential for preserving peace and stability in the face of emerging Russian hybrid tactics.