

Russia menaces Nato with flares and drone flights

Baltic Sea

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The Kremlin is stepping up the intensity of its aggression towards Nato countries, one of Poland's top defence officials told The Times, after a Russian warship fired flares at a Danish helicopter and a drone was shot down in Lithuania.

Pawel Zalewski, the state secretary of the Polish defence ministry, said that Russia was issuing "very serious signals of escalation", including a cruise missile that penetrated his country's airspace and an attempt to blow up a railway line running east from Warsaw.

Zalewski said that Moscow's ultimate objective was to rebuild something like its old sphere of influence in central Europe. "It has aggressive intentions towards many Nato states, including Germany and Poland," he said.

He added: "The response is proper communication, aimed at avoiding misunderstandings. We want to be unequivocal, and we are informing [Russia] that Poland will arm itself, or defend itself, with forces that will lead to the defeat of the adversary."

Yesterday morning, a Russian frigate launched two rounds of signal ammunition towards a Eurocopter Fennec from the Danish royal air force that was monitoring the vessel in international waters south of the island of Falster. One of the flares came within a "short distance" of hitting the helicopter, according to the Danish defence ministry.

Mette Frederiksen, the prime minister, said the incident was part of a pattern as Moscow sought to "intimidate and sow discord" in Nato.

Lars Lokke Rasmussen, the foreign minister, said he would summon the Russian ambassador, Vladimir Barbin, and inform him that such behaviour was completely unacceptable. Barbin told Danish TV that the helicopter had been making provocative and dangerous manoeuvres.

It is the second time a Russian warship has staged this kind of stunt. In 2024 a vessel discharged a flare towards a German naval helicopter as it was carrying out reconnaissance.

The incident is also a sign of the Russian navy's increasingly confrontational approach in the Baltic region, after a number of cases where its ships are understood to have locked their weapons systems on to Nato counterparts. The Kremlin appears to be stepping up its "hybrid" campaign against Europe as its economic troubles deepen at home and its military progress in Ukraine has largely stalled. Several political leaders



and intelligence agencies in Nato have warned of a possible escalation against Poland or one of the Baltic states in the coming months, although it remains unclear what form this could take.

An Italian Eurofighter combat jet on the alliance's air policing mission in Lithuania shot down a drone early yesterday that had penetrated about 60 miles into the country's airspace. The drone's origin has not yet been officially identified, but some specialists said it bore telltale signs of Russian manufacture. Robertas Kaunas, the Lithuanian defence minister, said it had been carrying an explosive payload. Vilmantas Vitkauskas, the head of Lithuania's national crisis management centre, said the machine seemed to have come from Belarus and spent about 30 minutes over Lithuanian territory, skirting several densely populated areas.

At the weekend a Russian drone struck the engine of a train at the Yahodyn station in Ukraine, a little over a mile from the Polish border. Kyiv suggested the attack might have been meant to hit a "diplomatic" train carrying high-profile figures who had participated in a Ukrainian security conference, including Boris Johnson, the former British prime minister, and the former CIA director David Petraeus.

Responding to the incident, Donald Tusk, the Polish prime minister, said: "Escalation on behalf of the Russian Federation became a fact, and the examples are ever closer to our border."

There have also been at least a dozen drone alerts along Nato's eastern flank over the past two months — one apparently misdirected Ukrainian drone was shot down over Latvia and four Russian drones were taken out over Romania. In July a Russian Kh-101 cruise mis-

sile flew nearly 60 miles into Poland, exploding in a field.

On Monday Poland's defence minister announced that a suspected Russian military drone had been found on a beach near the Baltic coastal town of Rusinowo, more than a hundred miles from the border with the Russian semi-exclave of Kaliningrad. It is understood to have been an unarmed aerial reconnaissance vehicle.

Germany has also broken with convention to explicitly hold Moscow responsible for a botched drone attack on a Ukrainian cargo plane at Leipzig/Halle airport in August.

There have been a series of recent arson and sabotage attacks on defence industry sites in Nato states. These include one fired at a private sector ammunition depot in Bulgaria on Saturday and another at a facility belonging to Milrem Robotics, an Estonian manufacturer of ground drones, last month. Both of the companies that were targeted have supplied Ukraine with armaments.

Poland's government has formally declared a state of elevated threat across the entire country until the end of November, and classified some areas as being at a particularly high risk of a Russian-sponsored "terrorist" incident.

Tusk said on Sunday: "We must be aware that from today we will be operating under a greatly heightened state of readiness, because what we know, and what we can expect, is that the coming weeks and months will be a period of intensified activity on the part of Russia."

Warsaw is increasingly signalling that it is prepared to fight a war, should Russia's attacks stray into the domain of clear military conflict. Radoslaw Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister, told a security conference in Kyiv: "If Russia attacked us and we took our gloves off, I think we would defeat Russia quite quickly. We have overwhelming superiority over Russia in air power."

Jacek Siewiera, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council think tank, said that Europe should make it clear to Russia that further aggression would lead to an increase in arms shipments to Ukraine. He said: "Every week that incidents of this kind occur in Europe, a representative of the European Commission or the member states should issue a summary of these attacks ... and present the Russian Federation with the bill. [They would say:] 'As a result of this attack, this attack and this attack ... this week we are sending Ukraine an additional 1,400 long-range strike drones' ... The Russians must understand that for every factory set on fire in Poland, Germany, France or anywhere else they will pay with infrastructure that is more precious and necessary for them than results they achieve."

Putin could be the next casualty of his own war, Roger Boyes, page 22



Mette Frederiksen, the Danish PM