



## INFORMATION SERIES

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### Russia Is at War with the West

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If the victim does not understand the game, the loss of a pawn here or a knight there does not worry him. If his thoughts are elsewhere, he does not see the traps set for him by his opponent. If his will to win is insufficient, his strength is gradually eroded until, when the tide of combat goes clearly against him, he discovers too late that the price of defeat is intolerably high.<sup>1</sup>

The term “hybrid warfare,” defined as a set of activities below the level of armed conflict, is not useful to describe Russia’s activities against the West. In fact, the term masks the severity of Moscow’s actual actions and distracts the West from pursuing the kind of retaliatory measures that would lead Russia to pull back from its campaign against targets in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) states. By evoking the term “hybrid warfare”<sup>2</sup> (or its close euphemisms like “gray zone conflict,” “shadow war,” or activities “below the level of armed conflict”) rather than acknowledging that Russia is, by its own account, at war with the West, gives the impression that the situation is less serious than it actually is.

Russia’s activities are an element of its comprehensive warfare against the West. Russia’s goals include restoring its former sphere of influence in former Warsaw Pact countries that are now NATO members, undermining the legitimacy of the democratic process, and sowing disputes within NATO.<sup>3</sup> So far, NATO countries have lacked the political will to impose costs that would dissuade Russia to stop its destructive activities that extend well beyond simply the information sphere. Countering Russia’s activities demands a comprehensive response beyond the West’s contemporary defensive measures.<sup>4</sup>



## Russia's Aggression in Europe

Russia's list of aggressive actions against targets in Europe is long and its campaign is "intensifying" according to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte.<sup>5</sup> The number of Russia's attacks quadrupled between 2022 and 2023, and tripled between 2023 and 2024.<sup>6</sup> Russia has conducted over 150 operations on NATO territory since the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Russia's activities range from assassinations and murder attempts, attacks against NATO's infrastructure, to acts of vandalism through people recruited by Russian handlers via social media.<sup>8</sup> Russia is becoming bolder, with its drones violating Polish airspace in September 2025.<sup>9</sup> Poland in cooperation with NATO allies shot several down of these drones.<sup>10</sup> The more immediate goal of the campaign is to weaken Europe's support for Ukraine and to disrupt supply chains through which aid for Ukraine flows.<sup>11</sup> Russia also wants to weaken NATO and undermine the political consensus within the Alliance.

Moreover, Russia is the prime suspect in several operations that resulted in cuts to undersea power and communication cables that run across the bottom of the Baltic Sea.<sup>12</sup> The attribution is challenging because the acts of sabotage are executed by oil tankers that are a part of Russia's "shadow" fleet, or operating under flags of convenience and a difficult-to-trace ownership structure.<sup>13</sup> A China-owned ship allegedly with a Russian captain cut two undersea cables in November 2024.<sup>14</sup> The cables' repairs will cost millions of dollars. Russia is also believed to have been behind a string of physical break-ins to water treatment plants in Finland and Sweden, potentially testing the security of the sites in the case it needed to contaminate the water supply.<sup>15</sup> Russia has reportedly plotted attacks against U.S. military bases in Europe.<sup>16</sup> Moscow also planned on setting parcels on fire on cargo flights bound for the United States.<sup>17</sup> The parcels exploded at logistics depots in Britain, Germany, and Poland. In March 2024, Russian pilot Maxim Kuzminov, who defected to Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion, was gunned down in the garage of his apartment in Spain.<sup>18</sup>

NATO countries were able to foil some of these attempts. For example, Russia tried to kill the CEO of the Rheinmetall arms manufacturer Armin Papperger in 2024.<sup>19</sup> Five men were charged with arson and sabotage against Ukraine-linked businesses to benefit the Russian state in the United Kingdom in April 2024.<sup>20</sup>

Willingness to cause a significant loss of life marks a departure from Russia's previous influence operations campaigns that were primarily focused on shaping the information environment.<sup>21</sup> Russia's campaign is marked by "increasing recklessness," according to the chief of Britain's MI5 Security Service Ken McCallum.<sup>22</sup> The head of Germany's foreign intelligence service Bruno Kahl said that Russia's activities have reached a "level previously unseen," and that "direct military confrontation with NATO has become an option for Moscow."<sup>23</sup> Russia could present even more significant military threat to U.S. allies in Europe within a few years of a ceasefire in Ukraine, because it could concentrate its forces closer to NATO's countries' borders.<sup>24</sup>



Russia's aggression against NATO members and individuals started prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2014, Russia's operatives blew up an ammunition depot in the Czech Republic in 2014, killing two people.<sup>25</sup> In 2018, the same operatives poisoned several people on British territory, causing one death.<sup>26</sup> The target of the operation was Sergey Skripal, reported to be a defector from Russia's intelligence service.<sup>27</sup> In 2006, Russia's agents poisoned and killed Alexander Litvinenko, another Russian defector in the United Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> In another case in Germany, a man, later revealed as a Russian intelligence service operative, shot dead a former Chechen commander at Russia's request in 2019.<sup>29</sup>

### Obscuring Russia's Nature

The term "hybrid warfare" has served to obscure Russia's nature as a revisionist, imperialist, and nuclear-armed adversary.<sup>30</sup> There are no universally shared definitions among allies with respect to when hybrid war ends, and armed conflict begins. A lack of shared understanding "hampers our ability to deter, mitigate and counter this threat."<sup>31</sup> Yet, an overt focus on definitional problems can further complicate countering these types of activities, because they obscure understanding of hybrid warfare, particularly for policy makers who are obliged to make decisions to address it, as historian Kenton White observes.<sup>32</sup>

The West has mostly ignored Putin's 2007 speech in Munich, in which he openly declared an intent to remake the post-Cold War order in Russia's own image.<sup>33</sup> For Russia, so-called hybrid operations are a matter of degree in its war against the West. Moscow's primary goal is to shape the information environment so that countries make choices advantageous to Russia's interests without them realizing they are being manipulated to do so. These efforts were known as "active measures" during the Cold War.<sup>34</sup>

The West's response to Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine 2014 were so weak that Vladimir Putin may have concluded that a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a next logical step from the perspective of Russia's imperialism, would be acceptable and that the West's response would not amount to much. But the West has rallied behind Ukraine and enabled it to fight back. Putin was certainly mistaken thinking that Russia could take Kyiv in two weeks.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the Russian leadership has so far concluded that continuing its aggression is more beneficial to Moscow's interests than stopping it.

The West's support for Ukraine can contribute to mitigating Russia's hybrid campaign, besides Russia's defeat in Ukraine remaining in NATO's geopolitical interest.<sup>36</sup> Ukraine forces Russia to focus its resources and attention, and it seems highly likely that otherwise Russia would use at least a part of these resources to expand its campaign against NATO states. Through support for Ukraine, Western countries can retaliate for Russia's malign activities and increase costs of Russia's hybrid activities against the West. Russia's hybrid operations against NATO started years prior, and the cessation of help to Ukraine will not stop them. This is because Russia desires a fundamental restructuring of the global world order against U.S. and allies' interests, in addition to defeating Ukraine.



## Countering Russia's Activities

The West's response to Russia's aggressive actions remains limited.<sup>37</sup> Irregular activities have always been a part of warfare, and a decision on whether one is at war is made at a political level. So far, politicians have been hesitant to characterize their countries as being at war with Russia, even though Russia says that Europe's support of Ukraine puts them at war with Russia.<sup>38</sup>

The repeated nature of Russia's actions indicates that Moscow has concluded that its sabotage campaign will contribute to its objectives at acceptable costs. For the moment, these objectives center around undermining NATO support for Ukraine, but the broader goal is to undermine the West globally. Russia's objectives also likely include gathering information and testing procedures in case of more active hostilities with NATO and undermining NATO's unity.

There is almost no discussion at the political level of the West taking similar offensive actions. Granted, Russia has been subjected to attacks on its territory, but these attacks are executed by Ukraine, a country Russia invaded, even if Ukraine occasionally uses Western-provided weapons. The lack of political will to discuss offensive response measures is a major gap and an indication of the limitation in current strategies to counter Russia's actions — which Moscow sees as weakness to be exploited. Increasing the public's support for more assertive counter-actions, e.g. sabotage of Russia's military and logistical hubs and its energy infrastructure, is a necessary prerequisite to answering Russia's aggression against the West, as is sensitizing the public to the fact that Russia sees democratic governments and populations that support them as adversaries. Indeed, if NATO fails to respond adequately, it is only inviting further, and perhaps escalated, Russian aggression within European borders. Western officials also should publicly highlight that the comprehensive nature of Russia's actions is a part of Moscow's broader effort to undermine democracies and shape the global world order in its image.

## Conclusion

NATO leaders would do well to remember that "Creeping aggression backed by militaristic ruthlessness has succeeded many times in the past. Appeasement does not prevent war, it assures conflict."<sup>39</sup> Defending against Russia's aggression is necessary, but not enough to change Russia's calculus whether it should stop, or at least scale down, its campaign against targets on NATO territory. NATO members ought to begin thinking and speaking publicly about their own offensive responses against targets in Russia, keeping in mind the degree of damage Russia causes in the West. These discussions should include sabotage of Russia's military and logistical hubs and its energy infrastructure, the primary enablers of Russia's aggression against the West. A principle of reciprocity may be the only way to convince Moscow to stop. If that is too difficult politically, the West should at least enable Ukraine to continue waging its fight against the Russian aggressors with its full support.



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<sup>1</sup> Donald Armstrong, *The Reluctant Warriors* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), pp. 180-181.

<sup>2</sup> The term originates with the 2006 war in Lebanon. In the context of Russia, it was popularized by Mark Galeotti, who has distanced himself from its contemporary usage. See Lawrence Freedman, "Liberal International Isaiah Berlin Lecture," October 2, 2023, available at <https://liberal-international.org/news-articles/2023-liberal-international-isaiah-berlin-lecture-sir-lawrence-freedman/>.

<sup>3</sup> Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Tom Balmforth, "Russia demands NATO roll back from East Europe and stay out of Ukraine," *Reuters*, December 17, 2021, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17/>.

<sup>4</sup> Keir Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power," *Chatham House*, March 2016, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "Joint press conference by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte with the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz," November 4, 2024, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_230188.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_230188.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Seth G. Jones, "Russia's Shadow War Against the West," *The Center for International and Strategic Studies Brief*, March 2025, p. 1, available at [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-03/250318\\_Jones\\_Russia\\_Shadow.pdf?VersionId=LHAmL2L7HJwLgZ7a\\_wq6xkTIwMh3TFpk](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-03/250318_Jones_Russia_Shadow.pdf?VersionId=LHAmL2L7HJwLgZ7a_wq6xkTIwMh3TFpk).

<sup>7</sup> Sophia McGrath, "Spotlight on the Shadow War: Inside Russia's Attacks on NATO Territory," *The Helsinki Commission*, December 2024, p. 3, available at <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Spotlight-on-the-Shadow-War-Website.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, "'We are here. Join us.' What the trial of two Wagner Group promoters in Poland reveals about Russia's covert campaign in Europe," *Meduza*, April 11, 2025, available at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/04/11/we-are-here-join-us>.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Charlish, Lidia Kelly and Barbara Erling, "Poland downs drones in its airspace, becoming first NATO member to fire during war in Ukraine," *Reuters*, September 10, 2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/poland-downs-drones-its-airspace-becoming-first-nato-member-fire-during-war-2025-09-10/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia*, 2025, p. 56, available at [https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2025/upload/vla\\_eng-raport\\_2025\\_web-002.pdf](https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2025/upload/vla_eng-raport_2025_web-002.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Arno Van Rensbergen, "Hybrid threats: Russia's shadow war escalates across Europe," *The Parliament*, January 21, 2025, available at <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/hybrid-threats-russias-shadow-war-escalates-across-europe>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Charlie Edwards, "Russia's hybrid war in Europe enters a dangerous new phase," *International Institute for Security Studies*, November 26, 2024, available at <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/11/russias-hybrid-war-in-europe-enters-a-dangerous-new-phase/>.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Apps, "Russia's suspected sabotage campaign steps up in Europe," *Reuters*, October 20, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-suspected-sabotage-campaign-steps-up-europe-2024-10-21/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, "Russia's Shadow War Against the West," p.13, op. cit.; and Kateryna Denisova, "From spy rings to arson – Russia's sabotage across Europe continues unpunished," *Kyiv Independent*, May 14, 2025, available at <https://kyivindependent.com/russia-suspected-in-series-of-sabotage-across-europe-here-are-key-cases/>.



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<sup>36</sup> Michaela Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series* No. 612 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/).

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