



Russia Launches Drone and Disinformation Attack on Poland

Filip Bryjka, Aleksandra Wójtowicz

The Russian disinformation campaign accompanying the violation of Polish airspace by Russian drones is part of a broader hybrid operation against NATO and the EU. The aim of these actions is to spread fear, deepen internal divisions, and create tensions in relations with Ukraine in order to discourage Western societies and decision-makers from providing further support. The direct use of military means, combined with disinformation activities, demonstrates Russia's readiness to escalate tensions in order to force the West to accept Russian terms for ending the war.

On the night of 9-10 September, the Polish Air Force, with the support of NATO allies, neutralised some of the 21 Russian drones that violated Polish airspace. Already during this incident, identified Russian disinformation channels (including on the Telegram platform) began spreading false information, blaming Ukraine. This effort is part of Russia's aim to shift responsibility for the incident away from itself while simultaneously attempting to intimidate the West by extending the conflict to NATO territory.

The Russian Narratives and Objectives. The Russian authorities consistently deny that they deliberately directed drones into Polish airspace. They also accuse Poland of making false accusations and reacting hysterically. Russia's main messaging regarding the drone attack on Poland therefore suggests that it was a "Ukrainian provocation" aimed at dragging Poland and NATO into the war. The dissemination of this narrative is intended not only to cause tension in Polish-Ukrainian relations but also to mobilise pro-Russian "anti-war" movements in Europe that are calling for an end to aid to Ukraine, which if successful would lead to the end of the war on terms imposed by the aggressor. The Russian narratives also suggest, among other things, that "it was Ukraine that took control of the Russian drones" or that "it jammed their GPS signal, causing them to change course". To lend credibility to their false claims, they manipulate data on the range of the drones and publish fabricated graphics

and maps suggesting that they were launched from Ukrainian territory. They also refer to the incident in Przewodów in November 2022 when the remains of a Ukrainian air defence missile fell on Polish territory during the repulsion of a Russian attack. These actions are intended to spread fear by painting a picture of the conflict spreading to Polish territory. They are also intended to cause tensions between Poles and Ukrainians, which Russia has been trying to achieve since 2014 by, among other things, manipulating history regarding the Volhynia massacres, socio-economic issues related to social assistance for refugees from Ukraine, provocations (e.g., destruction of monuments), and [sabotage](#) (arson attacks on warehouses and factories, reconnaissance of critical infrastructure) carried out by Ukrainian citizens on behalf of Russian intelligence.

Russia's Methods and Their Impact. Even before the attack on 9 September, social media accounts with a large reach and known for spreading Russian disinformation (particularly on the X portal), began publishing posts about an alleged provocation planned by Ukraine. They claimed that Ukraine was preparing a provocation on the Belarusian border with the aim of "dragging Poland into the war". During the night (between 2 and 3 a.m.), there was increased activity from fake accounts commenting on information about the attack and insisting that it was a "Ukrainian provocation". Posts published by Polish politicians, state institutions, and media referring to the incident also

received comments on a large scale. Those containing Russian narratives used simple hashtags, such as #provocation and #drones, which made it possible to mix factual information with false messaging. The hashtag #tonienaszwojna (“not our war”) also gained popularity, reaching a total of over 3 million views between 8 and 14 September (based on about 2,700 posts). This hashtag is regularly used by pseudo anti-war circles to promote pro-Russian narratives in Polish-language social media.

In addition to traditional Russian propaganda media (e.g., Rossiya 1 television), in the first phase of the disinformation operation, the same accounts that were used to spread anti-vaccination narratives during the COVID pandemic were activated on social media. This may mean that some of them have remained “dormant” and can be reactivated for specific operations. Subsequently, accounts of a seemingly neutral nature, such as those which normally focus on business and sports, joined in spreading the notion of a “Ukrainian provocation”. However, the disinformation infrastructure previously used against Poland in the so-called *Overload* and *Doppelgänger* campaigns, carried out currently against NATO and EU countries mainly by the Social Design Agency (a Russian PR para-agency), was not activated. These operations include, among other things, the creation of fake websites and social media profiles impersonating well-known people and media outlets. Manipulated content about the drone attack on Poland was also not disseminated via the Russian Pravda network, which since 2022 has published millions of disinformation articles on hundreds of websites posing as local news portals in several EU countries.

Although Russia did not use all its resources and capabilities for disinformation about the attack, it led to the intensive dissemination of false narratives about the event in the Polish media space. This is also the result of its many years of activity in the Polish infosphere, which is now achieving similar results as earlier, but with much less effort. This is indicated by data from Res Futura, according to which 38% of posts (the majority) referring to drone attacks on Poland argued that it was a “Ukrainian provocation”. The most popular video about Russian drones, which received a total of over 100,000 interactions on Facebook within two days of its publication, argued that the drones were intentionally

sent to Polish territory by the Ukrainians. The total reach of content related to the alleged “Ukrainian provocation” between 8 and 14 September was over 6 billion, with the most radical posts referring to Ukrainians and showing signs of hate speech reaching over 1.5 million users.

Conclusions and Prospects. Despite the rapid and uniform response to Russian disinformation by Polish and allied military, public institutions, and non-governmental organisations, including through providing the public with up-to-date and coordinated information, manipulated content reached a wide audience, which demonstrated the vulnerability of Polish society to it. It is therefore necessary to adopt [systemic educational solutions](#) to strengthen citizens’ ability to build individual resilience to information threats. However, implementation of it will not bring immediate results, which is why it is also necessary to regulate digital platforms in terms of detecting and removing networks of accounts that are gaming algorithms to promote disinformation.

The effectiveness of Russian information and psychological operations to date indicates that they are likely to intensify and to be combined with military incidents against Poland and other NATO/EU countries. The goal is to sow fear among society and deepen internal divisions over continued support for Ukraine, which in turn is aimed to force Western political elites and societies to accept Russia’s vision of a post-war world. Attempts to destabilise the internal situation of Alliance countries, including by spreading hate speech and inspiring hostility towards refugees from Ukraine, will be particularly dangerous for their internal security. NATO and EU countries should prepare for such scenarios by strengthening information exchange and coordinating their strategic communication activities.

The high effectiveness of Russian disinformation, given the lack of activation of all means of influence, also indicates that Russia does not require as much effort to achieve results that previously required much greater expenditure of resources. This is due, among other things, to a change in the attitude of part of the public towards further support for Ukraine under the influence of the protracted conflict, the anti-Ukrainian narratives promoted by Russia to date, and growing fears of the war’s spread to NATO territory.