



## MNI POLITICAL RISK ANALYSIS – Drone Incursion To Test Unity

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### Executive Summary

- Geopolitics took centre stage this week as Russian UAVs violated Polish territory and several were intercepted by Polish and allied fighter jets.
- The working hypothesis is that the incursion was an intentional act of provocation, with Poland rallying its allies to help reinforce the security of its borders.
- Further provocations could sow division within Poland and between NATO members testing their resolve and ability to react to Russian threats.

### Background Information

Tensions around Poland's eastern border escalated earlier this week as the Armed Forces Operational Command (DORSZ) detected an incursion of an unprecedented number of Russian military unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) into Polish airspace around 22:30BST/23:30CEST. A pair of Polish Air Force F-16s and a pair of NATO Quick Reaction Alert F-35s were deployed to engage and intercept those hostile UAVs which 'posed direct threat'. The airspace over airports in Warsaw, Rzeszów (the main hub for the delivery of aid to Ukraine) and Lublin (near the tripoint of Poland, Ukraine and Belarus) was briefly closed, although officials later said that this was to clear the sky for the operation of own fighter jets and prepare for a potential escalation rather than because of any direct threat.

Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) expert Jacek Tarociński said that a group of Russian UAVs travelled along the Ukrainian-Belarusian border and while most of them were intercepted or reached targets in Ukraine, some detached from the group and flew toward the city of Lublin in Poland. The OSW is a state-run think tank supporting the administration.

Polish and allied fighter jets destroyed several out of around 20 (possibly 23) UAVs, with Dutch F-35s responsible for most hits. Subsequent analysis of debris suggested that Russia used Gerbera decoy drones as well as Iranian-designed Shahed/Geran drones. The last drone was shot down at 05:45BST/06:45CEST, after which the four aforementioned civilian airports resumed operations. Prime Minister Donald Tusk subsequently confirmed that the situation was 'under control' and there would be no new restrictions for the population at this stage. There were no reported casualties but one of the drones fell on a residential building in eastern Poland, and another one fell as far as the northern village of Oleśno.

Chief of the General Staff Wiesław Kukuła confirmed to TVN24 that Belarus notified Poland about the drones traversing its airspace toward the west, which was 'helpful' but 'surprising', considering Minsk's escalatory steps on the ground border. Kukuła said that the pilots were pre-authorised to destroy the targets, and the authorities made all necessary preparations for the 'worst-case scenario', halting operations at several airports to 'prepare the field to increase the number of effectors, that is systems that can down drones'. He suggested that



hostile UAVs were engaged selectively, with the commanders shooting down only those that posed threat to human life or valuable assets.

## Russian Goals

The working hypothesis of Polish authorities is that the incursion was a deliberate act of provocation, despite repeated Russian denials of responsibility. Experts have noted that Russia may have wanted to:

- send a **warning** signal to Polish political decisionmakers and the wider population about the consequences of continued engagement in support for Ukraine;
- **destabilise** the internal situation by leveraging the asymmetric distribution of costs of escalation near the eastern border, which disproportionately affects eastern regions;
- improve the effectiveness of its **strike** on **targets in western Ukraine** by exploiting a 'backdoor' entry path where Ukrainian air defence coverage might be weaker;
- **obtain information** about Poland's and NATO's reaction time, as well as the means and procedures used to repel the incursion;
- **test the unity** of Western alliances amid recent US attempts to mediate peace talks and accompanying signals of readiness for concessions.

These distinct purposes are difficult to disentangle and divided into outright goals, foreseen consequences, and pure side-effects, while proving intention is always tricky, but there is evidence to suggest that at least part of the incursion was a deliberate provocation.

OSINT analyst Jarosław Wolski wrote on X that several Gerbera decoy drones seemingly crossed into Poland in random directions, which suggests that they may have gone astray because of the impact of electronic warfare assets. However, Shahed/Geran UAVs flew along a crescent-shaped trajectory from Belarus through Polish territory and toward targets in Ukraine, which would indicate deliberate operation intended to bypass Ukrainian air defence and, possibly as a side-effect, test Poland's reaction.

Separately, Spiegel ran a report quoting NATO sources, who said that the flight path of five of the drones suggested that they were targeting the logistics hub in Rzeszów, which has been the main entrepôt for military aid headed for Ukraine. The base near Rzeszów hosted US troops for three years, before they were transferred to other locations in Poland and replaced by European forces earlier this year.

Furthermore, the authorities and NGOs warned that the incursion coincided with heightened activity of Russian information warfare. The [analysis](#) by Res Futura suggested that around 38% of comments in Polish social media posted after the incident were 'supportive of Russia or relativised its responsibility', with a coordinated activity observable from around 02:00BST/03:00CEST as the drone incursion was underway. A plurality of comments attributed blame to Ukraine and the dominant narrative described the incident as a Ukrainian provocation.

## Aftermath

In the wake of night-time talks between the President and Prime Minister, Polish officials held a flurry of consultations with allies, which culminated in a formal request to invoke

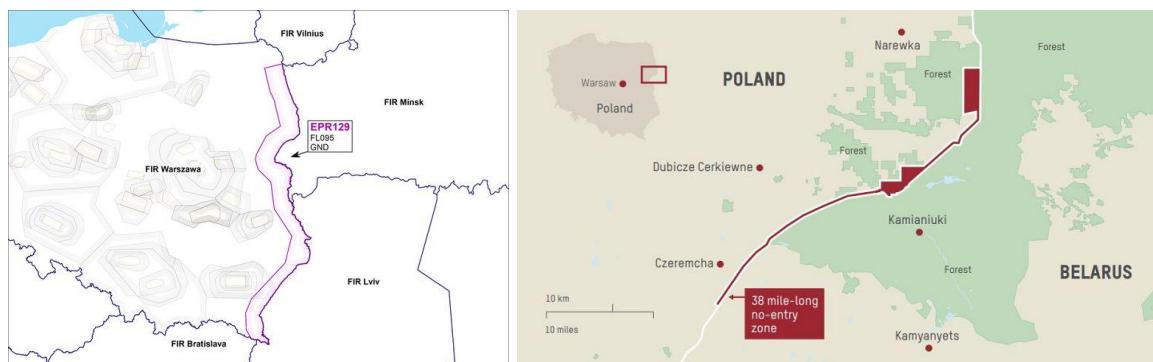
Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, which allows parties to 'consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened.' Article 4 had previously been invoked seven times by Türkiye, Poland and, most recently, a group of eastern European countries after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On top of that, the Foreign Ministry said that the UN Security Council will hold a special meeting to discuss the situation.

For the most part, communique from Polish officials has been consistent and emphasised unity of political leadership. The incursion was described as a large-scale act of provocation and a threat below the threshold of war. This is of some significance after weeks of overt tensions between President Karol Nawrocki and Prime Minister Donald Tusk amid their difficult cohabitation. The drone incursion was a stress test for their uneasy relationship and ability to ensure smooth coordination in crisis situations.

With most officials seeking to soothe the nerves, two notable exceptions stand out. Opposition leader Jarosław Kaczyński referred to the incident as a 'Russian attack on Poland' and focused on criticising the government. Leaders of the far-right Confederation party decried the lack of preparedness for drone attacks, drawing criticism from governing coalition members for fostering divisive rhetoric. As things stand, Kaczyński's Law and Justice (PiS) party narrowly leads in opinion polls, while Confederation comes third ahead of the looming 2027 parliamentary elections.

In the wake of consultations with allies, Defence Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz said that they will contribute assets to help reinforce Polish air defence within 'several dozen hours'. He is set to provide an update to parliament later on Thursday. Separately, President Karol Nawrocki called a meeting of the National Security Council (RBN) for 16:00BST/17:00CEST to discuss the incident and further steps. The RBN includes senior political officials, ministers from the security cluster, and representatives of all parliamentary caucuses. Furthermore, the DORSZ issued a temporary restriction on civilian air traffic along the borders with Belarus and Ukraine until December 9. Note that parts of the border had already been declared 'no-entry' zone due to hybrid warfare tactics deployed by Minsk.

*Figures 1 and 2. LHS: No-flight zone along the eastern border. Source: DORSZ/RHS: No-entry buffer zone on the Polish-Belarusian border. Source: Oxfam International.*





## Consequences

The downing of Russian drones represents the first case of the use of force by the Polish army to defend home territory since World War II and as such represents an unprecedented escalation in the stand-off with Moscow. The incursion exposed Poland's vulnerability to drone attacks amid ongoing work to patch remaining gaps. Although the operation of eliminating hostile UAVs was effective, a growing number of critics have argued that the surge in defence spending is being spent on building conventional capabilities without due regard for unconventional and hybrid challenges.

Comments from Polish officials suggest that they deliberately overdid the response to the incursion, triggering NATO defence mechanisms in anticipation of a potential wider attack, preferring to err on the side of caution. There is consensus that the reaction of the Armed Forces and subsequent communications met expectations, but longer-term structural vulnerabilities remain an issue. Following the incursion, a number of allies declared imminent support, pledging to contribute assets to bolster the security of Poland's eastern borders.

There is a risk that Poland will be targeted by similar provocations in the future, with adversaries leveraging cost asymmetries to impose economic penalties for supporting Ukraine. It has been widely noted that the cost of deploying fighter jets to intercept hostile effectors far exceeds the cost of modern UAVs, which are cheap and easy to manufacture in large quantities. Repeated incidents of the kind would continue to generate economic costs and drain precious resources.

Furthermore, drone incursions can be used to play into existing political divisions in Poland and undermine the domestic political situation. The costs of escalating geopolitical tensions are distributed asymmetrically, with easternmost regions shouldering much of the burden. Anecdotal evidence suggests that border closures, capital flight, and rising risk premiums have severely affected tourism, investments, and business activity in the east, even if aggregate national data mask this effect. This has been filtering through into political preferences, with some commentators interpreting outsized support for far-right candidates in the recent presidential election as driven at least partly by the disgruntled constituency in easternmost regions touched by rising border tensions. This creates an incentive for politicians to capitalise on geopolitical angst for the sake of domestic electoral competition.

Alongside testing the internal coherence of Poland's society and political elite, Russian provocations pose a threat to the unity of Western alliances. Communiques issued after the drone incursions already revealed subtle differences, with Hungarian and Slovak leaders expressing solidarity with Poland but refraining from clear blame attribution. The deployment of hybrid warfare tactics allows Moscow to exploit the differentials in exposure to military threat to sow division among NATO member states, probing the bloc's ability to trigger collective defence mechanisms and form a united front while facing geographically limited threat.

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