

Romania and the threat of Russian drone warfare

From restraint to the use of force

George Vișan



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George Vișan ²

Expert, Romanian Diplomatic Institute

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Abstract

This policy brief will argue that recent incursions in Romanian air space by Russian drones are the result of the escalation of the air war against Ukraine and a way to test Allied and national responses to this type of grey zone activities. Russia is looking for “chinks” in the “armor” of NATO countries in order to influence local politics and to identify vulnerabilities in the Alliance’s overall strategic posture, that could be exploited later. This brief argues that Romania’s initial restraint against these incursions represented a calculated risk and a way to avoid to direct confrontations with Moscow. As Russia’s drone incursions became more numerous and brazen this approach was changed with one of shooting down that violate Romanian airspace. By shooting down drones Romania demonstrates its determination to combat Russian aggressive behavior and maintains deterrence in its sector of the Eastern Flank. This brief will mostly concentrate on incidents that have taken place between May and August 2026 in Romania but will include references to other incidents that have taken place either on Romanian territory and on the Eastern Flank (Poland, Baltic states and the Republic of Moldova) because they fit the overall pattern of Russian behavior. The most likely conclusion that can be drawn is that these incursions are deliberate military actions aimed at intimidation and/or military intelligence gathering missions and are part of a larger Russian strategy of intimidating countries that support Ukraine, in the hope that they will cease their support in exchange for Russia putting an end to its incursions.

Keywords: Romania, Russia, drones, NATO Eastern Flank, Ukraine.

¹ This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

² george.visan@idr.ro

INTRODUCTION

For three consecutive days between July 24 and July 26, 2026, the Romanian Air Force shot down three Russian Geran-2 (Shahed-136 type) drones that violated its air space ([MApN](#), July 24, 2026; [MApN](#), July 25; [MApN](#), July 26). A similar airspace violation took place on July 27, when another Geran-2 UAV strayed into Romanian air space, but only for a short period time, not enough for a successful interception to occur ([MApN](#), July 27, 2026). On August 16, a Spanish air force F-18C deployed in Romania as part of NATO air policing mission, shot down another Russian Geran-2 drone that violated Romanian air space ([MApN](#), August 16, 2026). This interception marked the first time an allied aircraft shot down a drone over Romanian territory during NATO's air police mission to Romania.

Romania's recent use of force against Russian drone violating its airspace represents a departure from its past restraint regarding such incursions. The worst drone incident occurred on May 29, 2026, when, in the early hours of the day a Russian drone hit a block of flats in the port city of Galați, detonating and starting a small fire as well as wounding a mother and her child ([Hotnews.ro](#), May 29, 2026).

Romania has been faced with such incidents since the start of the Russian large-scale invasion against Ukraine in February 2022 ([The War Zone](#), March 11, 2022; [Libertatea](#), March 15, 2022), but the situation subsequently grew increasingly worse beginning with a series of drone crashes in September 2023 ([Observatorul Militar](#) 2023, 4-5). Until 2026, Bucharest has exercised a high degree of restraint regarding Russian drone incursions. Romania has been probably the EU and NATO member state whose airspace has been violated the most by Russian drone incursions since 2022. In August 2026, Romanian armed forces had to deal with drone threats from the air or from the sea almost on a daily basis.

This policy brief will argue that recent incursions in Romanian air space by Russian drones are the result of the escalation of the air war against Ukraine and a way to test Allied and national responses to this type of grey zone activities. Russia is looking for "chinks" in the "armor" of NATO countries in order to influence local politics and to identify vulnerabilities in the Alliance's overall strategic posture, that could be exploited later.

An apocryphal quote, attributed to V.I. Lenin, but often repeated within the Russian military circles says “Probe with bayonets. If you encounter mush, proceed; if you encounter steel, withdraw.” The aim of the Russian campaign against NATO countries is to discourage support for the Ukrainian cause as well as to create a climate of fear and security within their societies. Furthermore, Russia wants to evaluate the level of readiness of NATO forces on the Eastern Flank as well as the strength of the air defense deployed by member states.

This brief will mostly concentrate on incidents that have taken place between May and August 2026 in Romania but will include references to other incidents that have taken place either on Romanian territory and on the Eastern Flank (Poland, Baltic states and the Republic of Moldova) because they fit the overall pattern of Russian behavior.

RUSSIA’S “DRONE DIPLOMACY” IN ROMANIA

Romania is particularly vulnerable to Russia’s drone incursions because of its geographical proximity to Ukraine. Bucharest and Kyiv share a 649 km border, 343.9 km of which run along the River Danube and another 31.7 km represent the maritime border in Black Sea. **The close proximity between the two countries is being used by Russia as an excuse to deny that it undertook a strike on Romanian territory either deliberately or accidentally, or it violated Romanian air space on purpose.** As part of its disinformation campaigns, Russia can blame Ukrainian forces for its drone incursions in Romanian air space or to reinforce its propaganda regarding its war of aggression against Kyiv ([EUvsDisinfo](#), May 31, 2026).

Russian Federation armed forces have bombed with cruise missiles and later drones, Ukrainian port infrastructure on the Danube and the Black Sea since the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine ([CNN](#), April 8, 2022; [Atlantic Council](#), August 18, 2026). The ports of Kilia (*Chilia Nouă*), Reni and Izmail have come under heavy aerial attack ([Reuters](#), August 13, 2026; [CNBC](#), August 17, 2026) as Russia wants to cut off Ukraine from its access to the sea and from the global markets. Russian drone strikes have targeted Ukrainian border crossings on the Romanian-Ukrainian border ([Europa Liberă](#), November 22, 2025; [Știrile ProTV](#), septembrie 1, 2026; [News.ro](#), May 3, 2026), with the intent of destroying border infrastructure in order to restrict trade and direct communication between the two countries. Russian drone

attacks have also targeted border checkpoints between Ukraine and Poland ([Digi24.ro](#), September 29, 2026), and Ukraine and Moldova ([RRA](#), September 9, 2026).

The Kremlin's aim is to put an end to Ukrainian exports of grain, foodstuffs and other goods by destroying the port infrastructure that handles these exports and practically interdict the latter's access to the global market. Ukraine has been using its Danube ports to export goods and avoid the Russian attempted blockade of its Black Sea ports ([Kyiv Post](#), April 4, 2026). Since 2023, Ukrainian goods have used the Danube and Romanian, Bulgarian and Turkish territorial waters to avoid the Russian naval blockade and potential attacks.

Since 2025, Russian attacks against Ukrainian port infrastructure in the Black Sea and on the Danube have intensified as a result of the failure of the US mediation efforts, the relative lack of palpable progress on the battlefield, the failure of Russian blockade attempts in the Black Sea and the escalation of Ukrainian attacks against shipping in the Black Sea, Azov Sea and Caspian Sea ([Reuters](#), August 22, 2026). The failure of US mediation efforts between Russia and Ukraine ([PRIO](#), December 9, 2025; [Brookings](#), April 29, 2026), have led to a situation where both combatants are jockeying for a better negotiation position as well as to obtain Washington's support in the peace process.

Ukrainian forces have hit Russia "shadow fleet" assets in the Black Sea, Azov Sea and Caspian Sea, in an effort to cut off one of Russia's sources of revenue: oil, oil products as well as other goods ([Associated Press](#), May 28, 2026; [Hotnews.ro](#), July 13, 2026; [RFERL](#), August 19, 2026). Russia's so called "shadow fleet" has also been known to carry goods stolen and/or manufactured in the occupied Ukrainian territories ([The Kyiv Independent](#), August 6, 2026). Furthermore, Ukraine has targeted Russian air and naval bases in Crimea and Novorossiysk ([Associated Press](#), August 12, 2026; [The New Voice of Ukraine](#), September 9, 2026), as well as oil and grain terminals in the Black Sea ([Al Jazeera](#), August 12, 2026; [Trade Winds News](#), October 1, 2026) in order to drastically reduce Kremlin's revenues that are used to finance its war of aggression against Kyiv and to neutralize the remnants of the Black Sea Fleet.

The peculiarities of the Romanian-Ukrainian border represent both an opportunity and an excuse to test the reactions of a NATO country. Russia can easily excuse these incursions by saying that its drones have veered off course because of Ukrainian air defense activities, electronic countermeasures, weather patterns (north easterly winds), or stating that they were actually Ukrainian drones. The border between the two states also makes it difficult for Romanian ground-based air defense assets to engage targets, as shells and missiles can hit

Ukrainian territory. Since the start of the Russian large-scale invasion against Ukraine, more than 151 Russian drone attacks have occurred in the vicinity of Romania and 49 violations of Romanian air space ([MApN](#), October 2026). At the time of writing, thirty Russian drone incursions have occurred only during 2026 (*Ibid.*).

However, beyond geographic proximity there is a more sinister reason for repeated Russian incursions in Romanian air space. **Moscow is trying to coerce and punish Romania for its support for Ukraine.** Since the beginning of the large-scale invasion in Romania has been one of Ukraine's stalwart supporters. Bucharest has let Kyiv use its territorial waters and port infrastructure to export grain, foodstuffs and other goods to global, thus ensuring Ukraine's economic survival during Russia's war of aggression.

A further reason for Russia's incursions in Romanian air space is Romania's support for the Republic of Moldova's European integration and to break away from the Kremlin's sphere of influence. Moscow routinely accuses Romania of trying to annex Moldova and recreate Greater Romania ([MID](#), June 25, 2026). Since the beginning of the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Romania has been instrumental, along with France in organizing the Support Platform for the Republic of Moldova – a format dedicated to aiding Chișinău after the start of the Russian large-scale invasion against Ukraine.

Finally, Russia's repeated incursions in Romanian air space should be viewed as part of a larger plan to destabilize the country. In 2024, Russia interfered in Romanian presidential elections to such an extent that the result had to be annulled by the Constitutional Court and the electoral process had to be repeated in 2025 (BROD, December 2024; Viginum, February 2025).

RUSSIAN DENIALS AND OBFUSCATION

Despite being confronted with the evidence of its drone incursions, Russia has constantly denied that its unmanned systems have violated Romanian air space or fell on Romanian territory. The Russian Federation remains an uncooperative international actor and has not taken any steps to mitigate its behavior regarding drone incursions over the countries of the Eastern Flank in general, and Romania, in particular. Moreover, the Kremlin has rhetorically escalated the diplomatic conflict with Romania and this is reflected in the attitude of the spokesperson of the Russian foreign ministry, Maria Zakharova ([Antena 3](#), July 29,

2026). Faced with the evidence of three consecutive night-time violations of Romania's airspace, Maria Zakharova accused the Romanian authorities of making up these drone incidents as a provocation against Russia:

These orchestrated incidents and the accompanying propaganda campaign are evidence of the Romanian leadership's attempt to cover up the disastrous consequences of their irresponsible policy of supporting the Kiev regime. It is Romanian's reckless pro-Ukrainian adventurism, rather than "Moscow's scheming," that is undermining the foundations of Romania's national security and having an adverse impact on its socio-economic situation. It should therefore come as no surprise that Romanian society is increasingly calling for a more rational approach to Ukraine and the antics of its leaders. Bucharest's unfriendly actions will receive an appropriate response. ([MID.ru](#), July 28, 2026)

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that **these incursions are deliberate military actions aimed at intimidation and/or military intelligence gathering missions and are part of a larger Russian strategy of intimidating countries that support Ukraine, in the hope that they will cease their support in exchange for Russia putting an end to its incursions.**

The Russian ambassador to Romania has been summoned many times to the Romanian Foreign Ministry and numerous formal protests regarding Russian drone incidents have been presented to him ([MAE](#), May 29, 2026; [MAE](#), January 17, 2025; [MAE](#), February 13, 2025; [MAE](#), September 13, 2023) as well as drone fragments identified on Romanian territory ([MAE](#), July 27, 2026), but there are no signs that Moscow understands the situation it has created in Romania or plans to change its behavior.

This is a recurring pattern of behavior of Russian diplomatic behavior, not particularly specific to Romania. The Foreign Ministry of Poland has summoned and lodged similar protests to the Russian ambassador in Warsaw, over the numerous Russian incursions in Polish airspace ([Reuters](#), July 31, 2026). Coordinated diplomatic pressure has also been applied to little or no avail ([EUalive.net](#), September 12, 2025; [France 24](#), September 14, 2025).

As a result of Russian drone incursions in Romanian airspace and Russia's provocative behavior Romania closed down its consulate in the port city of Constanța, declared the Russian consul *persona non grata* ([MAE](#), May 29, 2026; [MID.ru](#), June 1, 2026) and withdrew Romania's ambassador to Moscow for consultations ([MAE](#), July 27, 2026). Following Russia's three consecutive incursions in Romania's airspace, another Russian diplomat was declared

persona non grata and expelled (Ibid.).³ In response Russia closed down Romania's consulate in Sankt Petersburg and expelled the consul ([MAE](#), June 25, 2026) as well as another member of country's mission to Moscow ([MAE](#), August 27, 2026). **Diplomatic relations between the two countries have reached their lowest ebb since 1991.**

Russia's non-cooperative and belligerent behavior over its drone incursions has not been deterred by diplomatic démarches even when protests have been lodged with the United Nations. Both Poland ([Gov.pl](#), September 12, 2025) and Romania ([MAE](#), June 1, 2026) have raised the issue of Russia's aggressive drone incursions in their airspaces at the UN Security Council, but the Kremlin has continued to deny responsibility for these incidents, even when faced with overwhelming evidence.

RUSSIAN ESCALATION ON THE EASTERN FLANK

Romania has not been the only victim of drone incursions since the Russian Federation has begun using these weapons systems to strike Ukraine. Russian drones and cruise missiles have violated Polish air space on more than one occasion. On September 9, 2025, a 19-23 drone swarm violated Polish and had to be intercepted by fighter aircraft ([Security Council Report](#), September 12, 2025). Four Russian drones have been shot down by NATO aircraft tasked with protecting Polish air space. This represented the largest incursion of this type in the airspace of a NATO member. Unfortunately, Russian incursions in Poland have not been limited to UAVs. Russian cruise missiles have violated and used Polish air space in order to hit more effectively targets in western Ukraine. The latest incident involving a Russian cruise missile happened on July 30, 2026, when a Kh-101 air launched cruise missile impacted near the village of Tarnawa-Kolonia, 100 km deep in Polish territory ([TVP World](#), July 30, 2026; [BBC](#), July 30, 2026). The nature of the incident could suggest a deliberate violation of Polish air space ([Polskie Radio](#), July 30, 2026). These incidents are not accidental, but they are part of an air campaign against Ukraine as well as an unsophisticated way in which Russia signals its displeasure over Polish and Allied support for the Ukrainian cause.

³ This is not the first time Romania and Russia have expelled a number of their diplomats over the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian War. In June 2023, Romania reduced the number of diplomats accredited in Bucharest ([MAE](#), June 30, 2023).

Another victim of Russian drone and cruise missile incursions is the Republic of Moldova. Since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova's air space has been violated at least 70 times by Russian drones and cruise missiles ([Radio Moldova](#), August 24, 2026). The worst incidents involved Russian cruise missiles that crashed or detonated on Moldovan territory ([RFERL](#), August 10, 2026). Five Russian cruise missiles crashed and detonated on Moldovan territory ([RFERL](#), August 18, 2026) since the beginning of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. In Chişinău's case, Russian forces used its airspace to bypass Ukrainian air defenses and to frighten the local population. The situation is made worse by Moldova's lack of a modern air defenses to deal with such threats. These incidents are part of a wider Russian campaign of destabilizing the Republic of Moldova ([Veridica](#), April 14, 2026).

Russia has violated on numerous occasions Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian airspace using electronic warfare aircraft, fighters, transport aircraft and maritime patrol aircraft, as part of its harassment of NATO allies on the Eastern Flank ([EPC](#), October 9, 2025; [Security Council Report](#), September 21, 2026). The Baltic states are especially vulnerable to such behavior as their air forces lack high-performance fighter aircraft. As Ukraine began hitting Russian targets near the Baltic Sea in 2026, Russia began using electronic counter measures to jam Ukrainian one-way attack drones so they would hit targets in the Baltic states. The first drone shot down by the Romanian Air Forces occurred during NATO's Baltic Air Police mission and it involved a Ukrainian drone which strayed into Estonian air space as a result of Russian electronic counter measures ([Agerpres](#), May 19, 2026).

ROMANIAN RESTRAINT AND THE NEED FOR AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE

In dealing with the Russian drone threat, Romania has chosen a selective approach. Considering recent developments, it can be surmised that Romania's air defenses will open fire on Russian drones if they threaten large urban areas and if the drones can be tracked, identified and a shooting solution can be safely obtained. The Romanian armed forces seem to operate under strict rules of engagement (ROE) when it comes to drones: Russian drones must be downed in a manner that does not endanger life and/or property on the ground. Although this policy has not been publicly acknowledged, it can be inferred from the actions of the Romanian armed forces.

Until 2026, Romanian authorities exercised restraint concerning Russian drones. This posture can be attributed to three main causes. First, has to do with a general approach by NATO allies of not provoking Russia, or more to the point, of not validating one of Kremlin's favorite narratives about the causes of its invasion of Ukraine: NATO "expansion" and "aggression" towards Russia ([Atlantic Council](#), February 28, 2025). In the same vein, NATO's support for Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression, should not be used by the Kremlin as a justification for attacks on member states.

"Discretion is the better part of valor" best describes NATO's approach concerning Russian provocations on the Eastern Flank and elsewhere. Although Romania's multidimensional support for Ukraine after February 24, 2022, is justified under the provisions of international customary law and is part of a larger international trend of supporting Kyiv facing Kremlin's aggression, this support should not be construed in Moscow as belligerency. Even though Vladimir Putin and his allies are claiming that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine was a way to halt further NATO expansion eastwards, the Alliance as whole is not interested in validating Kremlin's propaganda.

In the case of Romania that meant that drone incidents could be, to a large extent tolerated, so long as large populations centers were not affected and lives and property were not affected. Until 2026, most drone incidents usually occurred in scarcely populated areas of the country and in general the UAVs that ended up on Romanian territory were not carrying explosives warheads ([MApN](#), September 6, 2023).⁴ Furthermore, until 2026, drone incursions into Romanian air space were few and far between. Between 2022 and 2025, 19 drone incursions in Romanian air space occurred, while in the first ten months of 2026, 30 such incursions occurred ([MApN](#), October 2026).⁵ Most of these incursions have been made by Russian drones, Ukrainian drones being notable exceptions ([Curs de Guvernare](#), August 8, 2026; [Libertatea](#), March 11, 2022).

Initially, it seems that most of the Russian drones that ended up in Romanian air space, were decoy and reconnaissance drones, used to lure the Ukrainian air defense into opening fire to waste ammunition and to give away its position. Occasionally, these drones exploded and

⁴ This is based on reporting by Romanian authorities. Although a detonation occurred following the crash, this was attributed to the fuel on board the drone.

⁵ The cut off point of this analysis is October 6, 2026. At the moment of publication two more Russian drones have been shot down over Romanian territorial waters and 54 violations of Romanian air space occurred since the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine.

caught fire when crashing on Romanian territory, but these explosions occurred as the result of the ignition of the fuel on board not as a result of warhead detonation. Holding fire against this type of “interlopers” that violated Romanian air space, made military sense: why give away significant intelligence regarding air defense systems, air surveillance capabilities and air defense reaction times, to deal mostly with a nuisance, rather than a significant threat?

A forceful armed response against Russian drones was probably considered too provocative by most NATO members when this threat first appeared. Initially, drones have been regarded as more of a nuisance than a threat, considering the range of deep strike weapons that was being used in Ukraine by both combatants. Before the September 2025 drone raid incident that affected Poland, the Polish military exercised restraint in the face of a more complex and significant threat. Russian cruise missiles ([WSJ](#), May 30, 2023; [Reuters](#), December 30, 2026), Russian and Belarussian drones ([Reuters](#), August 20, 2025; [Notes from Poland](#), September 4, 2025) and Russian and Belarussian aircraft ([Notes from Poland](#), August 2, 2023; [Reuters](#), February 11, 2025; [Ukrainska Pravda](#), April 26, 2025; [Reuters](#), December 25, 2025) have routinely and brazenly violated Polish airspace since 2022.

Second, the change in Romanian defense posture regarding Russian drones occurred because of the exponential increase in the number of incidents and the threat posed by these drone incursions to Romanian citizens. **As these drone incidents multiplied between 2025-2026, it was likely felt that restraint as a policy against the drone threat was not paying any dividends and Romania was risking the credibility of its conventional deterrence on the Eastern Flank. Moreover, the credibility of the of the government’s pledge to protect Romanian’s citizens came under scrutiny as a result of Russian drone incursions.** In the case of the Geran-2 drone that hit a block of flats in Galați and wounded two people, the decision to shoot down the drone had already been taken – the Romanian Air Force had deployed three quick reaction alert assets (two F-16 multirole fighters and an IAR-330 PUMA SOCAT helicopter) to deal with this threat ([Digi24.ro](#), May 29, 2026). However, the drone threat comes with a particular set of technical and technological challenges, not only political and strategic, which brings us to the third reason why Romania initially practiced restraint against this threat.

Third, detection of UAVs and one way attack munitions is extremely difficult. Drones fly low and generally slow, which makes radar detection and interception by high-performance fighter aircraft difficult. They are built out of composite materials and being small and have a

small radar reflective surface ([Drone Warfare](#), August 23, 2026). Radar detection and tracking is therefore challenging because of aerostructure and flight profile. Worse, passive infrared detection is also difficult which makes detection infrared sensors challenging. Geran-2 and Gerbera drones use two-stroke piston engines that do not give off too much heat compared with high-performance jet engines.

Flying very low and slow (almost nap of the earth) makes interception risky, as fast fighter jets can collide with terrain features, ingest foreign objects or simply cause the pilot to become disoriented and crash. Tracking and targeting with infrared sensors are difficult in these conditions for a fighter aircraft. For example, engaging a Geran-2 or Gerbera drones with an infrared heat seeking missile is particularly challenging because of its low infrared signature and flight profile. Detection and interception are also made difficult by Romania's terrain. Drones using nap of the earth flight profiles are difficult to detect and track by radars and this situation is made worse in Romania by the numerous valleys and riverbeds close to the Ukrainian border, either north or along the Danube.

Russia has recently introduced Geran-4/5 UAVs which use a small turbojet for propulsion, which somewhat increases chances of infrared detection and tracking, but lowers the probability of interception by battery powered Ukrainian interceptors, because of their increased speed ([The Warzone](#), January 12, 2026; [The Warzone](#), September 29, 2026) and flight altitude. Nevertheless, the small turbojets produce smaller infrared signatures than high-performance turbofan jet engines which equip modern multirole fighter or strike aircraft for which short range air-to-air missiles or short-range air defense missiles have been designed to intercept. Furthermore, jet powered drones are difficult targets to intercept because they can change altitude faster than the piston-engine powered variants.

The Romanian air defense system has been created with conventional threats in mind: modern high-performance fighters, strike fighters, bombers, short range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and helicopters. In short, air assets with relatively large radar and infrared signatures, which fly at medium or high altitude. At most it could detect and intercept helicopters and cruise missiles flying at medium and low altitudes. Nobody believed that UAVs could become such a dangerous and persistent threat in such a short time ([USR](#), May 17, 2026).

In truth, the **current drone war between Russia and Ukraine is actually a strategic air campaign carried out with drones that act as rather unsophisticated yet effective improvised cruise missiles**. Neither the US or any other NATO country could have envisaged

that after 2022, drone technology would evolve and develop at such a rapid pace in this direction. In this case, war proved to be the main driving force for the development of unmanned systems – a confirmation of Thucydides' adage that war is a brutal headmaster.

In Romania's case the war caught the country in the midst of an air defense modernization process. In 2022, obsolete Soviet equipment was still being replaced by newer and sophisticated western air defense assets: long range radars, F-16 multirole fighter aircraft and Patriot integrated long range air defense systems. During that year, the MiG-21 Lancer still flew for the Romanian Air Force ([Hotnews.ro](https://hotnews.ro), March 2, 2022), though the number of operational F-16s was increasing. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the global logistics chain and procurement programs such as the Patriot integrated air defense systems are facing delays. Furthermore, acquisition procedures for short range and very short air defense missile (SHORAD/VSHORAD) took too much time from launching the tender to the signing of the contract and to the first deliveries.

Despite the proximity to the Russian-Ukrainian war, acquisition procedures have moved at a slow pace. For example, it took almost three years between the launch of the acquisition process in 2023 ([Hotnews.ro](https://hotnews.ro), November 17, 2023) and actual signing of the contract for the SHORAD/VSHORAD ([MApN](https://mapn.ro), June 25, 2026). The tender process lasted almost two years before a winner was decided ([MApN](https://mapn.ro), July 21, 2025). Unfortunately, the Russian-Ukrainian war did not lead to an acceleration of Romania's defense procurement processes in key areas and consequently has created vulnerabilities such as:

- Weapons systems ordered before or during the Russian-Ukrainian war risk being delivered obsolete, if they are not updated or upgraded, due to the accelerated pace of technological development driven by the conflict;
- Delays in deliveries caused by logistic chain issues affect readiness targets as well as risk receiving and already obsolete platform or weapon system.

Despite criticism over the costs of using F-16s to shoot down drones ([G4Media.ro](https://g4media.ro), July 27, 2026), the use of fighter aircraft demonstrates the willingness of Romania to fight and protects its airspace. The use of high-performance jets is not just a military solution to a military threat, but a political statement regarding the willingness to protect Romania's airspace. Besides the use of F-16 Romania has deployed a number of undisclosed Merops systems along the Danube near the Romanian-Ukrainian border to intercept Russians drones that may violate

its airspace ([MApN](#), June 24, 2026). Furthermore, an undisclosed number of ground-based air defense systems have been deployed in the same area ([TVRInfo](#), July 13, 2026). Romania has asked its NATO allies for assistance with Counter-UAS systems (C-UAS) until similar systems already ordered are delivered ([RRA](#), June 2, 2026). Spain has deployed three NH-90 helicopter to help intercept Russian drones that may venture into Romanian airspace at the Mihail Kogălniceanu (MK) air base, near Constanța ([Hotnews.ro](#), July 30, 2026). Nevertheless, detection remains a major issue when it comes to combating drones.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia's drone incursions are a form of kinetic hybrid warfare against the countries of the Eastern Flank in general, and against Romania in particular. Russia has weaponized drone warfare in a manner that allows both to strike Ukraine and affect the countries that support it at the same time, without crossing the threshold of overt military aggression. In Romania's case, its objectives are threefold: to discourage Romania from supporting Ukraine, to gather intelligence regarding its defenses and to generate distrust between Romanian authorities and Romanian citizens.

Romania's initial restraint against these incursions represented a calculated risk and a way to avoid to direct confrontation with Moscow. Moreover, at the time it was adopted it probably reflected NATO consensus. As Russia's drone incursions became more numerous and brazen this approach was changed with one of shooting down the drones that violate Romanian airspace. By shooting down drones Romania demonstrates its determination to combat Russian aggressive behavior and maintains deterrence in its sector of the Eastern Flank.

Strict rules of engagement (ROE) are useful in protecting civilian lives and private property however strict enforcement of these rules may hinder deterrence in the long run. Russia's evolving drone technology as well as gaps in Romanian air defense coverage and capabilities mean that the policy cannot always be effectively enforced. Some drones are detected but cannot be shot down while others are not detected at all. Early warning and detection remain a serious challenge for Romania's armed forces. The political and legal distinction between peace and war is no longer clear cut in the international system. Hybrid war has introduced a new paradigm which is neither war nor peace. It is a form of warfare, nevertheless. Romania's decision processes regarding foreign threats to national security need

to be adapted fast to the new paradigm shift. Decisionmakers need to be aware of this paradigm shift and adapt to it.

The large-scale use of one-way attack munitions by both Russia and Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian war represents a form of strategic bombing. A crude form of employment of strategic air power, but an effective one. This conclusion is derived from the fact that both countries launch deep strikes in each other's territory against military targets and civilian targets used for the war effort. Furthermore, Kremlin targets the morale of the Ukrainian society by attacking, destroying and damaging purely civilian targets (hospitals, schools, libraries, and churches). Historically, this type of strategic bombing has turned out to be counterproductive, in general reinforcing the target society will to resist. This was the case of the so-called German "Blitz" against London during the early part of World War II as well as the subsequent bombing campaign against UK territory (see the Baedeker Blitz), the Allied strategic bombing campaign against Germany and Japan during the same war (at least partially) and the US bombing of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

The intensification of Russian drone incursions is consistent with previous reports regarding the potential for escalation of Russia's hybrid war against NATO countries (United States Helsinki Commission, 2024; Ferris, 2026; IISS, 2026). Considering the Russian drone attack escalation against Ukrainian port infrastructure, ships going in and/or exiting Ukrainian ports and against Ukrainian energy grid and infrastructure, drone incursions against NATO members are likely to continue and intensify in the short term.

Diplomatic dialogue with Russia concerning its incursions against NATO countries in general and against Romania in particular, has not yielded positive results. Russia's position remains inflexible even when faced with diplomatic sanctions. This state of affairs does not affect Romania in particular, but other NATO member countries as well. The meeting between the Germany's foreign minister Johann Wadephul and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov during UNGA, regarding the Leipzig drone incidents and Russian hybrid campaign against Berlin, has not led to any positive outcome ([The Guardian](#), September 27, 2026; [Associated Press](#), September 27, 2026). The Kremlin continues to deny responsibility and blames the victims for making up the incidents or Ukraine, while carrying on with its hybrid warfare campaign. In the long run, this situation is untenable and dangerous.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Document and inform allies and likeminded countries about all the incidents involving Russian drones violating Romanian air spaces and/or territorial waters;
- Increase cooperation within NATO for combating drone incursions in the countries on the Eastern Flank facing the same issue: Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and Sweden;
- Russian drone incursions in Romanian airspace as well as in any other NATO member's airspace should lead to Article 4 consultations;
- Continue to raise the issue of the Russian drone incursions into Romanian airspace at the UN Security Council and General Assembly;
- Create an informal contact group within the EU made up of countries of the Eastern Flank and High North to disseminate information and raise awareness among member states regarding the threat of Russian drones;
- Call for strengthening the air surveillance and air defense capabilities of the Republic of Moldova by EU member states through the European Peace Facility. Emphasis should be placed on radars and other means of detection;
- Strengthen cooperation with Ukraine regarding combating UAVs, one way attack munitions, loitering munitions and air defense. The cooperation between Bucharest and Kyiv should be construed in such a way as it should not be interpreted as a case of Romanian co-belligerency. The proximity between the countries and Russian behavior demand that such cooperation. Particular areas where this cooperation should manifest itself are exchange of information regarding air threats, documentation of air space violation as well as attacks of civilian infrastructure, mutual support in international fora concerning Russian action, co-production of air defense assets that should not be limited to drone interceptors. The framework of cooperation between Bucharest and Kyiv is facilitated by the existing strategic partnership between two countries;
- Evaluate the possibility of downgrading bilateral diplomatic representation with the Russian Federation to that of *chargé d'affaires* considering the current state of relations. The relationship has reached a low ebb and not because of Romania's actions. A step in that direction has already been taken by the withdrawal for consultations of the Romanian ambassador to Moscow;

- Document drone incursions in Romanian air space and inform countries of the Global South about these incidents, pointing out the nature of the threat and Russian escalation;
- Generate a strategic communications campaign for the Romanian public to inform it about Russia's drone campaign against Ukraine and NATO and its objectives. Publicize interceptions, cooperation with NATO allies and explain as much as possible about the rules of engagement;
- Correct attribution of drone incursions against Romanian air space and territory is key to combating disinformation and influence campaigns;
- Improve drone detection capabilities of the Romanian armed forces by acquiring and/or developing acoustic detection systems, passive radars as well as infrared sensors;
- Increase radar coverage by acquiring airborne early warning and control aircraft (AWACS). Romania is already part of NATO AWACS initiative to acquire SAAB GlobalEye AWACS aircraft, but Bucharest should acquire two or three aircraft separately in order to increase its air defense capabilities and close existing coverage gaps. The extra cost of this procurement is justified by the potential military and political positive outcomes: shows determination regarding defense and deterrence, a marked increase in air defense capabilities and ISR, as well as Romania's commitment to be a security provider in the Black Sea and on the Eastern Flank;
- Initiate a dialogue with the countries where Romania has placed defense orders, especially in the case of air defense assets in order to accelerate deliveries;
- Evaluate the threats and risks of air attacks (drones, one way attack munitions, ballistic missile and cruise missiles) to Romanian critical infrastructure, in particular to energy production facilities and the electrical grid;
- Acquire and deploy electronic countermeasures in order to bring down UAVs and/or loitering munitions that violate Romanian air space with as little risk as possible for the civilian population and civilian infrastructure;
- Acquire, produce and deploy drone interceptors in order to make interception cost effective both in military and financial terms;
- Change and adapt the rules of engagement so that UAVs, one way attack munitions and loitering munitions that violate Romanian air space are intercepted and destroyed earlier.

Consideration should be given of intercepting drones that threaten Romanian air space, above international waters, over the Black Sea;

- Discuss the possibility of using EU funds for building and modernizing Romanian civil defense shelters;
- Protect offshore infrastructure against aerial drone attacks;
- Invest in developing new technologies of destroying UAVs, one way attack munitions and loitering munitions, such as laser-based air defense systems.

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Author: George Vișan is an expert at the Romanian Diplomatic Institute – Department of Expert Analysis.

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The Romanian Diplomatic Institute - IDR
<https://www.idr.ro/en/> | secretariat@idr.ro
Primăverii 17, Sector 1, Bucharest, 011972