OPEN NUCLEAR NETWORK

Nuclear Risks Matter

MONITORING REPORT

Russia and NATO's Eastern Flank

Assessing the Summer 2026 Warning Wave

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Executive Summary

BOTTOM LINE: ONN assesses, with moderate confidence, that the risk of Russian grey-zone activity against NATO's eastern flank is elevated, but that publicly available evidence does not establish an imminent, large-scale Russian attack on a NATO member - consistent with ONN's own public forecasting exercise, where forecasters assessed such an event "unlikely" by 31 August 2026. ONN judges this elevated risk to reflect a gradual ratcheting-up of hybrid confrontation since the start of the war in Ukraine, rather than a specific attack plan.

MOST CREDIBLE NEAR-TERM RISK: A limited, deniable operation - a drone or missile incident, sabotage, or electronic interference, or, less likely, a staged border event - designed to test decision-making and impose costs below the threshold of a collective response.

NOT SUPPORTED BY CURRENT EVIDENCE: A confirmed decision by Moscow to target NATO territory with captured drones, or an imminent large-scale conventional attack.

CONFIDENCE & BASIS: Moderate confidence, combining ONN's public forecasting exercise, open-source reporting, and anonymised field interviews conducted in Warsaw in late July 2026.

Key Findings

- Since June 2026, Polish, Baltic, and Western officials have issued a coordinated wave of public warnings that Russia is preparing a "grey zone" provocation against NATO's eastern flank. This comes from multiple independent, on-record statements by officials in four countries.[1] [2] [3] [4]
- The most consistently cited scenario involves Russia relaunching captured Ukrainian drones under a false flag. This is assessed as plausible and technically demonstrated – Russia's capacity to repair and repurpose

[1] Lachter, Efrat. "Russia Preparing Hybrid Attacks on NATO's Eastern Flank, Intelligence Warns." Fox News, June 22, 2026. https://www.foxnews.com/world/russia-preparing-hybrid-attacks-natos-eastern-flank-intelligence-warns.

[2] Dapkus, Liudas, and Claudia Ciobanu | AP. "Baltics and Poland Warn Russia Could Launch Limited Military or Hybrid Provocation Against NATO." *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2026. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/07/15/lithuania-baltics-poland-russia-attack-infrastructure-nato/eb470b8a-8050-11f1-8a16-393bd03340b0_story.html.

[3] Höller, Linus. "Russia May Use Captured Ukrainian Drones Against Poland and Baltics, Warsaw Warns." *Defense News*, July 21, 2026. https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/07/21/russia-may-use-captured-ukrainian-drones-against-poland-and-baltics-warsaw-warns/

[4] LRT.lt, and BNS. "Lithuanian Intelligence Says Russia May Use Ukrainian Drones to Attack Baltic Targets." *lrt.lt*, August 6, 2026. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/3013086/lithuanian-intelligence-says-russia-may-use-ukrainian-drones-to-attack-baltic-targets.

captured drones is confirmed by both Russia and Ukraine – but not confirmed to be aimed at NATO territory specifically.[5] [6]

- There is a split among the analytic community on whether the underlying intelligence reflects a specific, imminent plan or a broader elevated threat picture read into more general warnings.
- Publicising the warning carries a domestic political logic independent of its intelligence value, sources ONN interviewed said.
- Poland has adopted a visibly more assertive defensive posture, including forward troop deployments and a new multi-brigade border-protection formation.
- A missile impact near Lublin during the monitoring period illustrates how quickly ambient uncertainty can escalate perceived risk, even where attribution remains unclear.
- A single interlocutor assessed that Russia faces a narrowing strategic window, closing around 2027-2028, to act against Poland's eastern flank before European rearmament becomes effective. This is a **single-source, lower-confidence hypothesis**, not a consensus view, though it echoes – without matching in specificity – publicly reported Western timelines running from 2027 to 2030.[7] [8]
- Knowledgeable interviewees were keen to highlight other risks they deemed more pressing for Poland at the time, first and foremost Russia's information warfare campaign in the country's social networks and media space.

Assessment of Likely Threat Vectors

Threat vector	Assessment	Why it matters
Drone or missile incident with ambiguous provenance	A limited incident – intentional, manipulated, or accidental – is a plausible near-term risk. A recovered Ukrainian-origin drone could increase initial attribution ambiguity, though technical forensics would still be central.	Ambiguity may delay collective decision-making and create space for competing narratives.

[5] Shumlianskyi, Dmytro. "Russia Likely Begins Using Captured Ukrainian Drones for Provocations, as Poland Warned." Militarnyi, August 2, 2026. https://militarnyi.com/en/news/russia-likely-begins-using-captured-ukrainian-drones-for-provocations-as-poland-warned/.

[6] РИА Новости. "Российские бойцы атакуют Всу восстановленными трофейными дронами Vampire." *Риа Новости*, August 8, 2026. https://ria.ru/20260808/masterskaja-2109701006.html.

[7] Seligman, Laura, and Yoko Kubota. "U.S. Intel Finds Putin Could Test NATO's Resolve with Limited Incursion." WSJ, August 6, 2026. https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/u-s-intel-finds-putin-could-test-natos-resolve-with-limited-incursion-e3b02e2c.

[8] Saradzhyan, Simon. "Would Russia Attack NATO And, If So, When?" The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, June 5, 2025. https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/would-russia-attack-nato-and-if-so-when.

Sabotage, cyber activity, satellite navigation interference, or information operations	These remain the most persistent and most likely forms of pressure because they can be calibrated, denied, and repeated.	Their cumulative effect can erode confidence, normalise a higher level of confrontation, and compound the risk of accidents and miscalculation.
Limited border incident or engineered migration pressure	Government-assisted irregular migration as a tool of destabilisation and pressure, or a limited incursion by regular troops, was assessed as plausible form of coercive signalling or distraction, though available evidence does not indicate a specific imminent incursion plan.	A small event can produce disproportionate political and military pressure. A limited incursion may put to test NATO cohesion and effectiveness.
Deliberate, large-scale conventional attack	Available public information does not support an assessment of imminent large-scale invasion.	A major attack would be far less deniable and would carry a substantially higher risk of collective NATO response.

Background

Origins of This Inquiry

ONN's monitoring team first identified this case as an unusually coordinated wave of high-level warnings from Polish, Latvian, and Lithuanian officials beginning in June 2026, each independently signalling concern about a possible Russian provocation against NATO's eastern flank. Because a confirmed attack on NATO territory could sharply escalate tensions in the Euro-Atlantic space and elevate nuclear risk, ONN's mandate for nuclear-risk reduction led it to investigate further - first through a public forecasting exercise, then through direct field engagement.

The Public Forecast

ONN put the question to its forecasting community: Would Russia carry out a kinetic attack or clear military provocation against NATO territory before 31 August 2026? The group's aggregate assessment was: **very unlikely/unlikely.**

Most forecasters who judged the scenario unlikely pointed to Russia's continued military and political focus on Ukraine, reasoning that opening a new front against NATO would risk a disproportionate collective response at a moment when Moscow's resources are already stretched. Several also argued that if Russia were to test NATO's resolve directly, a later window – after the war in Ukraine settles or Russian rearmament advances further - was seen as more strategically likely than the summer of 2026.

A minority of forecasters set materially higher odds, citing Russia's demonstrated willingness to test NATO boundaries – including the September 2025 drone incursion into Polish airspace – alongside an established pattern of sabotage and hybrid pressure on critical infrastructure that these forecasters expected to continue.

A caveat recurred across both camps: several forecasters noted that even if Russia acted, confidently attributing an incident to Moscow within the forecasting window was itself uncertain – meaning the practical bar for a "Yes" resolution was, in effect, higher than the underlying risk of an incident occurring. *This distinction between the probability of an event and the probability of its attribution recurs throughout the rest of this report.*

The Warsaw Field Mission

To move beyond aggregated probability estimates and better understand what was driving the warnings themselves, ONN organised a special monitoring mission to Warsaw, Poland, in late July 2026. There, ONN spoke with journalists, policy-institute analysts, and other informed contacts to gather on-the-ground perspectives on the credibility of the warnings and their likely drivers. The remainder of this report presents the findings of that mission, read alongside the public warnings and forecast context above.

Timeline of Public Warnings

Since June 2026, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Western intelligence and political officials have publicly warned, with increasing specificity, that Russia is preparing some form of provocation against NATO's eastern flank – most consistently described as involving captured Ukrainian drones relaunched under a false flag, alongside other scenarios ranging from infrastructure strikes to a limited cross-border incursion.

The episode built cumulatively rather than emerging from one report. Latvian intelligence first warned of hybrid provocations in late June while explicitly ruling out an imminent full invasion.[9] By early July, U.S. intelligence reportedly warned Russia was planning an armed "provocation" on Polish soil to test NATO's resolve, prompting Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to describe the coming months as "critical."[10] Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski warned in mid-July that Russia might use drones framed as Ukrainian,[11] and on 21 July, Poland's Defence Minister stated that Russia had captured a significant number of Ukrainian drones that could be relaunched against Poland, the Baltics, Finland, or Romania.[12]

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[9] Lachter, Efrat. "Russia Preparing Hybrid Attacks on NATO's Eastern Flank, Intelligence Warns." Fox News, June 22, 2026. https://www.foxnews.com/world/russia-preparing-hybrid-attacks-natos-eastern-flank-intelligence-warns.

[10] Jurasz, Witold, James Rothwell, and Joe Barnes. "Russia Planning Attack on Poland to Test Nato Resolve, US Warns." *The Telegraph*, July 3, 2026. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2026/07/03/russia-planning-attack-on-poland-test-nato-resolve-us-warns/.

[11] Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute. *Conversation with Radosław Sikorski, Deputy Prime Minister of Poland*. 2026. https://www.youtube.com/live/kKHWLhN1IHY.

[12] Höller, Linus. "Russia May Use Captured Ukrainian Drones Against Poland and Baltics, Warsaw Warns." *Defense News*, July 21, 2026. https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/07/21/russia-may-use-captured-ukrainian-drones-against-poland-and-baltics-warsaw-warns/

A series of incidents during this period coincided with the warnings and added to the sense of urgency. These included Finland closing its airspace near the Russian border over stray-drone risk on 28 July.[13] On 30 July, a Russian Kh-101 cruise missile crashed near Lublin, Poland, prompting Warsaw to summon the Russian ambassador; Tusk stated at the time that there were "no grounds to believe Poland was the intended target."[14] [15] On 4 August, an explosive-laden drone was found near a Ukrainian cargo aircraft at a German airport, triggering a counter-terrorism investigation.[16]

By early August, concerns over Russian intentions appeared to have been heightened, with U.S. intelligence reported via the Wall Street Journal that Russia could test NATO's resolve with a limited attack within a window extending to 2029.[17]

Throughout, the Kremlin has dismissed the warnings as fearmongering intended to justify NATO military build-up,[18] while some Western institutional voices have pushed back on the warnings' urgency without disputing the underlying elevated threat environment.

The Captured-Drone Threat Profile

The captured-drone claim did not originate from a single source. Latvian broadcasters raised the possibility as early as May while investigating a drone incident at an oil facility.[19] It became an official warning on 21 July when Poland's Defence Minister cited Polish intelligence. A similar but independent claim came from Ukraine: a Ukrainian outlet reported on 1 August that Russian forces were collecting, repairing, and preparing captured

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[13] Reuters. "Finland Closes Airspace, Restricts Maritime Traffic Near Russia over Drone Risk." *Defense News*, July 28, 2026. https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/07/28/finland-closes-airspace-restricts-maritime-traffic-near-russia-over-drone-risk/.

[14] Sonko, Alona. "The New Voice of Ukraine." The New Voice of Ukraine, July 31, 2026. https://english.nv.ua/nation/tusk-says-no-evidence-poland-was-intended-target-of-russian-missile-50628700.html.

[15] Polish MFA. "Statement on Summoning the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the MFA - Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland - Gov.pl Website." Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, July 31, 2026. https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/statement-on-summoning-the-ambassador-of-the-russian-federation-to-the-mfa.

[16] Krupa, Jakub, and Deborah Cole. "Germany Investigates Drone Carrying 'Explosive Device' Near Ukrainian Plane at Busy Cargo Airport – as It Happened." The Guardian, August 5, 2026. https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2026/aug/05/europe-ukraine-russia-kyiv-zelenskyy-heatwave-austria-hungary-poland-czech-republic-latest-news-updates.

[17] Seligman, Laura, and Yoko Kubota. "U.S. Intel Finds Putin Could Test NATO's Resolve with Limited Incursion." WSJ, August 6, 2026. https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/u-s-intel-finds-putin-could-test-natos-resolve-with-limited-incursion-e3b02e2c.

[18] Reuters. "Kremlin Rejects Lithuanian Allegations of Planned Russian Attacks as 'Scare Stories.'" Reuters, July 15, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-rejects-lithuanian-allegations-planned-russian-attacks-scare-stories-2026-07-15/.

[19] LSM English. "Basic Facts so Far about Latest Drone Incidents in Latvia." *LSM*, May 7, 2026. https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defence/07.05.2026-basic-facts-so-far-about-latest-drone-incidents-in-latvia.a646047/.

drones for future provocations, based on footage analysis by a credible battlefield-technology adviser.[20] The Ukrainian information is meaningfully distinct from the Polish statement, since it derives from Ukrainian technical assessment of Russia's own drone-recovery practices rather than a warning about NATO, although the usual caveats and cautions apply when dealing with sources affiliated with warring parties. Lithuania's defence minister separately called the scenario "probably the most realistic" on 6 August, while adding there was "no direct threat" of an imminent attack.[21]

Separately, there is now solid evidence that Russia's pipeline for reuse of Ukrainian drones is real and operating at increasing scale – Russian sources claimed in early August to have repaired and repurposed more than 170 captured drones for reuse against Ukrainian forces.[22] **The capture-repair-relaunch chain is therefore demonstrated with high confidence; its specific application against NATO territory remains unconfirmed.**

Interlocutors interviewed for this assessment disagreed sharply on plausibility. One defence-sector journalist rejected the scenario on multiple technical grounds – limited range, unlikely overflight of Belarus given repeated Belarusian signalling against involvement, and an unresolved attribution problem, since no credible narrative would be likely to place responsibility on Ukraine itself. A regional security analyst reached a similar conclusion independently, judging the scenario logistically implausible. Two policy-institute analysts assessed the opposite: that a captured-drone false flag is plausible, most likely launched from Belarus, whose objections would likely be overridden given its military subordination to Moscow, or from occupied Ukrainian territory. A launch point in southwestern Belarus, near the Ukrainian border, was cited as an option that would maximise plausible deniability. **This split should be read as a genuine, unresolved technical disagreement among credible interlocutors rather than a case where one side is clearly better informed.**

Public reporting of existing instances of Russia repurposing captured Ukrainian drones has focused on shorter-range devices, primarily FPV drones, which appears to lend credibility to the questions some interlocutors raised about the range problem.

A separate scenario (a limited incursion as the result of a "navigational error" or a rescue mission for a downed helicopter, conducted by Russian or Belarusian troops) that was originally reported in media as a possible Russian provocation did not receive much uptake in personal conversations; one interlocutor dismissed this variant as not credible.

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[20] Shumlianskyi, Dmytro. "Russia Likely Begins Using Captured Ukrainian Drones for Provocations, as Poland Warned." Militarnyi, August 2, 2026. https://militarnyi.com/en/news/russia-likely-begins-using-captured-ukrainian-drones-for-provocations-as-poland-warned/.

[21] LRT.lt, and BNS. "Lithuanian Intelligence Says Russia May Use Ukrainian Drones to Attack Baltic Targets." *lrt.lt*, August 6, 2026. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/3013086/lithuanian-intelligence-says-russia-may-use-ukrainian-drones-to-attack-baltic-targets.

[22] РИА Новости. "Российские бойцы атакуют Всу восстановленными трофейными дронами Vampire." *Ria Новости*, August 8, 2026. https://ria.ru/20260808/masterskaja-2109701006.html.

Assessing the Credibility of the Warnings

During field interviews conducted in Warsaw in late July 2026, assessments of the underlying intelligence were split along professional lines more than along any single analytical divide. Two journalists interviewed were the most sceptical that the warnings reflect a specific, imminent threat. Policy-institute analysts and an academic commentator treated the intelligence as credible, differing mainly on how much weight to place on the specific scenarios publicly described and on the immediacy of the threat. **No interlocutor claimed to be privy to information suggesting an imminent, concrete action was underway.**

One policy-institute analyst noted a mismatch between the urgency of official language and the lack of visible response: no mobilisation, no change in alert status, and continuing normal summer activity patterns, though he cautioned that Poland's already-elevated baseline alert posture since 2022 could mask or pre-empt any incremental change. A regional security analyst offered a distinct alternative interpretation: that the intelligence itself could be a Russian-originated deception fed into Western channels to misdirect attention from actual force-posture developments – a single-source hypothesis not corroborated elsewhere but included here for completeness. A separate set of government-affiliated policy-institute analysts offered a middle position: **that the warnings likely reflect a genuine, significantly elevated overall threat picture, but that the specific scenarios circulated publicly are better read as illustrative worst cases than as indicators of a specific operational plan.**

Domestic Political Drivers

A recurring theory, raised by multiple interlocutors with differing professional and political backgrounds, was that publicising the warnings carries a distinct domestic political logic: it is politically safer for a government to warn and be wrong than to stay silent and later be blamed for failing to warn. This convergence across independent sources increases confidence that the dynamic is real rather than one source's speculation.

Two competing rationales were offered for why officials chose to publicise the warnings. One wire-service correspondent linked it to a domestic need to rally flagging public support for continued Ukraine assistance ahead of Poland's autumn 2027 elections. Another wire-service correspondent offered a different reading: the choice of a high-reach, syndicated domestic outlet for the initial leak, rapidly picked up internationally, suggested to them that the intended audience may have been international rather than purely domestic. The outlet in question (Onet) is Poland's largest online news portal, and its Springer ownership ties it to a major transnational media group that helps plausibly explain rapid international syndication independent of any deliberate targeting decision.

Polish-Ukrainian Tensions and Disinformation

Two policy-institute analysts separately suggested publicising the warning may also help distract from an ongoing Polish-Ukrainian political rift. Friction between Poland and Ukraine, at both governmental and societal levels, emerged as a significant independent theme particularly in 2026. Several interlocutors were critical of the Ukrainian government, citing disputes over historical remembrance and corruption concerns, and assessed that Polish public and political support for Ukraine is likely to become more conditional over time. At the same time, they separated the military dimension from the political one and remained supportive of Ukraine's struggle against Russia's invasion. Policy-institute analysts gave the most critical views, citing Ukrainian information campaigns perceived as critical of Poland and a recurring pattern of perceived Ukrainian dismissiveness when

Poland itself comes under drone or missile threat. Despite this friction, they assessed that Polish military support to Ukraine is likely to continue even as political and societal relations cool further, though Poland will likely act as a brake on Ukraine's EU accession process.

A second-order risk raised by policy-institute analysts is that Russian information-monitoring efforts may misread their own propaganda and influence campaigns within Polish online discourse as genuine pro-Russian sentiment, potentially distorting Moscow's own threat perception – drawing a parallel to apparent misjudgements ahead of the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Interlocutors also diverged on whether an attack on Poland would be strategically rational for Moscow: two were sceptical, reasoning it would likely galvanise Polish opinion against Russia; two others judged Russian aims centred on discrediting NATO's Article 5 guarantee separate from Polish domestic sentiment.

Military Posture Developments

Poland has shifted toward a more assertive defensive posture. Publicly available reporting confirms the establishment, from 1 July 2026, of a new multi-brigade Border Protection Component under Poland's East Shield programme, consolidating four territorial-defence brigades along the eastern and north-eastern frontier and tasked with reconnaissance, infrastructure protection, and rapid response, eventually comprising more than 15,000 personnel.[23] This has been accompanied by a large-scale HIMARS acquisition programme that will bring Poland's holdings to roughly 500 launchers, and the reported forward deployment of strike-capable forces toward NATO's eastern flank. Poland is additionally the recipient of up to 288 K239 Chunmoo multiple rocket launcher systems.[24] This build-up matters for the overall assessment: it means the region already carries a higher concentration of forces and hardware than at any point since the end of the Cold War, so even a limited or ambiguous incident lands in a more combustible environment than it would have a few years ago.

One Polish interlocutor, speaking on the basis of professional access not independently verifiable in open sources, described a further, previously unpublicised shift toward offensive cyber operations and deepened intelligence-sharing with Ukraine. This claim rests solely on that interlocutor's account and has no independent public corroboration; it is presented here as a single-source claim, not a confirmed fact.

Separately, one interlocutor flagged that illegal migrant crossings on the eastern border with Belarus of primarily Middle Eastern asylum seekers, facilitated by Belarusian and Russian authorities, which had declined earlier in the year, have begun rising again, a pattern that this person noted also preceded the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Around the same time, reports of tunnels detected beneath the Belarus-NATO border in Poland and Lithuania increased notably.

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[23] TVP World. "'Real and Tangible': Poland Creates Border Defense Component on Eastern Frontier." *Telewizja Polska S.A*, July 15, 2026. https://tvpworld.com/94355641/poland-launches-new-eastern-border-defense-force-for-natos-eastern-flank.

[24] Lee, Joyce. "South Korea's Hanwha to Supply More Rocket Launchers to Poland for $1.64 Bln." *Reuters*, April 25, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/skoreas-hanwha-aerospace-deal-supply-more-rocket-launchers-poland-2024-04-25/.

The Lublin-Area Missile Incident

A missile impact occurred near Lublin, Poland, on 30 July and was widely discussed as a live illustration of the ambient uncertainty affecting the broader threat picture. It was generally assessed, including by policy-institute analysts, that this incident was **not** what the publicised warnings from previous weeks had specifically anticipated.

One government-affiliated policy-institute assessment put the probability of an accidental cause (a technical malfunction) at roughly even against the possibility of a deliberate attack, citing the missile type's estimated 8-12% defect rate[25] as support for the accident hypothesis. This stood against countervailing indicators, including other Russian missiles reportedly transiting near the border around the same time and the incident's timing, just a few hours after a Ukrainian-Polish leader meeting held nearby the subsequent impact site. While the dimensions of the crater and distribution of debris suggested the high-explosive warhead had detonated, whether the missile was misdirected by fault or electronic interference, or struck the open field as a pre-planned target remained unclear. The official investigation determined the missile was a Russian Kh-101 produced near Moscow in 2026, but there is no final official conclusion on the intent at the time of writing.[26]

Probability of an Event vs. Probability of Attribution

A distinction largely missing from public commentary on this warning wave, but one this monitoring supports throughout, is between two separate questions that are often conflated: how likely Russia is to conduct some form of operation against NATO territory, and how likely that operation would be publicly and confidently attributed to Russia within any useful timeframe.

These are not the same bar, and the gap between them is where the "grey zone" concept does its work. A covert or ambiguous incident – a drone that may or may not have been deliberately launched, a missile that may have malfunctioned or been redirected – can occur without ever clearing the second bar, regardless of what actually happened. The Lublin incident illustrates this directly: even with a technical assessment available and confirming the origin of the missile, intent remains contested weeks later. Scenarios built around plausible deniability, such as the captured-drone false flag, are specifically designed to keep an operation below the attribution threshold even if it registers as an unusual and dangerous event. This distinction is not an argument

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[25] Public figures on Russian cruise missile failure rates vary widely. A U.S. estimate from early 2022 ascribed a rate as high as 60%, but used a broad set of criteria for what counted as a failure (Stewart, Phil. "Exclusive: U.S. Assesses up to 60% Failure Rate for Some Russian Missiles, Officials Say." Reuters, March 25, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/exclusive-us-assesses-up-60-failure-rate-some-russian-missiles-officials-say-2022-03-24/.).
RUSI, citing field interviews with Ukrainian sources on the ground, has pushed back against this narrative, saying that the missiles were generally functional but were often intercepted by Ukrainian air defenses, giving the impression of a high fail rate (Reynolds, Jack Watling, Nick. "Ukraine at War: Paving the Road from Survival to Victory." Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studie, July 4, 2022.).
The 8-12% failure rate was attributed to the interlocutor's organization's own research.

[26] Kamińska, Maria. "NATO Confirms Airspace Violation in Poland Was Russian Missile." *Telewizja Polska S.A.*, July 30, 2026. https://tvpworld.com/94599212/nato-confirms-airspace-violation-in-poland-was-russian-missile.

for inaction. It is a planning requirement: attribution capacity, evidence-sharing arrangements, and pre-agreed response options are likely to matter more in the first 24–72 hours than public rhetorical escalation.

Consequence Analysis: What Happens After an Incident

Should a captured-drone scenario or similar provocation occur, the immediate effect is likely to be evidentiary and procedural rather than military: air-defence and forensic units would need to determine drone provenance. The most probable near-term legal step, based on Poland's September 2025 precedent following the large incursion of drones into its airspace, is an Article 4 consultation request. This would be a high formal bar to clear and opens NATO debate, but does not mean an automatic military obligation. Article 5 carries a substantially higher threshold, requiring the affected state to affirmatively request it and demonstrate the incident constituted an "armed attack."

Escalation risk rises sharply with scale, casualties, and infrastructure impact, and with repetition: a single ambiguous incident is more likely to be absorbed into an existing pattern of stray drones and jamming-related incidents than treated as a discrete provocation, but a second or third incident within a short window would erode that framing and strengthen the case that a pattern rather than coincidence is underway, at which point accumulated weight, not any single incident's severity in isolation, becomes the trigger for a harder response. **Attribution ambiguity itself functions as an escalation suppressant**, since establishing confident attribution takes time, naturally slowing any escalatory response and serving Moscow's likely aim of remaining below the Article 5 threshold.

Several decisions taken in short- to medium-term response would be difficult to reverse regardless of how the underlying incident is ultimately resolved (whether by attribution, diplomacy, military or any other means): legal authorisations streamlining forces' kill chains to shoot down intruders, any new permanent NATO troop-presence, and, most significantly, any Polish move toward retaliatory strikes on drone-launch or other infrastructure, which would transform a NATO-Russia grey-zone standoff into a bilateral escalation with immediate Article 5 implications for the alliance as a whole.

Recent developments

Since the drafting of this report, several new developments have occurred that don't contradict the findings presented here but should be included for completeness.

On 17 August, Polish Deputy Defence Minister Cezary Tomczyk told Polsat News that Warsaw no longer treats a direct confrontation with Russia as an "unthinkable scenario" and is preparing accordingly, citing reports that Russia has built at least ten new or upgraded drone facilities near its borders with Belarus and Ukraine – including sites that could eventually bring Poland and Warsaw within range of Moscow's longer-range attack drones.[27] Tomczyk said Poland now evaluates threats as "probable" or "improbable" rather than "realistic" or "unrealistic," and that a large-scale Kremlin provocation "could just as well happen within a few

[27] News, Polsat. "Polsat News." *Polsat News*, August 17, 2026. https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2026-08-17/szykujemy-sie-wiceminister-o-przygotowaniach-na-wypadek-wojny/.

months." He also cited NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. Alexus Grynkewich's assessment that Russia could rebuild sufficient military capacity by 2027 to pose a substantially larger threat to Europe.

Separately, CIA Director John Ratcliffe made an unannounced visit to Moscow on 25 August, which multiple outlets reported was intended primarily to warn Russian officials against escalatory action toward NATO's Baltic members.[28] Despite the high-level nature of the visit, Estonian and Latvian officials publicly stated on 27 August that their own threat assessments remain unchanged: Estonia's foreign minister said the country "must remain vigilant" but that nothing has shifted, while Latvia's prime minister said there was "currently no reason for concern" and that readiness should not be confused with an immediate threat.[29]

Both developments reinforce this report's central distinction between an elevated, persistent hybrid-threat environment and the absence of convincing public evidence for an imminent, large-scale attack in the near future.

Method and Sourcing Note

This public brief integrates open-source reporting, an ONN public forecasting exercise, and anonymised, non-attributable field engagement conducted by ONN in Warsaw in late July 2026. Descriptions of interlocutor views have been generalised by functional category; no institutional affiliations, identifying biographical details, direct quotations from confidential interlocutors, or distinctive anecdotes are included. Assessments resting on a single interlocutor's account are explicitly marked as such throughout, rather than left to sit unmarked in the narrative. Where a claim can be independently verified against public reporting – including claims originally raised by an interlocutor – a citation to that open-source material is provided below. The underlying classified or non-public intelligence referenced by various governments in their own warnings is not itself public and cannot be independently verified by ONN; where our assessment relies on such second-hand reporting of government intelligence, this is noted in the text.

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[28] Liptak, Kevin, and Zachary Cohen. "CIA Chief Was in Moscow to Warn Russia Against Attacking NATO and Encourage Cutting Off Iran." *CNN*, August 27, 2026. https://edition.cnn.com/2026/08/27/politics/john-ratcliffe-cia-moscow-visit.

[29] Powers, Chris. "Baltics Assessment of Russia Threat 'Unchanged' After CIA Director"s Moscow Visit." *The Kyiv Independent*, August 27, 2026. https://kyivindependent.com/baltics-assessment-of-russia-threat-unchanged-after-cia-directors-moscow-visit/.