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Russia's Hybrid Invasion of Europe



We're witnessing growing alarm over a potential Russian invasion of NATO countries. In June, Germany's Chief of Defence, General Carsten Breuer, **warned** that Russia could strike within the next four years. "We have to be ready by 2029," he said.

France's military chief, General Thierry Burkhard, likewise **cautioned** that Russia will become a "real threat" within five years. "We have to be prepared for a Russian attack on NATO. Estonia has the highest risk," **said** Estonia's Minister of Defence recently.

Poland, too, has been reassessing its defence posture: as early as March, officials **considered** reinstating compulsory military service in response to mounting threats from Russia and Belarus.

Recent news added more concerns, especially those in Eastern Europe and bordering Russia. Russian drones have **landed** in both Romania and Poland, and in Estonia, three Russian MiG-31 fighter jets **entered** the country's airspace over the Gulf of Finland for 12 minutes without permission.

Shortly afterward, Russian aircraft breached Poland's security zone, and on Sunday two German Eurofighters were scrambled to intercept a Russian Il-20M reconnaissance plane over the Baltic Sea.

Czech President Petr Pavel **warned** Russia that repeated violations of NATO airspace could lead to Russian planes being shot down. He called the incursions "highly irresponsible" and said NATO must respond firmly, even militarily, if Russia crosses the line.

Those who seek peace prepare for war

However, given Russia's exhaustion from its war of attrition in Ukraine—economically, in human capital, and militarily—an invasion into NATO seems highly unrealistic for now.

First, where to get new troops and equipment?

Secondly, Moscow believes it is winning the war in Ukraine; diverting resources to other fronts would spell defeat across the board.

And last but not least—fighting poor Ukraine that had its nuclear arsenal taken by Russia and had a long history of connections with Russia is one thing; fighting the whole of NATO power with much more developed technologies and nuclear weapons is likely suicidal for Vladimir Putin.

If Putin does not have enough missiles and drones to conquer the whole Ukraine (the largest country fully located in Europe)—how is he supposed to conquer the several times bigger European NATO?

Hacking elections might be cheaper (and time-saving) than preparing for a large-scale war with almost zero chances to win

Refreshing military skills and coordination might be a good thing for Europe and NATO. Those who seek peace prepare for war. But while attention is fixed on military might, could Russia overtake the West on a different track?

Hacking elections might be cheaper (and time-saving) than preparing for a large-scale war with almost zero chances to win.

Last year, Russia **pumped** about €100 million (\$108 million) into an effort to thwart a crucial presidential election in Moldova through disinformation and destabilisation operations and payments to voters. Some voters cost Russia as much as €10.

Romanian intelligence reports **revealed** that foreign actors had manipulated social media platforms—particularly TikTok—to bolster the candidacy of Călin Georgescu, a vocal NATO critic who opposes Romania's support for Ukraine amid Russia's invasion. The assessments **pointed** to Russia as the likely orchestrator of the operation.

Putin is aggressively courting Western

partners. Beyond Hungary and Slovakia, Russia could gain friendly leadership in the Czech Republic. And Warsaw—while still hostile to Moscow—has also cooled on its once-unwavering support for Ukraine.

Why send tanks into Eastern Europe when hybrid warfare tools have been so effectively honed?

More than resistance

Cyber-attacks have long been one of the Kremlin's "strengths." While last week's **cyber-attack** on a provider of check-in and boarding systems—which disrupted operations and halted most European airports—has not been proven to be organised by Russia, it shows just how vulnerable the vast systems that millions of civilians rely on can be.

In the past, it has been **proven** that Moscow was behind cyber-attacks against Polish critical infrastructure, with hospitals and municipal water systems among the targets, pushing Warsaw to raise its cybersecurity budget to a record €1 billion this year.

Beyond Poland, earlier examples **include** the massive cyber-attack on Estonia in 2007, as well as operations against **Georgia**, **Azerbaijan**, and, of course, **Ukraine**—both during the 2014 protests and amid Russia's first military incursion.

Russia exploits, deepens, and manipulates problems with its disinformation and intrusion campaigns

Now, hear me out: Russia does not create the problems with its disinformation and intrusion campaigns — it exploits, deepens, and manipulates them. Is its propaganda more persuasive than dry facts?

Are its favoured candidates more appealing? Are its hackers capable of paralysing systems and breaching even the most secure

networks?

No, all these approaches just exploit the weaknesses and vulnerabilities already existing in the societies and systems they target.

To counter this requires more than resistance. It demands acknowledgement, systemic change, new ways of thinking, and close cooperation both within countries and across borders. Yet such efforts must rest on a solid foundation of workable ideas and alternatives that people genuinely support.

From space projects to shadow financing

Economic "invasions" are nothing new for Russia either. Long before the internet and today's advanced technologies, Moscow used economic leverage as a traditional tool of influence.

While Russia's FDI in the West has declined—with its stock in the EU falling from about €255 billion in **2021** to €156.3 billion in **2024**—Moscow is still seeking avenues for economic influence as part of its hybrid warfare.



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Unfortunately, the Ukrainian economy cannot offer nearly as much as Russia can. While Kyiv is **working** to engage partners in drone production, boosting its strongest current expertise, Russia is offering joint projects in

space and Arctic **exploration**.

And rest assured, good old bribes will also play their part. Russia has repeatedly used money, perks, and shadow financing to buy influence inside the EU and legitimise its aggression against Ukraine.

Russia **funded** Marine Le Pen's party in France with a multimillion-euro loan after annexing Crimea and more recently **used** the "Voice of Europe" network to pay members of the European Parliament and other politicians in cash or cryptocurrency to spread pro-Russian propaganda.

Each day of the war in Ukraine **costs** Russia between \$500 million and \$1 billion. It is highly unlikely that Moscow can accumulate the resources needed for a direct military attack on the West, even within five or ten years.

However, Russia has far greater chances of shaping Western politics through hybrid warfare—supporting friendly leaders, deepening internal divisions, and reaping financial gains.

Its future "war" may not be fought with tanks but with influence, and it could become a real test of the very systems on which the West built its values and prosperous societies after World War II.