



The Challenge of Russian Hybrid Warfare: Between Physical Sabotage and Psychological Conquest

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Europe is facing a period of profound transformation in its continental security. The conflict in Ukraine, now approaching its fifth year, has shown that hostilities are not confined to traditional conventional battlefields, but extend into a complex and pervasive "hybrid war" directed against the countries of the European Union and NATO. International press analysis highlights a two-pronged approach to this offensive: on the one hand, pressure on physical and critical infrastructure; on the other, a sophisticated strategy of psychological and cognitive influence.

The material dimension: sabotage, drones, and critical infrastructure

As indicated by European intelligence assessments and reported by *El País*, Moscow is intensifying hostile operations on European soil. The Kremlin's objective is to test the West's response capabilities and undermine political and logistical support for Kyiv.

Operational methods of the physical threat:

- **Attacks on infrastructure and sabotage:** Among the most serious incidents was the discovery of explosive-laden drones at Leipzig Airport in Germany, attributed to a coordinated operation. Drone incursions, arson attacks and aggressive naval maneuvers (such as the firing of signal flares from a Russian frigate at a Danish helicopter) demonstrate a progressive and dangerous erosion of the line between hybrid attack and military provocation.
- **Assassination and espionage campaigns:** Intelligence agencies (particularly the GRU) have expanded the range of targets on European soil. In addition to defectors (such as former pilot Maxim Kuzminov, killed in Spain in 2024), operations now also target pro-Ukrainian activists and political dissidents (such as the plots foiled in Lithuania against Ruslan Gabbasov and Valdas Bartkevicius).
- **Logistical and cyber vulnerabilities:** The modern threat seeks to paralyze a state's daily life and operations without the immediate use of tanks or missiles, but rather through disruptions to water and energy supplies, cyberattacks, and the prolonged shutdown of transport networks or airports.

The cognitive dimension: “symbolic management” and the psychological front

While the material aspect is the most visible manifestation, Carlo Pelanda's analysis in *La Verità* emphasizes that the strategic center of hybrid warfare lies in winning public opinion and exerting political influence.

The strategy of psychological impact:

- **Symbolic management and influence:** Drawing on techniques refined since the 1960s by the former KGB (such as the manipulation of peace movements during the Vietnam War), Moscow aims to build influential minorities capable of shaping the decisions of majorities. By exploiting the natural aversion to war among democratic and "demilitarized" societies, Russia's actions aim to instill fear of a military escalation in order to promote political currents that advocate surrender or disengagement.

- **The deterrence dilemma:** While Moscow maintains a controlled level of threat (the "minimum necessary") to fuel fear and push demilitarizing positions, NATO and European governments tend to emphasize the gravity of the danger in order to raise public awareness of the importance of national defense and strategic resilience.
- **Influence targets in Europe:** The psychological influence campaign is focusing particular attention on countries considered structurally or politically more susceptible to penetration, such as Italy, while also monitoring the evolution of domestic debate in Germany.

Europe and NATO's response: toward a "Total Defense" architecture

In the face of the increase in hostile acts, EU institutions and individual member states are reorganizing their security architecture.

- **The European Union initiative:** The European Commission is working on a new security strategy that includes emergency protocols and common response frameworks for incidents below the threshold of armed attack. Among the proposals is the creation of a rapid consultation mechanism ("European Article 4") and civil preparedness plans to ensure the population is self-sufficient for at least 72 hours in the event of a crisis.
- **National prevention plans:**
 - **France and the Netherlands:** Special plans to protect critical infrastructure and the defense industry from drones and cyberattacks, combined with increased civil preparedness.
 - **Northern Europe (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Lithuania):** Activation of "total defense" strategies, with substantial funding allocated to protect power grids, water supplies, telecommunications, healthcare, and evacuation systems.
 - **Spain and Belgium:** Legislative reforms to safeguard essential services and the launch of the first national defense plans since the end of the Cold War.
- **NATO's position:** Despite frequent violations and provocations, no ally has so far invoked formal consultations under Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Alliance recommends calm and preparedness, aware that future conflicts will increasingly begin with coordinated

attacks on technology, infrastructure, and social stability, rather than with the simple crossing of land borders by conventional troops.

Conclusions

The hybrid threat represents an asymmetric, multi-level challenge. To protect the stability of Western democracies, modernizing military capabilities and physically protecting vital infrastructure alone are not enough; it is essential to develop strong cognitive resilience capable of neutralizing psychological manipulation and disinformation.