



Ukrainian Special Forces in Russia: satellite images released of aircraft hit in Rostov. Moscow admits attack: 40% halt in crude oil processing at Yaroslavl.

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The night between September 16 and 17 was only the latest in a long series of Ukrainian operations conducted deep into Russian territory. But in terms of scale, coordination, and claimed results, it could represent one of the most significant episodes of Kyiv's long-range attack campaign.

Two strategic objectives, very different from each other and situated at great distance from one another, were struck on the same night: **Rostov-Central military airport, in Rostov-on-Don, and the large Slavneft-YANOS refinery in Yaroslavl**, in the heart of European Russia.

However, this is not the deepest Ukrainian raid ever conducted in Russian territory. Yaroslavl is located approximately **250 kilometers northeast of Moscow and about 700 kilometers from the international border with Ukraine**, but Kyiv has already demonstrated the ability to reach targets far more distant: already in 2024 an attack had reached Tatarstan, over 1,200 kilometers from Ukraine.

The truly interesting point from an operational perspective is **the ability to orchestrate simultaneously two actions against deeply different military and energy objectives and geographically separated both in the heart of Russia**.

Rostov: drones from the Special Operations Center “Alpha”

There is no doubt about the attribution of the first objective claimed by Kyiv. The **Security Service of Ukraine, SBU**, declared that long-range drones from the **Special Operations Center “Alpha”** attacked Rostov-Central military airport.

According to the official Ukrainian statement, the targets hit were **one An-12 transport aircraft, two An-26s and three helicopters**, while in the aircraft parking area a large fire developed accompanied by secondary explosions.

On **September 18 the OSINT group CyberBoroshno released two satellite images** of the airport after the attack. Analysis of the images attributes the visible destruction to at least **four aircraft: two Mi-8 helicopters, one An-12 and one An-26**. The images were relayed and analyzed by various OSINT sources.

An important piece of information comes from **Nightwatch**, an independent intelligence and OSINT analysis platform. In its Situation Report of September 18, Nightwatch assigns **“HIGH confidence” to the existence and contextual authenticity of the new satellite images**.



Yaroslavl: one of Russia's refining giants hit

Almost simultaneously, a target of a completely different nature was attacked: the **Slavneft-YANOS refinery in Yaroslavl**, one of the largest oil facilities in the Russian Federation, with a capacity of approximately **15 million tons of crude oil per year**.

In this case, the operation was even more complex. According to Kyiv, it involved, together with the SBU, the **Unmanned Systems Forces, Ukrainian military intelligence HUR/DIU and the Ukrainian Foreign Intelligence Service**, demonstrating a significant level of coordination between different structures.

The consequences of the attack found confirmations that go beyond Ukrainian statements. The **governor of Yaroslavl region, Mikhail Yevrayev**, [confirmed to the Russian agency Interfax damage to the refinery and a fire that developed at the facility after the attack.](#)

Reuters Agency also reported that the refinery has **suspended crude oil processing following damage to fundamental equipment in the primary AVT-3 unit**, which alone accounts for approximately 40% of the facility's capacity. Another unit, the AVT-4, was already under repair following a previous attack on August 28.

In this case, therefore, the operational result appears **much more solid from the perspective of independent verification**, thanks to the convergence between confirmation from Russian authorities and information from industrial sources.



The Slavneft-YANOS refinery in Yaroslavl on fire following the Ukrainian attack of September 17, 2026. The image is taken from a video distributed by the Telegram channel Exilenova+.

Distance and simultaneity, the leap forward of Kiev's special forces

After years of war, **the depth of the attack no longer represents by itself the surprising element**. The novelty is the progressive Ukrainian ability to combine intelligence, unmanned systems, target selection and coordination between different military and security structures.

Rostov and Yaroslavl represented two completely different operational problems.

In the first case the target was directly military: **strike aircraft on the ground within a protected airport**, achieving maximum possible damage on platforms difficult and expensive to replace.

In the second case the target belonged to Russian strategic depth: **temporarily reduce the capacity of a large refining complex**, with consequences on the production and availability

of petroleum products.

Putting pressure on two different systems within the same time span means forcing Russian defense to face a threat that no longer necessarily comes from a single direction and above all does not pursue a single category of targets.

The maturation of Ukrainian asymmetric warfare

This is probably the most important aspect of the operation.

Ukraine is acquiring growing **maturity in asymmetric operations and deep strikes**, compensating at least in part for Russian quantitative superiority through relatively economical systems, intelligence, technological adaptation and selection of high-value targets.

The war that began in 2022 enormously accelerated this process, but its foundations had been laid much earlier.

From **2015**, following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas, several Western countries launched programs aimed at increasing the capacity, training and interoperability of Ukrainian Armed Forces.

The United Kingdom played a particularly significant role through **Operation Orbital**, which between 2015 and 2022 trained over **22,000 Ukrainian military personnel**. After the large-scale invasion, the program was replaced by **Operation Interflex**, which by early 2026 had led to the training in the United Kingdom of over 62,000 Ukrainian military personnel with the contribution of several partner countries.

To this were added U.S., Canadian, and other NATO member programs, which in the years preceding the invasion contributed to the transformation of Ukrainian structures and procedures. An academic analysis published by Oxford University Press describes precisely this division of labor: the British more focused on tactical expertise, Canadians on company and battalion-level preparation, and Americans also on battalion and brigade staff.

The British role and the SAS and SBS issue

There are numerous reports and (Russian) accusations about the activity of British special forces in support of Ukrainian forces; in 2024 the Russian FSB explicitly accused the **Special**

Boat Service of having assisted Ukrainian units engaged in special operations, a claim on which the British Ministry of Defence did not provide public confirmation at that time.

It is also correct to emphasize **the central British role in training Ukraine since 2015.**

What can be observed is the result of over a decade of transformation: the experience accumulated over the years, Western assistance, the war fought daily since 2022, and above all Ukraine's enormous capacity to rapidly adapt tactics and technologies have produced a force very different from the one existing at the beginning of the conflict.

A growing problem for Moscow

The September 17 raid does not only demonstrate that Ukraine can still penetrate hundreds of kilometers deep into the Russian Federation with troops and drones. This had already been demonstrated many times.

It shows something more significant: **Kyiv appears increasingly capable of transforming deep strikes into a systematic campaign**, in which airports, refineries, depots, industrial infrastructure and other targets are subjected to continuous pressure.

And precisely as satellite imagery makes it possible to measure with increasing precision the effects of attacks, a characteristic that has now become central to Ukrainian strategy emerges: **not necessarily attempting to match Russia in quantity, but seeking to strike it where the cost of the attack is far lower than the damage produced.**

The night of September 17 should be read above all in this perspective. Not as the Ukrainian raid that reached the farthest, but as **a further leap in the capacity to coordinate operations in depth against different and distant objectives, transforming asymmetry from a necessity imposed by war into one of the main instruments of Ukrainian strategy.**