

Russia Strongly Escalates in the Black Sea: What Could Moscow's Next Move Be?

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Context



Russia has failed to make significant advances in Ukraine, sustaining heavy losses while achieving no meaningful success in the Donbas.¹ The most recent meeting between the U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, and the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, held on 23 July on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Manila, included the situation in Ukraine on the agenda but produced no change. The Russian side reiterated its position, "highlighting the inadmissibility of the continued supply of weapons to the Kyiv regime and the destabilising activities of European countries."²

Russia understands that the United States has no real leverage to pressure President Zelensky and its European allies into accepting the territorial concessions demanded by Moscow. As a result, the Kremlin's remaining option is to "persuade" Europe to scale back its military and economic support for Ukraine by creating incidents designed to create a heightened fear of war among European publics. By exploiting the specter of war as a tool of intimidation, Russia seeks to shape public opinion across Europe in a way that compels political leaders to become increasingly reluctant to continue supporting Ukraine. An important ally in this effort is represented by sovereignist and populist parties across the European Union, some of which directly or indirectly embrace Russia's narrative. Any political initiative advocating a reduction in support for Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression ultimately serves Moscow's strategic interests. Along NATO's Eastern Flank, Russia is seeking to exploit existing vulnerabilities, deepen internal divisions, and capitalize on public discontent driven by rising fuel prices.

Russia Escalates in Romania and the Black Sea



The Black Sea has been an intense battlefield for the past four years. What makes the current situation particularly significant is that, in addition to naval mines, electronic warfare, missile strikes, and aerial and naval drone attacks against port infrastructure, both belligerents are now extensively targeting commercial shipping in an effort to undermine each other's economies. While Ukraine has launched a large-scale campaign against Russia's "shadow fleet" operating in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea to reduce the financial resources generated by Russian oil exports, Moscow is seeking to severely disrupt Ukraine's grain exports, which constitute the country's most important source of revenue. In 2022, as a result of the Russian naval blockade, Ukraine's economy lost 6% of GDP.³ At the same time, Russia is escalating tensions and testing the reaction of Romania and NATO by attacking commercial vessels operating close to Romania's territorial waters and by conducting incursions with Geran-2 drones.

From the beginning of July, Russia attacked 31 vessels.⁴ Two of these were struck in Romania's contiguous zone on 21⁵ and 24⁶ July, at distances of 20 and 22 nautical miles from the Romanian coast, respectively. In the first incident, crew members reported that the vessel had been attacked by three aerial drones. In the second case, the attack is believed to have involved either a naval drone or a sea mine.⁷

On 24, 25, and 26 July, the Romanian Air Force shot down one Russian drone on each day after it had entered Romanian airspace without authorization. The

first drone was shot down at 11:02 a.m. by a Romanian F-16 fighter aircraft after flying approximately 200 kilometers inside Romanian territory.⁸ This marked the first time that a Russian drone had been shot down by Romania's air defence. Later that evening, Romanian officials announced that an analysis of the debris recovered on the ground confirmed that the unmanned aerial system was a Russian Geran-2 drone.⁹ On Saturday, 25 July, Romanian airspace was violated once again.¹⁰ This time, an F-16 fighter aircraft shot down the drone approximately 10 kilometres west of the village of Sfântu Gheorghe, in the Danube Delta, very close to where the Danube flows into the Black Sea. On Sunday, 26 July, another incident occurred when a drone was shot down over Romania's territorial waters in the Black Sea, approximately 12 kilometres northeast of the town and Romanian port of Sulina.¹¹ On Monday, 27 July, a Russian drone briefly

entered Romanian airspace over the Black Sea but was not intercepted by Romanian fighter aircraft.¹² The fact that, within six days, Russia attacked two vessels in Romania's contiguous zone while three Russian drones were shot down by Romanian F-16 fighter aircraft after entering Romanian airspace demonstrates a deliberate escalation by Russia rather than a series of accidental incidents.

Romanian authorities have stated that they will no longer tolerate future violations of Romania's airspace. General Gheorghiță Vlad, Chief of Defence declared that "Romanians should know one thing: whenever Romania's airspace is violated, the armed forces are already in place to defend it."¹³ Romanian Foreign Minister Oana Țoiu stated that "Romania is a sovereign state that does not negotiate its borders and does not tolerate illegal incursions into its airspace."¹⁴



This map represents:

1. Galați (May 29) - A drone carrying a military payload crashed at night into an apartment building in the city center, destroying one apartment and injuring two people.
2. Constanța (June 5) - An Ukrainian naval drone, lost due to signal jamming, self-destructed in the Port of Constanța. The area was evacuated as a precaution, with no casualties reported.
3. Gas Lisbon (July 21) - The Liberian-flagged LPG tanker was damaged by a drone or explosion 20 nautical miles offshore. The crew was urgently evacuated, and three sailors were injured.
4. Christiana B (July 24) - The cargo ship reported damage southeast of Sfântu Gheorghe, likely following an impact with a naval drone or a sea mine, and was directed to port for repairs.

5. Padina (July 24) - In a first-time event, a Romanian F-16 jet intercepted and shot down a Geran-2 drone illegally entering airspace, with debris landing in an unpopulated area of Buzău County.
6. Sfântu Gheorghe (July 25) - Another drone was detected on radar and shot down early in the morning by an F-16 fighter jet, its debris falling west of the town in the Delta.
7. Sulina (July 26) - A new Geran-2 drone targeted over three consecutive days was successfully intercepted and shot down by the Romanian Air Force over territorial waters in the Sulina-Chilia area.

Russia did not anticipate such a robust response from the Romanian Armed Forces. Before the first Russian drone was shot down on 24 July, there had been 30 recorded incursions by Russian drones into Romanian airspace. Until then, the Romanian Air Force and Allied aircraft deployed to Romania under NATO's Air Policing mission had generally tracked and monitored the drones without firing at them. This created a public perception of helplessness and growing dissatisfaction in Romania, despite the country's substantial investments in defence. The most serious incident occurred on 29 May, when a Russian Geran-2 drone struck a residential building in the city of Galați, injuring two Romanian citizens.¹⁵ The armed forces' failure to intercept the drone before impact triggered widespread public criticism.



Source: capture Youtube¹⁶

During the night of 5 June, a Ukrainian Sargan 3000 naval drone entered the Port of Constanța, most likely after being jammed and diverted by Russian electronic warfare.¹⁷ After detecting the drone at around 5:00 a.m., the Romanian authorities evacuated nearby vessels. Following a warning from the Ukrainian side¹⁸ that the drone was equipped with a self-destruct mechanism, the explosion did not cause significant damage.



Source: Facebook¹⁹



Source: amateur²⁰

These were not isolated incidents. Until the first Russian drone was shot down, Russian unmanned aerial systems had entered Romanian airspace without authorization on 30 occasions.²¹ In addition, Russian drone debris had been discovered almost 50 times²² near the Romanian-Ukrainian border, particularly in the Danube Delta.

In July, Romania was the target of a series of large-scale cyberattacks. The ransomware attacks targeting the National Agency for Cadastre and Land Registration (ANCPI) and the National Administration of Penitentiaries (ANP) highlight major systemic vulnerabilities in the resilience of Romania's public administration IT infrastructure. In the case of ANCPI, the compromise of its virtualization infrastructure temporarily disrupted²³ essential public services, although the central database remained unaffected. At the ANP, the attack disabled record-management and communication platforms.²⁴ In both cases, the incidents required the physical isolation of affected systems, the intervention of the Romanian National Cyber Security Directorate (DNSC), and the

involvement of the Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT). Hybrid attacks targeting Romania did not stop there. On 29 July, anonymous telephone calls reported the presence of a bomb in the passenger terminal at the Port of Constanța, disrupting some of the port's operations.²⁵ Romanian Minister of Defence Radu Miruță stated that the calls originated from two phone numbers registered in Poland and Ukraine, and that the message in Romanian had been generated using artificial intelligence. The following day, on 30 July, the Constanța Port Administration received another bomb threat claiming that an explosive device had been planted in the institution's headquarters located within the port.²⁶ Once again, some port operations were disrupted.

The frequency and increasing complexity of these incidents indicate that Russia is intensifying pressure in the Black Sea region in an effort to test both NATO's and Romania's response and to spread panic among Romanian citizens.

De facto blockade of Ukrainian ports



During the first two weeks of July, Russia carried out 23 attacks on Ukrainian seaports and 17 attacks on civilian vessels.²⁷ The Golden Leo vessel sank in the Gulf of Odesa on 26 July, one week after being struck by three Russian missiles while transporting Ukrainian corn. Ukraine's subsequent report to the UN²⁸ mentioned that 10 people were killed, including a Ukrainian maritime pilot, while Reuters' initial report²⁹ stated that nine crew members had been killed.

The immediate consequence was a sharp decline in vessel calls at the ports of the Greater Odesa region and the suspension of grain intake at numerous maritime terminals. The impact is particularly severe because, in recent months, approximately 90% of Ukraine's agricultural exports³⁰ have been shipped through the deep-water ports of Odesa, Chornomorsk, and Pivdennyi. The combined estimated capacity of the Danube, rail transport, and road transport is around 4 million tonnes per month, compared to the 6-7 million tonnes³¹ required to market the current harvest. If the blockade persists, Ukraine may require additional storage capacity for 10-12 million tonnes of grain.³² Persistent Russian attacks have led shipowners to begin avoiding the ports in the Odesa region. Since 22 July, no new vessels have entered these ports³³ to load agricultural products.

Although the Ukrainian government has not imposed an official ban, shipowners' commercial decisions, combined with the withdrawal or suspension of insurance coverage, have resulted in a de facto blockade of the maritime corridor. The ports continue to handle vessels that arrived before the escalation³⁴ and are still processing existing rail and road cargo deliveries. Prior to the escalation, the ports handled approximately 6 million tonnes of cargo per month; the available capacity has now declined to around 4 million tonnes. Four of the 13 major grain terminals³⁵ in the Odesa region have suspended procurement operations due to the security threats. Although transport costs have increased dramatically, it is no longer possible to maintain a steady flow of vessels. Freight rates for grain shipments from Ukrainian ports nearly doubled within one week, rising from approximately USD 24 per tonne to USD 47 per tonne.³⁶ These additional costs are being passed on to producers through lower purchase prices and the postponement of new contracts. At the Port of Chornomorsk, the purchase price for second-grade wheat fell from approximately UAH 10,500 per tonne on 14 July to UAH 8,950 per tonne on 22 July (235,9 USD / tonne to 201,08 USD / tonne). Port purchase prices³⁷ declined by approximately 12–15% within a single week, while at some grain elevators prices dropped to UAH 2,800–2,850 per tonne (USD 62.76–63.88 per tonne) in less than two weeks. Rapeseed prices also declined by UAH 4,000–5,500 per tonne (USD 89.65–123.27 per tonne).

Efforts are being made to maximize the use of the Danube as an alternative transport route. However, the river's low water levels, caused by prolonged drought, are severely limiting cargo volumes. Barges have lost approximately 30–60% of their loading capacity, with some operating at only one-third of their normal capacity. According to White Brokers, logistics facilities along the Constanța corridor are almost fully booked through November.³⁸ In the Cernavodă area, the available navigational draft is approximately 2 meters, causing barges to lose between 30% and 60% of their loading capacity, depending on their configuration. The Danube's discharge at Romania's entry point has fallen to around 1,700 m³/s, compared to the July average of 4,700 m³/s. Water levels recorded in Romania are the lowest since 1996.³⁹ For the first time since the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant began operations, Romania was forced to shut down both reactors due to an insufficient water supply required for their cooling and safe operation.⁴⁰

This entire economic and security landscape illustrates how difficult the situation has become in Ukraine's Black Sea and Danube ports, and highlights the major negative impact of Russia's constant attacks, which are now taking place day and night.



Danube ports, Source: Snazzy maps, New Strategy Center

How could Russia escalate further?



After Romania shot down three drones over three consecutive days, Russia stopped incursions into Romanian airspace. However, this is most likely a temporary pause while it prepares the next stage of escalation.

Russia is likely to test both the speed of the Romanian response and Romania's determination to defend its airspace by launching a coordinated wave of drones entering Romanian territory simultaneously, either through a single entry point or through multiple locations.

Particular attention should be paid to the proximity of the city of Galați to the Ukrainian border and to the nearby Ukrainian port of Reni. It is also important to note that, so far, the drones have been intercepted by Romanian F-16 fighter aircraft rather than by ground-based air defence systems. The Galați area presents particular challenges in terms of reaction time against Russian drones approaching from the Ukrainian border into Romanian airspace.

Another important factor is Russia's transition to the new generation of Geran-5 drones, equipped with jet engines and capable of speeds of approximately 650 km/h.⁴¹ This significantly reduces reaction time compared to the Geran-2, which typically flies at speeds of 150-180 km/h.⁴²

Russia may also attempt false flag operations, similar to those reportedly attempted near the Port of Constanța, by jamming Ukrainian drones or using Russian drones disguised as Ukrainian ones to attack port infrastructure or vessels in Romania's territorial waters or Exclusive Economic Zone, subsequently blaming Ukraine.

Russia has already demonstrated its ability to operate drones on the Danube. A relevant example occurred on 28 August 2025, when a Russian naval drone struck the Ukrainian vessel Simferopol. The attack took place about 25 km from the Danube mouths and just 4 km upstream from the Romanian village of Periprava, only 100 meters to our riverine borders with Ukraine.⁴³ The Sulina Channel is the most important commercial artery on the Danube, with navigation taking place both day and night, including by larger vessels capable of operating on the Black Sea. The channel played a critical role during 2022-2023, when Ukraine redirected much of its exports through the Danube, using its ports of Reni and Izmail together with the Romanian port infrastructure at Galați and Brăila, and transferring grain shipments to global markets through the Romanian ports of Constanța and Sulina.

One possible method by which Russia could disrupt navigation on the Danube would be through sabotage in the Sulina Channel. A maritime drone could attempt to enter the channel and strike a moving commercial vessel. The resulting explosion and the sinking of the vessel could obstruct the channel, effectively blocking commercial traffic. Such an incident would directly affect Romania's commercial interests as well as Ukraine's, particularly given that Ukraine's seaports remain severely constrained and the Danube, together with the Sulina Channel, constitutes one of the country's key alternative export routes.

Another form of escalation could be similar to what happened in Poland, where a Russian missile entered Polish airspace and exploded on the ground.⁴⁴

Until now, Ukrainian ports have primarily been targeted by drones rather than missiles. However, in the event of further escalation, Russia could also employ missile strikes.

The maritime domain remains particularly sensitive because NATO cannot maintain a significant naval presence in the Black Sea due to the restrictions imposed by the Montreux Convention. Turkey currently applies the Convention's provisions to all non-Black Sea states, preventing the entry of their warships into the region, not only those belonging to the belligerents.

Romania is currently developing critical infrastructure related to the Neptun Deep project, while its Exclusive Economic Zone is increasingly crowded with vessels supporting construction activities. Russia may seek to exploit Romania's limited ISR capabilities and constrained naval assets to conduct attacks within Romania's EEZ, targeting both the Neptun Deep project and commercial navigation in the western Black Sea.

This issue is particularly sensitive because the EEZ does not constitute territorial waters and is therefore not automatically covered by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. While attacks against offshore infrastructure or production platforms could potentially lead Romania to invoke even Article 5, attacks against commercial vessels would present far greater challenges in terms of attribution and legal responsibility. Even if Russia were widely assessed to be responsible, establishing attribution, traceability and sufficient evidence to trigger a collective NATO response could prove difficult.

It is also essential to understand that these hostile Russian actions are accompanied by a broad campaign of anti-Ukrainian narratives designed to exploit the public's natural fear of war. Russian drones are often falsely portrayed as Ukrainian drones, while Romania's interception of Russian drones is framed as an action that provokes Russia and will bring Romania closer to war. The objective of these narratives is to generate fear, panic and public pressure capable of constraining political decision-making, not only regarding continued support for Ukraine but also regarding a firmer and more decisive response to Russia's increasingly aggressive and provocative behaviour.

In the Black Sea, which has become an active theatre of conflict, Russia employs not only kinetic military operations but also a wide range of hybrid instruments intended to undermine public confidence in national institutions, NATO and the European Union, while simultaneously weakening support for Ukraine. For Russia, cognitive warfare is as important as kinetic warfare, and this strategy is already being actively pursued in both the Black Sea region and Romania.

Conclusions



Russia is attempting to impose a blockade on Ukraine's ports in order to deprive the country of a major source of budget revenue from grain exports. This will create serious economic difficulties for Ukrainian farmers, undermine the country's fiscal balance, and force Ukraine's allies to identify additional financial resources to compensate the losses caused by disruptions to Ukraine's grain exports.

Russia is escalating its actions in the Black Sea and along the Danube, placing increasing pressure not only on Ukraine, but also on Romania and, by extension, NATO. Violations of Romania's airspace, intensive electronic warfare that disrupts maritime communications while also possessing the capability to divert Ukrainian military drones, and attacks against commercial vessels in Romania's contiguous zone, close to its territorial waters, all increase the risk of dangerous incidents. Romania was forced to shoot down three Geran-2 drones that entered its airspace over the course of three consecutive days. The next likely step will be incursions by groups of drones designed to test the reaction speed of both NATO and Romania.

If these incidents continue and intensify, Romania will most likely no longer limit its response to diplomatic protests, the expulsion of a Russian diplomat, and the recall of its ambassador from Moscow for consultations, as it did following the most recent Russian drone incidents. Also, the Russian Ambassador to Bucharest, Vladimir Lipaev, was summoned to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 27 July⁴⁵, where he was presented with fragments of the drone that had been destroyed on Romanian territory, in Buzău County. Instead, Romania may be compelled, for the first time, to invoke Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty in order to trigger consultations within the North Atlantic Council and secure the deployment of additional capabilities from Allied states. Romania faces significant ISR capability gaps that limit its ability to accurately attribute and track Russian aerial and naval drones. Additional deterrence capabilities are also required to discourage Russia from continuing this increasingly aggressive behavior.

This issue is particularly important for Romania because its most significant energy project, the Neptun Deep offshore natural gas development in the Black Sea, is currently in the critical infrastructure construction phase. During July, 19 vessels have been operating on sea, with more than 2,500 personnel engaged in laying 172 kilometres of pipelines, platform, and completing the critical infrastructure that will enable Romania to become the European Union's largest natural gas producer by 2027.⁴⁶ This is one of the key reasons why Romania has supported the expansion of the missions of the Mine Countermeasures Task Force Group, including its role in protecting critical underwater infrastructure such as pipelines and submarine cables. On the margins of the NATO Summit in Ankara, the defence ministers of Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey signed a memorandum expanding the mandate of the Mine Countermeasures (MCM) Task Force Group.⁴⁷ This represents an important step for Black Sea security, reflecting not only a higher level of cooperation among the three NATO Black Sea allies, but also Turkey's willingness to assume a more significant regional security role.

Romania and its NATO allies should assess the various possible courses of action that Russia could pursue to escalate the situation in the Black Sea against Romania and the Alliance. NATO should consider deploying additional capabilities to strengthen Romania's deterrence posture. At the same time, Romania should accelerate its cooperation with Ukraine in order to gain a better understanding of Russia's operational methods, as well as the capabilities and tactics that can be used to counter Russian aerial and naval drones.

Romania's recent incidents have not gone unanswered by NATO. Spain will deploy seven F-18 fighter aircraft and approximately 200 personnel from the Spanish Air and Space Force to Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base in Romania. The deployment will also include an A400M aircraft to support air-to-air refuelling operations and, in the final phase of the mission, three NH90 helicopters dedicated to counter-uncrewed aerial systems (C-UAS) operations. "Our objective is clear: to contribute to Allied deterrence, protect NATO airspace, and strengthen the Alliance's posture on the Eastern Flank," said Lieutenant Colonel Alberto Calvo, commander of the Spanish detachment.⁴⁸

It remains to be seen what additional measures NATO will take to further deter Russia's hostile actions against Romania and in the Black Sea.

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