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No. 1034 (10/2024) | 17.01.2024

ISSN 2657-6996
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Airspace violations in Central and Eastern European countries in the context of the war in Ukraine

Keywords: war, Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, Ukraine, NATO

Due to the outbreak of a full-scale conflict between Russia and Ukraine, there have been several incidents involving air and missile threats, as well as air defence systems in the airspace of Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). Certainly, some of these incidents have been intentional provocations by Russia against NATO, Ukraine or Moldova, aimed at pursuing a specific political agenda. To effectively counter these challenges, CEEC must enhance their technical capabilities, develop response procedures, and take action in the information dimension.

Context of the issue. The Russo-Ukrainian war's entrance into the full-scale phase resulted in the use of almost full combat potential on both sides. Additionally, the conflict has extended over the entire territory of Ukraine and is being fought in multiple domains, including the air domain. Operations in the air domain have intensified since February 2022, with an increase in the number and types of weapons used. Due to the extensive shelling and Russia's targeting of objectives near Ukraine's western borders, there have been several incidents in non-war CEEC involving both Russian air and missile threats and Ukrainian defence systems. During the first weeks of the war, Russia targeted Yavorov (located 20 km from the border with Poland), Podolsk (located 20 km from the border with Moldova), and later Izmaile (on the border with Romania).

Main incidents. In March 2022, a Tu-141 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) crashed in Zagreb, Croatia. The UAV had been in Romanian airspace for approximately three minutes and then in Hungarian airspace for about 40 minutes before entering Croatian airspace. Both the Romanian and Hungarian governments confirmed that they had detected the object and were tracking its flight. The Tu-141s are capable of undertaking both reconnaissance and strike tasks and are used by both the Russian and Ukrainian armed forces. However, both sides in the conflict have denied ownership of the UAV. According to Mario Banožić, then Croatian Defence Minister, the UAV that crashed in Zagreb was armed.

In October 2022, as part of a massive shelling of Ukraine, three cruise missiles were launched from Russian ships in the Black Sea and flew over Moldovan territory. In February 2023, a similar incident occurred. The Ukrainian authorities even reported that the missiles had violated Romanian airspace, but the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly denied these reports. In connection with the attacks on Ukraine (for instance the Dniester Hydroelectric Power Station located about 14 km from the Moldovan border) the Moldovan authorities numerous times reported finding missile debris on their territory. The debris could have originated from either Russian missiles or Ukrainian defence systems. The air and missile defence systems of the Moldovan armed forces are outdated and underdeveloped, consisting of post-Soviet S-200 and S-125s. As a result, Moldova can only monitor the overflight of modern cruise missiles. In response to recent events and technological backwardness, President Maia Sandu has requested financial assistance from Western partners to develop Moldova's air defence. In December, the Moldovan armed forces received a Ground Master 200 mobile air defence radar, purchased from the French company Thales with funds from the Moldovan defence budget.

On 29 December 2023, during a massive attack on Ukraine, a Russian cruise missile (Kh-55/Kh-101) violated Polish airspace and stayed there for about 3 minutes. In April of the same year, fragments of a Russian Kh-55 missile were found near the town of Zamość, close to Bydgoszcz, Poland. Additionally, in March 2022, the remains of a Russian-made Orlan-10 unmanned surveillance aircraft were discovered in the municipality of Dumitra, Romania, about 70 km from the border with Ukraine. In December 2023, the Romanian Ministry of

Defence reported the identification of a 1.5m deep crater on the Danube delta near the village of Grindu, about 6km from the Ukrainian border. It is likely that there are more incidents like this in countries bordering Ukraine, but it is difficult to estimate their number precisely.

Due to the extensive nature of the conflict, a significant number of assault and defence measures have been employed in the air domain, resulting in incidents involving also Ukrainian surface-to-air systems. The most severe of these incidents occurred on 15 November 2022, when a 5W55 missile fired from Ukraine's S-300 air defence system exploded, killing two individuals in Przewodów, Poland.

It is important to emphasise that provocations involving aircrafts are also taking place. NATO agencies reported that in 2023, the Alliance's air force intercepted Russian aircraft approaching the airspace of NATO countries over 300 times. The majority of these incidents occurred over the Baltic States, where airspace violations have been a regular occurrence for several years. Other NATO countries, such as Romania (for example, an airspace violation by a Shahed 136 drone in December 2023) and Poland (for instance, Belarusian Mi8 and Mi24 helicopters in August 2023), have also experienced similar provocations.

Russia's objectives. Regarding Russia's actions, it is important to note that not all incidents involving violations of the airspace of CEEC, other than Ukraine, were necessarily intentional. Due to the scale of attacks, it is possible that some systems experienced failures. The proximity of the theatre of war naturally caused air assault measures to enter, and in some cases, deeply penetrate the airspace of CEEC. Fragments of Russian missiles or UAVs found in these countries' territories may have been downed by Ukrainian defence systems. However, these factors do not absolve Russia of responsibility. It is clear that a significant proportion of the events discussed were deliberate actions.

From a theoretical perspective, Russia's objectives can be divided into purely military and political. Military speaking, at the current level of escalation of the conflict between NATO and Russia, Russia's actions are primarily aimed at gathering technical information to gain an advantage in terms of the weaponry used. This data could include the speed at which NATO countries launch their machines to intercept enemy flying objects, their combat readiness (such as the type of armaments fighter jets are equipped with and the time they can remain operational in the air), or the identification of defence systems' radar emission parameters. It is possible for Russia to collect the radar emission parameters when NATO countries attempt to shoot down an enemy object. Therefore, the shooting down of a missile, particularly during peacetime, may not always be a cost-effective measure. Launching missiles over CEEC' territories may also serve to reduce the distance of a missile aimed at targets in Ukraine or to deceive the Ukrainian defence systems.

The catalogue of Russia's political objectives is much broader. After all, the armed forces are merely an instrument that enables the state to meet its political objectives. Any incident involving a violation of airspace can undermine citizens' confidence in their state's institutions. The potential for incidents of this nature to cause information chaos is due to the limited common knowledge of air and missile defence systems and their capabilities. One should bear in mind that it is not always feasible to intercept a cruise missile travelling at several hundred kilometres per hour (up to approximately 900km/h for Kh-55 or Kh-101) that only remains in a state's airspace for a few minutes. The decision-making process is typically longer than that. Furthermore, it is important to note that air and missile defence systems cannot secure the entire territory, but are typically deployed around critical infrastructure. In times of peace, the patrols of fighter jets in Central and Eastern European countries are not continuous mainly for economic reasons. Additionally, knocking down a hostile target may not always be advisable due to the desire to conceal radar emission parameters or the inability to control the remnants of a hit/dropped missile, which may hit inhabited areas.

The incidents discussed in this text can be used to undermine confidence in NATO, its effectiveness and procedures for cooperation between Allies, as exemplified by the UAV crash in Zagreb. Additionally, these incidents can be used as a tool of pressure and a threat when policies that go against Russia's interests are being

pursued. This is especially relevant for Moldova, which is not covered by Allied security guarantees. However, it is important to note that NATO countries are not entirely immune to this pressure. In their case, such pressure may contribute to increased support for the 'peace policy' or decreased willingness to continue supporting Ukraine. Furthermore, incidents related to Ukraine's air and missile defence systems could cause bilateral tensions, which may also reduce Western support for the country.

Conclusions. In recent months, Russia has intensified its provocations against NATO and transferred them into new dimensions. The tactic of 'salami slicing' to slowly push the boundaries of its actions and test how far it can go without exposing itself to the consequences remains a constant feature of Russia's modus operandi. By taking incremental rather than leapfrog actions, Russia is 'taming' its adversaries to these kinds of incidents. Russia's military measures in air domain serve broader political objectives, primarily to lower public confidence in state institutions, undermine allied guarantees within NATO, create dividing lines between allies (divide et impera) and reduce the level of support for Ukraine. From NATO's perspective, countering these types of challenges requires a continuous improvement in the technical capabilities of the armed forces, the development of collective response procedures, and operations in the cognitive space to reduce Russia's negative impact on societies.