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Ukrainian Strikes on Targets Deep Inside the Territory of the Russian Federation

In the ongoing war, Russia has consistently targeted Ukraine's energy sector. In response—and as part of a strategy aimed at reducing the aggressor's financial revenues from energy exports—Ukraine has increasingly shifted its kinetic operations towards Russian energy infrastructure, including refineries, crude oil terminals, transshipment facilities, and pipelines. In the spring of 2026, this campaign clearly accelerated and evolved in character. In addition to the refinery strikes already seen in previous periods, growing pressure emerged on export logistics, particularly terminals on the Baltic and Black Seas. Effective strikes, widely covered by the media, undermine the Kremlin's narrative of an imminent military victory in the war against Ukraine.

The Evolution of Targeting and Its Consequences. Ukrainian strikes against targets on the territory of the Russian Federation constitute an important element of Ukraine's attritional warfare strategy. These strikes are linked both to the increased number of attacks on the infrastructure deeper in the rear of the Russian military in the occupied part of Ukraine—intended to constrain the operational capabilities of Russian forces—and to efforts to reduce Russia's capacity to export crude oil and natural gas. In recent months, Ukraine has intensified these actions, which now take the form of a coordinated campaign employing long-range aerial drones, naval drones, and ballistic missiles. This has resulted in constraints on the Russian Federation's offensive operations, continued heavy losses of equipment and personnel, and the erosion of plans for the rapid capture of the Donbas. Ukraine has struck targets located more than 1,500–1,800 km from its state border. Examples include the attack on the refinery in Perm (Urals) in May 2026 and earlier strikes on Ukhta (Komi Republic). As a consequence, crude oil processing in Russia fell to its lowest level since 2009. Ukrainian Defence Minister Mykhailo Fedorov underscored the breakthrough character of these operations: "The way our President and armed forces compelled Russia to agree to a ceasefire is a good example of how effective organisation, efficient weapons, and support can produce a shared result. Therefore, we believe that at present, in each domain—air, land, and long-range strike capabilities—Ukraine holds a certain degree of initiative"¹.

Attacks on Energy Infrastructure. Ukrainian strikes on targets deep inside Russian territory are directed primarily against energy infrastructure, although one should not overlook the high-profile operations conducted against Russian aviation, including the "Spider's Web" operation in June 2025 and the strike on Shagol airbase in Chelyabinsk Oblast in April 2026. Broadly speaking, two parallel dimensions of Ukraine's military action against Russian energy infrastructure can be identified: 1) attacks on refineries, and 2) attacks on key elements connected with the export of crude oil and fuels, namely crude oil terminals, storage facilities, and pipelines. In recent weeks, however, a shift in target selection has become visible. Rather than seeking the permanent destruction of entire plants, strikes have increasingly focused on components whose damage temporarily blocks the export of crude oil or fuels. This includes both attacks against port loading installations and incidents involving vessels used to transport Russian cargoes outside the sanctions regime (the so-called shadow fleet). The maritime dimension is clearly part of an expansion of the target set from land-based installations to maritime logistics. Strikes on selected tankers and elements of maritime infrastructure produce a dual effect: on the one hand, they physically disrupt individual operations, while, on the other, they raise the risk premium across the entire export chain, including laytime, insurance costs, and route selection. At the same time, pressure continues to be applied to

¹ *Україна перехопила ініціативу у напрямі middle-strike – міністр оборони*, Інтерфакс-Україна, 11.05.2026, <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/1166604.html> (12.05.2026).

refineries located along export corridors, particularly in the Black Sea direction, where even limited damage to loading infrastructure can affect fuel output by constraining the ability to empty storage tanks. The key change in the campaign's profile lies in a shift from pinpoint strikes on processing capacity to sustained harassment of port infrastructure. A representative example is the series of repeated attacks on the Ust-Luga crude oil terminal on the Baltic Sea, after which a significant decline in loading volumes was observed, and thus a reduction in crude oil exports (approximately 423,000 barrels per day in March 2026, compared with an average of 508,000 barrels per day in 2025). In the Black Sea direction, strikes more often encompass the entire operational environment of a port and affect warehouses and quays, pipelines, transshipment systems, as well as pumping stations feeding the terminal. In practice, this reflects an attempt not so much to destroy a single facility as to generate instability within a logistics hub designed to sustain continuous export operations. This logic increases the effectiveness of the campaign, since relatively limited damage to auxiliary infrastructure can halt or delay exports, forcing costly workarounds, such as rerouting to other ports.

These actions have multifaceted consequences. First, strikes on ports and terminals shift the centre of gravity of risk from crude oil processing (refineries) to fuel exports (terminals). The principal mechanism of pressure lies in the disruption of export channels while Russian refineries continue to maintain high levels of fuel production, since the fuels produced quickly fill available storage capacity. As a result, as the tanks approach high fill levels, refineries are compelled to reduce crude throughput. Second, pressure on ports and terminals may translate into short-term export constraints on the main maritime routes, namely the Baltic and Black Seas. Third, the effectiveness of such strikes should be understood more broadly than as permanent destruction alone. In the aftermath of attacks, a recurring operational cycle often emerges: fire, emergency shutdown, limited restart, and renewed strike. Even if some facilities return to operation relatively quickly, the repetition of attacks raises the cost of maintaining continuity at refineries, reduces the willingness to operate at high utilisation rates, and also diverts resources—equipment, personnel, and security—from modernisation toward crisis response.

Russian Business and Local Administrations Burdened with the Costs of Defence. In the face of insufficient protection from the state, Russian businesses are investing in counter-drone defence on their own. The militarisation of strategic companies began in February 2023, when Gazprom obtained the right to establish its own corporate armed formation. A major turning point in the involvement of reservists came on 4 August 2023, when President Vladimir Putin signed a law allowing governors to create specialised state paramilitary units composed of volunteers and reservists (including members of BARS²), empowered to use combat weapons to protect critical infrastructure and thereby relieve the regular armed forces. Another key legal act was the amendment to the law on the security of energy infrastructure facilities, adopted by the State Duma and signed on 25 December 2023, granting corporate security personnel—responsible for supervising more than 80% of energy infrastructure facilities—the direct authority to physically shoot down drones and to deploy advanced electronic warfare systems. The evolution of this system culminated in the law of 9 April 2025, which expanded the powers of all private security companies in the field of countering unmanned aerial vehicles, with the explicit aim of strengthening the defence of Russian refineries against successive waves of strikes.

Large Russian enterprises are thus caught in a dual burden: on the one hand, they are losing revenue as industrial facilities are damaged by Ukrainian drones and missiles, and on the other, they are compelled to invest their own resources in protection against such attacks. Total expenditure for this purpose in 2025 was estimated at

² BARS (*Боевой армейский резерв страны* – Combat Army Reserve of the Country) is a Russian active military reserve system based on voluntary contracts, most commonly concluded for three years, which allow citizens to combine civilian employment with regular, paid military training. Established at the initiative of the Russian Ministry of Defence in 2021, it operates in a manner broadly comparable to the U.S. National Guard, with the aim of providing the state with rapid mobilisation capacity and a trained pool of personnel without the need to declare general conscription. Since the outset of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the BARS system has acquired major practical significance: numerous volunteer battalions were formed from it and deployed directly to the front, where they often suffered heavy losses. As the conflict evolved, and as the need to secure Russia's own territory increased, these units also came to be used extensively in rear-area roles, including as territorial defence formations tasked with protecting Russian critical infrastructure against Ukrainian drone attacks. See <https://bars2021.tilda.ws/> (12.05.2026).

approximately RUB 200 billion. As a consequence, in August 2025, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP) submitted to the Russian president a proposal for a systemic solution, whereby corporate defence expenditures would be at least partially offset through tax relief. However, the Russian Ministry of Finance issued a negative opinion on the proposal. By mid-2026, meanwhile, Ukrainian strikes deep inside the Russian Federation had become both more frequent and more effective, while the condition of the federal budget was worse than a year earlier.

The burden of defence falls on Russian enterprises in yet another respect. Formally, the Russian Federation is not in a state of war; it is conducting only a “special military operation.” In 2025, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that damage caused by Ukrainian drones should be treated as ordinary intentional destruction of property rather than as force majeure, under which the state would assume obligations toward the affected parties. This increased insurers’ costs. As a result, new insurance policies were either more expensive or excluded damage resulting from Ukrainian attacks altogether.

Disrupted Victory Day Celebrations. Over the past week, concerns about Ukrainian strikes deep inside the Russian Federation have affected the course of the Victory Day celebrations (9 May), the traditional centrepiece of which is the military parade on Red Square in Moscow. This year’s display was scaled back significantly, with the presence of heavy military equipment reportedly omitted, among other things, out of concern for its security. In several regions, the traditional celebrations were cancelled altogether.

Although Russia and Ukraine ultimately agreed, through United States mediation, to a ceasefire lasting from 9 to 11 May, and long-range strikes did in fact cease during those days, it was Kyiv that proved more effective in exploiting the situation for propaganda purposes. Russian and foreign media picked up on reports of a decree signed by Volodymyr Zelenskyy that excluded Red Square from the list of potential Ukrainian targets during the Victory Day celebrations. The message was intended primarily to underscore that Ukraine possesses the capability to strike targets in the centre of the Russian capital.

At the same time, the Russian infosphere widely commented on the change in tone in Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric. During his press conference on 9 May, the Russian president referred to Volodymyr Zelenskyy as “Mr Zelenskyy” (*господин Зеленский*). This phrasing was subsequently contrasted in journalistic commentary and on social media with Putin’s earlier remarks from 2022, when he described the Ukrainian authorities, including the president, as a “gang of drug addicts and neo-Nazis”. Regardless of the Kremlin’s actual intentions, this moderation in Putin’s rhetoric, when juxtaposed with the above-mentioned Zelenskyy decree, may be perceived as a sign of weakness, which in the context of cognitive warfare could contribute to a real weakening of the Russian regime.

It is also worth emphasising that the discussion surrounding potential Ukrainian strikes on Victory Day coincided with temporary mobile internet shutdowns and GPS signal jamming. The growing sense of uncertainty undermines the narrative that Russia is not participating in a war and exposes the ineffectiveness of the Russian authorities both in terms of bringing the war to a swift conclusion and in ensuring the state’s internal security.

Airport Truce. In May 2026, Ukraine put forward a proposal for an “airport truce” (*аеродромне перемир’я*). Its purpose was to capitalise on the success of strikes on targets deep inside Russian territory as an instrument of diplomatic pressure. By proposing the mutual exclusion of airport infrastructure from aerial attacks, Ukraine is pragmatically leveraging the growing vulnerability of key Russian transport hubs to long-range strikes as a de-escalatory asset, intended to compel Russia to revise its methods of conducting the air war, including by reducing the number of strikes against civilian targets. At the same time, the proposal constitutes a multidimensional political manoeuvre aimed at activating and increasing the role of the European Union in peace negotiations. From a domestic perspective, the successful implementation of such an arrangement would make it possible to gradually, and in a controlled manner, restore civilian air traffic within the country’s closed airspace, thereby providing a crucial economic and stabilising impulse in the context of a protracted war and representing an important step toward limiting its scale.

Conclusions

- In the fifth year of the war, Ukraine is intensifying its strikes on targets deep inside the territory of the Russian Federation. These actions are aimed at hitting energy infrastructure and reducing its extraction and production capabilities, thereby diminishing Russia's revenues from the export of hydrocarbons. Beyond their economic dimension, these strikes also carry significant psychological weight, as they make Russian citizens more directly aware of the threats arising from the ongoing war with Ukraine.
- The most vulnerable target of drone attacks against Russia's critical energy infrastructure is not any individual refinery, but the entire logistics chain—processing, storage, transshipment, and transport—in which crude oil terminals and pipelines have become increasingly prominent targets in recent weeks. Such actions can block the export of crude oil and fuels and trigger secondary effects, including the filling of storage tanks and the consequent imposition of limits on crude throughput. As a result, pressure is mounting on the entire energy and logistics system, leading to more frequent short-term disruptions, rerouting, and higher servicing costs. The system, therefore, functions less smoothly and at greater expense, even without the permanent destruction of production capacity.
- Successful Ukrainian strikes on infrastructure deep inside Russia entail not only financial losses and delays for Russian exporters; these events are also highly visible in media terms compared with what occurs daily on the front line or in its immediate rear. Each instance of Ukrainian forces destroying facilities located hundreds of kilometres away is noted and widely discussed by public opinion in Russia. The intensification of such attacks in recent weeks undermines the narrative promoted by the Russian authorities that Russia is close to achieving military victory in this war. For the milieu of so-called Z-bloggers, this has provided an opportunity to sharply criticise both the civilian and military authorities for incompetence. Recent polling, indicating a now relatively low level of support for the president within Russian society, may be attributable in part to this state of affairs.
- Ukraine is seeking to make pragmatic use of the success of its strikes deep inside Russian territory as a direct instrument of diplomatic pressure. By proposing initiatives such as an airport truce, Kyiv is using the growing vulnerability of Russian transport hubs as a de-escalatory asset in order to force the aggressor to alter its methods of warfare and reduce the number of strikes on Ukrainian civilian targets. In addition, these actions constitute a deliberate political manoeuvre aimed at activating and increasing the role of the European Union in the peace process.