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Poland Says Its Fighter Jets Shot Down Russian Drones That Entered Its Airspace

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Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

Poland and NATO scrambled fighter jets on Wednesday to shoot down several of what were said to be Russian drones that had entered Polish airspace during an overnight attack on western Ukraine, the first known instance of the Western military bloc firing shots since Russia's full-scale invasion.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk said at an emergency government meeting later in the day that 19 "objects" had violated Polish airspace, while three Russian drones that were believed to have posed a threat to civilians were shot down. However, details of the incident remain murky, and it is not clear what types of Russian drones were involved in the air incursion.

Tusk also said Poland invoked Article 4 of the NATO treaty, a rarely used mechanism that initiates consultations with other members of the military bloc and can potentially lead to some form of joint decision or action on behalf of NATO.

“The fact that these drones, which posed a security threat, were shot down changes the political situation. Therefore, allied consultations took the form of a formal request to activate Article 4 of the NATO Treaty,” the prime minister was quoted as saying by Reuters.

Article 4 was last invoked by several NATO members days after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Before Wednesday, the article had been invoked only seven times since the military bloc was founded in 1949.

Russia’s Defense Ministry later confirmed it had unleashed a wave of airstrikes across Ukraine overnight, including in the western city of Lviv, around 80 kilometers (50 miles) from the Polish border. But it said it had no intention of targeting Poland and denied its drones had entered the country’s airspace.

“Nevertheless, we are ready to hold consultations with the Polish Defense Ministry about this issue,” the Russian military said in a statement.

Russia’s Defense Ministry claimed its drones used in the overnight attacks had a maximum range of 700 kilometers (435 miles) and therefore could not have reached Poland. However, Poland’s eastern border is less than 600 kilometers away from western Russia, meaning the country is within firing range.

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There were no reports of injuries or deaths as a result of the drone incursion in Poland. Local media released images of firefighters and police in the village of Wyryki, located in the eastern part of the country, surveying a house that had its roof ripped apart from the impact of a drone that crashed.

Poland had temporarily closed part of its airspace during the incident, halting flights from Warsaw’s main Chopin Airport.

“This act of aggression posed a real threat to the safety of our citizens,” the Polish military’s operational command said in a statement, calling the airspace violation “unprecedented.” Dutch Prime Minister Dick Schoof, meanwhile, said fighter jets from the Netherlands provided support during the shootdown operation on Wednesday.

Belarus, a close ally of Moscow, said its air defense forces had tracked and shot down several drones that “lost their course as a result of electronic warfare measures” during an overnight exchange of air attacks between Russia and Ukraine.

In a video statement, Belarusian Chief of the General Staff Pavel Muraveiko said Minsk shared radar data with Poland and Lithuania that “allowed the Polish side to respond quickly by scrambling its aircraft.” According to Muraveiko, Poland, in turn, informed Belarus of drones approaching its border.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga said the incident showed that a lack of a strong international response against previous Russian attacks had emboldened President Vladimir Putin.

“The longer he faces no strength in response, the more aggressive he gets,” Sybiga said. “A weak response now will provoke Russia even more — and then Russian missiles and drones will fly even further into Europe.”

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While European leaders condemned the airspace violations as a serious provocation and a possible “deliberate attack,” some NATO officials suggested the incident may not have been intentional.

“These overflights are not seen as the start of something bigger,” a diplomat from the military alliance told AFP on condition of anonymity. “It looks like it was either aimed at testing NATO or at approaching targets in Ukraine from a different angle.”

Poland has reported similar episodes since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion. Last month, a Russian drone exploded in farmland in eastern Poland, which Warsaw described at the time as a “provocation.” In 2023, a Russian missile briefly crossed into Polish airspace before striking Ukraine.

On Truth Social, U.S. President Donald Trump gave a terse response to the shootdown on Wednesday, writing: “What’s with Russia violating Poland’s airspace with drones? Here we go!”

AFP contributed reporting.

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