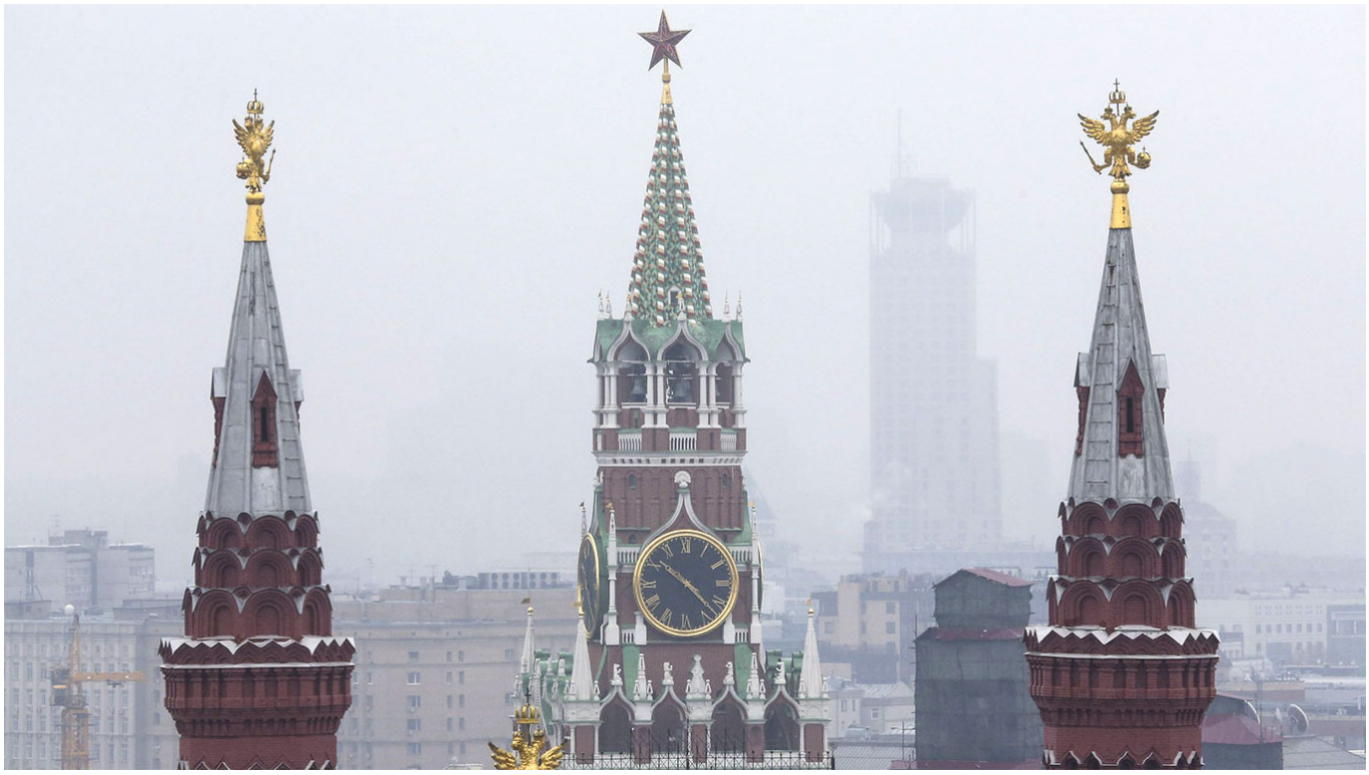
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'Unhappy' Putin Sends Message to West With Ukraine Strike on EU Border

By Fabien Zamora for AFP

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Russia's Oreshnik missile attack in Ukraine near the EU border aims to intimidate Kyiv's Western allies and signals Vladimir Putin's displeasure at recent foreign policy setbacks including in Venezuela, analysts said Friday.

Days after European and U.S. negotiators unveiled a post-war peacekeeping plan for Ukraine, Russia overnight Thursday to Friday targeted an infrastructure facility in the country's western region of Lviv with the Oreshnik nuclear-capable intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM).

It is thought to be only the second known combat use of the weapon.

While Moscow said the strike came in response to an alleged drone attack on a Putin residence in December, nearly four years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, analysts said the move was

designed to send a clear message to Western leaders and frighten ordinary Europeans.

"Vladimir Putin is using this to communicate with the West, because he could undoubtedly achieve the same operational effects without this missile," Cyrille Bret, a Russia expert at the Paris-based Montaigne Institute, told AFP.

"As Europeans are developing their air defense capabilities, this is a way of reminding them of their vulnerability," he added.

The Kremlin has touted the Oreshnik as a "state-of-the art" weapon, which travels at hypersonic speeds, can hit targets across Europe and cannot be intercepted.

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In a call on Friday, the leaders of Britain, France and Germany said Russia's use of the missile was "escalatory and unacceptable," according to a U.K. government spokeswoman.

U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said Russia was using "fabricated allegations to justify the attack," according to the spokeswoman. Ukraine has denied targeting Putin's residence.

Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovy said on Facebook the strike was "a new level of threat — not only for Ukraine, but also for the security of Europe."

The missile, named after the Russian word for hazel tree, was first fired on the central Ukrainian city of Dnipro in 2024.

'Psychological weapon'

The choice of a new target located around 70 kilometers (40 miles) from the border with the European Union was significant, observers said.

"It is much closer to the EU's borders," Etienne Marcuz, an associate fellow at the Foundation for Strategic Research, a French think tank, said on X.

"This should probably be seen as a message to European countries," he said, adding the result of the strike was "probably more psychological than operational."

Some observers saw the strike as Putin's attempt to reassert his authority following setbacks including Washington's capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, the seizure of a Russian-flagged vessel in the North Atlantic and fresh demonstrations in Iran challenging Moscow-allied authorities.

"It is a psychological weapon — an instrument of Putin's cognitive war against Ukraine and the West — rather than a weapon of mass physical destruction," wrote Mick Ryan, a retired major general from the Australian army and Ukraine war analyst.

He said the use of the Oreshnik was a "sign of a fearful, worried leader and not one that is confident and anticipating victory."

The move could not hide the fact that Russia had little power "to shape events or respond to military contingencies involving its allies and friends beyond its borders," he added.

Related article: What We Know About Russia's Oreshnik Missile Fired on Ukraine

Timothy Ash, an emerging market economist focused on Russia, struck a similar note, pointing to relatively limited damage on the ground after the missile strike.

"The Oreshnik is highly effective but also very high cost, and from a cost benefit analysis it makes zero sense for these to be deployed in Ukraine," he wrote.

"The deployment of the Oreshnik therefore seemed more a PR exercise, perhaps aimed at the Trump administration signalling that Russia is unhappy more broadly about the state of play in the world," he added.

While Russia calls the Oreshnik a hypersonic missile, Western defense analysts say it is not a revolutionary weapon.

"It is most likely NOT a hypersonic missile," said Marcuz, adding Europe has a means of intercepting IRBMs.

"The Oreshnik's multiple warheads could pose a problem, depending on when they are released," he added.

In December, Putin's ally, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, said the weapon had been deployed in his country, which borders NATO's eastern flank.

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