The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Inside the Ukrainian Deep-Strike Campaign That Has Moscow on the Back Foot

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June 22, 2026



People are seen outside a shopping mall as black smoke rises from the area of the Russian oil producer Gazprom Neft's Moscow oil refinery in southeast Moscow on June 18. **AFP**

From the foothills of the Ural Mountains to the arid coast of the Caspian Sea, Russian regions far from the front line are bearing the brunt of a widening Ukrainian deep-strike campaign using drones and missiles.

Recent months have shown just how willing Ukraine is to hit them hard. Look no further than the capital. Last week, Moscow experienced its largest drone onslaught of the war, painting the sky with black clouds from a strike on an oil refinery.

While Ukraine is attacking with increasing numbers of drones, it is also targeting regions previously untouched by fighting. In April, a high-rise building was set ablaze in

Yekaterinburg, the country's fourth-largest city, while drones were reportedly shot down near a metallurgical plant in Chelyabinsk. Both cities are more than 1,700 kilometers (1,050 miles) from Ukraine.

"It's bringing the war home in a way that it hasn't been brought home before," Samuel Bendett, a drone expert at the Center for Naval Analyses, told The Moscow Times.

The effect, analysts say, is not merely psychological. Seemingly more so than any other point during the war, Ukraine has been able to seriously incapacitate Russian energy infrastructure and factories contributing to the war effort.

Some regions, particularly those close to the front line, have experienced acute gasoline shortages, and Russia's oil production declined for the sixth consecutive month in June, eating into export revenues.

Threats of attacks regularly prompt officials across the country to issue drone warnings, close airports and even cancel public events.

It's a problem the Kremlin has been unable to brush under the rug.

"Their goal is to create a split in Russian society, sow confusion and inflict economic damage," President Vladimir Putin recently said of the strikes.

According to data from conflict monitor ACLED analyzed by The Economist, Ukraine's so-called "deep strikes" on targets more than 100 kilometers (62 miles) from its borders have more than doubled over the past year. If its current pace continues, Ukraine will conduct some 800 such strikes by the end of the year, up from 658 in 2025.

This number, while already large, does not capture the full extent of the campaign. That's because monitoring groups are almost certainly undercounting complex attacks that involve hundreds of drones and multiple targets.

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At least 60 Russian regions have come under attack — most often with drones or missiles — since the beginning of the war, according to data compiled by Novaya Gazeta Europe, something that Kyiv justifies as a response to Moscow's full-scale invasion.

To understand what the damage looks like on the ground, The Moscow Times verified and analyzed four recent attacks deep in the Russian interior, three of which were conducted with drones and one with missiles, including last week's strikes on Moscow.

Satellite imagery released over the weekend shows the destruction of at least three oil tanks at the Kapotnya refinery in southeast Moscow caused by the recent attack, which also hit a shopping center.

Ukraine's General Staff said that the damage was more extensive, knocking out four tanks, while Reuters reported that an oil refining unit was also damaged.

A New York Times analysis of videos posted to social media said that Russia's own air defenses may have inadvertently hit the refinery, contributing to the destruction.

In March, multiple drone attacks over the course of one week devastated northwest Russia's Ust-Luga port, destroying at least half a dozen storage tanks at a facility that handles daily exports of 700,000 barrels of oil. Experts predicted that repairs would take months, a sign of how strikes can cripple long-term energy production.

Indeed, as of early June, the damage was still visible and it did not appear that significant construction had started. Similar strikes incapacitated other major ports in the region used for exporting oil.

In mid-June, Ukrainian "flamingo" missiles reportedly hit a plant used for making drone components in the republic of Chuvashia's capital of Cheboksary.

Medium-resolution satellite images taken two days after the strike show that a large section of the main building, which appeared to be covered in anti-drone netting, had collapsed.

The extent of damage to such facilities is not always clear. Russian authorities tend to release little information on how attacks impact operations, except in cases when they result in complete or partial closures. And satellite imagery cannot account for destruction inside buildings.

A strike on a chemical plant in the Perm region in April, for instance, produced no visible damage in medium-resolution satellite imagery captured just a day after the attack.

The region, some 1,700 kilometers (1,050 miles) from the front line, is one of the most distant targets reached by Ukrainian drones yet.

Oil facilities in the region have been targeted regularly in recent months, producing a sight that has become increasingly familiar across Russia: darkened, smoke-filled skies.

Overwhelming numbers of drones

The uptick in deep strikes appears to be due in large part to Ukraine's growing technical competence and ability to manufacture more drones.

It's a question of numbers, say experts. Ukraine is filling the Russian skies with hundreds of drones in each attack, overwhelming air defenses. Last week's attack on Moscow alone saw the shooting down of nearly 200 drones, according to city officials, but the ones that got through appear to have caused serious damage.

"I think the key factor really is the volume of strikes," said Pasi Paroinen, an analyst with the Finnish Black Bird Group, an open-source Ukraine war monitor. "Every night or every other night there is some sort of an attack somewhere in Russia. The intensity means that these sites are getting struck repeatedly."

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The potency of the strikes is also related to changing strategy and refined target selection, he added. Whereas before drones might have mainly damaged storage tanks, new strikes are hitting vital station and refinery components.

“They are easier targets to hit in most cases, but usually you just cause a temporary disruption of service and maybe destroy some stockpile of either products or raw oil,” Paroinen said, referring to storage tanks. “But now we have also seen that they are able to more accurately target the refinery structures themselves.”

The success of Ukraine’s deep strike efforts raises questions about the effectiveness of Russia’s air defenses. The Kremlin has widely deployed interceptor systems around strategic points — Moscow, for instance, is believed to be heavily guarded by such systems — but recent months have tested their limits.

According to reports, Ukrainian officials believe that Moscow is running low on key interceptors, namely the S-300, a Soviet-era system designed to protect against incoming missiles. That further constrains officials’ capability to respond at a time when Ukraine is trying to press its advantage.

As drone expert Bendett sees it, a major problem for Russia is figuring out how to keep developments in the country’s air defenses apace with those in Ukraine’s own drone warfare.

“There are significant gaps in air defense capabilities,” he said. “The Russian government is probably protecting certain locations and certain sites at the expense of everything else.”

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