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“NATO’s Fracture and A New Military Bloc Rising”: The Kremlin’s European Narratives

How Kremlin propaganda turns NATO tensions and European rearmament into proof that the West is preparing a wider war with Russia

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Table of contents

Executive Summary 5

Official propaganda: media and officials 9

Pro-war Z-community as narrative amplifier 11

Sources 13

Executive Summary

In recent months, Russian propaganda has systematically advanced two mutually reinforcing narratives about NATO: the alliance is weakening under the strain of US-European tensions – and those very tensions are pushing Europe to build parallel military structures to pursue its plans of aggression against Russia.

The first narrative is designed to vindicate the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy course against a backdrop of mounting war fatigue among the Russian public; the second, to prepare domestic opinion for a potential escalation beyond Ukraine and to assign blame for any such escalation to the West in advance. In parallel, the same narratives are being exported to Eurosceptic audiences in Western countries, with the aim of deepening divisions within the alliance itself.

The overarching logic of the European track of Russian propaganda in recent months can be summarised as follows: Russia is making steady advances in Ukraine and approaching victory in the Special Military Operation, while NATO is systematically losing its hybrid war against Russia on Ukrainian territory. Within this propaganda framework, an evident contradiction exists: narratives about NATO's internal fracture, signs of its weakening, and its present vulnerability sit alongside a sweeping campaign claiming that the alliance and Europe are preparing aggression against Russia – illustrated by European remilitarisation, escalation in the Baltic region, aggressive statements by European politicians, and plans to establish European military structures running parallel to NATO.

Russian nationwide channels, following Kremlin editorial guidelines, simultaneously assert that "Trump trusts NATO, and its Eastern flank in particular, less and less"[1], "Trump has realised that the trillions of dollars spent on building and sustaining NATO's military infrastructure in Europe were squandered"[2], while NATO is "ready to switch from defence

to offence at any moment"[3], and "Europe itself continues to rearm at its own expense"[4].

The primary focus of both the official propaganda apparatus and the pro-war Z-community falls on intra-alliance conflicts and their consequences: denials of US access to European NATO bases for strikes on Iran, reductions in the American military footprint and the cancellation of plans to deploy Tomahawk missiles in Germany, and delays in the transfer of US troops to Poland. Particular attention is paid to Donald Trump's personal disputes with European leaders – Friedrich Merz, Keir Starmer, Giorgia Meloni, and others.

As a result, the focus shifts from NATO to the EU itself: the build-up of national armies, the development of the European defence-industrial base, joint military exercises, nuclear threats, and the renovation of the collective security architecture – including proposals to establish a "Viking bloc"[5] on the Scandinavian Peninsula, a unified European army[6] and "the replacement of the 'old' NATO bodies with 'new' European ones, <…> with Poland serving as the principal 'strike fist' and the United Kingdom, Germany, and France as 'security guarantors'"[7].

The Z-military Telegram channel Two Majors, linked with the security establishment, states: "Europe is already at full speed bringing its logistics, industry, healthcare, and society to a state of readiness for wartime conditions and active combat. This restructuring consumes enormous resources and is taking considerable time, which points to serious intent to participate in a war"[8].

One of Russia's leading propagandists, Dmitry Kiselyov, stated in his broadcast of 24 May: "Sweden is participating in military operations against Russia. Britain and France, Germany, Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states have long been doing the same. <…> Europe is preparing to go to war with Russia"[9].

These narratives are reproduced systematically by every Russian official who speaks publicly on foreign policy. Over the past three months, at least ten senior officials have addressed these themes on multiple occasions; the typical frontmen are Dmitry

Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, and Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Medvedev has declared that "Washington genuinely has no need for Europe – and feels no regret about it. <…> As an ally, Europe is worthless. <…> European countries should therefore not count on active US intervention in any hypothetical conflict between individual EU states and Russia"[10]. He has also addressed Europe's trajectory: "the EU is no longer an economic union. It could fairly rapidly become a fully-fledged military alliance deeply hostile to Russia – in some respects worse than NATO"[11].

Zakharova, for her part, has claimed that "there is no solidarity within the EU and NATO – only a brutal command-and-control dictatorship headed by the United States of America"[12]. The same ideas are actively promoted by representatives of the "party of permanent war", on which the EK Strategic Communications Center has previously reported[13].

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has similarly claimed that "we are witnessing a crisis in NATO. Voices from various official European sources are growing louder, calling for a new bloc to be assembled from the EU, Britain, Norway, and Ukraine"[14], and that "the European Union is now barely distinguishable from NATO. Once an economic bloc conceived to improve the welfare of European citizens, it has become a replica of the North Atlantic Alliance"[15].

All of these statements and propaganda campaigns are directed primarily at the Russian domestic audience. Their dual purpose is to explain why the war in Ukraine has proved so prolonged – a war being waged, in the words of Sergei Kirienko, First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, by "44 states against Russia, including the entire NATO bloc"[16] – and to build tension and prepare public opinion for a potential escalation. Should the war in Ukraine spread beyond its current borders, it is critically important for the Kremlin to frame that development for Russian citizens as "forced defence" or a "pre-emptive strike", anticipating public fear of a potential war with Europe against a backdrop of fatigue from an unwinnable war in Ukraine, and a rally-round-the-flag effect.

At the same time, the Kremlin exports these narratives to Eurosceptic audiences abroad – with the aim of deepening divisions within NATO and placing responsibility for any escalation on European national governments and elites, who "have a historical tradition of 'marching eastward'".

"**Canceled troop deployments and delayed weapons deliveries are signaling the end of the bloc's old military order**"[17] and "**as US priorities move away from the EU, NATO faces a fragmented future shaped by Russia fears, French autonomy and Germany's military revival**"[18] – so runs the framing of RT, the Kremlin's export propaganda outlet, which also amplifies storylines that resonate painfully with European audiences: the conflict between NATO members Greece and Turkey[19], the prospect of mandatory military conscription returning to European countries[20], their remilitarisation, and the political fallout from drone incidents[21].

Official propaganda: media and officials

Russian propaganda systematically covers NATO's internal tensions, building from them a narrative of "NATO in crisis as an aggressive structure" – primarily as a demonstration of the success of Russia's own aggressive foreign policy course. This geopolitical legitimation of the course is further reinforced by the propaganda frame of "Putin has outmanoeuvred everyone again", which purports to underscore the Russian president's foresight and strategic calculus.

Stories about growing tensions within the alliance run in near-daily rotation on Russian nationwide channels – in propaganda news bulletins and political talk shows that receive their core narratives and editorial registers directly from the Presidential Administration: "Trump: EU countries have made a complete mess of Ukraine"[22], "NATO Secretary General bans discussion of US withdrawal from the alliance"[23] and "Does he need NATO? Half-life period: Washington is weighing several punishment options, one of which involves withdrawing US troops from countries deemed to have betrayed the alliance"[24] – among the most prominent stories on Russia's three largest television channels.

Beyond the US-European conflict, the propaganda apparatus also focuses actively on tensions between European countries: "Greece disillusioned with NATO following naval drone incident involving Ukrainian Armed Forces"[25], "Von der Leyen's hysteria: Ukrainian drones in the Baltics sow discord in NATO"[26] and "Military equipment prices rise in Europe: disagreements among NATO leaders"[27].

In parallel, the Kremlin's propaganda machine has substantially intensified its narrative about Europe's alleged preparations for aggression against Russia – with France, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Germany as the primary focus. "Macron is betting on nuclear threats. The scenario for the Paris-Warsaw joint exercises envisages Polish forces designating targets for French

Rafale aircraft striking objectives in Russia and Belarus, with the aircraft simulating nuclear strikes"[28], "London has cobbled together yet another coalition of nine states whose combined fleet is to bottle Russia up in the Baltic and the Barents Sea"[29], "the Poles plan to test their latest defence-industry innovations by killing Russians"[30], and "Germany too wants a powerful army, for which Scholz has to coerce everyone and everything: the young into the military, industry into defence production, the country into debt bondage"[31].

The messaging is, however, not without internal inconsistency: claims of "Europe and NATO on the brink of crisis"[32] coexist with claims of "NATO expanding its military presence in the Baltic amid exercises and arms procurement"[33] – and all of it is framed within the overarching narrative of "Europe's war psychosis and its preparations for war with Russia"[34].

Over the past three months, at least ten members of Russia's senior political elite have actively promoted these narratives. Particularly prominent among them are representatives of the security establishment – the so-called "party of permanent war", on which the EK Strategic Communications Center has previously reported[35]: Sergei Shoigu[36], former Defence Minister and Secretary of the Russian Security Council; Sergei Naryshkin[37], Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR); and Nikolai Patrushev[38], former Secretary of the Security Council and current Chairman of the Russian Maritime Board.

Most prolific of all is Dmitry Medvedev[39], Deputy Chairman of the Security Council and the unequivocal leader in terms of volume of public statements, while Putin's press secretary Peskov regularly comments on these themes in the same register: "The EU is using Russophobia as a trigger for mobilisation. They are prepared to spend large sums on military construction"[40].

The same narratives are advanced by the foreign policy establishment: from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minister Sergei Lavrov speaks regularly[41], as do his deputies Sergei Ryabkov[42] and Alexander Grushko[43] and ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, while Putin's designated "negotiator" Kirill Dmitriev regularly and publicly points to "The bleak future of a failed NATO"[44].

Pro-war Z-community as narrative amplifier

Russian pro-war Z-bloggers actively amplify the above narratives, picking up and elaborating on stories the official propaganda apparatus leaves uncovered. Their task is to present a picture of Europe and NATO engaged in comprehensive preparations for aggression against Russia, with each country assigned a distinct role. Any development that strengthens European countries' defence capabilities is presented by Z-bloggers as obvious evidence of impending aggression, and statements by European politicians as its corroboration.

The narratives manifest with particular clarity in relation to countries not normally in the foreground of Russian propaganda. From 22 May onwards, Z-bloggers actively discussed the Czech Republic, responding in turn[45,46] to statements by Czech Chief of General Staff Karel Řehka and President Petr Pavel, expressing bewilderment: "I genuinely cannot understand, even remotely, what threat Russia could possibly pose to the Czech Republic. Will we stop buying Czech beer?"[47].

Even Spain was enlisted to illustrate NATO's problems: "Spain backs the creation of a unified EU army against the backdrop of instability in the United States"[48], the Telegram channel Colonelcassad wrote.

A parallel narrative about the threat from the north-west – Norway, Sweden, and Finland – is gaining traction: "The build-up of military presence on Russia's northern borders is becoming part of the broader strategy of a number of states"[49] wrote Kremlin war correspondent Yevgeny Poddubny, while MIG of Russia, a channel close to the security establishment, claimed that "Norway is making ever more conspicuous efforts to assemble its own 'Viking bloc' on Russia's northern borders"[50].

All of these narratives are regularly reinforced by depicting the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Poland as leaders of remilitarisation and Russophobia: "Britain to create a naval group

against Russia in addition to the NATO fleet"[51], "France's preparations for war, or how Macron spends the public budget in the interests of the arms lobby"[52], "Germany has openly declared Russia 'an enemy once again'"[53] and "Poland ramps up missile production to counter UAVs"[54].

The Z-channels' systematic monitoring of any defence-related news from European countries serves to sustain the narrative of preparations for aggression: the channel Two Majors, linked with the security establishment, wrote that "Europe is actively converting civilian infrastructure to military use"[55], while prominent Z-author Boris Rozhin described[56] what he termed "the doubling of Europe's militarisation": "It is now possible to say that Europe has moved from the concept of 'strategic autonomy' to the practical construction of military command and financing structures parallel to NATO.

At the same time, one should not assume that this process will result in the replacement of the 'old' NATO bodies with 'new' European ones. What it means is that a parallel structure is being created that 'doubles' Europe's militarisation – above all in the Eastern European region – which increases the threat to Russia and Belarus."

The propaganda campaign was clearly in evidence during the week of 18–24 May: several Z-channels published posts[57,58] with near-identical content within a single day of each other, each listing recent European defence news. The composite picture these posts construct is framed under the headline "The West is intensively preparing for war with Russia" – which in Z-language signifies preparations for aggression against Russia, not defensive countermeasures against the Kremlin's own aggressive foreign policy.

The effect is cumulative: measures attributed to eight or nine European countries, listed in a single post, serve as apparent corroboration of the propaganda thesis that escalation and European aggression are imminent.

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