



**A War of Narratives in the Air:  
Hungary's position at the  
intersection of hybrid warfare  
and communication pressure**

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**DANUBE**  
INSTITUTE

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Image: Uniformed honor guards, Kovacs and Balogh of Hungarian Defence Forces, stand guard at guardhouses outside of the Sandor Palace.



## Contents

About the Danube Institute .....	iv
About the Author.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Introduction – Hungary on the New Fault Line of Hybrid Warfare .....	1
Technical Realities: What Do We Actually Know About Airspace and Military Technology?	4
The Absence of Evidence: Questioning the Narrative.....	9
The Factory of Wartime Rhetoric .....	15
Hungary’s Place Between Strategic Neutrality and Interest-Based Caution .....	17
Endnotes.....	18



## About the Danube Institute

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## About the Author



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# A War of Narratives in the Air: Hungary's position at the intersection of hybrid warfare and communication pressure

Norbert Szári, Géza Gazdag

## Abstract

The Hungarian government's defence policy is to meet its commitments to the NATO alliance while, at the same time, maintaining sovereignty. This gives rise to a major challenge: how can the government avoid being seen as being insufficiently committed to supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia, in the context of hybrid warfare in the 21st Century? This paper explains what hybrid warfare is: a situation where perceptions - or narratives - are a structural element of the conflict and not just an accompaniment to it. In the Russian-Ukrainian war, hybrid warfare is closely associated with the use of drones - the technical aspects of which are discussed in detail. The paper explains three situations where drones flew into or across Hungarian airspace, and how these situations generated politically-charged narratives. Appropriate responses from the Hungarian government are outlined. The paper describes how the Russian-Ukrainian war is a "factory of wartime rhetoric" of narratives that focus on the unity of NATO: this complicates the attainment of the Hungarian government's strategic objectives.

## Introduction – Hungary on the New Fault Line of Hybrid Warfare

The Russian–Ukrainian war that erupted in 2022 has done far more than reshape Europe’s eastern periphery: it has unleashed cross-border security dynamics that now permeate the everyday strategic environment of Central European states, including Hungary. Now entering its fourth year, the conflict has made it clear that we are not dealing with conventional military operations but with the complex system of 21st-century hybrid warfare. One of its least discussed yet most sensitive elements is the question of airspace sovereignty: drones, missile fragments, electronic jamming, and information operations are all capable of creating an environment of uncertainty in which real threats and perceived threats either sharply diverge or dangerously merge.

Hungary has experienced several airspace incidents in recent years that can be attributed to the spillover effects of the conflict. At the same time, public debates and international narratives often emerge faster than any thorough analysis of the facts. The issue of Hungarian airspace violations has suddenly become a central topic in regional security discourse, around which both political and media actors have built their own interpretations and conclusions. Some of these narratives lack a solid evidentiary base; others suggest an escalatory logic that diverges from the objective security realities of the region. The result is frequently a double distortion: an underestimation of genuine, measurable security risks on the one hand, and an overvaluation of communicative, geopolitical, or institutional interests that seek to reinforce wartime rhetoric on the other.

In this complex space, Hungary occupies a distinctive, often contested, yet consistent position. The government’s “strategic neutrality” – which places the emphasis on preventing the escalation of the war, protecting the civilian population, and maintaining regional stability<sup>1</sup> – is fundamentally a cautious approach. However, it easily comes into conflict with political expectations of NATO unity and the universalised language of alliance communication. While Hungary approaches the defence of sovereignty through moderation and the maintenance of open diplomatic channels, many Western and regional actors interpret the threats posed by the conflict as tools for strengthening coalition solidarity. The difference is not merely one of political style but of security strategy.

A different response emerges when airspace incidents are viewed as by-products of hybrid warfare, and a different one when they are framed as deliberate state aggression. The Hungarian–Ukrainian relationship has gradually deepened into a crisis of trust over the past years, inevitably influencing the interpretation of airspace-related events. Diplomatic disputes, espionage scandals, and mutual accusations have repeatedly arisen between the two countries, signalling how sensitive bilateral ties have become in the shadow of the war. Budapest has consistently maintained that it does not wish to become a party to the conflict: it sends no weapons to Ukraine, keeps energy dialogue open with Moscow, and opposes Kyiv’s Euro-Atlantic integration under the present circumstances. None of this reflects hostile political intent; rather, it is a conscious, realist foreign-policy stance derived from Hungary’s security and economic interests – one that naturally does not align completely with European or alliance expectations shaped by the wartime situation.

Statements from President Zelenskyy and Ukrainian officials – often exaggerated and framed in the logic of the war – claim that Hungary is obstructing Ukraine’s strategic goals<sup>2</sup> and that other tools will therefore be necessary only deepen mutual suspicion. In this atmosphere, it is particularly important to interpret airspace incidents not in isolation but as part of this complex bilateral context, exercising heightened caution. In the world of hybrid warfare, perceptions, misunderstandings, and insinuations frequently carry greater weight than actual intent or proven action.

One of the most significant problems in the security-policy discourse is that these two interpretive frameworks often fail to separate. While the war has created an intense communicative competition in which every actor seeks narrative superiority, the distortions of these narratives can easily seep into political decision-making. The political and media discourse surrounding the war – in which various institutional, military, and political actors all have a stake – often exerts a stronger influence on public threat perception than actual intelligence or technical data. One of the distinctive features of modern conflicts is that the struggle over interpretation and narrative construction can carry as much weight as tangible military capabilities: the assessment of threats and the perceptions formed around them themselves become strategically significant.



*ex-Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy in Kyiv, Ukraine (Shutterstock)*

The distinctive feature of hybrid conflicts is that perception is not merely an accompanying phenomenon but a structural element of the conflict itself.

Consequently, the political and media discourse – which shapes public opinion through the presentation of events – is often able to obscure the true nature of phenomena, especially when the “popularised” interpretation of the conflict distorts reality.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a realistic assessment of airspace sovereignty violations is a far more difficult task today than it was during the Cold War.

At the same time, the operation, modernisation, and NATO integration of Hungary’s air defence system are measurable against objective facts. According to domestic and allied technical data, most airspace incidents can be attributed to the indirect spillover effects of the war rather than to any deliberate, targeted provocation. The characteristics of drone technology – autonomous flight, control failures, or electronic jamming – are all factors that increase the likelihood of accidental overflights and unintended incursions. By contrast, the fact that parts of public discourse quickly and confidently assume state intent reflects a communicative rather than a military logic.

A particularly important question is how rational strategic thinking can be preserved amid the intensified geopolitical noise. Hungary’s room for manoeuvre in security policy consists not only in responding to genuine threats but also in recognising the narrative and political pressure mechanisms that are by-products of great-power competition in the region. One of the keys to hybrid warfare is the control of psychological, informational, and political space – and Hungary is not immune to external attempts at influence. The defence of sovereignty is therefore not merely a military issue: it is equally a matter of communication and strategic rationality.

This paper argues that understanding the current security situation requires seeing three dimensions simultaneously:

- the technical realities – that is, the genuine capabilities of the air defence system, the nature of drone technologies, and the mechanisms of the conflict’s physical spillover;
- the geopolitical context, in which the war is waged not only on the front lines but also in the media space, in diplomacy, and in political narratives;
- the necessity of rational security policy, which is able to separate proven threats from perception - or interest-driven escalatory pressure.

The purpose of this introduction is to establish the framework within which the subsequent analysis can be understood: a framework that equally respects facts, sovereign state decision-making, and the complexity of regional security. Hungary’s position is not simple, but from a strategic perspective it offers the opportunity to develop a nuanced approach that is rare in the region – one that does not allow wartime rhetoric to suppress genuine security-policy considerations.

The litmus test of hybrid warfare today is not only how a state responds to technological threats, but also whether it can remain level-headed amid the accelerating competition of narratives. For Hungary, the key question is how the defence of sovereignty and alliance commitments can be reconciled without the country becoming one of the drifting actors in the geopolitical perception war. This paper sets out to explore these dilemmas and to contribute to the development of a more sober, evidence-based regional security discourse.

# Technical Realities: What Do We Actually Know About Airspace and Military Technology?

The interpretation of security incidents in airspace can only be credible if we clearly separate technical realities from political narratives. One of the defining features of modern warfare is that the growing complexity of technology is accompanied by increasing interpretive uncertainty: behind any given event – such as a drone overflight – there may be a deliberate military action, but it is equally likely to be the result of a technical failure, loss of control, or electronic jamming. In Hungary’s case, maintaining this distinction is particularly important, because claims about airspace violations often emerge faster than their technical verification.

## The real capabilities of Hungary’s air defence system

Hungary’s air defence operates as an integral part of NATO’s Integrated Air and Missile Defence System (NATINAMDS). This means that the domestic radar network, command-and-control systems, and interception capabilities do not function in isolation but are embedded within an alliance-level detection and decision-making structure, where detection, identification, and response occur with real-time data sharing. Hungarian airspace surveillance is provided, among other assets, by a radar network of NATO-compatible 3D locators, which in recent years has been supplemented by new-generation mobile systems – such as the ELM–2084 multi-function radars – offering more advanced signal processing and greater detection capability, especially against small-sized, low-altitude targets.<sup>4</sup>

These systems do not operate independently; they form a multi-layered defence architecture integrated with air defence missile complexes and tactical air forces, the purpose of which is the continuous monitoring of airspace and the rapid handling of threats.

One of the most significant limitations, however, remains the detection of low-altitude targets with small radar cross-sections. Small drones, especially commercial or improvised UAVs, often fly below or near the radar horizon, which significantly reduces the probability of detection.

In addition, terrain conditions – such as hilly or forested areas – also affect radar coverage, justifying the use of gap-filler radars and the need for multi-sensor systems.<sup>5</sup> This means that the fact that an object is undetected does not necessarily mean that it did not exist: it simply was not detectable in the given sensing environment.

Reaction time is another critical factor. In modern air defence systems – particularly with the introduction of new-generation sensors and integrated command systems – the decision cycle has accelerated considerably, yet it remains a multi-step process: detection is followed by identification, threat assessment, and decision-making. In practice, this means decisions must sometimes be made in a matter of seconds while minimising the risk of misidentification.

The nature of events in airspace is that they unfold extremely quickly, often within minutes, which does not allow for lengthy analysis and decision-preparation processes; the system therefore operates on strictly regulated procedures and pre-defined reaction chains.<sup>6</sup>

A slow-moving object on a non-aggressive trajectory – for example, a drifting or uncontrolled drone – is therefore not necessarily classified as an immediate threat, and the system does not automatically activate a kinetic response.

## The operational characteristics of drone technologies

The proliferation of drones has fundamentally transformed the logic of airspace use. Modern UAVs span a wide spectrum: from a few-kilogram commercial quadcopters to several-hundred-kilogram military platforms that differ significantly in range, flight altitude, and mission profile.<sup>7</sup> In most current conflicts – including the Russian–Ukrainian war – small and medium-sized drones dominate. Their mass employment and transformation into expendable assets have created an entirely new operational logic in warfare.<sup>8</sup> The functioning of these systems carries numerous uncertainty factors that are directly relevant to Hungarian airspace.



*FPV drones before being sent to the troops Donetsk, Ukraine  
(Shutterstock)*

Autonomous or semi-autonomous navigation is one of the most important such factors. GPS-based route flight is vulnerable to jamming and spoofing, while in practice drone operations still rely on complex human–machine interaction rather than full autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Electronic warfare tools can divert drones from their original routes or render them completely uncontrollable. Both sides in the Ukrainian theatre of operations use these technologies intensively, significantly increasing the number of “wandering” or uncontrolled devices, especially in an environment where drones function as the “sensory and strike nervous system” of the battlefield.<sup>10</sup>

Loss of communication link is also a common occurrence. In many drones, if contact with the operator is lost, the device continues on its pre-programmed route or executes a return manoeuvre. However, if this process occurs with faulty parameters – for example, due to jamming or software error – the drone can easily cross state borders without any deliberate intent. This operational logic is further reinforced by the fact that drone employment is increasingly networked and coordinated by multiple actors within an observation and strike system, in which decisions and execution can be separated in both space and time.<sup>11</sup>

Physical damage and partial malfunctions also contribute to unpredictability. The trajectory of a hit or technically faulty device can become unstable, further increasing the likelihood of overflight. In modern drone warfare, where platforms are employed en masse and often as short-lived expendable assets, this kind of instability is not an exception but a structural feature of the system.<sup>12</sup>

### **The probability of spillover mechanisms**

One of the most undervalued characteristics of modern conflicts is physical spillover. This does not mean deliberate military expansion but a side-effect arising from the intensity and technological nature of operations. The war in Ukraine is particularly suitable for studying this phenomenon, as it involves the use of large quantities of often improvised or rapidly deployed assets that have become a defining part of battlefield processes.<sup>13</sup>

Geographical proximity is a key factor. Hungary lies directly adjacent to the theatre of war, so devices drifting westward can potentially reach Hungarian airspace. Wind conditions, flight altitude, and the speed of the device all influence this process.

In the case of a drone or missile fragment with a range of several hundred kilometres, no deliberate targeting is required for it to enter a NATO member state’s airspace. The rapid increase in the number of drones and their increasingly frequent presence in the airspace inherently raises the probability of such incidents, especially in an environment where the devices can unintentionally endanger security.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to distinguish between deliberate and unintentional incursions. A deliberate action generally presupposes complex coordination, target designation, and political risk-taking. By contrast, unintentional overflights are often the consequence of system failures, jamming, or battlefield chaos. The nature of drone warfare is that operations increasingly take place in a networked, technologically mediated environment where command and execution can be separated in space, which increases the probability of unintended consequences.<sup>15</sup> Based on available empirical experience, most documented cases fall into the latter category.

### **What is provable – and what is not?**

One of the most important limitations of technical analysis is the question of provability. Reliable reconstruction of an airspace event requires the combined presence of multiple data sources: radar data, electronic signals, wreckage analysis, and allied intelligence information. In the absence of these, events can only be partially reconstructed.

Radar data alone is not always sufficient for precise identification. In the case of a small drone, it is often only possible to determine that “an unidentified flying object” has entered the airspace. Establishing ownership, point of origin, and intent is a far more difficult task.

Wreckage analysis can provide stronger evidence, but only if the device actually crashes and is recoverable. Even then, uncertainty is common, especially when the system is built from components originating from multiple sources.

The most difficult element to prove is intent. Even if the technical parameters become known, it is not always clear who launched a given device and for what purpose. The initial phase of crisis situations is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty, and decision-making is often based on incomplete or limited information, which can distort assessment.<sup>16</sup>

This uncertainty is one of the key elements of hybrid warfare: it enables deniability and makes it difficult to draw clear political conclusions. This is especially true when there is not a sufficient quantity and quality of information, which can also impair the objectivity of decision preparation.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion: the limits of technical rationality**

The analysis of technical realities clearly shows that a significant proportion of airspace violations cannot be unambiguously interpreted as deliberate aggression. Modern drone warfare, electronic jamming, and battlefield complexity together create an environment in which chance, error, and loss of control become structural factors.

This does not mean that the threats are not real. Any violation of airspace integrity constitutes a security risk and requires an appropriate response. At the same time, over-interpretation carries at least as great a danger as underestimation: if we assume deliberate state action behind every incident, decision-making easily follows perceptions rather than evidence. For Hungary, therefore, the most important strategic task is the preservation of technical rationality.

The interpretation of airspace events must be based on measurable data and probabilistic analysis – not on political or communicative pressure. This approach is not a weakness but one of the most important guarantees of sovereignty in the age of hybrid warfare.



*A B-2 Spirit Stealth Bomber taxis at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada  
(Shutterstock)*

## The Absence of Evidence: Questioning the Narrative

After reviewing the technical realities, the question is no longer what physical or technical processes might lie behind any given airspace incident, but rather how these events appear in the political and media discourse. The problem is not simply a lack of information, but the fact that fragmentary or unverified data are often quickly placed into interpretive frameworks that determine the political meaning of the events.

The Hungarian case illustrates particularly well that the interpretation of airspace incidents is not a linear process: the available technical data, official state communications, and international narratives frequently paint differing pictures of the same incident. In this environment, the absence of evidence is not merely an analytical limitation but an active factor that shapes geopolitical interpretations.

The following examination of three documented cases demonstrates how airspace incidents become part of the informational dimension of hybrid warfare, and how a technical event is transformed into a politically charged narrative.

### I. The Tu-141 incident (10 March 2022)

One of the most symbolic spillover events of the early weeks following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war affected not only Hungary but the entire Central European region. On 10 March 2022, a Tu-141 Strizh-type pilotless reconnaissance drone – developed in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and reactivated by Ukrainian forces at the start of the war – entered NATO airspace via Romania, then crossed Hungary before continuing into Croatia, where it crashed in a residential district of Zagreb, causing significant material damage. The drone covered more than 560 kilometres across the airspace of three NATO member states without being intercepted or consistently tracked by any country's air defence system.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of the Tu-141, the technical evidence was relatively clear: wreckage analysis and identification of the drone type made it almost certain that the device belonged to the Ukrainian armed forces. Nevertheless, neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian side claimed responsibility for the incident. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence stated that it was not their drone<sup>19</sup>, while the Russian side suggested it was a Ukrainian provocation. At the same time, the available technical and geographical parameters make it highly unlikely that the device was launched from Russian territory, which further strengthens the uncertainty surrounding attribution and the logic of responsibility denial.<sup>20</sup>

This double denial clearly illustrates one of the fundamental characteristics of hybrid warfare: the blurring of responsibility and the maintenance of deniability. It was advantageous for both sides not to claim the drone: Ukraine avoided diplomatic responsibility for violating NATO member states' airspace, while Russia could maintain the narrative that the Ukrainian side was handling its military assets irresponsibly.

The Hungarian government's reaction was restrained. There was no high-profile media campaign, nor any call for sanctions or a strong diplomatic note. Instead, technical investigations and coordination with NATO took centre stage. According to Hungarian Defence Forces statements, contact with neighbouring countries remained continuous after the incident, information was shared, and Gripens were scrambled due to radar detections: this indicates that the Hungarian response moved towards heightened readiness and coordinated technical oversight rather than political escalation.<sup>21</sup>

While national-level monitoring and precautionary measures were activated, the incident nonetheless revealed that air defence systems – even within NATO-integrated structures – do not necessarily react automatically to every slow-moving, low-altitude object, especially if it does not exhibit aggressive behaviour or appear target-oriented.



*Ukrainian gunners manning a self-propelled artillery cannon  
(Shutterstock)*

The incident drew heavy criticism from Croatian officials toward NATO's air defence coordination, as the drone was detected by various national radar systems but was not intercepted before impact.<sup>22</sup> Technical reporting also emphasized that, despite being tracked across multiple NATO airspaces, the drone was not treated as a credible threat in time to trigger an interception.<sup>23</sup> The Tu-141's flight was essentially a spillover event: the accidental overflight of a device that likely lost control and deviated from its intended, pre-programmed route. At the same time, the case raised questions about the effectiveness of regional air defence coordination and how NATO handles unintentional but potentially dangerous border violations.

## II. The Tokaj drone incident (May 2025)

The Tokaj drone incident of May 2025 represents an entirely different quality from the Tu-141 case. Here we are not dealing with the drift of an uncontrolled device but with an event whose interpretation was embedded from the outset in an informational and intelligence context. Hungarian Defence Forces radar detected several drones, presumably originating from the direction of Ukraine, at least one of which was destroyed.

The distinctive feature of the case, however, lies not merely in the technical dimension but in the fact that neither the Hungarian nor the Ukrainian side issued any detailed, official, publicly verifiable statement about the events: the reconstruction of what happened relied overwhelmingly on press reports and investigative journalistic sources (e.g., András Dezső).<sup>24</sup> This uncertainty is not a side issue but part of the phenomenon itself: the available information is fragmentary and appears embedded in interpretive frameworks.

The timing further strengthens this reading. The incident coincided with the period when Ukraine's Security Service accused Hungarian citizens of espionage<sup>25</sup>, while the Hungarian side firmly rejected the claims and made counter-accusations.<sup>26</sup> The drone event thus appeared in public discourse not as an isolated technical incident but as part of a parallel intelligence and political conflict.

In this context, the Tokaj case well illustrates one of the basic mechanisms of hybrid warfare: the deliberate maintenance of uncertainty and the domination of narrative space.

The aim of hybrid operations is not necessarily direct military effect but rather to keep actions below the threshold of detection and response while generating interpretive uncertainty.<sup>27</sup>

The actual operator of the drones, the purpose of their launch, and their intent could not be clearly proven – which is not an exceptional phenomenon but a structural feature of hybrid operations: they are deliberately designed to be difficult to detect and attribute while still creating confusion and uncertainty.<sup>28</sup>

In this sense, the drone is no longer interpreted merely as a technical object but becomes an informational and political tool whose significance derives not from its origin but from the interpretations and consequences it triggers.

## III. Hungarian drones in Ukrainian airspace (September 2025)

The third case is the reverse and perhaps even more contradictory than the previous two. In September 2025, the Ukrainian General Staff and president Volodymyr Zelenskyy repeatedly stated publicly that drones originating from Hungary had violated Ukrainian airspace over Transcarpathia.<sup>29</sup> The Ukrainian defence leadership also published maps that allegedly showed their routes. According to Ukrainian claims, these drones were of Hungarian military origin and their purpose may have been reconnaissance or observation over Ukrainian territory.<sup>30</sup>

The Hungarian reaction was swift and categorical. The Ministry of Defence and the Hungarian Defence Forces issued a joint statement declaring that the domestic radar system had not detected any airspace violation and that it was ruled out that Hungarian military drones had entered Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Balázs Orbán, the Prime Minister's political director, also refuted the claims, emphasising that Ukraine had not even reported such an event through official diplomatic channels.<sup>32</sup> In an interview, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán went further and questioned Ukraine's sovereignty, stating that even if a drone had crossed, it would not constitute a significant problem since Ukraine could not be considered a fully independent, sovereign state in the current situation, as its survival depended on "Western support".<sup>33</sup>



*Hungarian Defence Forces conducting a seaborne operation  
(Shutterstock)*

This incident is extraordinary in several respects. First, there is no confirmed technical evidence that Hungarian drones actually overflowed Ukrainian territory. Second, the Ukrainian narrative does not align with Hungarian technical data. Third, the authenticity of the maps published by the Ukrainian side could not be verified from independent sources. Fourth, even if such an event had occurred, it is far from clear whose interests it served and exactly what kind of devices were involved.

Among the most likely explanations are: (1) the alleged drones were not operated by the Hungarian state but by a third party – for example, smugglers or other non-state actors – who launched them from Hungarian territory; (2) the data were fabricated or misinterpreted on the Ukrainian side; (3) the entire narrative was part of an information operation aimed at geopolitically isolating Hungary or exerting domestic political pressure.

All three possibilities belong to the toolkit of hybrid warfare: the first ensures deniability, the second is disinformation, and the third is narrative manipulation.

The Hungarian position was clear: no such operations had taken place, and if anything had flown, it was not the responsibility of the Hungarian Armed Forces. The incident led to diplomatic consultations but did not result in any significant escalation. At the same time, the case demonstrates how vulnerable small states are to information campaigns by great powers or stronger regional actors.

Once a claim enters the public domain – supported by maps, official statements, and speeches by political leaders – it becomes very difficult to refute, even if it is objectively false.

## **Defensive strategies against hybrid provocations**

Read together, the three cases testify not merely to technical incidents but to a geopolitical game in which airspace events become tools for achieving political objectives. For Hungary, the greatest challenge is not the physical defence of its airspace – for which it possesses adequate technical means and NATO integration<sup>34</sup> – but the defence of narrative space. How can one prevent unproven accusations from causing lasting damage to international perception? How can an evidence-based discourse be maintained in an environment where information warfare is often more important than actual military power?

The answer can be formulated on several levels. First, transparent but restrained communication is indispensable. Hungarian practice in this regard has so far proved appropriate: rapid response, the release of technical data where possible, but avoidance of escalation. Second, strengthened regional and alliance-level coordination and information sharing are necessary so that false claims do not find resonance in other states' security-policy assessments. Third, Hungarian security institutions must consistently distinguish between real threats and narrative provocations. Not every airspace event constitutes an attack, and not every accusation is true simply because it is voiced through a state's official channels.

Ultimately, hybrid warfare can be countered not only with military means but also with strategic communication and diplomatic tools. Hungary's position in this respect is particularly delicate: it must simultaneously defend its sovereignty, maintain alliance cohesion, and resist external pressures that seek to turn Budapest into an active participant in the conflict.



*ex-Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto at a ceremony to mark the 75th anniversary of NATO at NATO headquarters in Brussels (Shutterstock)*

## The Factory of Wartime Rhetoric

The Russian–Ukrainian war has reshaped Europe’s security environment not only in military, economic, and diplomatic terms but also in the domain of political communication. Narratives surrounding the conflict have evolved into independent instruments of power. The “factory of wartime rhetoric” thus denotes a self-reinforcing system in which political, military, and media actors continuously produce and reproduce interpretive frameworks that shape how events are perceived. Without understanding this narrative background, it is impossible to see clearly which factors shape the political interpretation of airspace incidents affecting Hungary, or what external expectations influence Hungary’s positioning in the communicative space of the conflict.

### **Institutional frameworks and the logic of escalatory narratives**

Institutions operating in a wartime environment – whether international organisations, intelligence centres, military leadership, or foreign-policy decision-makers – naturally strive to present the conflict within their own security-policy interpretive frameworks. Over recent years, the communication systems of NATO and the European Union have evolved in such a way that, alongside the natural expectation of coalition solidarity and unified strategic stance, the adoption and repetition of a resolute – often overstated – narrative portraying Russia as the primary aggressor has become virtually mandatory for member states. The logic arising from the functioning of alliance structures assumes that strategic coherence can only be ensured by maintaining a “common threat picture.” Consequently, the expression of doubts or more nuanced positions on the conflict is not only unsupported but is frequently regarded as distinctly unwelcome behaviour. Institutions fear that dissonant voices weaken cohesion, the credibility of deterrence, and alliance political unity.

In this sense, escalatory narratives do not stem from a good-faith search for strategic unity but frequently function as political manipulation: they create perceptions that serve internal obedience and bloc formation within the alliance rather than an understanding of actual security realities.

One dangerous side-effect of this logic is that it stigmatises those member states – including Hungary – that do not wish to automatically adopt the more extreme elements of wartime rhetoric or that insist on an evidence-based approach. Anyone who does not join the chorus is easily cast in the role of “renegade,” “Russia-friendly,” “Putin’s agent,” or “unreliable ally” – regardless of the fact that their position is actually rooted in the defence of national sovereignty and strategic sobriety.

One of the fundamental political norms of NATO’s internal functioning is the maintenance of unified threat interpretation and strategic coherence. The continuous expansion and reinforcement of the eastern flank – through the accession of Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and most recently Finland and Sweden – essentially aims to create a security *cordon sanitaire* around Russia’s western border and to block any potential Russian expansion. In essence, there is nothing radically new here: it is merely the rewiring of Cold War reflexes. Within this structural logic, it has become a self-evident expectation that member states reinforce one another not only militarily but also rhetorically, and that they uniformly align with the narrative that places the Russian threat at its centre.

By contrast, Hungary – while fully meeting all its alliance obligations – continues to maintain a distinctive, more nuanced and pragmatic stance compared with the mainstream in its interpretation and communication of the conflict. This position appears to stand out simply because it does not fully fit into the escalatory logic that seeks to combine the strengthening of the eastern flank with rhetorical hardening. The discourse aimed at maintaining NATO unity in communication usually smooths over internal nuances: open debate, signalling uncertainty, or mentioning unproven categories can easily appear as an element that weakens alliance cohesion. This normative pressure significantly narrows the space in which Hungary could, on the basis of its own experience and technical assessments, distinguish genuine threats from fears generated by perceptions. The interpretation of airspace incidents thus gradually leaves the realm of military-technical rationality, crosses into the political sphere, and becomes the symbolic terrain of trust positioning within the alliance.



*Hungarian Ceremonial Guards, Budapest  
(Shutterstock)*

## Hungary's Place Between Strategic Neutrality and Interest-Based Caution

The distinctive feature of Hungarian foreign and security policy is that it seeks simultaneously to meet the alliance obligations arising from NATO membership and the cautionary logic derived from national interests.

For Budapest, the war is not a terrain for strengthening bloc formation but a risk environment in which excessive escalation automatically increases regional instability and the vulnerability of the civilian population.

Strategic neutrality – which government communication often describes as a peace-oriented stance<sup>35</sup> – does not mean geopolitical withdrawal but the avoidance of being drawn into the conflict.

This position, however, is easily misinterpreted by the factory of wartime rhetoric. Several Western analysts, political decision-makers, and media commentators assess that Hungary is not sufficiently committed to supporting Ukraine<sup>36</sup>, which leads some interpretations to portray it on NATO's eastern flank as an outlier or a problematic actor from the point of view of cohesion.<sup>37</sup>

From time to time, the Ukrainian leadership and various Western political actors voice criticisms that interpret specific Hungarian decisions – such as blocking EU support packages or financial aid – as obstructing the common war effort, thereby exerting communicative and diplomatic pressure on the Hungarian government.<sup>38</sup>

Airspace-related incidents become particularly sensitive issues in this environment. When Hungary refers to the lack of technical evidence or adopts a cautious stance regarding a given case, some actors interpret this as if it were relativising the danger or weakening the alliance narrative.

Yet the essence of the Hungarian approach is precisely realist differentiation: as long as it has not been proven that a drone or aircraft is the result of deliberate state action, the incident cannot be classified as aggression but at most as a security risk. For Hungary, therefore, the greatest challenge is not physically defending its airspace – for which a modern, NATO-integrated system is available – but remaining independent in the narrative space. In this sense, Hungarian strategic culture undertakes a dual task: it adheres to an evidence-based security-policy logic and seeks to prevent its sovereignty – in communicative or political terms – from dissolving in the current generated by wartime rhetoric.

The combination of strategic neutrality and responsible caution is a rare approach in the current European discourse. Hungary's position is therefore not merely a foreign-policy deviation but a form of resistance, amid the noise of hybrid warfare, to the dominance of perceptions. At the same time, this position is vulnerable: the louder the wartime rhetoric becomes, the harder it is to maintain an analytical, measured approach.

## Endnotes

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