

Ukraine military briefing

Military briefing: the drone attack on the Kremlin

Subterfuge, attempted assassination or a brazen operation to embarrass Moscow?



Video footage showed two drones exploding within the walls of the Kremlin on Wednesday morning © FT montage/Reuters

Henry Foy in Brussels, **Christopher Miller** in Kyiv, **Polina Ivanova** in Berlin and **John Paul Rathbone** in London 10 HOURS AGO

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An audacious assassination attempt targeting one of the world's most protected citadels? A cynical piece of military subterfuge designed to justify a violent response? Or a brazen operation to embarrass a supposedly powerful police state by revealing its vulnerability?

As intelligence analysts and defence experts pore over the scant details of [the alleged drone attack on the Kremlin](#) early on Wednesday morning, Moscow, Washington and Kyiv are at odds over who is to blame — and what was the aim.

The two small drones with their limited payloads had almost zero chance of killing Russian president Vladimir Putin, who is well known for not sleeping in his official Kremlin offices.

But if they were operated by Ukraine, or agents of Kyiv, their journey is the most serious penetration of Russia's — and Moscow's — supposedly secure airspace since German teenager Mathias Rust landed a small plane near the adjacent Red Square in 1987.

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that has prompted hesitation among some experts over declaring this a false flag conducted by Russia potentially aimed at justifying a new escalation in Ukraine. It would be a significant risk, they argued, for Putin to imply that its military prowess is misplaced, or that one of the most protected sites in the country is vulnerable.



German teenager Mathias Rust's single-engine Cessna aircraft after its landing near the Red Square in 1987 © AP

What happened?

Videos posted online and verified by the Financial Times showed two drones flying towards the Kremlin about 16 minutes apart in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

The first drone flew from the west and was filmed exploding into the dome of the Senate Palace inside the Kremlin walls at 2.27am local time, according to the clock tower in the video. The second flew from the east at 2.43am, exploding near a flagpole on top of the same dome displaying a Russian tricolour. Social media footage showed two people climbing the burning dome when the second attack occurred.

The two drones were small and, from the size of their explosions, appeared to be carrying limited payloads. Moscow has said an investigation is under way, leaving analysts with just the low-quality videos shared on social media.



Lieutenant General Scott Berrier, director of the US Defence Intelligence Agency, said on Thursday the drones did not appear to be the size of weapons that would do significant damage to the Kremlin. Based on photos and videos he had seen, Berrier said the drones potentially required the controller to be within relatively close line of sight.

Some 10 hours after the incidents took place, the Kremlin issued a statement blaming Ukraine for what it called a “terrorist attack” and “attempted assassination”, vowing retribution on Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in reply.

A day later, on Thursday, Putin’s administration pivoted to [laying the blame on Washington](#), accusing the US of having dictated the Ukrainian attack “from across the ocean”.

Both Kyiv and Washington have categorically denied involvement.

How was it done?

If it was a Ukrainian operation, to reach one of the most heavily defended cities in the world and then hit its political heart would demonstrate remarkable planning, luck, daring — and a surprising capability.

Moscow is ringed by radar and air-defence missile systems, which in recent months have been spotted on top of government buildings, including Russia’s defence ministry. The Kremlin is protected by a GPS spoofing system that makes mobile phones and GPS-based navigation systems believe they are elsewhere.

On Thursday, a day after the attack, GPS spoofing in Moscow appeared to be operating with full force. Local residents reported so much diversion of signals in central Moscow that people struggled to order taxis or locate e-scooters.

The Kremlin also reportedly has two Pantsir air-defence systems stationed around it, and a Krasukha-4 ground-based jamming system that is able to knock drones out of the sky. Moreover the Kremlin guard have handheld anti-drone weapons, according to a study by Mark Galeotti, a veteran Kremlin watcher and defence expert.

Even so, General Valeriy Zaluzhny, head of Ukraine’s armed forces, has spoken explicitly of the need for Ukraine to probe Russia’s remoteness and its distant “centre

capacity of the need for Ukraine to probe Russia's remoteness and its distant "centre of gravity", which allows Russian citizens to not "perceive the losses, failures and, most importantly, the cost of this war".

Ukraine has successfully used drones to attack other highly guarded targets inside Russia, including two separate strikes in December on the Engels air base that lies 600km inside the country and is home to Russia's nuclear-capable bombers.

Pantsir air-defence systems are also no guarantee against drones, as Russia found in Syria and Libya. Furthermore, small drones can be hard for radar to detect due to their size, ability to fly low and, in some cases, a non-reflective exterior made from composite materials.

"Ukraine has shown it can take off-the-shelf products, scale them and then use them to creative and lethal effect," a senior western defence official said. "Ukraine's previous attacks using unmanned vehicles also show how hard it can be to defend against those strikes."

Even so, analysts said the small size of the explosion suggested that if it was a Ukrainian attack its purpose was purely symbolic and demonstrative.

The drones used "very small warheads or low-grade explosive, not military high explosive", said Justin Bronk, senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London. "If it was Ukrainian, it was incongruously poorly aimed and armed to cause any actual damage."

Could Ukraine have pulled this off?

Michael Kofman, director of the Russia studies programme at CNA, believed the most likely explanation was that the operation was at the very least orchestrated by Ukraine.

"The simplest explanation is exactly what it looks like," he said, with the objective of demonstrating that Russia was vulnerable and diminishing the Kremlin's power.

US intelligence documents leaked online this spring allegedly showed that Ukraine's GUR military intelligence agency wanted to carry out a series of strikes on Moscow but was overruled by Zelenskyy. GUR's head, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, has a reputation for conducting brazen and sometimes risky operations.

Analysts are divided over whether the drones could have been flown from Ukraine — a journey of around 760km from Kyiv — or launched from inside Russia.

The distance between the Kremlin drone attacks and Kyiv is around 760km

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 Drone attack



Ukraine has little to no capacity for drones that will be able to fly accurately and evade Russian air defences, especially through the secure area around the Kremlin, said a European ex-military adviser who has recently spent months in Kyiv to help assess the purchase of military-grade drones.

“It’s a size, speed and accuracy equation. [Ukraine’s] smaller drones won’t fly that far, larger ones will be picked up early and neither of them will be able to go hundreds of kilometres without loss of accuracy,” the person said.

More likely, the person said, the drones seen in the video were flown from a location near Moscow, and travelled fast — expending fuel and battery — en route to the target. “That doesn’t discount a Ukrainian operator, but makes it a far more complex mission,” he said.

“It is important to understand that this attack could have been orchestrated not just by a government, but also by a non-state actor,” said Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a Moscow defence think-tank. “It’s possible that Zelenskyy was not aware.”

Pukhov pointed to examples in other conflicts where non-state actors such as Isis had been able to assemble attack drones from easily commercially available parts.

“There are powerful volunteer groups in Ukraine. It could’ve been a group of zealots who chipped in some money,” he said, assessing that it would cost less than \$1mn to prepare such an attack.

Could this be a ‘false flag’?

The Kremlin’s initial response stressed its right to retaliate. This led some analysts to suggest the attacks may have been conducted by Russia itself, either to stir up popular anger at Ukraine or to justify a military escalation.

But others assert that the incident casts a deeply negative light on Russia’s security apparatus and ability to protect itself — a key pillar of Putin’s 23 years in charge of the country. “I have my doubts about a false flag operation because the political damage for Putin is huge,” said one senior western diplomat.

Another western official drew comparisons to [the Nord Stream explosions](#) in September 2022. These crippled three of the four gas pipelines under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany, but led to a whirlwind of theories over who was to blame or stood to gain.

“This whole war is full of false flags,” they said. “Every day there are events all along the front line or in Russian territory where we can’t be sure who did what and why.”

Repeated public denials by Zelenskyy and other prominent Ukrainian officials were to be expected, Kofman said. “Ukraine has a range of partners supporting it in the war . . . Some will cheer these types of attacks, others could see them as reckless,” he said. “From past experience, the US administration doesn’t always look positively on strikes in Russia.”

Additional reporting by Felicia Schwartz in Washington, Mehul Srivastava in London and Roman Olearchyk in Kyiv

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