

# Russian Planes 'Play Dangerously', Report Warns

"Highly disturbing" close encounters between Russian and civilian planes in European airspace could cause tensions to escalate.

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Video: Russian Military Action In The West

By Katie Stallard, Moscow Correspondent

Russia is pursuing a dangerous course of military brinkmanship, with the potential for serious escalation, according to a new study backed by senior European figures.

Research by the European Leadership Network examined more than 40 close military encounters between Russia and NATO countries, and their partners in Sweden and Finland, over the last eight months.

The incidents included a civilian airliner taking off from Copenhagen on 3 March, 2014 that came within 90 metres of a Russian reconnaissance aircraft which was not transmitting its position.

The Boeing 737, bound for Rome, had 132 passengers on board.



The majority of incidents happened in Europe

Scandinavian Airlines, which operated the flight, confirmed to Sky News that the incident had taken place and was reported to the relevant authorities.

In early September, Russian strategic bombers were reported in the Labrador Sea near Canada, practising what researchers believe to be simulated cruise missile strikes on the United States.



Video: Russian Planes 'Play Dangerously'

On 17 September, two Russian aircraft violated Swedish airspace, in what the country's Foreign Minister described as the "most serious aerial incursion" in years.

Former UK Defence Secretary Des Browne told Sky News: "History shows that, quite often, serious conflicts escalating into wars start off with relatively small incidents which grow very quickly."

"In my view, they are doing this on NATO's borders to test cooperation and readiness on our side. We need to tell Russia that there are costs and risks associated with this for them, as well as us."

Last month, Swedish armed forces searched the waters off Stockholm in the hunt for what was widely rumoured to be a Russian submarine. However, the country's military would only confirm they were investigating suspected "foreign underwater activity".



Video: Russia Deploys New Fighter-Bombers

Vowing to use force if necessary, it was the nation's biggest anti-submarine operation since the end of the Cold War.

The following week, RAF fighter jets were scrambled twice to intercept Russian long-range strategic bombers.

A degree of mutual probing is routine, but NATO has reported an unusual level of Russian activity over European airspace recently – with more than 100 recorded intercepts so far this year, three times the total in 2013.

Russia has doubled its military spending over the last decade, under ambitious orders from President Vladimir Putin to upgrade 70% of military equipment by 2020.



### Video: Spike In Russian Military Flights

But despite the image of strength Mr Putin likes to project, Russia's economy is looking increasingly weak.

The value of the ruble has plummeted, hit by sanctions and a fall in the price of oil.

Capital flight from the country is expected to exceed \$100bn (£63bn) this year, around twice the cost of hosting the Sochi Olympics.

Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer explained that the weaker Russia's economy gets, the stronger its posturing may become, in an attempt to force concessions on sanctions from Europe.



Video: UK Jet Chases Russian Planes Away

"It's basically nuclear blackmail to frighten the Europeans that Russia may go to war, that this may become nuclear. That they should make concessions – phase out sanctions, be more considerate to Russia, because Russia can go real bad."

Last week, Finland's President warned that Europe is at the gates of a new Cold War.

As tensions continue to rise over the crisis in Ukraine, this pattern of close air and naval encounters appears to be an increasingly dangerous game.