Drone Warfare in Ukraine: Myths and Reality

Description

The European Programme of the Irregular Warfare Initiative is proud to present another episode of the *Notes from the Eastern Front: Lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War* series. The discussion is hosted by Ukraine Hub Lead, Armenak Ohanesian, and Dr Olga R. Chiriac, Europe Programme Director. Our guest is Ivan Grys, Sergeant First Class in the Ukrainian Armed Forces and co-founder of Resist Labs.

The Ukraine Hub of the IWI Europe Program brings forth discussions grounded in battlefield reality., exchanges with operators and practitioners of IW in Ukraine, it explores what separates ideas that survive combat from those that collapse under pressure.

This episode explores how drone warfare has evolved under real combat pressure and why Ukraineâ??s experience is reshaping modern military thinking. Rather than focusing on theory or future concepts, the discussion is grounded in what has worked, what has failed, and what has survived on an active battlefield since 2022.

We begin with a brief look at how drones entered the war in Ukraine. In the early phase, they were mostly civilian tools used for reconnaissance and artillery correction. There was no doctrine, no standards, and little protection against losses. By 2023, FPV drones had become strike weapons, dedicated drone units appeared, and logistics, training, and repair became part of military planning. Today, drones are used at massive scale, with constant upgrades driven by enemy countermeasures. Adaptation cycles are measured in weeks, not years.

The conversation then turns to war economics. Drones are not valuable because they are advanced, but because they are replaceable. A trained soldier takes years to prepare and cannot be quickly replaced. Drones reduce exposure, take on high-risk missions, and help compensate for limited manpower. This matters especially for Europe, where resources and industrial depth are finite. In wars against countries like Russia, outcomes are shaped by what can be produced, lost, and replaced every day.

A central theme of the episode is why the idea of a â??perfect droneâ?• is misleading. In a contested environment filled with electronic warfare and air defenses, large and expensive platforms quickly become high-value targets. Their survivability does not scale with price. Instead, simple and expendable systems prove more resilient when they can be updated quickly and deployed in large

numbers. The evolution of the Shahed drone illustrates this logic: not as a sophisticated weapon, but as a basic platform that is constantly modified, tested, and improved in combat. Its danger lies in how fast it evolves, not in technical perfection.

The episode also addresses the strategic risk of production dependence. Modern drone warfare relies heavily on fragile supply chains and civilian technologies. Without control over key components and manufacturing, scale and endurance are impossible.

Finally, the discussion highlights why Ukrainian battlefield experience is essential for any serious research and development effort. Real combat feedback exposes failures immediately, prevents costly mistakes, and keeps systems aligned with reality.

The key conclusion is simple: modern war is not about perfect weapons. It is about speed, scale, and the ability to learn faster than the enemy.

In our upcoming segment we address drone and robotics warfare in the maritime environment. Specifically, how a nation without an active Navy has taken the battlefield away from the Russian Black Sea fleet. We will look at current developments for subsea warfare and draw conclusions for the Baltic Sea, Arctic, and South Chinese Sea.

Watch on YouTube.

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