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Discrediting Estonia over the Milrem Arson

Denying the sabotage while calling EU factories legitimate targets

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EK Strategic Communications Center

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Kremlin FIMI actors denied Russian involvement in the August 15 Milrem Robotics arson while suggesting that attacks on European arms suppliers to Ukraine could be justified. After Estonia attributed the attack to Russian intelligence on September 29, the messaging shifted to discrediting the investigation and questioning Estonian statehood.

Key topics:

1. Denying Russian Involvement While Justifying Sabotage
2. From Disputing the Evidence to Questioning Estonia's Statehood

Executive Summary

The August 15 arson[1] **at Milrem Robotics**, an Estonian defense technology company that develops and manufactures unmanned ground vehicles for military use, including systems supplied to Ukraine, became a focus of Kremlin information manipulation weeks before Estonia formally attributed the attack to Russian intelligence services on September 29.

> The coverage combined accusations against Estonia, attempts to discredit allegations of Russian sabotage, and arguments justifying attacks on European defense manufacturers.

The Russian-language FIMI channels Latvian Hillock and Shadows of the Baltics, linked to the international InfoDefense propaganda network run by Russian propagandist and milblogger Yuri Podolyaka, initially used the incident to portray a potential closure of Estonia's border as an act of aggression against residents who maintain ties with Russia.

> "This is the essence of Estonian nationalism: it is not defending itself against mythical aggression; it is itself aggressive," a publication circulated by both channels claimed.

As reports emerged linking incidents at several European defense facilities to possible Russian sabotage, pro-Kremlin publications challenged the evidence while simultaneously advancing arguments in favor of such attacks. Shadows of the Baltics described strikes against European arms manufacturers as "an appropriate and lawful response to military assistance to Kyiv," adding that it was "long past time to strike."

The German-language FIMI channel Analytik & News, linked to the InfoDefense network, described European countries as Ukraine's "strategic rear" and argued that sabotage could become "a rational continuation of efforts to disrupt the production chain."

Meanwhile, Pravda DE, the German-language branch of the Pravda (Portal Kombat) network, disputed whether the incidents formed a coordinated campaign, calling the theory "a working hypothesis, not a proven conclusion."

> On September 22, following Latvia's transfer of three suspects to Estonia, Shadows of the Baltics ridiculed the investigation, sarcastically claiming that all three had been recruited "either by the nonexistent Russian GRU or by the FSB, which exists but does not engage in recruitment." Latvian Hillock reposted the claim the following day.

Following Estonia's official attribution on September 29, the multilingual Pravda network and Sputnik LV, the Latvian branch of the Russian state-controlled propaganda outlet Sputnik, amplified Moscow's official denials. Pro-Kremlin publications also sought to ridicule Estonia's Internal Security Service (KAPO), accusing it of pulling allegations "out of a magician's hat and presenting them to a gullible public."

Latvian Hillock and Shadows of the Baltics suggested an alternative explanation for the fire:

> "Could it have been the company's own employees trying to conceal missing inventory?"

Neither channel provided evidence for this suggestion. By September 30, the rhetoric had extended to questioning Estonia's statehood. Civic Optimist, a Russian-language FIMI channel, declared:

> "Russia, meanwhile, will continue to exist with a capital letter. Whether so-called 'Estonia' will continue to exist with any letter at all remains open to debate."

The publications did not need a consistent account of who organized the arson: Russian involvement

could be dismissed as a politically motivated accusation, while similar attacks on European defense manufacturers could be presented as justified.

> After Estonia's official attribution, the emphasis shifted toward discrediting the investigation itself, culminating in a publication questioning Estonia's continued existence.

Denying Russian Involvement While Justifying Sabotage

The August 15 arson at Milrem Robotics, an Estonian military robotics manufacturer that supplies unmanned ground vehicles to Ukraine, attracted FIMI coverage well before Estonia formally attributed the attack to Russian intelligence services on September 29. Notably, EK Stratcom had already suggested in early September that the incident was a possible act of sabotage.[2]

> FIMI narratives about the incident circulated among Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltic states and Scandinavia, appeared in German-language publications, and subsequently reached English-language audiences through the InfoDefense network.

On August 21, Aleksejs Stefanovs linked[3] the Milrem Robotics fire to a potential closure of Estonia's border. A long-time Sputnik contributor, Stefanovs was named[4] editor-in-chief in the funding application for a Baltic Telegram project that received €109,000 from Russia's Fund for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad (Pravfond).

Referring to the espionage conviction in Estonia of truck driver Edgar Mukhanov, and to a proposal[5] by Urmas Reinsalu, chairman of the conservative Fatherland (Isamaa) party, to close the border if Russian involvement in the arson was established, Stefanovs stated: "Each new case, each new statement is another brick in the wall. The goal is clear: to prepare public opinion for complete isolation." He added:

> "An act of sabotage at a defense plant means the border must be closed. A truck driver convicted of espionage means the border must be closed. Migration pressure means the border must also be closed."

The Russian-language Baltic FIMI channels Latvian Hillock[6] **and Shadows of the Baltics,**[7] affiliated with the InfoDefense network run by Russian propagandist and milblogger Yuri Podolyaka, developed this argument into an accusation about Estonia's treatment of residents with ties to Russia.

> "Closing the border is not protection against an external threat but an act of internal aggression against the country's own residents," a publication circulated by both channels claimed. "This is an attempt to cut off the oxygen supply to those who have maintained ties with their historical homeland. This is the essence of Estonian nationalism: it is not defending itself against mythical aggression; it is itself aggressive."

On August 23, Pravda DE, the German-language branch of the pro-Kremlin Pravda (Portal Kombat) network, challenged[8] an article in The Telegraph[9] alleging that Russia was recruiting local criminals to sabotage European defense manufacturers and test NATO's resolve. Citing anonymous Western intelligence sources, the British newspaper linked four incidents: the Milrem Robotics arson in Estonia, explosions at KNDS Ammo Italy and at EMCO in Bulgaria, and a fire at LPP Holding in Pardubice, Czechia. Pravda DE rejected the inference that these incidents had a common Russian organizer:

> "As usual, no evidence is presented. The reasoning, however, is so simplistic that it borders on primitive." It emphasized that the Milrem Robotics suspects were Latvian citizens, adding: "Yet the search for a 'Russian connection' to the sabotage continued. So far, none has been found."

Shadows of the Baltics responded[10] **to the same article** by questioning both the evidence and the choice of targets. "They took four unrelated incidents, linked them solely because they involved the defense industry and Ukraine, and justified their conclusions with anonymous intelligence," the channel argued. "If the GRU had organized these acts of sabotage, it would have targeted production facilities rather

than warehouses." Yet it also openly advocated Russian attacks on European arms manufacturers:

> "It is a pity that the Russian military did not blow to pieces the enterprises that produce ammunition and send it to the enemy." Such attacks, it claimed, would be "an appropriate and lawful response to military assistance to Kyiv," and it added that it was "long past time to strike."

On August 28, the German-language FIMI channel Analytik & News presented[11] sabotage against European defense production as a rational instrument of warfare. Its publication, "Factories in the EU – legitimate targets," discussed the four incidents covered by The Telegraph alongside a thwarted attack on a Skyeton facility in Slovakia that produces Raybird reconnaissance drones. It also referred to a list of European facilities supplying Ukraine that Russia's Ministry of Defense had published[12] earlier that year, suggesting that someone had "used the list for its intended purpose." Describing European countries as Ukraine's "strategic rear," it argued:

> "Under these conditions, sabotage warfare could become a rational continuation of efforts to disrupt the production chain, merely by other means."

On September 3, Pravda DE revisited[13] the five incidents in an article titled "Five incidents – one campaign?" This time, it questioned whether the incidents constituted a coordinated operation.

> "The calendar provides a basis for comparing the cases. It does not, however, justify connecting them all with a single arrow," the outlet argued.
> "The theory of a common campaign remains a working hypothesis, not a proven conclusion." It also challenged the blanket characterization of European arms factories as legitimate military targets, stressing that the circumstances of each case required individual assessment: "The word 'factory' alone cannot complete the chain of evidence."

On September 22, following Latvia's transfer of three suspects in the Milrem Robotics case to Estonia, Shadows of the Baltics published[14] a mocking post about the investigation. "All three were recruited either by the nonexistent Russian GRU or by the FSB, which exists but does not engage in recruitment," the channel claimed. It predicted that the authorities would attribute the attack to Russia regardless of the findings:

> "If the investigation deviates from our scenario in any way, we will sharpen our knives and eat a hat in the newsroom. A good felt hat." Latvian Hillock reposted[15] the text the following day.

The same accusation reached[16] **Russian-speaking audiences in Scandinavia** through the FIMI channel Danish girl around the corner. "But Russia has already been neatly written into the plot!" the channel declared.

> "In old-fashioned detective work, they first found the evidence and then named the culprit. In the Baltic version, it seems, they first find the culprit, and then an exciting quest begins: find the evidence." On September 23, InfoDefense republished[17] the material in English.

Before Estonia's official attribution, pro-Kremlin publications simultaneously portrayed the investigation as politically predetermined and presented attacks on European defense manufacturers supplying Ukraine as potentially justified. These arguments did not require the publications to agree on whether Russia had actually organized the arson.

From Disputing the Evidence to Questioning Estonia's Statehood

On September 29, Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal announced[18] that the August 15 arson at Milrem Robotics had been ordered by Russian intelligence services. Three Latvian citizens had been detained and transferred to Estonia in connection with the attack, and Estonia summoned[19] Russia's chargé d'affaires, Kamran Abilov.

> The Kremlin rejected the accusation. Presidential spokesperson Dmitry Peskov called[20] it "groundless" and "reckless," while the Russian embassy said[21] that Estonia, citing the ongoing investigation, had provided no evidence during the diplomatic meeting.

Moscow's denial was rapidly reproduced across the Estonian- and Latvian-language branches of the Pravda network[22] and by Sputnik LV, the Latvian branch of Sputnik. While some publications reported[232425] both sides' statements, others emphasized[2627] Peskov's denial or the Russian embassy's claim that Estonia had presented no evidence.

> Pravda EE (Estonia) also connected[28] the case to Moscow's claim[29] that arms deliveries would prolong the war and lead to retaliatory strikes.

The propaganda portal Baltnews adopted[30] a more explicitly dismissive framing.

> "Estonia's prime minister is convinced of Russia's involvement in the arson attack without bothering with evidence," it wrote. The outlet emphasized that the three suspects were Latvian citizens and claimed that no links to Russia had been reported.

Latvian Hillock[31] **and Shadows of the Baltics**[32] **developed a similar argument** by mocking Estonia's Internal Security Service (KAPO).

> "Perhaps these are highly classified documents. Or very funny ones. Or perhaps they do not exist at all. Once again, the public is expected to take KAPO at its word," the channels wrote. They also floated an alternative explanation for the fire: "Could it have been the company's own employees trying to conceal missing inventory?"

The post further claimed that pulling supposed Russian threats "out of a magician's hat and presenting them to a gullible public is now KAPO's main job."

> Neither publication provided evidence for the suggestion about Milrem Robotics employees.

On September 30, Latvian Hillock reposted[33] **a publication by the Russian-language FIMI channel Civic Optimist**[34] that combined the absence-of-evidence argument with ridicule of Estonia's response. Referring to reports that Estonia's Ministry of Defense had begun spelling "Russia" with a lowercase initial letter in official communications, the original author mocked the measure as retaliation by the "former Estonian SSR" and "so-called Estonia." The post ended by questioning Estonia's continued existence:

> "Russia, meanwhile, will continue to exist with a capital letter. Whether so-called 'Estonia' will continue to exist with any letter at all remains open to debate."

The absence of publicly disclosed evidence became more than a reason to question Estonia's attribution: it was used to portray the investigation itself as an instrument of political hostility. This framing shifted scrutiny away from the arson and toward the credibility and legitimacy of the Estonian authorities, without requiring an alternative account supported by evidence.

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