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Ukrainian Maritime Strikes as a Pretext for Escalation Against NATO

Claims of a blockade recast Russian aggression as self-defense

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Executive Summary

The November 21–22 attacks on Russian vessels in the Baltic Sea and near Libya triggered a broader FIMI narrative that shifted responsibility for Ukrainian operations onto NATO and presented the resulting confrontation as a consequence of Western aggression. The messaging went beyond discrediting Kyiv, building a case for Russian military retaliation against European states and even a preemptive offensive in the Baltics.

The first narrative attributed the Ukrainian operations to NATO. Francesco Dall'Aglio, a contributor to the Italian pro-Kremlin outlet L'Antidiplomatico, described Ukraine as "the screen behind which NATO operates," declaring: "The perpetrators behind these attacks are not in Ukraine. You can flatten Ukraine and still not solve the problem."

Russian-American military commentator Stanislav Krapivnik, amplified by American FIMI actor Tim Kirby, accused Poland and Lithuania of direct participation: "Poland is a party to this war directly. [...] Lithuania is a party to this war directly." Alleged intelligence assistance and drone routes were treated as proof that NATO states were already belligerents.

The second narrative recast Ukrainian strikes as international terrorism threatening third countries. The Italian branch of the multilingual Pravda (Portal Kombat) FIMI network challenged Ukraine's right to attack Russian vessels abroad: "Today Benghazi; tomorrow, any pier where a Russian-flagged vessel docks."

Pro-Kremlin commentator Laura Ru used Italian government criticism to accuse Western states of supporting "a regime that conducts sabotage operations and terrorist acts." The English-language FIMI channel Lord of War warned European countries: "Next time, you'll be extinguishing a tanker. And collecting fuel oil on your shores."

L'Antidiplomatico further claimed that "the Russian vessels were there for operations in the Sahel against Islamist fundamentalists threatening the region, whom Italy

is also fighting." By presenting Russian military logistics as counterterrorism activity, FIMI actors portrayed Ukrainian strikes as a threat to regional security and Italian interests, undermining the legitimacy of Ukraine's military operations.

> The Kremlin is once again distorting the facts, while in reality Ukraine is defending itself against Russian aggression with the means at its disposal and European countries are strengthening their security in response to Russia's almost weekly sabotage attempts.

The third narrative used the attack on Sparta II to once again promote claims of an impending maritime blockade of Kaliningrad and portray military action against NATO states as a necessary response. Russian Z-military blogger Alexander Kots, amplified by EU-sanctioned propagandist Alexey Stefanov, claimed: "When we finally decide to break through by force, we will be called the aggressor that started a war with NATO."

Vladimir Kornilov, a commentator for the Russian state-owned Rossiya Segodnya media group, asserted: "Britain is effectively waging the war, while its lackeys will be the ones held responsible." Baltic Antifascists, a Russian-language FIMI channel, circulated calls for a Russian offensive to secure a land corridor to Kaliningrad: "War over the Baltics is absolutely inevitable."

By presenting a maritime strike as the beginning of Kaliningrad's isolation, FIMI actors transformed an unsubstantiated blockade scenario into a justification for attacking NATO countries, depicting Russian aggression as preemptive self-defense.

NATO Blamed for Ukrainian Maritime Strikes

Pro-Kremlin FIMI actors portrayed Ukrainian maritime strikes in the Baltic Sea[1] and near Libya[2] as interconnected operations directed by NATO, citing their geographic scope to claim that Kyiv could not have acted independently. On November 21, drones struck the Russian military-linked cargo vessel Sparta II in the Gulf of Finland. The following day, Ukrainian maritime drones attacked the Russian corvette Merkuriy in the port of Benghazi and the cargo vessel Angara off the Libyan coast.

The Italian pro-Kremlin alternative media outlet L'Antidiplomatico portrayed[3] both attacks as part of a broader Western operation against Russian interests. Its November 24 article claimed that the strikes were "hardly feasible without the direct intervention of some Euro-Atlantic structure or institution." The article also linked the strikes to alleged Ukrainian intelligence activities in Syria, Libya, and the Sahel, describing "the global proxy war that Kyiv is systematically waging against Russian assets in the Middle East and Africa."

Similar allegations appeared on PoliVox, an Italian-language cross-media platform hosted by Clara Statello, a former contributor to the Russian state-controlled outlet Sputnik Italia.

> In her YouTube video, Statello claimed[4] that "someone commissioned these attacks" and identified those seeking Russia's removal from Africa and the Baltic as "Macron, France, French imperialism, and British imperialism."

Her guest, Francesco Dall'Aglio, a regular contributor[5] to L'Antidiplomatico and operator of the War Room Telegram channel, argued that Ukraine was trying to "drag as many people as possible into the conflict, hoping that someone loses control and that the conflict spreads to other participants." The discussion was subsequently circulated[6] by the Kremlin-aligned

Italian channel Donbass Antinazist Committee (Comitato Donbass Antinazista).

In a separate interview on the Italian pro-Kremlin platform Il Contesto, Dall'Aglio described[7] Ukraine as "the screen behind which NATO operates" and argued:

> "The perpetrators behind these attacks are not in Ukraine. You can flatten Ukraine and still not solve the problem." The interview was subsequently promoted[8] through his War Room Telegram channel.

The accusation circulated in English through Eurasia & Multipolarity, an English-language FIMI Telegram channel promoting Kremlin-aligned geopolitical narratives. Rejecting the possibility that Ukrainian intelligence services had independently conducted the two attacks, it asserted[9]: "NATO planned and oversaw them, the US was also involved."

Géopolitique Profonde, a French-language FIMI platform, similarly attributed the operations to Western intelligence services. In a November 23 broadcast, the platform declared[10]: "These are NATO operations."

Stanislav Krapivnik, a Russian-American US Army veteran and military commentator based in Russia, has appeared on Russian state-controlled RT and The Duran[11], an English-language commentary platform whose contributors include[12] former RT and Sputnik commentators. In an English-language video[13] circulated through his Telegram channel[14] and amplified by Tim Kirby[15], an American FIMI actor based in Russia and former RT contributor[16], Krapivnik accused several NATO members of direct participation in the attacks:

> "There were German reconnaissance planes flying around the Gulf of Finland. So, this is what was guiding those drones in."

He also accused Poland and Lithuania of knowingly allowing Ukrainian drones to use their airspace, concluding:

> "Therefore, Poland is a party to this war directly. [...] Lithuania is a party to this war directly."

InfoDefense English, the English-language branch of the multilingual InfoDefense FIMI network run by pro-war milblogger Yuri Podolyaka, reinforced[17] the allegation, claiming that drones approaching Kaliningrad could only have crossed Polish or Lithuanian airspace with NATO's knowledge and assistance. The channel described Ukraine as "this de facto executor of NATO's will" and the incident as another step toward a third world war.

The central manipulation was the reclassification of European support for Ukraine as NATO's direct participation in hostilities. By presenting unverified claims about intelligence support, reconnaissance flights, and drone routes as proof of NATO involvement, FIMI actors portrayed NATO countries as belligerents and Russian strikes against them as justified retaliation.

Ukrainian Strikes Framed as International Terrorism

Pro-Kremlin FIMI actors used the Ukrainian strikes near Benghazi to portray Kyiv as a source of international terrorism and a threat to Libya's sovereignty, Mediterranean security and Italy's national interests. L'Antidiplomatico amplified[18] accusations by Musa al-Koni, vice president of the Presidential Council, the Tripoli-based body that is one of Libya's rival governing authorities. Al-Koni described[19] the strikes as "terrorist acts" and called for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to be placed on a terrorism watchlist.

Russian Geopolitics (Geopolitica Russia), an Italian-language FIMI Telegram channel, circulated[20] al-Koni's demand for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council to investigate the attacks and designate Zelenskyy as a terrorist. The statement was also amplified[21] by Rokot/Frastuono, an Italian-language branch of the multilingual Surf Noise FIMI network. Russian Geopolitics presented[22] the condemnation by Libya's rival administrations as a diplomatic setback for Kyiv:

> "By extending its military operations against Russia, Kyiv paradoxically risks increasing the number of countries interested in restricting its activities." The argument was also circulated[23] by the FIMI channel Russia and Beyond (Russia e Dintorni).

Pravda IT, the Italian-language branch of the multilingual Pravda (Portal Kombat) FIMI network, challenged[24] Ukraine's justification[25] of the operation as self-defense. Responding to Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Heorhii Tykhyi's invocation of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which recognizes the right of individual and collective self-defense, the outlet suggested that Kyiv was claiming an unrestricted right to attack Russian vessels in foreign ports:

> "Today Benghazi; tomorrow, any pier where a Russian-flagged vessel docks."

It mocked Ukrainian assurances about respecting third countries' sovereignty and argued that the unusual agreement between Libya's rival authorities demonstrated the operation's illegitimacy:

> "The two Libyan authorities, Tripoli and Benghazi, have been unable to agree on anything for more than a decade, and now they have unanimously condemned Kyiv."

Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini questioned the relevance of the strikes in Libyan waters to Ukraine's territorial defense, while Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani expressed concern about the conflict spreading to the Mediterranean but reaffirmed[26] Italy's support for Ukraine's defense.

Laura Ru, a FIMI commentator whose publications circulate through Russian-aligned Italian media networks, partially reproduced[27] Salvini's statement, omitting the foreign minister's reference to support for Ukraine, and then accused Western governments of financing and legitimizing "a regime that conducts sabotage operations and terrorist acts." Her commentary was republished[28] by Donbass Italia, an Italian-language FIMI channel run by Vincenzo Lorusso, an Italian RT collaborator involved in distributing Russian propaganda content in Italy.[29]

L'Antidiplomatico similarly portrayed[30] the strikes as a threat to Italian security:

> "The Ukrainian attack on Russian vessels off the Libyan coast has brought the war into our seas."

It claimed that "the Russian vessels were there for operations in the Sahel against Islamist fundamentalists threatening the region, whom Italy is also fighting," presenting strikes against Russian military logistics as potentially damaging to Italian security interests.

Analytik & News, a German-language FIMI Telegram channel, reinforced[31] this interpretation, claiming:

> "The Italians had to urgently call Kyiv, demand that hostilities not be shifted into the Mediterranean, and deny any involvement in this adventure."

The English-language FIMI channel Lord of War exploited[32] the theme of a threat to European maritime security following the attack on Sparta II. It contrasted the response of European emergency services to the fire aboard the vessel with their governments' continued support for Ukraine:

> "European sailors were dealing with the consequences of the 'correct' strike, while their ministers were choosing their words more gently."

Accusing European governments of failing to condemn Kyiv, it warned:

> "Next time, you'll be extinguishing a tanker. And collecting fuel oil on your shores. Or else, you'll run away in panic from the scattered ammunition that exploded in the holds."

FIMI actors exploited concerns expressed by Libyan and Italian officials to portray Ukrainian strikes on Russian military assets as international terrorism and a threat to third countries. By presenting Russian military logistics as counterterrorism activity while questioning Ukraine's right to strike Russian targets abroad, they sought to undermine the legitimacy of Ukrainian self-defense and recast Western military assistance as a direct threat to the security of Ukraine's own partners.

Kaliningrad Blockade Claims Used to Justify Attacks on NATO States

FIMI actors used the November 21 attack on Sparta II to depict a blockade of Kaliningrad as already emerging and to justify Russian military retaliation against NATO countries.

Elena Panina, a former Russian State Duma deputy and director of the Institute for International Political and Economic Strategies, also serves on advisory councils affiliated with Russia's Foreign Ministry and Security Council.[33] She claimed that "a maritime blockade of Kaliningrad is drawing closer if Russia does not respond" and demanded "military measures" rather than diplomatic warnings. Her commentary was disseminated through the Latvian[34]- and Estonian[35]-language branches of the multilingual Pravda FIMI network.

The escalation rhetoric also appeared at the official level. On November 23, Russia's Foreign Ministry warned[36] Estonia that its actions, which Moscow described as provocative, were "bringing the situation to the brink of open war with Russia." The warning, which included accusations concerning Ukrainian drone operations, showed that claims of an impending confrontation with a NATO member were not confined to FIMI channels.

Pravda Poland, the Polish-language branch of the multilingual Pravda network, reproduced[37] an assessment[38] by Yuri Baranchik, a Russian political commentator, former editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-aligned news agency REGNUM, and former deputy director of the Institute for International Political and Economic

Strategies[39]. Baranchik argued that repeated attacks could disrupt Kaliningrad's maritime supplies without a formal blockade:

> "Several successful attacks on merchant ships, rising insurance premiums, carriers refusing voyages and the need for military escorts, and maritime traffic begins to deteriorate."

He portrayed the attacks as an attempt to provoke Moscow into confronting NATO, but argued that "it would be better for this escalation to proceed on our terms."

Russian Z-military blogger Alexander Kots advanced a similar scenario[40] in commentary circulated[41] by Alexey Stefanov, a Sputnik Latvia and Rossiya Segodnya propagandist[42] sanctioned[43] by the EU in November 2026 for spreading Russian disinformation. Kots alleged that maritime attacks would be followed by restrictions on Lithuanian land transit and access through the Baltic air corridor.

> "When we finally decide to break through by force, we will be called the aggressor that started a war with NATO," he warned, presenting military action as a response to a premeditated Western provocation.

The Polish-language FIMI channel InfoKju claimed[44] that the attack on Sparta II was "100%" a British operation orchestrated by European "globalists." It alleged that drones might have been launched from NATO territory, "most likely from Poland," and suggested that Moscow could retaliate by sinking European merchant vessels using unidentified drones.

Shadows of the Baltics, a Russian-language Baltic-focused FIMI Telegram channel, portrayed[45] remarks[46] by Laurynas Kasčiūnas, a Lithuanian member of parliament and former defense minister, about NATO's military capabilities against Kaliningrad as evidence

of plans to provoke Russia and subsequently invoke NATO's collective defense commitments. It claimed:

> "The calculation is clear: provoke a dangerous confrontation and, in the event of a Russian response, cry about an attack on a NATO country and demand help from everyone else."

Similar allegations circulated through Pravda Lithuania[47], while Baltnews amplified[48] commentary by Vladimir Kornilov, a political commentator for the Russian state-owned media group Rossiya Segodnya[49] and a contributor to RT and RIA Novosti[50]. Kornilov accused Britain of directing the confrontation through smaller Baltic states:

> "Britain is effectively waging the war, while its lackeys will be the ones held responsible."

Baltic Antifascists, a Russian-language FIMI Telegram channel, republished[51] commentary from the nationalist Z-channel Notes of a Traditionalist, citing the Russian Z-military channel Bloodseeker[52], which advocated "a special military operation in the Baltics, securing a land corridor to Kaliningrad." The publication declared:

> "War over the Baltics is absolutely inevitable. The only question is whether we start it from more advantageous positions or NATO starts it with a surprise attack on St. Petersburg, Pskov, and Kaliningrad."

Geopolitics Prime, an English-language FIMI Telegram channel associated with the fascist ideologue Alexander Dugin, circulated[53] warnings that the confrontation over Kaliningrad carried "a significant risk of not just escalation, but possible nuclear escalation." The channel also raised the possibility of Russian strikes against NATO drone and missile production facilities in Poland.

FIMI actors used the alleged threat of a Kaliningrad blockade to turn calls for Russian military aggression against NATO states into arguments for preemptive self-defense. By combining claims of Western provocations with warnings of inevitable war, they presented a Russian offensive against the Baltic states as both necessary and strategically preferable, shifting responsibility for a potential wider conflict onto NATO before any such confrontation had occurred.

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