Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders

HOT REPORT

WHEN DOMESTIC POLITICIANS ECHO KREMLIN NARRATIVES – THE DISINFORMATION BATTLE OVER RUSSIAN SABOTAGE IN ESTONIA

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THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE TITLED **VARRO VOOGLAID AND HELLE-MOONIKA HELME QUESTIONED RUSSIA'S ROLE IN SABOTAGE ATTACKS. THE KREMLIN EAGERLY SEIZED THE PROPAGANDA VICTORY** WAS PUBLISHED BY DELFI/EESTI EKSPRESS INVESTIGATION BY MARTIN LAINE AND IREENE KILUSK.

WHAT'S HOT?

Statements by two Estonian Members of Parliament questioning Russia's involvement in sabotage operations have been amplified by Russian state-controlled media, turning domestic political commentary into material for Kremlin propaganda.

Following an attempted arson attack against Estonian defence technology company **Threod Systems**, Estonia's Internal Security Service (KAPO) identified Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, as the organisation behind the operation.

However, MPs Varro Vooglaid (independent MP) and Helle-Moonika Helme (EKRE) publicly challenged this assessment. Vooglaid suggested that the attack was more likely an operation organised by Estonian intelligence services, while Helme described it as a possible domestic information operation.

Russian state media quickly amplified their statements, presenting them as evidence that even Estonian parliamentarians believe their own security services are staging attacks to blame Russia.

The case illustrates how domestic political statements can be transformed into propaganda assets by foreign influence networks, without requiring evidence of direct coordination between the speakers and those networks.

What Do We See?

1. Sabotage attributed to Russia is reframed as an Estonian intelligence operation
The immediate trigger was an attempted arson attack against Threod Systems, an Estonian defence industry company.

According to KAPO, the operation was commissioned by Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU. The perpetrators reportedly arrived from Latvia, while information provided by Latvian authorities and the preparedness of the company's security team helped prevent the attack.

Russia denied responsibility.

Vooglaid publicly questioned whether Russian intelligence would repeatedly conduct such unsuccessful operations. He suggested that an Estonian intelligence operation designed to generate fear of Russia was a more plausible explanation.

Helme similarly argued that the attempted attack appeared too amateurish to have been organised by Russian intelligence and suggested that it was part of a local information operation.

The resulting narrative reversed the roles of perpetrator and victim:

Russia is not attacking Estonia; Estonian authorities are staging attacks to portray Russia as a threat.

2. Russian propaganda uses Estonian politicians as credible sources.

The statements were rapidly circulated through Russian-language social media and state-controlled outlets.

Among the examples documented by Delfi:

- Russian propagandist Alexey Stefanov circulated the claim that Estonian security services had organised explosions in Estonia, emphasising that the accusation came from an Estonian parliamentarian rather than Russian sources.
- Sputnik reported Vooglaid's suggestion that the Threod attack was an Estonian, rather than Russian, intelligence operation.
- RIA Novosti presented the statements as an accusation that Estonian security services were deliberately fuelling fear of Russia.

Former pro-Kremlin political activist Andrei Zarenkov translated and circulated Vooglaid's Facebook post in Russian. It attracted thousands of reactions and shares before being picked up by Russian propaganda outlets.

According to Delfi, approximately ten Russian media outlets subsequently published stories about the Estonian politicians' statements.

The significance lies in the source of the message. Instead of relying on Russian officials to deny responsibility, Kremlin-aligned media could cite elected representatives of the country targeted by the attack.

3. The narrative relies on the apparent incompetence of sabotage operations.

A central argument was that Russian intelligence services would not organise amateurish operations that repeatedly fail.

However, this reasoning overlooks the operational model documented in numerous Russian-linked sabotage cases across Europe.

Russian intelligence services have recruited local individuals through social media and other online channels to conduct vandalism, arson and similar attacks. These recruits are often inexperienced and receive limited training.

Such arrangements offer several advantages to the organisers: low operational costs, distance from the perpetrators and greater opportunities to deny responsibility.
At the same time, inexperienced recruits increase the likelihood of operational failure.

An unsuccessful attack is therefore not, by itself, evidence that Russian intelligence was uninvolved.

The argument also overlooks documented damage. Delfi reported that the attempted arson attack against Estonian defence company Milrem resulted in losses amounting to hundreds of thousands of euros.

4. Court-established facts are replaced by speculation.

The controversy extended beyond the Threod incident.

Vooglaid also questioned Russian involvement in earlier attacks, including damage to former Interior Minister Lauri Läänemets's vehicle.

Yet this case had already resulted in criminal convictions.

According to the court-established facts described by Delfi, Allan Hantsom established contact with individuals acting in the interests and on the instructions of the GRU and participated in preparing attacks against property in Estonia.

Several participants admitted their involvement.

Although some evidence in national-security cases remains classified, courts examine the evidence presented by investigators and prosecutors.

The distinction is crucial: **an unsubstantiated alternative explanation should not be presented as having the same evidentiary standing as findings established through criminal proceedings.**

5. “Just asking questions” becomes a vehicle for spreading suspicion.

When questioned by Delfi, Vooglaid argued that he had not made definitive accusations but had merely raised questions.

This distinction matters. Questioning official accounts is legitimate in democratic societies, including when those accounts concern national security.

However, questions can also communicate a specific accusation without explicitly presenting it as a verified fact.

For example:

Could Estonian intelligence services have staged the attack themselves?

When repeated alongside suggestions that Russia would have acted more professionally, such questions can encourage audiences to adopt a particular explanation despite the absence of supporting evidence.

Russian propaganda can then transform the speculative question into a declarative headline.

The original speaker may maintain that no factual accusation was made, while the amplified message communicates precisely that accusation.

Why Does It Work?

Domestic voices provide external propaganda with credibility. Statements by elected representatives carry institutional significance. When Russian state media quotes Estonian parliamentarians questioning their own security services, the message appears less like foreign propaganda and more like an internal disagreement about established facts.

The narrative reverses responsibility. Instead of discussing evidence of Russian involvement, audiences are invited to consider whether Estonia is manufacturing the threat.
This shifts attention from the suspected organiser of the sabotage to the credibility and motives of Estonian institutions.

Uncertainty is exploited. National-security investigations often involve classified information. The public cannot always independently examine every piece of evidence. This creates opportunities to suggest that undisclosed information must conceal wrongdoing, even when courts have reviewed evidence in related cases.

Operational failures are turned into apparent proof. The reasoning is intuitively appealing: professional intelligence services should conduct professional operations. However, the use of inexperienced, disposable recruits means that failed or amateurish attacks are compatible with documented Russian sabotage methods.

Speculation is amplified as confirmation. A politician's suggestion or rhetorical question can become a Russian-language headline asserting that Estonian authorities organised the attack.

Through translation, selective quotation and repetition, uncertainty is transformed into apparent confirmation.

Existing distrust reinforces the narrative. Audiences already sceptical of security institutions may find alternative explanations more persuasive, especially when they come from domestic political figures.

The propaganda does not necessarily have to persuade everyone. Reinforcing suspicion among existing audiences can be sufficient.

Risk Assessment: HIGH

The main risk is the **laundering of foreign propaganda narratives through domestic political authority**.

The case demonstrates how statements by democratically elected politicians can be selected, reframed and amplified by foreign state-controlled media to support narratives that undermine trust in national security institutions.
Three risks are particularly significant.

1. Institutional distrust. Repeated suggestions that security services fabricate attacks can weaken public confidence in institutions responsible for investigating genuine threats.

2. False equivalence between evidence and speculation. Court-established findings, intelligence assessments and unsupported conspiracy hypotheses may appear to be competing explanations of equal credibility.

3. Normalisation of aggressor–victim reversal. The narrative portrays Russia as falsely accused while depicting Estonia as responsible for manufacturing hostility.

The case also demonstrates a broader vulnerability: foreign propaganda does not always need to create narratives from scratch. It can exploit statements already circulating within a democratic country's political debate.

Importantly, the documented amplification does not itself establish that the Estonian politicians coordinated with Russian propaganda outlets or intended their statements to be used in this way.

How to Respond?

For Policymakers and Security Institutions

Explain the evidence and the operational model. Public communication should clarify why failed sabotage attempts are compatible with the use of inexperienced recruits. For example, authorities can explain that Russian intelligence services may recruit individuals online to carry out relatively simple acts of vandalism or arson, rather than deploying trained intelligence officers.

Distinguish ongoing investigations from established court findings. Where an investigation is ongoing, identify the attribution as an official assessment. Where criminal proceedings have concluded, explain what the court established.

Communicate what can be disclosed. Classification should not prevent authorities from explaining investigative procedures, judicial oversight and the general evidentiary basis of previous cases.

Address the wider narrative. Rather than responding only to individual accusations, explain how false-flag allegations and aggressor–victim reversal are used in information operations.

For Journalists and Fact-Checkers

Track the complete amplification chain. Document how a domestic statement moves from Facebook or a political interview to Russian-language intermediaries, Telegram channels and state-controlled media.

In this case, the sequence from Vooglaid's Facebook post through Zarenkov's translation to Russian propaganda outlets is particularly informative.

Preserve the distinction between statements and evidence. Report what politicians suggested, what investigators assessed and what courts established, without presenting these as equivalent forms of knowledge.

Challenge arguments based on assumptions. When someone claims that an intelligence service would never conduct an unsuccessful operation, examine whether the claim is supported by documented operational practices.

Identify narrative transformations. Compare the original statement with subsequent headlines. Did a question become an accusation? Did speculation become a statement of fact?

Avoid amplification without context. Headlines repeating allegations against national security institutions should clearly indicate whether those allegations are supported by evidence.

For Media Literacy Educators and Civil Society

Teach the difference between scepticism and unsupported suspicion.

A useful exercise is to compare three statements:

- “What evidence links the attack to Russian intelligence?”
- “Could another actor have been responsible?”
- “Estonian intelligence services probably staged the attack.”

The first asks for evidence. The second explores an alternative possibility. The third advances a specific explanation requiring its own supporting evidence.

Demonstrate how source credibility is transferred. Show how a statement by a domestic politician can acquire additional authority when circulated internationally as the view of an elected representative.

Analyse the difference between failure and attribution. An unsuccessful operation does not establish who organised it. Attribution requires evidence concerning planning, recruitment, financing, communication and operational control.

Use real examples of narrative laundering. Comparing original political posts with their Russian-language media coverage can reveal how messages change during amplification.

For the Public

Before accepting claims that an attack was staged by domestic authorities, consider:

- Is there evidence supporting the alternative explanation, or only speculation?
- What have investigators and courts actually established?
- Does the argument rely on assumptions about how intelligence services supposedly behave?
- Has a question or personal opinion been presented elsewhere as a confirmed fact?
- Who is amplifying the statement, and how has its meaning changed?

Political criticism and scrutiny of security institutions are essential in a democracy. They become more meaningful when grounded in verifiable evidence rather than assumptions about what must or could have happened.

Key Takeaway

Foreign propaganda does not always need foreign messengers. Sometimes domestic political statements provide the most effective material.

The controversy surrounding the attempted sabotage of Threod Systems demonstrates how unsupported alternative explanations can be incorporated into an established

Kremlin narrative: Russia is not conducting hostile operations against Estonia; Estonia is manufacturing threats to justify anti-Russian policies.

The mechanism is straightforward:

Domestic speculation → selective quotation → translation and amplification → apparent confirmation by local political authority → increased distrust of national institutions.

The broader lesson extends beyond Estonia. In democratic societies, the freedom to question official accounts must coexist with a clear distinction between evidence-based scrutiny and unsupported accusations.

The information-manipulation risk emerges when speculation is transformed into apparent fact — particularly when foreign propaganda networks present it as confirmation from within the targeted country itself.

FURTHER READING

- **Delfi/Eesti Ekspress: Varro Vooglaid ja Helle-Moonika Helme seadsid Venemaa rolli sabotaažis kahtluse alla. Kreml võttis propagandavõidu lahkesti vastu**
- **The Guardian: How Russia uses online recruits for sabotage operations in Europe**

What is BECID?

BECID – the Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders – brings together expertise in fact-checking, media literacy, and journalism across the Baltics. We conduct fact-checks in collaboration with Delfi/Delfi Meedia, monitor disinformation narratives and campaigns under the leadership of investigative journalism organisation Re:Baltica, and promote media literacy through the Baltic Centre for Media Literacy (BCME). We also develop methodologies to effectively counter disinformation. Learn more: becid.eu

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