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By: TA | AP Insight

"Our dagger in Europe" – increasingly dangerous Russian sabotage throughout Europe

The arson of a warehouse in east London in March 2024 is one of a series of sabotages across Europe organized by Russian intelligence services.

Russian intelligence services are increasingly relying on proxies instead of their trained agents in a campaign of sabotage aimed at disrupting everyday life across Europe.

It was almost midnight when a truck driver resting in his cab heard the crackling of flames at a warehouse in east London storing equipment for Ukraine. He grabbed a fire extinguisher and leapt out — but realized the blaze was too big and retreated.

When police arrived, they banged on the doors of a nearby apartment building, shouting at residents to evacuate. Parents grabbed children and ran into the street.

About 30 minutes after the fire started, Dylan Earl, a British man who admitted to organizing the arson, received a message from a man U.K. authorities say was his Russian handler. "Excellent," it read in Russian.

On Tuesday, a British court found three men guilty of arson in the March 2024 plot that prosecutors said was masterminded by Russia's intelligence services — part of a campaign of disruption across Europe that Western officials blame on Moscow and its proxies. Two other men, including Earl, previously pleaded guilty to organizing the arson.

The fire is one of more than 70 incidents linked to Russia that The Associated Press has documented since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Four European intelligence officials told AP they're worried the risk of serious injury or even death is rising as untrained saboteurs set fires near homes and businesses, plant explosives or build bombs.

AP's tracking shows 12 incidents of arson or serious sabotage last year compared with two in 2023 and none in 2022.

"When you start a campaign, it creates its own dynamic and gets more and more violent over time," said one of the officials, who holds a senior position at a European intelligence agency. The official, like two others, spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss security matters.

The Kremlin did not reply to a request for comment on the British case. Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov previously said the Kremlin has never been shown "any proofs" supporting accusations Russia is running a sabotage campaign and said "certainly we definitely reject any allegations."

Recruiting young amateurs

Most of the saboteurs accused of working on behalf of Russia are foreign, including Ukrainians.

They include young people with no criminal records who are frequently hired for a few thousand dollars, the intelligence officials said.

The senior official said Russia has been forced to rely increasingly on such amateurs since hundreds of Moscow's spies were expelled from Western countries following an operation to poison former Russian intelligence officer Sergey Skripal in the U.K. in 2018. That led to the death of a British woman — and a major response from the West.

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Russia "had to change the modus operandi, from using cadre officers to using proxies, making a more flexible, deniable system," the official said.

Documents shared during the London warehouse trial offered a rare glimpse into how young men are recruited.

Among those were transcripts of messages between a man prosecutors said was a Russian intelligence operative and his recruit, Earl, who was active on Telegram channels associated with the Wagner group — a mercenary organization whose operations were taken over by Russia's Defense Ministry in 2023.

Russian military intelligence — acting through Wagner — was likely behind the plot, said Kevin Riehle, a lecturer in Intelligence and National Security at Brunel University in London.

The recruiter — who used the handle Privet Bot — posted multiple times in a Telegram channel asking for people to join the battle against the West, Riehle told the court.

Once connected, the recruiter and Earl communicated predominantly in Russian with Earl using Google to translate, according to screenshots on his phone. Their messages ranged from the deadly serious to the almost comic.

The recruiter told Earl, 21, that he was "wise and clever despite being young," and suggested he watch the television show "The Americans" — about Soviet KGB intelligence officers undercover in the U.S.

"It will be your manual," the recruiter wrote.

In one message, Earl boasted of — unproven — ties to the Irish Republican Army, to "murderers, kidnappers, soldiers, drug dealers, fraudsters, car thieves," promising to be "the best spy you have ever seen."

Potential for injuries

Earl and another man eventually recruited others who went to the warehouse the night of the fire. Earl never met the men, according to messages shared in court, and it's unclear whether he ever visited the site himself.

Once at the warehouse, one of the men poured out a jerrycan of gasoline before igniting a rag and throwing it on the fuel. Another recorded the arson on his phone. It was also captured on CCTV.

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The warehouse was the site of a mail order company that sent supplies to Ukraine, including StarLink devices that provide internet by satellite and are used by the country's military.

Around half the warehouse's contents were destroyed in the fire, which burned just meters (yards) from Yevhen Harasym, the truck driver, and a short distance from an outbuilding in the yard of a home and the apartment block.

More than 60 firefighters responded.

"I started knocking on everyone's doors screaming and shouting at the top of my lungs, 'There's a fire, there's a fire, get out!'" Tessa Ribera Fernandez, who lives in the block with her 2-year-old son, told the court.

A campaign grows more dangerous

When Russia's disruption campaign started following the Ukraine invasion, vandalism – including defacing monuments or graffiti — was more common, said the senior European intelligence official.

"Over the last year, it has developed to arson and assassination," the official said.

Other incidents linked to Russia with the potential to cause serious injury or death include a plot to put explosive devices on cargo planes – the packages ignited on the ground – and plots to set fire to shopping centers in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Lithuanian prosecutors said a Ukrainian teenager was part of a plan to plant a bomb in an IKEA store just outside the capital of Vilnius last year.

It sparked a massive fire in the early hours of the morning. No one was injured.

More fires and a kidnapping plot

Shortly after the fire in London, Earl and his co-conspirators discussed what they would do next, according to messages shared with the court.

They talked about burning down London businesses owned by Evgeny Chichvarkin — a Russian tycoon who delivered supplies to Ukraine.

Hedonism Wines and the restaurant Hide should be turned to “ashes,” Earl said.

Conspirators talked about burning down London businesses owned by Evgeny Chichvarkin — a Russian tycoon who delivered supplies to Ukraine

In the messages, Earl vacillated between saying they didn't “need” any casualties and that if they “wanted to hurt someone,” they could put nails in a homemade explosive device. He noted there were homes above the wine shop.

That reflects a phenomenon the senior intelligence official noted: Middlemen sometimes suggest ideas — each one a “little better” and more dangerous.

While Russia’s intelligence services try to keep “strict operational control” — giving targets, deciding on devices and demanding recruits record the sabotage — sometimes “control does not hold,” said Lotta Hakala, a senior analyst at the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service.

That appears to be what happened in London.

After the fire, the Russian recruiter told Earl he “rushed into burning these warehouses without my approval.”

Because of that, he said, “it will be impossible to pay for this arson.”

Still, the recruiter told Earl he wanted to target more businesses with links to Ukraine.

“You are our dagger in Europe and we will be sharpening you carefully,” the recruiter wrote. “Then we will start using you in serious battles.”