

DISINFORMATION TACTIC SPOTLIGHT

DISTRACTION AND MISDIRECTION



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OVERVIEW

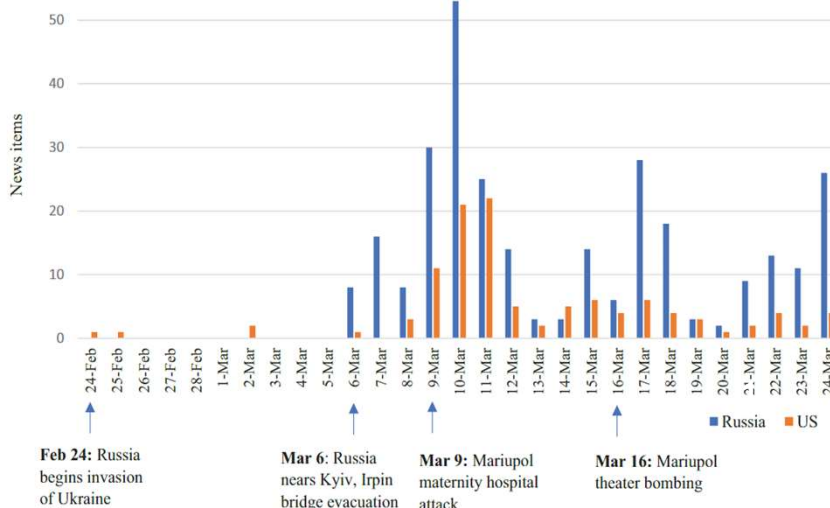
The Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (GP) seeks to understand and counter Russian state-sponsored or state-adjacent disinformation across Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) threats, in support of GP Member efforts. As part of this effort, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security (JHCHS) analyzed disinformation in news media to identify common narratives, tactics, and themes associated with pro-Kremlin CBRN disinformation.

Tactic Spotlight: One commonly used tactic is “distraction and misdirection.” This tactic points to (real or falsely alleged) CBRN activity and threats, such as weapons use, attacks on facilities, or emerging dangers. It is designed to cause confusion about what may be happening on the ground, justify potential use of weapons, and/or direct attention away from potentially embarrassing events or a country’s own CBRN activities.

Misdirection on Biological Laboratories

Leading up to Russia’s enlargement of a high containment biological laboratory near Moscow, there was an increase in false rumors regarding biological laboratories in Ukraine. Historically, this mirrors disinformation campaigns promoted by the USSR to cover up its own clandestine biological weapons activities. Additionally, this effort to draw attention to biological laboratories in Ukraine and accuse Ukrainians of working on biological weapons may have been designed to justify the invasion of Ukraine and divert attention from atrocities committed by Russian forces. The graph to the right shows the volume of news items about Ukrainian biolabs in relation to events in Ukraine in spring 2022.¹

News Items Covering Ukrainian Biological Laboratories by Country, February–March 2022



EXAMPLES

Creating Confusion about Chemical Weapons

Disinformation about chemical weapons frequently creates confusion through false allegations, such as:

- Use of chemical weapons by Ukrainian Armed Forces against the Russian military and Ukrainian locals
- Plans for anti-Russia provocations and false flag operations featuring deployment of chemical weapons
- Ukraine and allies engaging in nefarious activities, like purchasing and transporting suspicious chemicals
- Ukraine and allies disregarding or violating international rules, laws, and norms
- Alternative theories around the poisonings of Alexei Navalny and Sergei & Yulia Skripal

These activities reflect previous efforts to confuse the information space about chemical weapons use in Syria.² They flood and overwhelm the information space, confusing readers, and making it difficult to recognize what information is accurate or false. This distraction tactic can create an environment where malicious activity can remain undetected or difficult to discern from reality. Additionally, it can be used to divert readers from evidence of Russia’s own nefarious activities to other, emotionally evocative allegations against opponents.

Disinfo excerpt: “The simultaneous supply of American chemical weapons and means of protection against them to the Ukrainian Armed Forces indicates active preparations for the use of the biological psychotropic chemical agent Bi-Z in the Donbass.” (Sputnik Georgia, 2023)

EXAMPLES

Distracting from Real Events by Leveraging Fears About Radiological or Nuclear Threats

Pro-Kremlin news media outlets often prey upon fears and confusion about radiological and nuclear weapons to distract and direct attention away from real events. News media outlets, for example, falsely alleged that Ukraine attacked the Kursk nuclear power plant (NPP).³ Such false claims muddled the information space and served as a distraction from the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk.⁴

Radiological and nuclear weapons-related disinformation distracts and misdirects through false narratives about:

- Attacks on nuclear power plants
- Plans for anti-Russia provocations and false flag operations featuring radiological and nuclear weapons
- Spikes in radiation near nuclear sites and across Europe
- Evidence and graphic descriptions of explosions that are likened to the atomic bomb

Disinfo excerpt: *“Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday accused Ukraine of trying to strike Russia’s Kursk nuclear power plant in an overnight attack and said Moscow had informed the U.N. nuclear safety watchdog about the situation.”* (Reuters, 2024)³

IMPLICATIONS

These manipulative techniques influence the information space by directing attention in purposeful ways. Like a magician with a card trick, Russia deceives audiences by misdirecting their attention, drawing it away from its own failures or illegal acts and towards the fictitious crimes of other actors. Because they are highly feared and have strong emotive potential, CBRN threats serve as a compelling subject for Russia’s disinformation campaigns. Further, when such disinformation campaigns include allegations about the development or use of CBRN weapons, the polluted information space may lead others to perceive that multiple parties are violating international norms and regulations, weakening these systems and increasing the risk of WMD proliferation.

ACTIONS

Audiences should be made aware of how common this approach is in disinformation campaigns and try to remain aware of the larger information space in which these types of accusations are made in order to gain a better understanding of how their attention may be misdirected. Forewarning policy makers and the public can help to improve resilience to this kind of disinformation. Such warnings can include describing the historical use of disinformation to distract and manipulate audiences. Voluntary transparency exercises such as peer-review visits to laboratories⁵ or other facilities may also help build and maintain trust between states and preserve the nonproliferation norms and systems that may be undermined by such disinformation.

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