

UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA'S CHEMICAL WEAPONS ALLEGATIONS IN UKRAINE



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Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has repeatedly accused Ukrainian armed forces of using chemical weapons. Russia's disinformation efforts surrounding Chemical Weapons (CW) development and use in Ukraine are a continuation of tactics that have evolved since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. These narratives appear strategically timed to coincide with military and political escalations, aiming to influence international opinion and justify Russia's conduct.

This briefing paper focuses on the evolution of these allegations, highlighting Russia's strategic use of such claims as part of a broader disinformation campaign. Historically, allegations of CW use have been a powerful tool for manipulating international opinion. For instance, in the Syrian Civil War, allegations of chemical attacks, such as the 2013 Ghouta attack, altered the politics of international involvement, leading to widespread condemnation and intervention efforts. In the current context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia appears to be employing similar tactics by making allegations against Ukraine to serve its broader political and military objectives. Unlike the Syrian case, where evidence played a central role in shaping international responses, the Russian accusations lack substantiation and seem designed to manipulate the narrative.

EVOLUTION OF CHEMICAL WEAPON DISINFORMATION

Russian allegations of Ukrainian chemical weapons have specifically cited agents such as white phosphorus, chlorine, phosgene, CS gas, chloropicrin, BZ, sulfuric acid and sodium cyanide. Twenty-one specific claims (graph 1) have been made using international treaties, platforms and mechanisms such as the *United Nations Security Council (UNSC)*, *Note Verbales to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)* and the remainder published via the media or social networks from February 2022 to November 2024.



The timeline of chemical weapons allegations in the Russia-Ukraine war reflects a pattern that appears closely tied to a broader pattern of disinformation and counteraccusations. A regular cycle of mutual allegations has established itself, with Russian narratives prioritising disinformation regarding chemical incidents, and Western Powers countering with concerns relating to potential Russian cover operations. Russian allegations have been widely interpreted as an effort to preemptively deflect blame or justify future actions in relation to possible chemical weapon use in the conflict.

In the initial months of the conflict after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Russian forces faced unexpected resistance. Following this resistance, the first wave of CW allegations began to emerge. The early accusations were often vague, without reference to specific events and with little or no evidence presented. For example, in March 2022, Russian authorities claimed they had found evidence of US-funded biolabs in Ukraine conducting research on dangerous pathogens and including chemicals that could be weaponised. Despite the lack of credible evidence, these accusations were heavily amplified by Russian media and echoed by state officials, signalling an early attempt to create a narrative that positioned Ukraine as the aggressor. This early period saw Russia attempt to frame Ukraine as a violator of international norms, likely in an effort to justify its invasion and delegitimise Ukrainian resistance on the global stage.

As the conflict intensified, the nature of the allegations evolved. In June 2022 at the UN Security Council, Russia claimed that Ukraine was preparing a chemical false flag incident. Despite failing to provide any evidence, the accusations gained traction serving the purpose of spreading confusion and casting doubt on Ukraine's actions whilst pre-emptively deflecting blame in the case of deliberate use of CW by Russia.

In July 2022, Russia provided another notable accusation to the OPCW involved claims that Ukraine planned a chemical provocation in Mykolaivka, Donetsk, by dispersing liquid chlorine at the Slovyansk thermal power plant. Similarly, no evidence was presented to substantiate these claims, and international observers were unable to verify the existence of such chemical threats. The timing of these allegations coincided with increased international military aid to Ukraine, suggesting a possible attempt by Russia to sway international opinion and deter further support.

From early-2023 onwards, the focus of the allegations shifted towards more specific incidents involving claims of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) delivering chemical munitions. In February 2023, Russian media circulated footage purportedly showing Ukrainian drones dispersing unknown chemicals over Russian positions in Velyka Novosilka. However, the video was quickly flagged by Fenix Insight as likely staged or manipulated, given the lack of corroborating evidence and the similarity to previous disinformation tactics used in other conflicts.

Most recently, in October 2024, the Kremlin made an unfounded public statement claiming that Western-backed Ukrainian forces used toxic chemicals against Russian forces, and that Ukraine, with the support of NATO, planned to stage a chemical weapons attack.

In a significant development, the OPCW recently confirmed the presence of riot control agent CS gas in samples collected by Ukraine near confrontation lines in the Dnipropetrovsk region, following an alleged chemical incident in September 2024. CS gas is one of the most commonly used tear gases in the world. CS gas is used as a riot control agent, however, is banned for use in warfare due to the 1925 Geneva Protocol. While the use of CS gas is prohibited as a method of warfare under the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW report underscores the need for independent verification mechanisms amidst the ongoing allegations from both sides.

Following the Ukrainian incursion in the Kursk region, a further spate of chemical weapons allegations have appeared, including the claim that Ukraine is clearing territory using chlorine. The evidence provided has included manipulated images which, in one case was taken in Iraq in 2015, but presented as if it relates to recent combat operations in Kursk.

TIMELINE

- March 2022**
Russian authorities claimed they had found evidence of US-funded biolabs in Ukraine.
- June 2022**
Russia claimed that Ukraine was preparing a chemical false flag incident.
- July 2022**
Russia claims Ukraine planned a chemical provocations in Mykolaivka.
- Early 2023**
Allegations shift towards claims of UAVs delivering chemical munitions.
- February 2023**
Russian media alleges chemical drone strikes targeting Russian positions.
- October 2024**
Russia claimed that Western-backed Ukrainian forces used toxic chemicals against Russian forces.
- November 2024**
OPCW confirmed the presence of riot control agent CS gas in Ukraine.



CONCLUSION

The timing of these allegations appears closely linked to key points in the conflict when Russia sought to shift narratives or justify escalations. By examining the pattern of these claims, it becomes clear that they serve several strategic purposes for Russia. Firstly, they act as a tool for deflecting attention away from its own military actions, particularly those that may violate international laws. Secondly, they help to frame Ukraine as a violator of international norms, potentially weakening international support.

Understanding the background and timing of these chemical weapons allegations is crucial for policymakers and international observers. Recognising the strategic intent behind these claims can help mitigate their impact, counteract disinformation, and focus on obtaining credible, verifiable information in assessing the true situation on the ground.

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