

STRATEGY AND IMPACTS OF CW DISINFORMATION



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Disinformation plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, influencing diplomatic outcomes, and diverting attention. Russian allegations against Ukraine concerning the use of chemical weapons (CW) have been a central part of this strategy. These claims are not simply reactive responses to specific events; they are part of a calculated effort to shape conflict narratives to confuse international observers and deflect attention from alleged transgressions of international law.

STRATEGIC AIMS

1. *Deflection of Blame*

Russia's allegations fit into a broader strategy which is seeking to shift the blame for chemical weapons use onto Ukraine. By accusing Ukraine of chemical warfare, Russia attempts to position itself as the victim of a false narrative, claiming to be targeted by unsubstantiated attacks. This tactic serves two purposes: it deflects attention away from Russia's own violations of international norms, and it undermines the credibility of Ukrainian and international claims. Russian allegations are often directed with little or no evidence, but their repetition contributes to a growing atmosphere of confusion that can hamper efforts to hold Russia accountable for its actions.

2. *Justification for Potential Action*

Another strategic aim of these allegations is to set the stage for Russia's own potential use of chemical weapons. By framing accusations of Ukrainian chemical attacks as a pre-emptive move, Russia can lay the groundwork to justify the use of chemical weapons on the battlefield. This tactic further aligns with concerns expressed by the US, UK, and Ukraine about the possibility of "false flag" operations, in which Russia might stage chemical attacks to falsely implicate Ukraine. These pre-emptive accusations create a framework in which any future Russian use of chemical weapons can be justified as retaliation or as a defensive response to Ukrainian "provocations."

3. *Discrediting Ukraine and International Allies*

By accusing Ukraine of chemical weapon use, Russia seeks to frame Ukraine—and by extension, its allies—as aggressors or violators of international law. These allegations are part of a broader strategy to undermine Ukraine's legitimacy on the world stage, presenting it as a rogue state that ignores the laws of war and the disarmament treaties such as the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Furthermore, by focusing on the actions of the US and NATO, Russia attempts to discredit the support Ukraine receives from the West, portraying it as an enabler of Ukrainian violations. By continuously disseminating CW-related disinformation, Russia aims to polarise the geopolitical landscape.

IMPACTS ON CONFLICT DYNAMICS

1. *Complicating Accountability*

The stream of unverified claims and manipulated evidence complicates the process of accountability for contraventions of the norms, laws and guidelines under threat during the ongoing conflict. International bodies, such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), can struggle to determine the veracity of claims when accusations are constantly reported. The volume of disinformation makes it challenging for these organisations to distinguish between genuine threats and fabricated claims.

2. *Erosion of Trust in International Monitoring*

The effectiveness of international monitoring bodies such as the OPCW has been undermined by the ongoing disinformation campaign. When evidence regarding allegations is inconsistent or unverifiable, international organisations are left with limited options. The repeated lack and volume of clear evidence leads to a situation where organisations tasked with monitoring CW can lose credibility, as they are unable to confirm or refute the claims. This erosion of trust not only hampers the credibility of international monitoring but may also reduce the deterrent these bodies have on states considering the use of CW.

3. *Increased Tensions and Sanctions*

The disinformation surrounding the alleged use of chemical weapons has contributed to increased diplomatic tensions. These allegations have sparked a cycle of retaliatory sanctions, as the US, EU, and their allies impose financial and economic penalties on Russian entities in response to accusations of chemical weapons use. The ongoing accusations

feed into a broader narrative of escalating tensions, with each new claim prompting further punitive measures and deepening divisions.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

1. *Role of the OPCW and UN*

International organisations, particularly the OPCW and the United Nations (UN), face significant challenges responding to chemical weapons allegations due to the lack of verifiable evidence and the complexity of the claims. The OPCW has struggled to verify allegations made by both Russia and Ukraine, as the limited or contradictory information available makes it difficult to establish reliable facts. This challenge is compounded by the high volume of claims, which not only raises concerns about the authenticity of specific reports but also overwhelms the OPCW's ability to conduct thorough investigations. As a result, the OPCW's ability to independently verify chemical weapons use has been severely hampered, preventing clear conclusions and effective responses.

In the absence of conclusive proof, these organisations are often forced to issue generic statements or suspend investigations, which further fuels scepticism and disinformation. The competing narratives make it difficult for the international organisations to take decisive action with regards to accountability.

For example, the OPCW's recent Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) to Ukraine in November 2024, following allegations from Ukraine of toxic chemical use near Ilyinka, provides a clear instance of these challenges. In response to Ukraine's request for a TAV the OPCW team corroborated the chain of custody for samples provided by Ukraine, confirming the presence of the riot control agent CS in both soil and grenade samples. However, the OPCW noted that the use of riot control agents as weapons of war is prohibited under the CWC, which highlights the difficulty of managing competing allegations while ensuring compliance with international norms.

Despite the OPCW's rigorous methods, including independent analysis by designated laboratories and witness testimonies, such incidents underscore the ongoing challenges of verifying chemical weapons use. These complexities are not limited to the verification of false claims, but also involve the logistical and technical hurdles of gathering consistent, reliable evidence amid ongoing conflict.

2. *Sanctions and Diplomatic Pressure*

The United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom have imposed sanctions on Russian entities and individuals associated with the spread of false information or the alleged use of CW. These sanctions are intended to punish Russia and deter further escalation. However, they also serve as a diplomatic tool to signal disapproval of Russia's actions and to bolster the credibility of Ukraine's claims. In addition, the international diplomatic pressure on Russia has been amplified by the allegations, which have become a focal point for global debates on the ethics of warfare and the use of CW.

The increasing readiness of States Parties to call out Russian disinformation relating to chemical weapons reflects the growing concern over the implications of Russia's disinformation campaign, which undermines efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict. As accusations of chemical weapons use continue to surface, international powers are increasingly aligning with Ukraine's calls for greater international scrutiny and accountability, further isolating Russia from the global community.

CONCLUSION

Russia's use of disinformation about Ukraine's chemical weapons is a strategic tool designed to deflect blame, justify potential future actions, and discredit both Ukraine and its supporters. By complicating accountability, eroding trust in international monitoring, and prompting retaliatory sanctions, these allegations are impacting the dynamics of the conflict at the international level. The ongoing responses from international organisations such as the OPCW and the UN, have been limited by the lack of verifiable evidence, highlighting the challenges posed by disinformation amidst ongoing conflict



hostilities. The international community's response, including sanctions and diplomatic pressure, reflects the growing recognition of the dangers posed by Russia's disinformation campaign, and the need for a unified stance against the use of chemical weapons.

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