

DEBUNKING THE RECENT OCTOBER 2024 RUSSIAN CLAIMS OF A CHEMICAL WEAPONS ATTACK BY UKRAINE



DECEMBER 2024

DETAILS OF THE NARRATIVE

On October 12, 2024, over 290 individual channels on Telegram and accounts on X (formerly Twitter), as well as some online news websites amplified a message claiming Ukraine was attacking Russian soldiers with unidentified chemical weapons.

The channels which repeated almost identical allegations across multiple languages (Russian, French, Spanish, English and Polish), focus on a story of a Russian soldier who experienced a chemical weapons attack. The soldier (callsign 'Cerberus') was allegedly the only survivor of a four-day chemical attack by the Armed forces of Ukraine. The posts describe how the soldier sustained injuries from exposure to a chemical agent while rescuing another soldier from their position. The narrative reports the use of a gas without assigning a specific classification to the substance (although a video description on RuTube classifies it as Sulphur Mustard) and is often accompanied by photos or videos.

Whilst the origins of the story are unclear, it has gained traction after being published by a war correspondent and Kremlin-affiliated Telegram channels. There are two variations of media reports supporting the claims – a video of the position the soldier was allegedly located at, with either a supporting selfie of an individual who is suggested to be the soldier, or a still image of what is claimed to be the soldier's hand damaged by the chemical agent. The video and the selfie are presented as original material. However, monitoring by GP WMD Disinformation identified the pictures to have appeared two months prior related to other contexts.

The first instance of the photo in question appeared at a local Ukrainian channel from the Kharkiv Regional Administration on September 21, which initially claimed it depicted damage caused by a Russian chemical attack. The post was later amended to say the picture was illustrative and didn't show the results of the actual attack. It was then deleted entirely. The actual origins of the picture and its connection to exposure by a chemical agent have not been identified. However, Russian networks are actively claiming and watermarking the image as evidence of a Ukrainian chemical weapons attack.

CONTEXT

This campaign has emerged during a period of high tension with Russia's actions in the ongoing conflict with Ukraine, particularly relating to the allegations of CW use in Ukraine and the diplomatic discourse within the OPCW.

In October 2024, the Russia-Ukraine conflict entered a phase of heightened military and diplomatic activity. On the ground, Russian forces launched aggressive offensives, seizing strategic locations such as Krasnyi Yar in

TIMELINE

September 2024

Photo showing alleged CW injuries of Ukrainian soldier is shared by Ukrainian channels.

These claims are later clarified and debunked, revealing the image was illustrative, with no confirmation of its origin or link to chemical attacks.

October 2024

A network of Russian channels begins sharing claims about the Armed Forces of Ukraine using chemical weapons

The claims are amplified by Kremlin-associated media outlets like Tsargrad TV and Pravda News

November 2024

Video posted on RU Tube detailing the chemical as sulfur mustard

Donetsk and Nevske in Luhansk, while Ukraine successfully defended other critical areas, including Kurakhove. Both sides escalated their use of drone warfare, with Russia targeting Kyiv and Ukraine conducting strikes in Belgorod.

Diplomatically, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy introduced a "Victory Plan" during a NATO defence ministers' meeting, outlining goals for increased military support, advanced weaponry, and NATO accession. Zelenskyy emphasised the urgency of robust international backing, particularly considering concerns about declining aid from key allies like the United States.

This surge in activity occurs alongside several significant developments tied to chemical weapons allegations. The Russian Federation was ousted from the OPCW Executive Council and faced Ukrainian-led efforts to block its re-entry. Additionally, the OPCW Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) to Ukraine recently released a report confirming the presence of CS gas in samples reportedly linked to a Russian drone attack.

The timing of these accusations is crucial within the broader context of the ongoing military and diplomatic tensions. It aligns with a well-documented pattern where Russian disinformation increases during periods of intense conflict. These chemical weapons allegations may serve as a strategic effort to shape international perceptions and responses. With Ukraine actively lobbying for more support, including advanced weapons and NATO membership, these allegations could be seen as a tactic to discredit Ukrainian forces and draw global attention to supposed violations of international law.

TACTICS USED

The allegations of a CW attack by Ukrainian forces on Ukraine follows a similar pattern of tactics used by Russia:

- **Firehose of falsehood:** this tactic utilises high numbers of channels and messages and exemplifies a willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions. This tactic is used through the multiple messages across multiple channels, in different languages, portraying the same story. It is important to note that this is not a story told from different perspectives but is instead identical description of events likely machine translated into different languages.
- **Misrepresentation of evidence:** As highlighted, whilst the messages claim the images of wounds and the soldier are from mid-October, these images actually circulated in September, suggesting that the use of such images as 'evidence' of a recent CW attack is not genuine.
- **Appeal to emotions:** by using highly emotive/ graphic imagery, Russian actors seek to evoke feelings of disgust, fear and outrage.

TECHNICAL ASSESSMENT: PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

The photographs presented in this case are inconclusive in determining the nature of the alleged chemical agent. While a Russian source has suggested sulfur mustard as the agent of concern, there is no corroborative evidence to substantiate this claim, nor any documented instances of sulfur mustard use in Ukrainian territory.

The wounds depicted in the photographs are nonspecific and cannot be used to confirm the patient's exposure to sulfur mustard. The injuries, which depict focal tissue necrosis of the 4th and 5th digits - could have resulted from localised trauma or thermal burns – importantly there is no specific wound pattern presented that is confirmatory of a chemical exposure, either inhalational or locally delivered to the anatomical site of concern.

Furthermore, the absence of evidence for sulfur mustard use in Ukraine and the fact that the photographs provided have been sourced from a prior post by Ukrainian online accounts, renders these photographs irrelevant to the present claims made by Russian actors.

SUMMARY

The chemical weapons allegations made against Ukraine in October 2024, involving a Russian soldier's claim of being attacked with an unidentified chemical agent, appear to be part of a broader disinformation campaign. Despite widespread dissemination across multiple platforms, the narrative lacks credible evidence. Key images, which pre-date the incident in question, are misrepresented to make suggestive claims without contemporaneous evidence. The claims of sulfur mustard use are unsubstantiated, and the injuries depicted in the images are non-specific for indicating chemical weapons exposure.

This disinformation, amplified through a "firehose of falsehood" strategy, with tactics designed to garner audiences' emotional reaction, aligns with Russia's broader tactics to discredit Ukraine amidst a tense military and diplomatic climate. As both sides continue to intensify operations, these allegations may serve as a tool to influence international perception, particularly in the context of rising chemical weapon concerns and Ukraine's calls for further support.

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