

DISINFORMATION TACTIC SPOTLIGHT

PORTRAYING STATES AND ORGANIZATIONS AS PUPPETS



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OVERVIEW

The Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (GP) seeks to understand and counter 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) systematically analyzed over 300 news media items from the EUvsDisinfo Database to identify common narratives, tactics, and themes associated with pro-Kremlin CBRN disinformation.

Tactic Spotlight: One commonly used tactic is portraying states and organizations as puppets. This tactic is used to imply that a foreign power exercises control over a country or organization, thereby discrediting it and its supporters. This tactic is often employed alongside false claims of CBRN development or use, including claims that Ukraine's development or use of such weapons is controlled or directed by the United States and the broader "West." This tactic also discredits and undermines multilateral institutions such as the OPCW, IAEA, and UN by framing them as puppets of "the West."

Portraying states and organizations as puppets: Biological weapons

In news media items containing disinformation about biological weapons, Ukraine's sovereignty was repeatedly called into question. In particular, news items claimed that Ukraine was effectively controlled by the United States, which was using the country to further its own geopolitical interests, including the development of biological weapons.

News media items containing disinformation about biological weapons constructed Ukraine as a "puppet state" by claiming that:

- Ukraine was merely a testing ground for the United States' clandestine biological weapons activities.
- The Ukrainian government had no control over the functioning of U.S.-funded biological laboratories in its territory.
- The 2014 Maidan Revolution, during which former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich was removed from power, was orchestrated by the United States in response to the Ukrainian government's attempts to close U.S. biolaboratories in Ukraine.

Example: *"This is the main reason for the creation of U.S. biolabs in Ukraine, serving as an opportunity to carry out the most dangerous kinds of studies, including studies on human beings, which are prohibited under U.S. laws, but allowed in Ukraine, due to problems in Ukrainian legislation, but to a greater extent, to Ukraine's foreign control by the United States."* (Sputnik International, 2020)

Portraying states and organizations as puppets: Radiological and nuclear weapons

In spreading disinformation about radiological and nuclear weapons, news media outlets asserted that Ukraine, the United Nations, and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are puppets controlled by and acting on behalf of "the West", typically the U.S. and U.K.. This tactic, which effectively framed the war in Ukraine as a proxy war with the West, was used to justify Russia's actions, such as the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus, as a defensive and just response to Western aggression.

Radiological and nuclear weapons-related disinformation portrayed states and organizations as puppets in narratives claiming:

- The U.S. and U.K. are behind Ukraine's plans of a nuclear provocation using a dirty bomb.
- The U.S. is interested in escalating the war against Russia using nuclear weapons.
- Russia is calling on "the West" to stop Kyiv's shelling of nuclear power plants, but the IAEA, which is under pressure from the West, won't make definitive statements on where the shelling is coming from.

Example: *"Russian President Vladimir Putin commented on the IAEA report on the Zaporozhye NPP published yesterday. In his opinion, the agency wrote it under pressure from the United States and Europe, and therefore did not directly indicate that the shelling was coming from Ukraine."* (Kommersant, 2022)

EXAMPLES

Portraying states and organizations as puppets: Chemical weapons

News media items containing disinformation about chemical weapons often referred to Ukraine as a "puppet state" of "the West" in an effort to discredit Ukraine's military response to Russia in the Russo-Ukrainian War and discredit countries that supported Ukraine. When paired with allegations of nefarious activity (e.g., claims that U.S.-made chemical weapons were delivered to Ukraine), this tactic was used to proactively blame "the West" for preparing to use chemical weapons in Ukraine, warn them about pinning the blame for it on Russia, and justify retaliatory actions.

This disinformation tactic also included the following claims related to chemical weapons:

- Alleging that the U.S. planned to use chemical weapons against Russia, using Ukraine's army for cover.
- Mocking the Ukrainian army's losses due to their alleged "Western" puppeteers' lack of military prowess.
- Accusing the media and OPCW for being puppets of "the West" if they blamed Russia for being involved in the deaths of Sergei Skripal, Yulia Skripal, and Alexei Navalny or ignored Russia's supposed evidence to the contrary.

Example: "Igor Kirillov announced the delivery to Ukraine of several wagons of toxic substances, including the US-made Bi-Z chemical weapon, as well as a large batch of personal protective equipment. Washington's goal is, under the cover of the puppet Ukrainian army, to use weapons of mass destruction in the special operation zone and shift responsibility for this crime to Russia." (Sputnik Georgia, 2023)

Framing a country as a "puppet state" uses the metaphor of a puppeteer controlling a puppet to imply that a country that appears to be independent is being manipulated or controlled by a foreign power.¹ Russia's attempts to frame Ukraine as a puppet of "the West" are politically strategic because they undermine Ukraine's credibility, discredit Ukraine's supporters, blame "the West" for allegedly waging a proxy war against Russia, and deflect attention away from Russia's own actions (including its efforts to exert control over Ukraine).^{2,3} This narrative also justifies Russian intervention in Ukraine as a way to seemingly liberate Ukraine from its puppeteers. Framing multilateral or intergovernmental organizations as puppets similarly discredits their autonomy and undermines their impartiality, trustworthiness, and ability to fulfill their mission of ensuring WMD non-proliferation.

Encouraging public awareness of this tactic can help promote resilience and resistance to its effects. When communicating about this tactic in the context of Ukraine, it may also be useful to highlight Russia's own attempts to exert control over Ukraine, including by staging "referendums" in occupied territories. Such an approach could underscore the hypocrisy in Russia's claims about Ukraine being a puppet of "the West". It is also vitally important for policy makers and other communicators to stress the autonomy and impartiality of multilateral institutions like the OPCW, IAEA, and UN. In addition, it may be helpful to emphasize that Russia's attempts to frame such institutions as puppets undermine their credibility and, by extension, pose a threat to international security.

1. Marek K. *Identity and Continuity of States in Public International Law*. Librairie Droz; 1968.
2. Bodnar, Joseph , et al. "How Is Russia Covering the Ukraine Crisis?" *Alliance for Securing Democracy*, 27 Jan. 2022, securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russia-propaganda-disinformation-ukraine/.
3. Kremlin Watchers Movement. "Disinformation Trends in September 2023." *Vox Ukraine*, 2023, voxukraine.org/en/kremlin-watchers-movement-disinformation-trends-in-september-2023. Accessed 14 Jan. 2025.