

DISINFORMATION TACTIC SPOTLIGHT

FRAMING RUSSIA AS A SAVIOR

JANUARY 2025



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) 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 “Framing Russia as a Savior.” This tactic represents Russia’s attempt to commend its own actions, framing them as necessary to ensure global peace and security. By drawing attention to alleged CBRN and other security threats that purportedly require Russian intervention, this tactic is designed to legitimize Russia as a responsible international actor and justify its aggression in Ukraine.

Framing Russia as a Savior: Biological weapons

In news media items containing disinformation about biological weapons, Russian efforts to warn the global community about the alleged danger posed by U.S.-funded biological laboratories in Ukraine were emphasized. In addition, Russia was framed as a protector from those very threats.

Several actions taken by Russia to “protect” specific populations or warn the global community were lauded, including:

- Russia’s appeal to the UN Security Council to investigate the purportedly nefarious activities of U.S.-funded biological laboratories in Ukraine
- Russia’s proposals to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention in the context of U.S.-assisted biological laboratories in Ukraine
- Russia’s efforts to “protect” residents of the Donbas region from various threats (including alleged biological weapons threats)

Example: “[The United States] act[s] in exactly the same way in Ukraine, where they provoked a coup d’état, condoned the inculcation of neo-Nazi ideology, turned Ukraine into a testing ground for military-biological experiments, turned a blind eye to the killings of the civilian population of Donbass and prepared for military action against our country. Under these conditions, Russia stood up to protect the population of Donbass and did not allow their aggressive plans to be implemented.” (News.am, 2023).

Framing Russia as a Savior: Chemical weapons

Pro-Kremlin news media items containing disinformation about chemical weapons often praised Russia’s actions in the Russo-Ukrainian war and portrayed Russia as a symbol of justice, righteousness, and freedom. They emphasized this rhetoric through contrasting negative narratives alleging that the U.S., U.K., NATO, OPCW, and others were disregarding nonproliferation norms or engaging in nefarious activities regarding chemical weapons.

Disinformation about chemical weapons framed Russia as a protector and praised their actions, including:

- Asserting that Russian military laboratories can identify potential chemical weapons use by “the West” in Ukraine.
- Russia asserts leadership in strengthening the Chemical Weapons Convention, despite obstruction from “the West”, as evidenced by their alleged bias in the investigation of Alexei Navalny’s poisoning.

Example: “The Russian Ministry of Defense today officially warned the Western masters of the puppet Ukrainian army about inevitable retaliation for the use of chemical weapons during the special military operation ... The analytical capabilities of the chemical laboratories of the Russian Ministry of Defense deployed in the zone of the special military operation make it possible to reliably determine the type of chemical used and the country of origin.” (Sputnik Georgia, 2023)

EXAMPLES

Framing Russia as a Savior: Radiological and nuclear weapons

Pro-Kremlin news media outlets framed Russia as a morally responsible international actor intent on restoring order to Ukraine and preventing the escalation of a nuclear world war. They emphasized Russia’s military prowess and ability to outsmart Ukraine, U.S. and NATO opposition by foiling their alleged plans to carry out nuclear strikes against Russia. Such false claims reinforce the notion that Russia is a “protector” by exploiting legitimate fears of radiological and nuclear weapons-use and attacks on nuclear power plants.

Disinformation about radiological and nuclear weapons that framed Russia as a savior included claims that:

- Russia has never threatened to use nuclear weapons in the Russo-Ukrainian war
- Russia invaded Ukraine to protect people from the Kyiv "regime" and confirm Ukraine's status as a neutral and nuclear-free state
- Russia is trying to protect the public from the alleged radiation risks associated with Ukraine's use of Western-supplied depleted uranium shells

Example: “According to him, Moscow has repeatedly warned about the disastrous consequences of the West supplying Ukraine with shells containing depleted uranium.” (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2023)

The framing of Russia as a savior is likely designed to legitimize the notion that Russia is a responsible and beneficent international actor, one dedicated to maintaining global peace and security and ensuring a world free from CBRN threats. Moreover, by constructing humanitarian and CBRN threats that allegedly require Russian intervention, this tactic may also be designed to provide a legal and moral justification for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its other aggressive actions. The construction of threats may evoke a fear response in readers, making them more prone to emotional reasoning and therefore more likely to believe Russia's false claims.¹ Finally, by drawing attention to alleged CBRN and other security threats, this tactic may serve as a [distraction](#) from Russian atrocities committed in Ukraine.

Exposing this disinformation tactic may help prevent it from persuading the public that Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine or elsewhere are legally or morally justified. Russia has used a similar framing in the past² and will likely use it again in future conflicts. As such, it may be beneficial for policy makers and communicators to call attention to the tactic now as a form of pre-emptive refutation. Communicators can also debunk specific claims associated with this tactic, including false claims of CBRN threats. To be maximally effective, debunking efforts should include detailed alternative explanations.³ For example, a debunking message could explain that the biological laboratories in Ukraine are public and animal health facilities that *reduce* biological threats in the region.

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3. Lewandowsky S, Cook J, Ecker UKH, Albarracín D, Amazeen MA, Kendeou P, Lombardi D, Newman EJ, Pennycook G, Porter E, Rand DG, Rapp DN, Reifler J, Roozenbeek J, Schmid P, Seifert CM, Sinatra GM, Swire-Thompson B, van der Linden S, Vraga EK, Wood, TJ, Zaragoza MS. *The Debunking Handbook 2020.* <https://sks.to/db2020>. 2020. Accessed January 9, 2025. DOI:10.17910/b7.1182