

DISINFORMATION TACTIC SPOTLIGHT

DISREGARD FOR RULES, LAWS, AND NORMS



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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 falsely alleging that a country or entity is disregarding or breaking rules, laws, and norms. This tactic represents Russia's attempt to discredit its opponents by claiming that they are hypocritical rule-breakers, often accusing them of breaking or planning to break the same rules they accuse Russia of flouting. Such allegations cause reputational damage, distract audiences from Russia's own rule-breaking, and may undermine the international normative and legal framework by creating the impression that existing laws and norms are being violated with impunity.

Disregard for rules, laws, and norms: Biological weapons

News media items containing disinformation about biological weapons frequently referenced the United States' overseas biological activities, often claiming that such activities were not peaceful in nature and were therefore a violation of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC or BTWC). Many items also alleged that the United States was conducting such activities in violation of national legislation and without regard for ethical or moral norms. News items in which this tactic was employed included the following false claims:

- Claims that the US is circumventing or failing to comply with both U.S. national legislation and the BWC by conducting prohibited biological activities in overseas (as opposed to domestic) laboratories.
- Claims that the US is conducting biological experiments on individuals living in the post-Soviet space, often without their consent or knowledge, thereby violating ethical regulations and norms.
- Claims that U.S. scientists working in overseas laboratories are granted diplomatic immunity, allowing them to break national laws without facing prosecution.

Example: *"The Americans frankly did not bother to comply with the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and their Destruction (BTWC). This was precisely the primitive, but cunning idea: the jurisdiction of the BTWC covers the development of biological weapons on one's own territory, but not on the territory of other BTWC states parties."* (Sputnik Belarus, 2023)

Disregard for rules, laws, and norms: Chemical weapons

News media items containing disinformation about chemical weapons often constructed hypotheticals, like Ukraine and the US allegedly planning to deploy banned chemical weapons in Ukraine and highlighted how doing so would violate rules. They pointed to supposed double standards or lack of cooperation during investigations, often in situations where these countries had accused Russia of breaking rules. This sought to discredit "Western" countries and paint them as unreliable, untrustworthy, and hypocritical, thus making Russia look like a rule-follower in contrast. This disinformation tactic included the following claims related to chemical weapons:

- Alleging that the Ukrainian Armed Forces plan to use prohibited chemical weapons and commit war crimes with U.S. support, thereby violating the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).
- Accusing the US of not fulfilling its obligations to destroy chemical weapons stockpiles.
- Claiming that the "West" violated norms by not cooperating with Russia during investigations of the poisonings of Alexei Navalny and Sergei & Yulia Skripal.

Example: *"In February, the head of Russia's Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Protection Forces, Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, accused Ukrainian forces of using banned chemical warfare agents on the battlefield. He claimed that Washington had been aiding and abetting Kiev in these activities ... the two nations had thus violated the OPCW's charter."* (RT, 2024)

EXAMPLES

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Disregard for rules, laws, and norms: Radiological and nuclear weapons

News media items featuring disinformation about radiological and nuclear weapons often accuse Ukraine and the West of disregarding and manipulating international rules, laws and norms, such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), to advance their geopolitical interests and support alleged attacks on nuclear power plants (NPPs). These claims discredit Russian opposition by highlighting their supposed political shortcomings and suggesting that they are willing to disregard non-proliferation norms and endanger citizens in pursuit of their goals. This tactic was featured in the following radiological and nuclear weapons-related disinformation narratives:

- Claims that Ukraine and its Western allies are portraying Ukraine’s alleged attack on the Zaporizhzhya NPP as lawful and consistent with international norms.
- Assertions that the West is complicit in “criminal” behavior by turning a blind eye to Ukraine’s alleged attacks on the Zaporizhzhya NPP.
- Accusations that the West uses Russia as a scapegoat to distract from their own diplomatic failures and manipulates international norms and laws to serve its geopolitical agenda.

Example: *“We strongly urge Washington, Brussels and other capitals, primarily European ones, to leave irresponsible games and intrigues around the Zaporozhye Nuclear Power Plant and immediately exert influence on the Kyiv authorities in order to force them to stop shelling the station and adjacent territories,” Zakharova emphasized. ‘Further connivance with on the part of the Western curators of Ukraine is simply criminal.’” (TASS, 2022)*

IMPLICATIONS

The Russian government’s tendency to accuse its opponents of violating or circumventing rules, laws, and norms can be described as a form of whataboutism. Whataboutism is a fallacious rhetorical technique that is designed to deflect criticism of one’s own wrongdoings by pointing to an opponent’s wrongdoings,^{1,2} which, in the context of Russian disinformation, are often falsely alleged. By accusing the United States, Ukraine, and broader “West” of violating international and national laws, Russia seeks to deflect and distract from its own breaches of international law, including its invasion of Ukraine and its recent use of chemical weapons. In addition to discrediting and undermining Russia’s opponents, this tactic may erode confidence in the broader international normative and legal system by framing existing laws and norms—including those designed to protect the global community from weapons of mass destruction—as weak and easy to transgress.

ACTIONS

Policy makers and communicators can respond to this tactic by exposing it for what it is: a fallacious argument designed to divert attention from Russia’s own disregard for rules, laws, and norms.³ In fact, raising awareness of this tactic among both diplomats and the general public may improve their ability to identify when it is being used to deceive or mislead them, promoting cognitive resistance and resilience.⁴ This tactic is often used in conjunction with another commonly used tactic: [Distraction and Misdirection](#). As such, it may be useful to raise awareness about both tactics together. In addition, when responding to this tactic, it may also be beneficial for countries to reaffirm their commitment to abiding by and upholding international laws and norms, including those codified in non-proliferation and disarmament treaties, thereby reinforcing their strength and value.

REFERENCES

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