

DISINFORMATION TACTIC SPOTLIGHT

USE OF MISLEADING “EVIDENCE”



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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 consists of referencing, describing, or alluding to “evidence” that purportedly confirms Russia’s false claims about CBRN weapons/threats. Such evidence may include agreements, documents, reports, and other “materials.” In some cases, these materials are legitimate but are deliberately misinterpreted or taken out of context. In other cases, these materials are partially or fully fabricated. This tactic is designed to legitimize Russia's claims, driving audiences towards false conclusions that Russia desires.

Use of misleading “evidence”: Biological weapons

News media items containing disinformation about biological weapons frequently alleged that there were "materials" to supposedly substantiate Russia's claims about U.S. overseas biological weapons development. Some referenced specific documents or claimed that evidence existed and was incontrovertible—even if it didn't exist or was strategically manipulated—to bolster perceived credibility of false claims. Claims in which this misleading tactic was used include:

- Claims that Russia had uncovered documents and other "materials" (e.g., laboratory reports, "eyewitness" testimony) during its invasion of Ukraine that proved biological weapons development was taking place in Ukrainian laboratories.
- References to—and mischaracterizations of—specific documents or agreements outlining U.S. cooperative biological activities in the post-Soviet space.
- References to U.S. patents for devices or products that could purportedly be used to disseminate biological weapons.

Example: *“Igor Giorgadze, a former Georgian state security minister, has claimed that the US-funded medical facility, known as the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research, in Georgia could be a cover for a bioweapons laboratory... Having allegedly obtained some 100,000 pages of secret docs, Giorgadze said he would consistently make them publicly available. For instance, he has already revealed a US Patent for the development of a remotely controlled 'device for the aerial release of mosquitoes.”* (Sputnik International, 2018)

EXAMPLES

Use of misleading “evidence”: Radiological and nuclear weapons

Pro-Kremlin news media outlets often referred to data, information, instructions, and other forms of “evidence” to substantiate false claims about Ukraine and the West’s engagement in suspicious activities related to radiological and nuclear weapons. These narratives cause confusion and stoke public fears of radiological and nuclear disasters by claiming that evidence of WMD development and radiation spread was concealed or ignored. This tactic was featured in the following radiological and nuclear weapons-related disinformation narratives:

- Claims that Russia obtained information outlining Ukraine’s plans to create a dirty-bomb for a nuclear "provocation" with support from the West.
- References to—and mischaracterizations of—video evidence of explosions allegedly exhibiting the characteristics of an atomic bomb.
- Claims that the European detector system was tampered with to conceal evidence of an alleged radioactive cloud moving towards Poland.

Example: *“Recently, several web media outlets provided videos of an enormous explosion in the town of Khmelnytski, located to the West of Kiev, and about 200 km from the border with Poland. There were two major explosions which produced a massive roiling swirling fireball which, like an atomic bomb, developed upwards and formed a mushroom cloud, which was black.”* (Sputnik International, 2023)

Use of misleading “evidence”: Chemical Weapons

False claims about chemical weapons alleged that materials such as internal government documents, scientific reports, and videos provided evidence that Ukraine and the “West” were engaging in suspicious activities related to the purchase or use of chemical weapons. This included claims that the “West” concealed or disregarded evidence Russia had presented to defend itself against allegations of criminal activity. Unsubstantiated evidence is often used to conceal and divert attention from Russia’s own violations. This tactic was featured in the following chemical weapons-related disinformation narratives:

- Claims that the OPCW concealed findings around the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, setting up a planned provocation¹ to discredit Russia and disregarding Russia’s evidence alleging that Navalny died of natural causes.
- Claims of evidence showing that Ukraine agreed to let companies dump hazardous waste and pollute Ukrainian land.
- Claims alleging delivery of chemical weapons to Ukraine and supposed plans to use them and blame Russia for it.

Example: “[Maria Zakharova] believes that after their call, Berlin will stop hiding “secret materials” from the international community and erasing formulas detected substances from reports ... The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the West and the OPCW, by not providing the Russian Federation with information about the substance with which [Alexei] Navalny was allegedly poisoned, are concealing key “evidence.”” (RIA Novosti, 2021)

Referencing or discussing “evidence” (even if such evidence is fabricated or taken out of context) is a tactic used to signal to Russia’s target audiences that its claims are factual or legitimate. These types of signals, which are often referred to as heuristic cues, are problematic because they may discourage individuals from thinking critically about Russia’s claims, leading them instead to rely on a more intuitive and biased form of information processing.¹ The Russian government (along with its proxy outlets) uses these cues deliberately to increase the chances that its falsehoods are believed. Russia also uses this tactic to erode the credibility of the agencies and institutions named in its evidential “materials,” making it difficult for them to respond effectively to Russia’s allegations and potentially undermining their ability to implement global threat reduction activities. This tactic is often used in conjunction with another similar, commonly used tactic: [Using “Authoritative” Sources](#).

Communicators can respond to this tactic by exposing the ways in which Russia misrepresented or misinterpreted specific documents and other materials. The correct interpretation of these materials should be emphasized, as individuals may need to fill a cognitive gap²⁻⁴ about why such materials (including patent applications) exist or what they really mean. In addition, pre-emptive or anticipatory approaches should also be considered. Raising awareness of this tactic, for example, may help protect Russia’s target audiences from being manipulated by its use in future disinformation campaigns. In addition, those responsible for drafting documents on activities that are commonly targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns (e.g., cooperative threat reduction activities) may want to think pre-emptively about how to draft language in a way that would be difficult for a foreign government to misinterpret or misrepresent.

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2. Cook J. How to Effectively Debunk Myths About Aging and Other Misconceptions. *Public Policy & Aging Report*. 2017;27(1):13-17. doi:10.1093/ppar/prw034
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4. Ecker UKH. Why rebuttals may not work: the psychology of misinformation*. *Media Asia*. 2017;44(2):79-87. doi:10.1080/01296612.2017.1384145