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GEC Special Report

The Kremlin's Chemical Weapons Disinformation Campaigns

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kremlin's spreading of unfounded and debunked allegations that the United States and Ukraine are conducting chemical and biological weapons activities in Ukraine is part of a well-established Russian disinformation tactic.

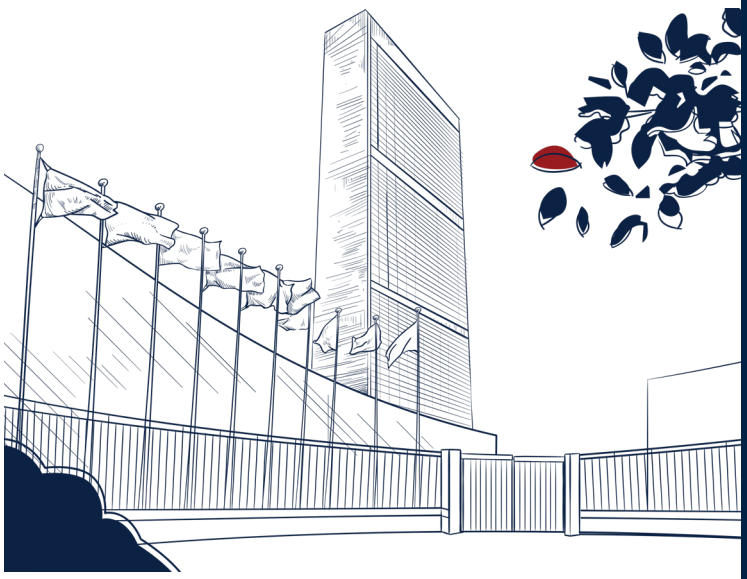
The Kremlin has a long track record of accusing others of the very violations they commit. The United States does not own or operate any chemical or biological laboratories in Ukraine and is in full compliance with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Ukraine is also in full compliance with its obligations under the CWC and BWC. It is, in fact, the Russian Federation that has active chemical and biological weapons programs and is in violation of its international obligations.

Just like during Putin's war of choice against Ukraine, the Russian government spread disinformation to shield its Syrian ally from accountability after the Assad regime's repeated use of chemical weapons, including the 2017 sarin attack against Syrians in Khan Shaykhun. The Kremlin also denied its own responsibility for the 2018 Novichok poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the United Kingdom and the subsequent, related death of a UK citizen in Amesbury. The Kremlin also has tried to escape taking responsibility for the Novichok poisoning of Russian opposition politician Aleksey Navalny in 2020. Each time, the Kremlin used its seat in multilateral organizations as a platform to spread its disinformation. The Kremlin is now attempting to use the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and other multilateral organizations to deceive people on this issue and to justify President Putin's brutal war of choice against Ukraine.

CASE STUDY

KHAN SHAYKHUN, SYRIA ATTACK 2017

Although there were indications that chemical weapons had been used in Syria previously, the August 2013 chemical weapons attack on Ghouta, which killed an estimated 1,400 civilians, drew global attention. An OPCW–UN Joint Mission was formally established in October 2013 to oversee the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons program, with both Russia and the United States assisting the Mission. In addition, the United States and Russia worked together to ensure that Syria acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), Russia's propaganda portrayed these efforts in the media as an example of Russia's leadership on the world stage, and its indispensability in any potential resolution to the conflict. Despite successful multilateral cooperation at that time, the Russian Federation and its disinformation and propaganda ecosystem continued to portray the United States and the West as being roadblocks to the full success of Syrian peace talks.



IN 2015, THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL ESTABLISHED THE OPCW-UN JOINT INVESTIGATION MECHANISM (JIM) "TO IDENTIFY TO THE GREATEST EXTENT FEASIBLE" THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA.

When the Russian military entered the Syrian armed conflict in late 2015, the Kremlin reinforced its partnership with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with full knowledge that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons against its own people. The enduring nature of the Syrian armed conflict, the repeated use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad and the high level of public attention to these atrocities led Russia to repeatedly use disinformation to distract and obfuscate its ally's responsibility for these attacks. Because Russia had shielded Syria from accountability for these violations, in 2015, the UN Security Council established the OPCW-UN Joint Investigation Mechanism (JIM) to "identify to the greatest extent feasible" those responsible for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The JIM confirmed Syrian government

forces were responsible for three chlorine-barrel bomb attacks in 2014-2015, as well as the April 4, 2017, sarin attack on Khan Shaykhun. In the fall of 2017, Russia repeatedly exercised its veto on UNSC resolutions that would have extended the mandate of the JIM, to prevent it from investigating further cases of regime use of chemical weapons in order to protect Assad.

Multiple Conflicting Disinformation Narratives

On the morning of April 4, 2017, the town of Khan Shaykhun, located in the Idlib Governorate of Syria, was attacked with sarin gas. In October 2017, the JIM concluded that the Syrian Government was responsible for the attack. On the same day of the attack, Al-Masdar News, a pan-Arab outlet that supports the Assad regime, published a story claiming the attack was staged, which was quickly picked up by Russia-friendly Twitter accounts. The author of the article was Paul Antonopoulos, a frequent contributor to Russia's state-funded foreign propaganda outlet RT, and the disinformation proxy website InfoBrics, which has links to Russia's military intelligence service. Early on April 5, 2017, Russia's Ministry of Defense stated that the Syrian Air Force had destroyed a warehouse in Idlib where chemical weapons were produced by the opposition and stockpiled before being shipped to Iraq, describing its information as "fully objective and verified," despite providing no further evidence. Kremlin-funded and Kremlin-aligned media then repeated this statement in their own reporting, despite Russia's Ministry of Defense incorrectly stated the time the attack had occurred. The Ministry of Defense phrase "fully objective and verified" was repeated by both Western and Kremlin-friendly media for days following the attack. Within 24 hours of the attack, two main disinformation narratives spread throughout the information space, messaging that: 1) the operation was staged; and 2) the Syrian Air Force had destroyed an opposition chemical weapons lab.

As these two primary disinformation narratives began to spread, various Russian government officials went on the record to restate both false claims. The Kremlin then deployed a series of secondary false claims to try to bolster its case, including: messaging that: the OPCW and its investigative missions were flawed and unprofessional; that the White Helmets, a volunteer organization of rescue workers who operate in Syria, were untrustworthy and linked to terrorists; and that the Syrian government did not have any chemical weapons. In an emergency April 5 UNSC meeting, Russia's representative followed traditional Kremlin lines and questioned the reputation of the White Helmets and their reporting from the site of the attack, themes then repeated by Kremlin-friendly media.

Use of Multilateral Organizations

On April 6, 2017, following a U.S. strike on the airfield from which Assad's planes dropped chemical weapons on Khan Shaykhun, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. attack was made "under an invented pretext." The following day, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov claimed that "all Syrian armed forces' chemical weapons stockpiles were eliminated was registered and confirmed by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), a specialized UN unit." In addition to ignoring the fact that the OPCW is not a body of the UN, Peskov's statement disregarded the fact that both the OPCW and the UN had repeatedly declared that Syria's CWC declaration cannot be considered accurate and complete. The

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OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) had engaged the Syrian government to resolve outstanding issues for eight years but continued to discover new gaps, inconsistencies, and discrepancies with Syria's declaration. This specific example illustrates how the Russian Federation is willing to falsely invoke the UN and the OPCW to further its disinformation narratives when it suits their needs.

On April 11, 2017, Putin claimed the chemical weapon attack on Khan Shaykhun was a false flag operation and warned that future false flag operations were planned. Various outlets subsequently spread this disinformation. The next day, the Russian Federation vetoed a UNSC resolution condemning the attack. Russia's representative, Vladimir Safronkov, promoted both disinformation narratives in one intervention, stating that it was an "alleged use of chemical weapons" but then later claimed that the Russian government has "every reason to believe that after Khan Shaykhun other provocations by extremists using toxic substances could follow." In his statement, Safronkov also questioned the professionalism of the OPCW. During the vote on the resolution, he aggressively warned the British representative, "Don't you dare insult Russia again!" Safronkov's tirade at the UNSC received significant attention in both Western and Russian media, and even RT noted the undiplomatic nature of his remarks. His emotional outbursts brought more attention to Russia's false arguments at the UNSC.

An April 13, 2017, the OPCW Executive Council meeting held to discuss the use of chemical weapons in Syria offered the Russian Federation another opportunity to use a multilateral organization as a platform to spread disinformation. After Russia vetoed a UNSC resolution the day before that would have urged Syria to cooperate with the JIM, Russia and Iran proposed launching a new, separate investigation mechanism. Following pushback, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov falsely claimed again the attack was staged

and hinted those countries that voted against the Russia-Iran proposal to launch a new investigation mechanism had a guilty conscience. The discussion continued April 19 and 20, when the Kremlin disputed sarin gas had been used in Khan Shaykhun, adopting the narrative Putin had presented on April 11 that the attack was staged. Following the failure of Russia's and Iran's proposal to launch a new investigation mechanism at the 54th Meeting at the OPCW's Executive Council, Lavrov said, "I think we are very close to this organization [OPCW] being discredited."

These actions illustrate how the Kremlin constructs a disinformation campaign following the use of chemical weapons.

Role of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem

As it did during other disinformation campaigns, the Kremlin supported the use of inauthentic personas, bots, and trolls following the Khan Shaykhun attack to spread its false claims. There was a clear spike in the creation of Twitter accounts in support of Russia's narratives after the attack. Following the April 6, 2017, U.S. strike on the Syrian Shayrat airbase, the U.S. Department of Defense stated the number of Russia's troll accounts increased 2,000 percent in reaction to the situation. Russia's Mission to the UN also mocked the U.S. Ambassador to the UN on Twitter, likely in an attempt to bring further attention to Russia's claims.

The Kremlin relies heavily on its disinformation media network to introduce its most outlandish false claims. For example, on April 8 and April 12, 2017, the Russian military's television channel TV Zvezda falsely claimed Ukraine had delivered chemical weapons to the Middle East. In addition, Russian state propaganda outlet Sputnik claimed that Qatar-based Al Jazeera news channel had filmed the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack and therefore was somehow complicit in staging it. Other Russian state-controlled and proxy media repeated this narrative, but it did not get picked up by Western media.

The Kremlin used its disinformation and propaganda resources to shape the information space, adapting its strategy after repeated chemical weapons attacks by the Assad regime became harder to flatly deny. Russia's Ministry of Defense falsely claimed in March 2018 that "American instructors have trained several groups of insurgents near al-Tanf in order to hold provocations with chemical weapons in the south of Syria..." and that "the Jabhat al-Nusra armed formations with support of so-called 'White Helmets' are preparing a staged chemical attack near the settlements of al-Habid and Qalb Luza located 25 km northwest Idlib. Therefore, 20 containers with chloride have been delivered there." Jabhat al-Nusra is a terrorist organization and the White Helmets do not work with terrorist organizations. In this instance there was no attack, nevertheless, repeated false chemical weapon predictions by Russia's Ministry of Defense, Putin, and other Russian officials show that, the Kremlin will add to its initial disinformation narrative to further distort the information environment. Syria has leveled hundreds of similar accusations about supposed terrorist chemical plots, sometimes weaving into the accusations claims of alleged Western support, but the OPCW has not been able to verify any of these allegations from Syria or Russia. These frequent false claims provide an ample source of unverified material that Russian propaganda networks can then amplify.

CASE STUDY

THE SALISBURY AND AMESBURY POISONINGS 2018

The Russian Federation used a military grade chemical weapon in the United Kingdom when Russian military intelligence (GRU) attempted to assassinate Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia with the nerve agent Novichok in Salisbury, England, on March 4, 2018. This attack not only resulted in long term hospitalization for both Skripals, but also for a British police officer who was first on the scene. In June 2018, a British couple was poisoned by the same agent in nearby Amesbury, after one of them came in contact with an abandoned perfume bottle containing the poison. UK citizen Dawn Sturgess died after this exposure, the result of Russian mishandling of the deadly poison. The Kremlin's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem quickly went into action to protect Russia's interests after international outrage to the assassination operation conducted on NATO soil. At many multilateral meetings held on the Salisbury poisoning, Russia continued to lie about its involvement, inventing false narratives about who was responsible and seeking to lay groundwork for future disinformation campaigns about chemical weapons.

Following both the Salisbury and Amesbury incidents, Russian state media and Russian government officials presented many, often mutually contradictory, theories about who was responsible.

Multiple Conflicting Disinformation Narratives

Following both the Salisbury and Amesbury incidents, Russian state media and Russian government officials presented many, often mutually contradictory, theories about who was responsible. The Kremlin has also used the technique of flooding the information space with many false claims following events such as the Khan Shaykhun chemical weapon attack and the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17. False and contradictory claims about the Salisbury poisoning included:

- **It never happened:** the Skripals were not poisoned;
- **Someone else did it:** the UK, the United States, Ukraine, exiled Russian oligarchs, Bill Browder, Yulia Skripal's future mother-in-law, etc.;
- **It was not Novichok:** it was either a NATO toxin or fentanyl; Novichok doesn't exist; Novichok was invented elsewhere, not in Russian labs; Skripal was smuggling chemical weapons;
- **Russophobia:** Nazi propaganda; the West is vilifying Russia as a nation of criminals;

- **It is a provocation invented for an ulterior motive:** to justify sanctions; increase NATO's military budget; justify more NATO troops in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe; boycott the upcoming World Cup tournament in Russia; prepare for war against Russia; influence Russia's elections; divert attention from Brexit or Western scandals; and harm Russia's reputation as a peacemaker.

A study by Kings College London found that in the month following the Salisbury poisoning, Russian government-funded RT and Sputnik published 735 articles about the poisoning, using 138 different, often contradictory, narratives. RT and Sputnik often cited high ranking Russian government sources to support these lies. The study found that the government sources' "use of combative and confrontational language towards Western counterparts resulted in substantial coverage by mainstream UK media." The study concluded this was the most successful means by which the Russian Federation inserts Kremlin-generated narratives into Western media.

As it did with the Khan Shaykhun attack, the Kremlin used social media to amplify its disinformation. DFRLab found that "between March 28 and April 4 [2018], two out of [every] three articles on the Salisbury case shared on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Pinterest came from Kremlin-funded media outlets."[1]

Use of Multilateral Organizations

As the Kremlin filled the information space with its disinformation narratives, the UK and its allies led international efforts to seek accountability for the use of a chemical weapon. In the March 14 UNSC meeting, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vasily Nebenzia repeated disinformation claims pushed by Russia's state and Russia-friendly media, including false claims that it was the UK that poisoned the Skripals. Nebenzia claimed the only way the UK could be certain the poison used against the Skripals was Novichok was if British officials already possessed some of the agent with which to compare the sample, insinuating that the poison must have come from British chemical labs, a blatant fabrication.

At the first OPCW meeting following the poisoning, March 13-15, 2018, Russia's representative denied the UK's accusations and said the UK would be held accountable for its lies. On April 4, the OPCW held a special meeting of the Executive Council, at the request of Russia, to specifically discuss the Salisbury poisoning. Russia's delegation brought a Doctor of Chemical Sciences from its Ministry of Defense to testify. His testimony promoted Russia's claims that the knowledge of Novichok production is easily accessible, therefore it was possible for any state to create it, and that the formula of the Novichok used against the Skripals is impossible to track to any one nation. A Sputnik report quoted this expert, Ivan Rybalchenko, a few days earlier, when he falsely claimed the United States had created the nerve agent used against Skripal. This claim was debunked a few days later in an interview with media by retired Russian scientist Vil Mirzayanov, who said that "production [of Novichok] was only refined in the USSR and Russia." This is a clear example of the Kremlin using multilateral organizations to promote disinformation narratives that it concurrently spreads in the media.

[1] The Atlantic Council is a recipient of U.S. government funding.

The next day, April 5, the UNSC discussed the Salisbury poisoning. Ambassador Nebenzia claimed Russia's different theories of the Skripal poisoning were the opinions of journalists, not Russian authorities. He then used the rest of his speaking time to present yet even more scenarios for how the Skripal poisoning happened, including his theory that Western intelligence services were behind the attack.

During two other UNSC meetings held on April 10 and 12 to address the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria, Russia's disinformation ecosystem attempted to link the Salisbury poisoning to Syria by claiming the White Helmets had conducted a false flag operation in Douma.

The extent of the Kremlin's campaign against the OPCW became even more clear on April 13 when the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service apprehended four agents from the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (Russian military intelligence- GRU) Unit 26165 for attempting to hack into the OPCW HQ's network. Dutch officials also found evidence the Russian government was planning a cyber operation on a Swiss OPCW lab. At that time, the OPCW was analyzing both the Salisbury poisoning and the Douma attack. What the Kremlin would have done with access to the OPCW's system is unclear, but there is precedent for the Russian Federation conducting "hack and release" operations, often falsifying contents of a hack to support its later narratives.

On April 18 both the UNSC and the OPCW Executive Council held meetings, which Russia used to spread disinformation. In the UNSC, Russia's representative questioned the April 12 OPCW technical assistance team report, which "confirm[ed] the findings of the United Kingdom relating to the identity of the toxic chemical that was used in Salisbury." In the OPCW meeting, Russia's representative outlined what he claimed were eight false charges against Russia. In addition, the Russian Federation submitted an 11-page aide memoire, or informal diplomatic message, outlining many of its arguments in-depth. Kremlin-backed media reported the Russian OPCW and UN representatives' statements without fact-checking their accuracy. The next day, Russia's MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused the British intelligence services of conducting a false flag operation to frame the Russian Federation for the poisoning, an accusation that was picked up and spread by other pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets.

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Role of Kremlin-Funded Media

One of the most bizarre disinformation tactics the Kremlin deployed following the Salisbury poisoning was a 25-minute video interview with the two GRU officers accused by the UK of carrying out the poisoning, conducted by RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan. During the interview, the two men, visibly uncomfortable and poorly rehearsed, spun a tale of a tourist trip to Salisbury during which they were unable to see the Cathedral due to a light snowstorm. Simonyan tried to justify her guests' awkwardness by insinuating they may have been trying to conceal a same-sex relationship. The British government called the interview "an insult to the public's intelligence." The disinformation, however, worked within Russia: only three percent of Russian citizens in October 2018 believed the Kremlin was behind the poisoning, while 28 percent believed it was British intelligence.

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NATO's Response

More than 20 countries and NATO expelled 153 Russian Federation diplomats and intelligence officers following the British government's decision to expel 23 Russian officers on March 20, 2018. Then-British Prime Minister Theresa May called it "the largest collective expulsion of Russian intelligence officers in history." NATO's response made it clear that despite Russia's attempts to spread disinformation, there was no confusion in the minds of the Western governments as to who was responsible.

The concerted response to the Salisbury and Amesbury poisonings provide an example of the power of unity among allies following a chemical attack. Allies working closely together maintained clarity in the face of the Kremlin's attempt to distract and confuse with multiple different disinformation claims. Further, international partners were able to take concrete, impactful actions with a broad coalition of countries to impose costs on the Russian Federation for its brazen action. The increased use of chemical weapons also led to States Parties to the OPCW adding two families of Novichok agents to the CWC's "Schedules of Chemicals" in November 2019 by consensus.

CASE STUDY

THE ALEKSEY NAVALNY POISONING 2020

Despite the international backlash from using Novichok in the UK, just two years later the Russian Federation employed a chemical weapon in another assassination attempt. On August 20, 2020, Russian political opposition figure Aleksey Navalny became violently ill and collapsed on a domestic flight from Tomsk to Moscow. After an emergency landing in Omsk, Navalny was admitted to the toxicology unit of a local hospital and, two days later, flown to the Charité hospital in Berlin at the request of his family. Navalny's personal doctor Anastasia Vasilyeva told The New York Times that Russian authorities deliberately delayed his departure in hopes the poison in his system would dissipate and become impossible to later identify.

Charité's diagnosis of Navalny indicated "poisoning with a substance from the group of cholinesterase inhibitors." On September 2, 2020, the German government announced toxicological tests conducted by the Bundeswehr laboratory "revealed unequivocal proof of the presence of a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group" in Navalny's test samples, a finding also confirmed by the OPCW and by independent Swedish and French national laboratories. A joint investigation by Bellingcat, The Insider, Der Spiegel, and CNN implicated Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) in Navalny's poisoning.

Russian authorities and pro-Kremlin media employed a variety of disinformation and propaganda narratives to hide the facts surrounding the Navalny poisoning, including several narratives identical to those the Russian government used in the case of the Salisbury poisoning. EUvsDisinfo, the European Union's counter-disinformation website, documented more than 200 instances of disinformation from pro-Kremlin outlets about the Navalny poisoning between August 20, 2020, and January 21, 2021, more than one per day. Key disinformation narratives from the Navalny case are:

- **Deny:** deny that Navalny was poisoned; that Russia possesses the Novichok nerve agent; and that it has any motive to poison Navalny;
- **Confuse and distract:** pollute the information environment by inventing and disseminating alternative theories of what could have happened to Navalny, including a bad diet, drug overdose, illness, or alcoholism;
- **Blame the accusers:** go on the offense; falsely claim Russia's accusers committed the crime to frame Russia; portray Russia as again a victim of Russophobia.

The Kremlin's Denial

One of the main tactics the Kremlin has used in the disinformation and propaganda campaign surrounding the Navalny poisoning is denial. Russian officials and pro-Kremlin media consistently cite the denials of the Russian toxicologists that Navalny was poisoned in Russia. According to the toxicologists' claims, made while Russia's security services were present at their hospital in Omsk, Navalny suffered from a metabolic disease and his coma could have been caused by a bad diet, excessive fatigue, overheating, overcooling, or alcohol use.

As it did in the aftermath of the Salisbury poisoning, the Russian government denied possessing the Novichok nerve agent, claiming it had eliminated all of its chemical weapons under international supervision, and that Novichok is a "purely Western brand." This deflection plays into a long existing Kremlin narrative that Russia has destroyed all of its chemical weapons. In fact, Russia has only verifiably eliminated its declared stockpile, a key caveat that it often omits to obscure its undeclared programs. Further, experts have stated Novichok is widely known to have been developed by the Soviet Union and Russian Federation.

Lastly, Moscow denied it had any motive to poison Navalny, dismissing the opposition politician as "inconsequential." For example, President Putin stated "if they [Russian security services] really wanted to [poison Navalny], they would have, most likely, carried it through." Putin used his decision to let Navalny go to Germany as supposed evidence that the Kremlin was not involved in the poisoning. "If the authorities had wanted to poison the person you mentioned [Navalny] or to poison anybody, it is very unlikely they would have sent him for medical treatment to Germany. Don't you think so?" Putin told one journalist.

Multiple Conflicting Disinformation Narratives

Reflecting the "anything could have happened to Navalny" narrative propagated by Russian doctors, Russia's state-owned and state-controlled media spread a variety of alternative explanations to deflect attention from the Russian government's role in the poisoning. The mass circulation daily newspaper Moskovskiy Komsomolets cited sources who claimed Navalny drank "village moonshine" before his flight to Omsk, while the state-owned television channel Rossiya 1 quoted an alleged developer of Novichok arguing that moonshine was possibly the culprit for Navalny's poisoning.

In addition to denying and trying to muddy the waters around the Navalny poisoning, Kremlin officials attempted to shift the blame to their accusers, to discredit them, and to portray Russia as a victim of a Western plot. Russian disinformation focused mainly on Germany, the United States, the OPCW, on the Swedish and French laboratories where the chemical weapon was identified, and on Navalny himself and his associates. Russia's Foreign Ministry argued that Germany violated the CWC, led a baseless "broad smear campaign" against Russia, refused to cooperate, and withheld information from Moscow while secretly sharing Navalny's biomaterials with partners. Lavrov said Russia had "all grounds to believe" Navalny could have been poisoned "in Germany or on the plane where he was loaded and sent to the Charité clinic" and claimed that Navalny's colleague Maria Pevchikh might be connected to the poisoning.

Many Russian state-owned or state-controlled media personalities declared on national television that Pevchikh was Navalny's poisoner and an agent of British intelligence. Sergey Naryshkin, director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), claimed there was circumstantial evidence that the poisoning was a provocation by Western intelligence services to make Navalny a "sacrificial victim" in order to re-energize Russia's political opposition. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov accused Navalny of working as a mouthpiece for the CIA, while President Putin called Bellingcat's exposure of the FSB assassins a "legalization of materials from the U.S. intelligence services," seeming to imply that U.S. intelligence agencies fed information to Bellingcat to publish.

Finally, the Kremlin tried to portray itself as a victim of another "anti-Russia propaganda attack" aimed to "contain Russia's development" and punish Moscow for its "independent foreign policy." Lavrov argued that just as in the case of the Skripals, the West was using Navalny as a pretext for imposing new sanctions on Russia, without providing any evidence to prove Russia's culpability.

Use of Multilateral Organizations

Once again, Moscow used both the UN and the OPCW platforms to spread disinformation. In a 2020 September UNSC meeting, Russia's Ambassador questioned the reputation of the OPCW and the supposed politicization of the organization. At an October 5 UNSC meeting, the Russian Ambassador falsely claimed the OPCW's Technical Secretariat was a tool the West uses to pressure Russia. Russia's state media quickly reported the ambassador's remarks in both meetings, and these UNSC statements formed the basis for future statements by Russia at other multilateral organizations. Russia's repeatedly attempts to question the OPCW's reputation to tarnish the OPCW and its findings. The Director-General of the OPCW said in 2019 that the organization is being "attacked with misinformation."

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CONCLUSION

Multilateral pressure continues to grow following the Russian government's repeated use of chemical weapons. The OPCW's 99th Executive Council Session March 8-10, 2022 focused on Moscow's pattern of chemical weapons use and disinformation, extending through Putin's current war in Ukraine. OPCW States Parties overwhelming condemned Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. The Session also focused on Navalny's poisoning. No country spoke in favor of Russia regarding Navalny, and Russian Representative to the OPCW, Alexander Shulgin, struggled to mount a defense. NATO Allies remain united on the unacceptability of Russia's use of chemical weapons, despite Russia's continuing attempts to sow contradiction, obfuscation, and disinformation through media and international gatherings. As with other examples of Kremlin propaganda, Russian disinformation about chemical weapons are not necessarily made to persuade others to accept their arguments, but to sow doubt and confusion and undermine the unity and effectiveness of an international response.

Russia has a track record of accusing the West of the very violations that Russia itself is perpetrating. Russia is once again spreading disinformation about chemical weapons. Russia's latest attempts to twist the truth on this very serious topic may be another Kremlin ploy foreshadowing another horrific use of chemical weapons, this time in Ukraine

GEC Special Report:

The Kremlin's Chemical Weapons Disinformation Campaigns

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