



# ALBANY

Ibn al-Khattab, 2002/ Viktor Yushchenko, 2004/ Anna Politkovskaya, 2004/ Gouta, Syria, 2013/ Emilian Gebrev, 2015/

## A Toxic History

**The Kremlin, chemical weapons and disinformation**

Vladimir Kara-Murza, 2015/ Petr Verzilov, 2018/ Sergei Skripal, 2018/ Douma, Syria, 2018/ Alexi Navalny, 2020/

# Summary

Throughout the invasion of Ukraine and the preceding border crisis, there have been persistent fears that the Kremlin could potentially stage a chemical attack, either as a method of terror-warfare or as a false-flag to justify measures of mass force and bolster its narrative of Ukraine as the aggressor. Such fears are justified by the Kremlin's history of using chemical weapons to poison critics and dissidents, whilst also assisting in covering up chemical attacks by its allies in Syria. Therefore, such an attack would certainly be an increase in scale if not necessarily in kind.

The use of chemical weapons in warfare by regimes has often led to irreversible damage to their international image, making their use a risk. Consequently, as this report will demonstrate, their use by Russia is frequently accompanied by disinformation campaigns to disorientate international responses and justify domestic narratives of counter-responses being unreasonable. These narratives followed a pattern noted by experts in Kremlin information operations: the aim was to create so many different versions of events that audiences lose faith in a single truth.<sup>1</sup>

The value of 'pre-bunking'<sup>2</sup> to prevent the manipulation of international opinion has been demonstrated in the build-up to the current invasion. This report aims to identify common narratives utilised by the Kremlin in the aftermath of chemical incidents in order to raise awareness and undermine traction for the Kremlin's narratives.

1) See Richard Stengel 'Information Wars', Peter Pomerantsev 'This Is Not Propaganda' and JSIS 'A Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer'

2) "The process of debunking lies, tactics, or sources before they strike." Psychology Today, 'What Is Prebunking?'

# Chemical weapons in assassinations: Russia, the former Soviet states and beyond, 2002-2020

There have been multiple instances of poisoning with chemical weapons in the past two decades against Russian dissidents within Russia and abroad. In their aftermath, disinformation campaigns have been used to simultaneously justify and deny the action through two key narratives:

## 1) They had it coming

- There is a consistently utilised Kremlin narrative to denigrate dissidents, critics, and particularly defectors, as traitors of which to be despised.
  - In 2010, Putin commented on a spy swap (in which Sergei Skripal was involved) that "they live by their own rules, and these rules are well known by everyone in the intelligence services [...] they may take their thirty pieces of silver, but they will choke on it."<sup>3</sup> This comment inferring that traitors were effectively outlaws.
  - Vladimir Kara-Murza, a prominent opposition activist who was poisoned twice, was smeared as an FBI agent and "an errand boy for Russophobic Senator McCain."<sup>4</sup>
  - In the aftermath of the Salisbury poisoning (March 2018), Putin decried Skripal as "a scumbag and a traitor," even as he denied responsibility.<sup>5</sup>
- Another tactic is to depict potential targets as criminals, degenerates or extremists, reinforced by a parallel campaign of 'lawfare'.
  - Ibn al-Khattab, a Chechen rebel leader poisoned with an envelope coated with an unidentified nerve agent in March 2002, was charged with being the mastermind behind the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings.
    - Although al-Khattab claimed credit for terrorist attacks on Russian soldiers, he always denied involvement in the apartment bombings.
    - A number of dissidents and investigative journalists have since asserted the FSB itself was behind the bombings as part of a false-flag campaign, including murdered dissident and FSB defector Alexander Litvenenko.
  - In the aftermath of the Skripal poisoning, Putin alleged that defectors "always die sooner or later of heavy drinking or drug abuse", a clear attempt to suggest that Mr Skripal's symptoms were a result of "degeneracy".<sup>6</sup>

3) New York Times. "A Spy Story: Sergei Skripal Was a Little Fish. He Had a Big Enemy"

4) EU vs Disinfo. "DISINFO: EVIDENCE SHOWS: KARA-MURZA WAS NOT POISONED"

5) Politico "Putin calls Sergei Skripal 'traitor' and 'scumbag'"

6) New York Times. "A Spy Story: Sergei Skripal Was a Little Fish. He Had a Big Enemy"

# Chemical weapons in assassinations: Russia, the former Soviet states and beyond, 2002-2020

- The poisoning of Alexei Navalny came while he faced charges of corruption and embezzlement that were widely viewed as politically motivated, while his organisation was labelled an extremist group under new laws. Kremlin-linked accounts on social media suggested these 'criminal links' were the cause of the attempt on his life.

## 2) It was a false-flag

Even as the Kremlin denigrates potential targets for poisoning with chemical weapons, at the same time it denies and obfuscates its involvement. The most common method for achieving this is by claiming the poisoning to be a false-flag operation carried out by either rival intelligence agencies, or the victims themselves to encourage 'Russophobia.'

- In 2004, Ukrainian pro-western candidate Viktor Yushchenko fell seriously ill with Dioxin poisoning.
  - Russian security services were accused of being behind the attempt.
  - Russian media continues to allege the symptoms were a result of cosmetic procedures, based on fabricated reports.
  - Other outlets suggested it was the work of the CIA to inflame anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine.
- In 2018, Russian state-media and Kremlin-linked Social Media accounts produced 40 different explanations for who carried out the Salisbury poisonings.<sup>7</sup>
  - Speaking on state TV, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova claimed that identical timestamps on airport security footage of the two GRU agents entering the country proved the images had been doctored, when in reality they had passed through two separate gates at the same time.
  - Sputnik news accused British intelligence, the CIA and Hillary Clinton.
  - State media also suggested that the state had no interest in Skripal; that he was homeless and had been offered money to help stage his own attack to discredit Russia's Syria intervention.
  - The two suspects: 'Alexander Petrov' and 'Ruslan Borishlov' were depicted as tourists unfairly singled out due to their Russian names, but later investigations revealed their real identities as GRU Colonels Alexander Mishkin and Anatoliy Chepiga. Mishkin had medical training, and both were recipients of the 'Hero of Russia medal', an award traditionally bestowed personally by the president.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>) Number of explanations based on Russian media analysis and statement by UK ambassador to the UN, 10/03/22

<sup>8</sup>) See Bellingcat "Skripal Suspect Boshirov Identified as GRU Colonel Anatoliy Chepiga" and "Skripal Poisoning Suspect Dr. Alexander Mishkin, Hero of Russia" for details of identification process.

# **Chemical weapons in assassinations: Russia, the former Soviet states and beyond, 2002-2020**

- In 2020, Russian state-media and Kremlin-linked accounts attempted to assert that Navalny's poisoning had been arranged.
  - Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov alleged Navalny had faked the attack with the aid of the CIA.
  - Russian state media also featured a 'confession' by a Russian doctor that he had helped Navalny stage his novichok symptoms.
  - According to Le Monde, in a phone call with French President Macron, Putin alleged Navalny was a "troublemaker" who had "simulated illnesses in the past".

**The overall aim of these narratives is to encourage apathy among the Russian populace that is critical to the Kremlin's control:**

- It undermines sympathy for the targets, or at least makes it more difficult to express public support.
- It muddies the water to make it seem as though the target was caught up in activities that led to their death without state involvement, or was of no interest to the state at all.
- It reinforces the sense that Russia is alone and besieged by Russophobic powers from both without and within, justifying Kremlin repression.
- It furthers the narrative that all states are as bad as each other, therefore a transition to democracy wouldn't change anything.

# Chemical weapons in war: Syria 2013-2018

The Global Public Policy Institute identified 336 instances of chemical weapons use during the Syrian Civil War, the vast majority perpetrated by the Assad regime. Two incidents in particular saw international attention and resulted in extensive disinformation campaigns: Eastern Gouta, August 2013, and Douma, April 2018.<sup>9</sup> The following narratives were used:

## 1) It was a false-flag

While disputing whether the attacks happened at all, Russian state media also suggested the chemical attacks had occurred, but that they were false-flags designed to besmirch the Assad regime.

- Chief among the accused were the rebels themselves.
  - It was claimed that Jihadist factions in the rebel groups carried out the attacks. Although, two separate small-scale attacks were linked to Islamic State, overall the Jihadists lacked the capabilities to carry out attacks of this scale.
  - It was further asserted that CIA-backed militias had carried out the attacks with the CIA's help, using a still image from a video game as proof.
- Another prominent target was the Syrian Civil Defence Group (a.k.a SCD & the White Helmets), a search and rescue group that had documented war crimes committed by the Assad regime.
  - In April 2018, the Russian Foreign ministry accused the SCD of working "hand in glove with terrorists" to conduct the attack.<sup>10</sup>
  - The Russian MoD produced a 9-second video clip and a single image of trucks operating near a cave with barrels that they asserted belonged to the SCD.

9) Data collected by Hamilton 68, an online dashboard that tracks the messaging of roughly 600 Russian-linked accounts, revealed a significant spike in pro-Kremlin activity in the aftermath of the strike. Securing Democracy "The Syria Swarm: How pro-Kremlin Accounts Influence Western Public Opinion."

10) The Guardian. "How Syria's White Helmets became victims of an online propaganda machine"

# Chemical weapons in war: Syria 2013-2018

- Among the others accused without evidence were:<sup>11</sup>
  - The French Government
  - Middle Eastern TV channels
  - The regional branch of the American news channel
  - Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its previous iterations
  - Undefined "Foreign specialists"
  - Turkish foreign experts
  - Chechen foreign experts

## 2) It never happened

Russian officials and state media also claimed the attack had not happened at all, rather that it was staged to besmirch the Assad regime and justify foreign intervention in Syria. Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vasily Nebenzya, likened the situation to Alice in Wonderland and promised a "journey" that would reveal the truth: no one had died and that the attack was staged by the SCD with help from British Intelligence.

- To support this narrative, Russian and Syrian state media, and sock-puppet and bot accounts used the following 'evidence.'
  - Pictures from movie sets of Middle-Eastern films claiming to be from productions of the staged attacks.
  - Outdated and doctored satellite imagery showing empty areas where the attacks occurred.
  - Videos and images taken from video games.
  - A 'leaked report' from Sputnik alleging that chlorine canisters had been deposited at Douma after the attack.
- Russian Defence Officials also alleged British Intelligence staged the attack so it could win public support for sanctions against Russia regarding the Skripal affair.

11) For a full list, see Bellingcat "Chemical Weapons and Absurdity" and EU vs Disinfo "THE PRO-KREMLIN TOOLBOX FOR DISINFORMATION ABOUT CHEMICAL ATTACKS"

# Chemical weapons in war: Syria 2013-2018

**These narratives aimed to achieve multiple goals:**

- Legitimise the White Helmets (and associated groups) as targets.
- Delegitimising the evidence collected by such groups of war crimes by the Assad regime.
- Confuse attribution for chemical attacks, providing the pretext for engagement with the Assad regime.
  - This also reinforces the narrative that without Assad control, and by association, Russian control, Syria will collapse into a lawless terrorist state led by groups with chemical weapons, effectively hijacking the justifications for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.
- Endebt the Assad regime to the Kremlin.
  - This debt has recently borne fruit: as Russian advances in Ukraine stall, the Kremlin has suggested 16,000 Middle-Eastern 'volunteers' have stepped forward to serve in the Russian army, of which it is believed that at least 800 have arrived in Russia so far.

# Accuse others of that which you are accused: the Ukraine WMD narrative

In the buildup to the invasion, Russian state media and officials utilised similar narratives to those used in Syria.

- On 21st December 2021, Sergei Shoigu, Russia's defence minister, as well as other officials, alleged without evidence that Ukrainian troops and American mercenaries were preparing a provocation in the Donbas with "chemical components."<sup>12</sup>
- At the same time, US intelligence disclosed that there was a possibility that Russia planned to stage a false-flag chemical attack to justify an invasion of Ukraine.

Since the invasion began, Russian state-media and officials have alleged that Ukraine has a clandestine WMD programme in partnership with the US, including biochemical warfare labs. It also alleges Ukrainian saboteurs are seeking to cause chemical leaks.

- On 21st February, Donetsk militia released footage claiming to be of a firefight against Ukrainian saboteurs attacking a Chlorine plant.
  - Later investigations demonstrated the video was doctored using recordings of live fire of a Finnish military exercise.<sup>13</sup>
- In a UN Security Council meeting on 11th March, Russia claimed "secret labs" were being used for biochemical warfare.<sup>14</sup>
  - On the same day, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement warning of "potential chemical provocations in Ukraine." The statement, without evidence, accuses U.S. special operations forces and "[r]adical Ukrainian groups" of plotting a chemical weapons attack on Ukrainian civilians in an attempt to blame Russia.
  - The Kremlin further accused Ukraine of plotting to bomb two chemical factories, in Severodonetsk and Odessa, and of plotting "the destruction of containers with toxic chemicals in highly populated areas." Alleging that in December 2021, "Ukrainian radicals delivered 200-litre metal barrels with foreign markings to Donetsk Oblast. As they were being unloaded, four Ukrainian soldiers received severe chemical [burns] and poisoning."
  - No proof has been provided regarding these claims.

12) Moscow Times "U.S. Mercenaries Preparing Donbass 'Provocation' – Russian Defense Chief"

13) The Guardian "Dumb and lazy': the flawed films of Ukrainian 'attacks' made by Russia's 'fake factory'"

14) The Guardian "What are Russia's biological weapons claims and what's actually happening?"

# Accuse others of that which you are accused: the Ukraine WMD narrative

- Since 2005, the US Department of Defence has partnered with Ukraine through the Biological Threat Reduction Program, supporting 46 labs run by local officials in Ukraine to detect pathogens that would be harmful if released into the wider world.
  - Their locations are not secret and they have been regularly inspected by the WHO.
  - Russia has made similar claims in 2018 regarding Georgia, using documents its alleged whistleblower later refused to avow.<sup>15</sup>

**Although these narratives have been debunked by multiple independent outlets<sup>16</sup> they are gaining traction abroad, particularly among right-wing movements like Qanon via Fox News and are supported by Chinese media, often conflating biological and chemical weapons.<sup>17</sup>**

- Qanon groups in America have alleged that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is aimed at destroying biochemical weapons labs that are planned for use against white populations and dissenters of the 'deep-state'.
  - This follows a popular narrative among far-right groups - that Putin is a saviour of 'traditional values' and acts as a bulwark against 'white genocide.'
- On the same day as the UN Security Council meeting, the Global Times released an article urging the US military to "come clean" regarding its activities in Ukraine, mentioning not just biological warfare, but the stockpiling of chemical weapons too.
- China likely supports this narrative as payback for accusations that COVID-19 deliberately originated in a lab in Wuhan as well as to support Russia through rhetoric, without giving direct physical support for the invasion..
  - The Global Times directly linked the two issues, suggesting questions remained regarding COVID-19's origins in the US.

15) See BBC "Russian disinformation and the Georgian 'lab of death'"

16) See The Intercept "Russia Is Lying About Evidence of Bioweapons Labs in Ukraine, Russian Biologists Say" and BBC "Fact-checking Russia's biological weapons claims"

17) Global Times: "US urged to come clean on bio-military activities as outcry grows after its 'confusing, contradictory' responses", "Chief of Russia's Roscosmos Says Bioweapon Developed in Ukraine Affects Fertility", "International voices urge US explanation for bioweapons accusations"

## **Accuse others of that which you are accused: the Ukraine WMD narrative**

The greater concern is that these accusations will set the stage for a false-flag chemical attack as the Kremlin seeks to influence international viewpoints<sup>18</sup> and justify its invasion to domestic audiences in the face of rising death tolls among Russian soldiers.<sup>19</sup> In such a case, evidence suggests a disinformation programme alleging false-flags would follow.

18) See Forbes "The Russia-Ukraine Information War Has More Fronts Than You Think"

19) See BBC "The heavy losses of an elite Russian regiment in Ukraine" and the New York Times "As Russian Troop Deaths Climb, Morale Becomes an Issue, Officials Say"

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