

Russia Spreads Disinformation to Cover Up Its Use of Chemical Weapons in Ukraine

GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT CENTER

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In May 2024, the United States [imposed](#) new sanctions on three Russian government entities and four Russian companies in response to its full-scale war and use of chemical weapons against Ukraine. The United States [determined](#) Russia used the chemical weapon chloropicrin against Ukrainian troops and riot control agents (RCA) as a method of warfare in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention ([CWC](#)).

[Chloropicrin](#) is a [choking agent](#) that “causes severe irritation to the skin, eyes, respiratory tract (if inhaled), and gastrointestinal tract (if inhaled or ingested).” In cases of severe exposure, it can be [deadly](#) causing “potentially fatal accumulation of fluid in the lungs.”

Russia’s use of such chemicals is not an isolated incident, and is probably driven by Russian forces’ desire to dislodge Ukrainian forces from fortified positions and drive them into the line of fire, the exact reason the CWC [prohibits](#) the use of RCA as method of warfare, and achieve tactical gains on the battlefield. Russia [retains](#) an undeclared chemical weapons program and has used chemical weapons, such as the Novichok nerve agents, at least twice in recent years in assassination attempts.

Cover Up and Distract

To conceal and divert attention from its violations, the Kremlin routinely [spreads](#) [\[1 MB\]](#) unfounded and debunked allegations accusing the United States and Ukraine of using chemical and biological weapons activities in Ukraine. Russia uses this [well-established](#) [\[1 MB\]](#)

disinformation tactic, sometimes referred to as “[mirror politics](#),” to falsely accuse others of the very violations Russia commits or plans to commit.

In the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem falsely accused the United States and Ukraine of planning “[provocations](#)” (false flag operations) with the use of chemical weapons, likely in an attempt to demonize Ukraine and provide a pretext for Kremlin aggression. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion began, the Kremlin has continuously spread false claims about Ukrainian chemical weapons, alleging to have discovered “chemically hazardous substances,” [accusing](#) Ukraine of using UAVs adapted for chemical weapons use, and claiming that the United States supports Ukraine’s use of chemical weapons. All of these claims are deceptive.

It is, in fact, the Russian Federation that has an active chemical weapons program and is in violation of its international obligations under the CWC.

Russian Soldiers Admit to Using RCAs

As the Kremlin disseminates false accusations against Ukraine and the United States, Russian soldiers and pro-Kremlin media brag about the Russian Army’s use of RCAs in Ukraine.

In May 2024, Russia’s state-funded media outlet [RT](#) [[3 MB](#)] published a [video report](#) on Telegram [claiming](#) to show a “gas grenade” used by the Russian Army against Ukrainian soldiers.

In May 2023, Russia’s state-controlled Channel 1 broadcast an [interview](#) with a Russian soldier [describing](#) the Russian Army’s use of tear gas to “smoke out” Ukrainian forces. In the video, drone footage shows a grenade being dropped into a trench, smoke billowing from the trench, and then soldiers fleeing from the trench. On the broadcast, the soldier states, “We are trying to force them out with smoke.” The broadcast goes on to state, “Soldiers from the 88th Brigade are using the so-called ‘Bird-Cherry’ tear grenades.” According to independent media outlet [Meduza](#), Bird-Cherry tear grenades, known in Russian as Cheremukha, may “contain the chemical warfare agent chloroacetophenone. The substance can cause a burning sensation in the eyes, corneal clouding, and vision impairment, as well as shortness of breath, coughing, and burns on the skin.”

In October 2023, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the United States [asked](#) Russia to explain the above-described Channel 1 broadcast. To date, Russia has claimed that its forces’ statements were a “misunderstanding.”

In December 2023, Russia’s 810th Naval Infantry Brigade [stated](#) on its

Telegram channel that the brigade is using a “radical change in tactics” by dropping K-51 grenades on Ukrainian forces to “smoke them out from their fortified positions.” According to the Institute for the Study of War, the Brigade later [edited](#) the post in an apparent effort to hide Russia’s violation of the CWC. In January 2024, the Brigade [published](#) another post about receiving a “combat order” to use K-51 grenades and reported using them.

Russian soldiers [talked](#) about using drones to drop the Bird-Cherry tear grenades on Ukrainian positions in [interviews](#) with the Russian media and there have been several posts on Telegram (examples [1](#) , [2](#) , [3](#) , [4](#) , [5](#) , [6](#)) by pro-Kremlin actors, mostly by the [so-called “pro-war bloggers,](#)” describing the use of RCAs by Russia’s armed forces.

On March 4, Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense [reported](#) that Russia carried out 1,068 chemical weapons attacks since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. British media outlet The Telegraph on April 6 [confirmed](#) that “Russian troops are carrying out a systematic campaign of illegal chemical attacks against Ukrainian soldiers.”

History of Kremlin Chemical Weapons Use and Disinformation Campaigns

Russia’s use of chloropicrin in Ukraine marks the first time since World War One that this agent is being deployed on the battlefield, but the Kremlin had used chloropicrin before. For example, in 1989, the Soviet Union [used](#) chloropicrin against demonstrators in Georgia.

The Kremlin has a [history](#) [\[1 MB\]](#) of spreading disinformation about chemical weapons. The Russian government [spreads](#) false claims to shield its ally, the Syrian regime, from accountability after the Assad regime’s repeated [use](#) of chemical weapons from 2013-2019. The Kremlin also [denied](#) [\[1 MB\]](#) 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 tried to evade responsibility for the Novichok poisoning of the late Russian opposition politician and anti-corruption activist [Aleksey Navalny](#) in 2020. In those cases, Kremlin propagandists resorted to the same [tactics](#) we observe today in Ukraine, blaming others for Russia’s own crimes and invoking so-called “provocations.”

In each case, the Kremlin used its seat in multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), as a platform to spread its disinformation. Despite Russia’s attempts to use [disinformation](#) to

lobby officials from various countries, Moscow lost (for the first time in its history) its seat on the Executive Council of the OPCW on November 29 to Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. This rejection demonstrated OPCW States Parties' resolve to hold Russia to account for its actions – including its war of aggression against Ukraine and continued violations of the CWC.

By spreading disinformation through media and from international platforms, Russia attempts to create confusion and obfuscate facts to sow enough doubt to undermine the unity and effectiveness of an international response to Russia's own chemical weapons use. The international community remains united – Russia's use of chemical weapons is unacceptable.

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