

Warning Update: Russia May Conduct a Chemical or Radiological False-Flag Attack as a Pretext for Greater Aggression against Ukraine

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Key takeaway: The Kremlin has set informational conditions to blame Ukraine for a Russian-conducted or Russian-fabricated chemical or radiological false-flag attack against civilians as a pretext for further Russian escalation. The Kremlin is likely still evaluating this course of action but is building out the necessary conditions to justify broader violence against civilians. That risk must be addressed. The United States and NATO must “pre-bunk” such Kremlin efforts, destroy in advance Moscow’s efforts to create informational cover for escalation, and deter Russia’s potential use of a chemical or radiological weapon.

Recent Russian state media narratives have built upon a long-running Kremlin information operation to falsely claim that Ukraine, the United States, and NATO are plotting a chemical or radiological attack on Russia or Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory. Russia may conduct or fabricate such an attack and blame Ukraine and NATO to justify additional aggression against Ukraine.

The Kremlin may have initially intended its recent information operations to set conditions for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That invasion plan likely included conducting a false-flag operation against Donbas civilians and blaming Ukrainian forces, thereby justifying further military action (if only to the Russian population and credulous global partners). However, US and allied intelligence services “pre-bunked” many planned Russian false-flag attacks intended to justify the invasion, declassifying US intelligence of the planned Russian operations and sharing it with the media.¹ Such intelligence sharing likely forced President Vladimir Putin to choose between delaying or canceling the invasion and conducting it without informational cover. He chose the latter.

The Kremlin previously used claims of US and Ukrainian exploitation of eastern Ukraine to set conditions for its 2014 invasion of Crimea and proxy invasion of eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin has long falsely claimed that the United States and NATO maintain a ring of chemical or bioweapon facilities in post-Soviet states and has previously falsely accused the United Kingdom of preparing to conduct chemical weapons attacks within Ukraine.²

Russian state-affiliated media has set conditions for a false-flag chemical weapons attack in eastern Ukraine since December 2021.

- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu accused the United States of planning a chemical attack in Donbas at a Ministry of Defense collegium with Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 21, 2021.³
- The Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) falsely claimed on December 22 that the United States shipped botulinum toxin (a noncontagious biochemical agent) to Mariupol and Kharkiv and provided the antidote to Ukrainian forces.⁴
- Kremlin-sponsored media quoted a former Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) officer on December 24 stating that Ukrainian Armed Forces will use chemical weapons to attack schools, hospitals, and mass gatherings in then-Ukrainian-controlled eastern Ukraine.⁵

- Russian-backed DNR leader Denis Pushilin said on January 18 that the DNR is ready to respond to an expected Ukrainian chemical weapons provocation. Pushilin falsely alleged that Ukraine may accuse Russia or the DNR of a chemical attack in Donbas or on other Ukrainian territory to justify Ukrainian aggression.⁶
- Members of the Russian State Duma Committee on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) discussed non-existent US biological laboratories near Russian borders with Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Secretary General Stanislav Zas on January 20, 2022.⁷
- Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergey Naryshkin implied that the United States was preparing a false flag chemical attack in eastern Ukraine on February 10.⁸
- Russian Ministry of Defense Spokesperson Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov falsely claimed on March 6 that Russian forces discovered evidence of US-funded biological weapons research in Ukraine near the Russian border.⁹ Konashenkov described evidence of anthrax, plague, cholera, and tularemia bioweapons.
- Russian Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Defense Chief Igor Kirillov falsely claimed on March 7 that US-funded Ukrainian laboratories in Lviv, Kharkiv, and Poltava were rapidly destroying “plague agents” to keep evidence of US-Ukrainian bioweapons research out of Russian hands.¹⁰ Kirillov claimed that destroyed agents included plague, anthrax, brucellosis, diphtheria, salmonellosis, and dysentery. Kirillov falsely blamed alleged US bioweapons research for Ukraine’s high rates of measles and polio infections.
- Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian claimed to Chinese media on March 8 that Russia had found labs that the United States uses to conduct bio-military plans. Zhao urged the United States to disclose information about what is stored and what research is being conducted in these alleged facilities. Zhao urged all relevant parties to ensure the safety of the labs. Russian state-run propaganda outlet RT English shared Zhao’s statements on March 8 and tied them into previous Russian claims, emphasizing the risk posed by alleged US bioweapons facilities in Ukraine.¹¹
- Russian Ministry of Defense Spokesperson Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov told Russian media on March 9 that “Ukrainian nationalists” delivered 80 tons of ammonia to Zolochiv, a village northwest of Kharkiv. Konashenkov claimed that the Ukrainians taught villagers how to act in case of a chemical attack. Konashenkov warned that “nationalists” were preparing to conduct a “provocation using toxic substances to accuse Russia of allegedly using chemical weapons.”¹²
- Russian Permanent Representative to the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Alexander Shulgin claimed on March 9 that Russia would send documents to the OPCW documenting Russian fears of an alleged Ukrainian chemical escalation.¹³

Putin and his allies have re-purposed their pre-existing “chemical attack” information operation and may now be using it to set conditions for an actual Russian false flag attack. In this scenario, Russian forces would conduct an attack employing dangerous chemicals, likely in eastern Ukraine, but possibly in Russian territory. Russia would immediately blame Ukrainian forces. Domestic Russian media, which is now mostly closed off from the international information space, would leverage this false flag to stoke domestic outrage and to establish a pretext for additional escalation in Ukraine.

Despite false Russian rhetoric surrounding Ukrainian bioweapons, ISW has no reason to assess that the Kremlin intends to conduct a biological attack. Russia is extremely unlikely to use a contagious bioweapon because of the inherent risks to its own forces and population. Russia could leverage its longstanding false claim of NATO bioweapons facilities in post-Soviet states to plan a Russian-caused “leak” of a non-contagious biochemical agent from a Russian-staged lab in Ukraine and blame the

United States. ISW has not seen additional indicators of such preparations, though publicly observable indicators are likely limited.

There is extensive precedent for the Kremlin supporting chemical weapons attacks and accusing its adversaries of responsibility without suffering consequences. Conducting illegal chemical attacks against civilians and then blaming those attacks on opposition fighters has become a standard part of the Russian-backed Syrian regime’s playbook. Russian media usually presages such attacks by warning of US or opposition plans for chemical weapons attacks, thereby setting conditions to blame Russian adversaries when Russian-backed forces carry them out.¹⁴ Russian media also often warns about chemical weapons attacks that do not occur, likely to stoke panic among civilians and international monitors and to establish a “boy who cried wolf” effect. The United States rightfully argues that Russia bears ultimate responsibility for Syrian chemical weapons attacks against civilians and that Russia has failed in its responsibilities as a signatory of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The Kremlin is complicit in the use of chemical weapons in Syria, but there is no evidence that Russia has directly carried out chemical weapons attacks there. However, the lack of major consequences imposed against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by the international community for his illegal use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians has eroded the international norm against the use of chemical weapons.¹⁵ China’s parroting of Russia’s information operation likely also reassures the Kremlin that China would not oppose a false-flag chemical weapons attack in Ukraine.¹⁶

Russian state media has also set conditions for a false-flag radiological attack in eastern Ukraine or in Russia. The Kremlin could cause an intentional radiological disaster or use a radiological weapon of its own to falsely blame Ukraine for use of a “dirty bomb” or other radiological attack. A dirty bomb is not a nuclear weapon, but a radiological dispersion device that combines a conventional explosive with radioactive material. A traditional nuclear bomb could irradiate thousands of square miles. A dirty bomb could immediately irradiate no more than a few square miles, though radioactive material could be further dispersed if unintentionally carried by fleeing people. The purpose of using radiological material in a dirty bomb is to cause mass panic, not mass casualties—the conventional explosive is likely more immediately deadly than the radiation. Russian use of a dirty bomb combined with an effective information operation blaming Ukraine or NATO could help Putin justify increased demands on his own population to support the failing war effort as well as possible escalations against Ukraine. The Kremlin could also rely on this running narrative for damage control to reframe an unintentional radiological leak caused by Russian aggression, such as the shelling of a nuclear power facility.

- Kremlin-affiliated military commentator Alexei Leonkov claimed on February 16 that the United States would strike Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to stage a provocation in Ukraine.¹⁷ Russian forces attacked Zaporizhzhia on March 4 and caused a fire in the facility.¹⁸ Russian media blamed Ukrainian forces for the attack on Zaporizhzhia.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed in his February 24 pre-invasion speech that Ukraine was preparing for a nuclear attack against Russia.¹⁹
- State-run Russian media has since heavily covered alleged improvements in Ukrainian nuclear capabilities and research and development toward acquiring nuclear weapons.²⁰
- Russian state-owned news agency *Tass* cited an anonymous “trusted” Russian government source who falsely claimed that Ukraine is “months” away from having a nuclear weapon in a March 6 article.²¹
- Putin warned on March 6 that Russia cannot allow the West to deploy nuclear weapons to Ukraine and threatened that such a deployment would delegitimize “Ukrainian statehood.”²²

- Russian media falsely alleged on March 6 that Ukraine used the heavily irradiated Chernobyl exclusion zone to test nuclear weapons without detection and to create a radiological “dirty bomb.”²³ Russian media implied that Russian forces uncovered evidence of that capability after Russian forces began occupying the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on February 24 and the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant on March 4. Kremlin-sponsored news program *Vesti Nedeli* falsely claimed on March 6 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky threatened NATO with a Ukrainian nuclear attack if NATO does not soon intervene on Kyiv’s behalf.²⁴
- Russian Permanent Representative to the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Alexander Shulgin claimed on March 9 that Ukraine planned a “provocation” at an experimental nuclear reactor in Kharkiv and that the Russian military prevented Ukrainian sabotage at the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant.²⁵

The March 9 disconnection of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant could also be a Russian attempt to trigger nuclear panic over a potential radiological incident.²⁶ Attacks like the March 4 Russian attack on the Zaporizhia nuclear facility or the March 6 Russian shelling of a physics research facility containing a small nuclear reactor in Kharkiv could be Russian attempts to trigger such a radiological incident for which it could blame Ukraine.²⁷ The Kremlin would likely use such an incident to claim to the Russian public that Ukraine is a nuclear-armed or soon-to-be nuclear-armed national security threat that may require a more aggressive response. The Kremlin could also forgo a false-flag operation entirely and build on its already-established information operation to claim that Russia must conduct a more aggressive attack against Ukraine to deter Ukraine from a “planned” nuclear strike. Ukraine is a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and has no nuclear weapons capabilities. Ukraine joined that treaty and surrendered its entire nuclear stockpile to Russia per the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 (in which Russia, along with the United States and the United Kingdom, guaranteed the integrity of Ukraine’s territory at that time—a guarantee Russia violated in 2014).

The United States and NATO must continue to orient around deterring and pre-bunking Russian false-flag attacks. The United States and its allies demonstrated the ability to pre-bunk and prevent Russian false-flag operations prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine but have less aggressively declassified and shared intelligence since the invasion began. The objective of earlier pre-bunking may have been to ensure that Western audiences did not believe Russian information operations to justify Russia’s invasion. That objective has been achieved. The United States and its allies should again aggressively leverage their superior intelligence to share information, this time to publicly reject Russian claims that Ukraine has any access to or intention to use chemical or radiological weapons. Such a Russian claim is less likely to gain traction in the current information environment, but aggressive US pre-bunking and deterrence efforts could still prevent Russian attempts to carry out a false-flag attack in the first place.

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<https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/03/politics/us-alleges-russian-false-flag-ukraine/index.html>

² <https://tass.com/politics/1155901>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/putins-offset-kremlin%e2%80%99s-geopolitical-adaptations-2014>

³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf> page 103

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⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf> page 35

⁶ <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf> page 131

⁷ <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf> page 87

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- ⁸ <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf> page 61
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- ¹⁸ <https://understandingwar.org/background/ukraine-conflict-update-15>
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