

# [EXTERNAL]FCO Disinformation update: Salisbury and Syria

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This e-mail focussed on the Russian disinformation campaigns surrounding the chemical attack in Douma, subsequent military action, the Salisbury incident and the subsequent investigation.

It is not intended to cover Russian responses as a whole but deliberate distortions and obfuscation of the facts by the Russian state and its proxies.

Please use as background for your own work and only share it with trusted colleagues and partners.

## **Updates:**

31 different disinformation narratives deployed by the Russian State on the bungled assassination attempt in Salisbury and the horrific chemical weapons attack in Douma.

The Russian State had been using disinformation tactics before the beginning of its bombing campaign in Syria in 2015 when State TV anchors were deployed days before Russian planes and troops. The Russian State subsequently claimed to be attacking Daesh, when the vast majority of strikes were aimed at opponents of Assad. The Russian State is claiming that there is a joint UK, US and French effort on information warfare from Salisbury to Syria.

## New Narratives

### Syria

- The Operation in Eastern Ghouta is aimed at freeing civilians from militants and terrorists [Russian MFA 8 April]
- White Helmets work hand in glove with terrorists [Russian MFA 8 April]
- There was no chemical attack in Douma [Russian UN Ambassador 9 April]
- The UK and the White Helmets staged the attack [Russian defence ministry spokesperson 13 April – RT digital itself has debunked Syrian State TV videos alleging this]

### Salisbury

- Swiss Lab confirms that “BZ toxin” used in Salisbury, not produced in Russia [FM Lavrov 14 April]  
*The Lab has referred media to the OPCW whose report states “The results of the analysis by the OPCW designated laboratories of environmental and biomedical samples collected by the OPCW team confirms the findings of the United Kingdom relating to the identity of the toxic chemical that was used in Salisbury and severely injured three people”.*

## **Summary**

The Russian State is attempting to mount disinformation campaigns around the chemical weapons attack in Douma and the bungled assassination attempt in Salisbury.

The Salisbury campaign had been similar in nature to that implemented around the shooting down of

MH17. The intent here was to confuse the wider audience whilst supplying State officials and supporters with a range of lines to take. This approach failed with Salisbury and the Russian State has now focussed on one fake narrative: That the UK or its intelligence agencies conducted the attack.

The horrific chemical attack in Douma was initially denied by the Russian State. It has subsequently tried to blame the UK and the White Helmets for staging the attack as a provocation.

## Detail

Russian state media was fielding experts who were providing multiple motives for the bungled assassination attempt in Salisbury before the Prime Minister's statement to Parliament about Salisbury on 12 March.

The Russian State began mounting a widespread propaganda campaign before the beginning of its bombing campaign in Syria in 2015 when State TV anchors were deployed before Russian planes and troops.

The Russian State initially attempted to deny that there was any chemical attack in Douma. A staged visit by Russian State television "found no evidence" (@embassyofrussia – 10 April), this was debunked by Bellingcat [https://twitter.com/N\\_Waters89/status/983715467390046208](https://twitter.com/N_Waters89/status/983715467390046208)

The Russian Defence Ministry subsequently claimed that the UK and White Helmets staged the attack. Unfortunately for them, supposed footage showing a staging of an attack, aired by Syrian State TV, was exposed as a drama that was filmed some time ago.

The focus on discrediting the UK and OPCW investigations reflects a tactic used in other disinformation campaigns orchestrated by the Russian state, such as in the wake of the MH17 shoot-down and during the state-sponsored doping scandal. In these cases legitimate international organisations were the targets of disinformation campaigns which aimed to undermine their legitimacy and integrity.

Readers should be aware that tactics used in Ukraine and Syria have included faking evidence, where the Russian State has access and capabilities in theatre. This Bellingcat Article contains a number of examples: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/02/10/truth-behind-russian-embassy-netherlands-russias-strength-truth-branding-proposal/>

The Russian State attempts to delegitimise those that evidence its disinformation campaigns. The White Helmets have been central to documenting civilian atrocities in Syria and have therefore been targeted. Details of this campaign are here: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/syriafoax-part-two-kremlin-targets-white-helmets-c6ab692d4a21> - The DFRLab have also published an item today on differing claims around air-strikes: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/syriastrikes-conflicting-claims-c9623a7cbdc9> .

The Russian state has attempted to deny the fact that it has held Novichok. But this effort has been somewhat confused. State TV had claimed that it was developed in the USSR, not Russia. The MFA had claimed that it was not developed in either and President Putin had claimed that all stocks have been destroyed.

## Campaigns

The campaigns are primarily deploying narratives through State assets: Russian State Media or state controlled media anchors, experts appearing on Russian State controlled channels and through Russian political figures including Foreign Minister Lavrov and President Putin.

These narratives are used by agents of influence, groups of paid for online trolls and supporters of Russian State narratives (some of whom are unwitting multipliers of disinformation). There is a symbiotic relationship between those that use these narratives and the Russian State. The promotion of Russia's views by those outside of overt State control is often used by the State to add legitimacy to its malign claims.

RT editor and chief was reported in the Russian Army Newspaper as giving a "masterclass" at the Russian military academy on the "activities of Russia Today to form a positive image of the State abroad"- "Russian troops & soldiers of the information front are solving the same tasks, defending the interests of the Motherland". This article demonstrates the true nature of RT and Russian State controlled media.

Suspected Twitter sock puppet accounts have mirrored State media lines.

Suspect bot-net activity (groups of automated accounts) has been confined to high frequency posting from specific accounts (posting up to 639 times a day). We judge that Twitter's recent policy changes have had a positive impact in stopping co-ordinated posting of identical messages to amplify content [comment: previous disinformation campaigns have been accompanied by large bot-nets amplifying content from sock puppets, useful idiots or probable agents of influence].

Twitter have confirmed these changes to us along with a platform wide ban on taking advertising from Russian State sources e.g. Sputnik or RT.

There are signs of Russian State controlled trolling activity on newspaper platforms and Reddit (though Reddit tends to self-regulate trolls).

This list summarises disinformation narratives surfaced by the Russian State since the Salisbury attack:

1. Accidental exposure due to the proximity to Porton Down (Russia 24 – 8 March)
2. Suicide: Addiction and stress are common amongst defectors (Russia 1 – 8 March)
3. Untrustworthy or complicit testing at Porton Down (pushed through RT – 8 March)
4. Accidental Overdose (RIA Novosti – 8 March)
5. Stoking Russophobia (Russia 1 – 8 March)
6. Skripal "assassination" could have been a ploy to frame Russia and undermine Putin by a rival faction (possible error by State TV – 11 March)
7. The Brits did it: If you carefully consider who benefits it's the British. Simply to fuel Russophobia (Russia 1 – 11 March)
8. The Americans did it: "to destabilize the world, inflame Russophobia and force the UK to isolate Russia" (Russia 1 – 12 March)
9. Ukraine did it: "to frame Russia" (Russia 1 – 13 March)
10. The British are responding like this to distract from Brexit (Sergey Lavrov , UN Ambassador and OSCE Ambassador – 14-15 March)
11. It was the "mother-in-law to be" (MK.RU 14 March)
12. Russia made progress in Syria, they are trying to undermine our role as a peacemaker (MFA spokeswoman – 17 March)
13. Skripal was a chemical weapons smuggler (Pravda – 17 March)
14. Only the UK, the Czechs, The Swedes or the Slovaks would have this weapon (MFA spokeswoman – 17 March)
15. It was a drone (Zvezda – Russian MOD – 18 March)
16. We destroyed all of our chemical weapons (President Putin – 18 March)
17. If it was military people they would have died on the spot (President Putin – 18 March)
18. Bill Browder did it (Russia 1 – 18 March)

19. The terrorists did it (MFA spokeswoman – 21 March)
20. It was Theresa May because she's a friend of Gina Haspel, director of the CIA (Zvezda – 13 March)
21. Theresa May herself invented novichok (Russia 1 – 26 March)
22. English gentlemen kill those they consider beneath them (Russia 1 – 26 March)
23. The USA invented novichok (Sputnik – 26 March)
24. The UK poisoned Ivan the Terrible (Komsomolskaya Pravda – 26 March)
25. The UK intelligence services were involved (Russian MFA – 28 March)
26. The UK did it to justify high military spending because "they need a major enemy" (Deputy foreign minister, Alexander Grushko, quoted in [Guardian](#) – 3rd April)
27. The Operation in Eastern Ghouta is aimed at freeing civilians from militants and terrorists (Russian MFA 8 April)
28. White Helmets work hand in glove with terrorists (Russian MFA 8 April)
29. There was no chemical attack in Douma (Russian UN Ambassador 9 April)
30. The UK and the White Helmets staged the attack (Russian defence ministry spokesperson 13 April – Syrian State TV videos alleging this have been debunked)
31. Swiss Lab confirms that "BZ toxin" used in Salisbury, not produced in Russia (FM Lavrov 14 April – the Lab has subsequently referred media to the OPCW whose report states "The results of the analysis by the OPCW designated laboratories of environmental and biomedical samples collected by the OPCW team confirms the findings of the United Kingdom relating to the identity of the toxic chemical that was used in Salisbury and severely injured three people"]

Stopfake have debunked Russian media stories on Porton Down: <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-uk-s-secret-weapons-lab-chief-confirms-chemical-weapons-development/>

Chemical weapons expert Dan Kaszeta published a strong rebuttal of conspiracy theories on politics.co.uk (<http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2018/04/06/myth-busting-why-didn-t-the-skripals-die-on-the-spot>)

A chemical weapons database to be hosted by the Syrian Archives will be hosted at the ECCHR in Berlin on 24 April: <https://www.facebook.com/events/228152094587928/>

Good sources of further information on the campaign are the European External Action Service East StratComm Task Forces Disinformation Review, the Atlantic Council DFRLab, Bellingcat on Syria in particular and Stopfake:

<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

<https://medium.com/dfrlab>

<https://www.bellingcat.com/category/news/mena/>

<https://www.stopfake.org/en/news/>

Sources on Novichok confusion:

Kiselyov: [https://youtu.be/rInhLx8PSnI?t=907 ...](https://youtu.be/rInhLx8PSnI?t=907...)

Zakharova: [https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/11297083.shtml?updated ...](https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/11297083.shtml?updated...)

Novichok destroyed: [https://vz.ru/news/2018/3/13/912268.html ...](https://vz.ru/news/2018/3/13/912268.html...)

More from The Bell: <https://thebell.io/en/the-scientist-who-developed-novichok-doses-ranged-from-20-grams-to-several-kilos/>

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