



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY

Disinformation in the Kremlin's Toolkit of Influence

Training Guidance for Scoping
the Threat to the Norms and Institutions
of Weapons of Mass Destruction Nonproliferation

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**Training Guidance for Scoping the Threat to
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This training guidance looks into ways in which Russia utilizes disinformation to advance its hybrid warfare and avoid accountability for its interference with the domestic affairs of foreign countries. The guidance focuses on hybrid threats involving the use of materials associated with the development of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. It seeks to illustrate 1) how the use of WMD materials fits within the Kremlin’s toolbox of influence and 2) how disinformation activities regarding WMD-enabled attacks can impact the existing WMD nonproliferation norms and institutions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BTWC	Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention
CBRN	chemical, biological, radiological/radioactive, nuclear
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
NPT	Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

INTRODUCTION

Disinformation – the deliberate spread of inaccurate, incomplete, or fabricated information – remains one of the core instruments through which the Kremlin seeks to assert its political authority domestically and exercise influence abroad. Russia’s disinformation campaigns are wide-ranging and designed to provoke an emotional reaction by exploiting issues of significant public concern (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic). Their aim is to secure the Kremlin’s strategic and economic advantage in international and regional affairs by polarizing and destabilizing foreign countries and eroding public trust in the local and international institutions. During the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, Russia has stepped up its disinformation campaigns focusing in particular on technically specific and malign narratives around chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons – collectively referred to as weapons of mass destruction (WMD). These campaigns have come on top of the Kremlin’s continuing efforts to discredit and undermine the investigation of Novichok chemical nerve agent use against Sergey Skripal in 2018 and Alexei Navalny in 2020 in which Russian intelligence operatives have been implicated.

The Kremlin has relied on different strategies to integrate disinformation into its hybrid warfare playbook. These strategies need to be considered within the broader framework of the Kremlin’s vicious cycle of state capture that makes it possible to influence strategic foreign policy decisions in Europe.¹ There are two primary channels of the Kremlin’s state capture power: its state-sponsored networks of influence and corruption and its control over Russia’s economic and financial flows. Russia’s media capture strategy combines media ownership, control over advertising budgets, and coordination and support for journalistic proxies that manufacture fake news to promote disinformation narratives.² As an evolution of Cold War-era ‘active measures’, media capture has allowed the Kremlin to amplify its influence in Europe considerably through the deployment of coordinated disinformation and propaganda campaigns. These methods exploit political indecisiveness and public opinion ambiguities regarding strategically significant issues in such areas as national security, energy, and foreign policy. Media capture can take different forms: (1) ownership capture, i.e. exercising control on media outlets through their ownership; advertising capture, i.e. using advertising revenue as a way of exercising control on media outlets; (3) government capture, i.e. inconsistent strategic communication on issues of high public significance and ambiguous messaging by high-ranking political figures; and (4) cognitive capture, i.e. exploiting emotional predispositions and existing sentiments to manipulate and eventually take control on the public discourse.³

¹ Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., and Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020.

² Shentov, Stefanov, and Vladimirov (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: CSD, 2020.

³ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Countering Hybrid Threats in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No. 118, 2022.

Russia's hybrid warfare operations utilize a combination of tactics and tools – e.g. diplomatic, military, technological, and economic. Whilst these activities typically remain beneath the threshold of an actual armed conflict, they can have far-reaching pernicious effects upon the victim state, resulting in loss of life, injuries, damage, disruption of essential services, or widespread panic. But the Kremlin's hybrid campaigns can also affect societies in more intangible ways – for example, by gradually weakening key institutions in the target country (through systematic corruption or by exploiting regulatory vulnerabilities), taking over entire sectors of the economy, undermining established governance processes and arrangements, and polarizing communities.

This training guidance looks into ways in which Russia utilizes disinformation to advance its hybrid warfare and avoid accountability for its interference with the domestic affairs of foreign countries. The guidance focuses on hybrid threats involving the use of materials associated with the development of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. It seeks to illustrate 1) how the use of WMD materials fits within the Kremlin's toolbox of influence and 2) how disinformation activities regarding WMD-enabled attacks can impact the existing WMD nonproliferation norms and institutions. The guidance contains indicative scenarios which are intended to facilitate consideration of the possible manifestations of disinformation activities and the types of approaches and strategies that can be implemented to counter foreign malign activities in the media sector. The scenarios can also serve as awareness-raising resources for mapping emerging hybrid threats from Russia.

HYBRID WARFARE AND WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION (WMD)

Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) include chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. The concept of WMD hybrid threats refers to subversive or coercive activities involving the misuse of chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) materials or related information. Such activities can be wide-ranging and can also include cyberattacks on facilities that produce or store such materials, for example nuclear power plants, or high-containment laboratories, and disinformation activities on WMD-related issues.⁴ WMD hybrid threats challenge disarmament and nonproliferation treaties and conventions and skew established concepts of deterrence.

The use of WMD materials (i.e. chemical, biological, radioactive, or nuclear (CBRN) materials or agents) in targeted assassinations constitutes a particular deterrence challenge for at least three reasons. *First*, such attacks are usually aimed at a specific individual which makes them difficult to predict. *Second*, as witnessed in documented cases, carrying out such attacks do not require a large quantity of a toxic agent or substance which means that the material could be smuggled or transported across borders with a relative ease. And *third*, such attacks may not be immediately detected as the symptoms that the victim shows may resemble a natural health condition or illness. The cumulative effect of these three factors at play can amount to significant delays in identifying the agent or material used in the attack which in turn would have implications for conducting a timely and effective investigation and apprehending the actual perpetrators.

Over the past two decades, Russian security services have been implicated in a series of high-profile cases in which radioactive and chemical warfare agents were used to poison individuals perceived as adversaries and political opponents. The most well-known of these cases is the 2006 assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian defector and dissident, for which the Kremlin's involvement was confirmed in court.⁵ The investigations of the Novichok poisonings of the former Russian spy, Sergei Skripal, and opposition leader Alexei Navalny indicate that these incidents have followed a similar pattern to that of Litvinenko. While targeted assassinations are not a novel tactic in the Kremlin's toolbox for power projection per se, the use of toxic substances traditionally associated with chemical and nuclear weapon programs signals Moscow's determination to both maintain and deploy an offensive weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability, when deemed necessary. Chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons – collectively referred to as WMD – are subject to a different type of international control. Whereas certain states still have the right to possess nuclear weapons, international law prohibits the development, production, and use of chemical and biological weapons.

⁴ MASC-CBRN, *Countering the Misuse of CBRN Materials and Knowledge: Methodology for National Capacity Assessment*, 2022.

⁵ See European Court of Human Rights, *Carter v. Russia*, no. 20914/07, September 21, 2021.

Russia inherited the Soviet Union's nuclear-weapon-state status and it is allowed to maintain a nuclear-weapon arsenal in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The Russian nuclear deterrence doctrine does not preclude the possibility of the first use of nuclear weapons in case state sovereignty or survival are under an imminent threat.⁶ As a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) Russia is prohibited from developing, acquiring, producing, or using chemical weapons. The definition of chemical weapons includes any toxic chemicals and their precursors unless these are intended for purposes not prohibited under this Convention, as long as the types and quantities are consistent with such purposes. This definition seeks to ensure that toxic chemicals that are already known, as well as toxic chemicals that may be developed in future are both covered by the international prohibition of chemical weapons. The purposes that are not prohibited under the CWC are stipulated in its Article 2(9). The Convention also contains an Annex on Chemicals listing three categories (Schedules) of toxic chemicals that are intended to facilitate the implementation of its verification provisions.

The allegations of Russia's continued reliance on its offensive WMD capabilities need to be considered against the backdrop of the country's dubious track record as regards compliance with international law in the field of WMD non-proliferation and disarmament. The history of the Soviet biological warfare program is a case in point. The Soviet Union was one of the three depository states of the 1975 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) which is the first multilateral treaty that outlaws an entire class of weapons of mass destruction. Despite this, throughout the 1970s, the Soviet leadership considerably expanded its effort to develop biological warfare capabilities making use of novel scientific and technological advances, including emerging DNA recombinant techniques.⁷ The biowarfare program spanned military, health, agricultural, and academic research facilities employing some 50,000 scientists. Most of this work took place under the guise of legitimate activities and only handful of senior Communist Party officials and science administrators were aware of the full scale of the biowarfare effort.

Evidence that the Soviet Union carried out offensive biological activities started to pile up in the 1980s following the accidental leak of anthrax spores from a military bioweapon production facility in Sverdlovsk (today's Yekaterinburg) and thanks to the accounts of senior Soviet officials who defected to the West.⁸ The bioweapons program was officially terminated by a Presidential Decree in 1992; however, Russia's commitment to the goals of biological disarmament remains questionable.⁹ For one thing, it is worth noting that the

⁶ Russia, [Presidential Decree No 355](#), *Fundamentals of Russian Federation's State Policy in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence* [in Russian], June 2, 2020.

⁷ On the history of the Soviet biological warfare program, see Leitenberg, M. and Zilinskas, R. (with Kuhn, J.) *Soviet Biological Weapon Program: A History*, Harvard University Press, 2012; Zilinskas, R. et al. *Stories of the Soviet Anti-Plague System*, Occasional Paper No 18, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 4 September 2013.

⁸ See Meselson, M. et al. 'The Sverdlovsk Anthrax Outbreak of 1979', *Science*, vol. 266, no. 5188, November 18, 1994. See also Alibek, K. and Handleman, S. *Biohazard: The Chilling True Story of the Largest Covert Biological Weapons Program in the World – Told from Inside by the Man Who Ran It*, Random House, 2000.

⁹ See, for example, US Department of State, [2022 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments](#), April 2022.

none of the biological research facilities under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence in Russia have opened up for international inspection.¹⁰

Russia's posture in the context of the chemical weapon prohibition regime has been almost equally controversial. During a terrorist hostage crisis at a Moscow theater in 2002, the Russian security forces used fentanyl-based gas which resulted in fatalities and long-term incapacitation among a considerable number of the hostages. The incident raised questions about the extent to which the use of chemical agents that affect the central nervous system for law enforcement purposes is consistent with the goals of the CWC.¹¹ Russia has systematically supported Syria despite the evidence that the country's government forces used chemical weapons during the civil war.¹² Russia has also continuously questioned the evidence of Novichok use against Sergei and Yulia Skripal and Alexei Navalny denying any involvement whatsoever in the perpetration of these attacks.¹³ High-level political statements and maneuvering by Russian officials within the context of the CWC have been coupled with intense efforts by the state-owned media to present the investigation of the incidents as driven by 'Western Russophobia'.¹⁴ Given the concerted nature of Russia's tactics, it would be naïve to look at them solely as self-serving, which is to ignore the possibility that the broader effects of these tactics including the weakening of the international norms against chemical weapons are not deliberately sought.

¹⁰ Kelly, D. 'The Trilateral Agreement: Lessons for Biological Weapons Verification', *Verification Yearbook 2002*, VERTIC: 2002.

¹¹ See, for example, Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)-Conference of the States Parties (COP), [Decision: Understanding regarding the Aerosolized Use of Central Nervous System-acting Chemicals for Law Enforcement Purposes](#), C-26/DEC.10, 1 December 2021.

¹² See Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), 2022. The IIT is tasked with identifying the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic. The IIT has issued [two reports](#) so far – in 2020 and 2021 – in which the Team notes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the attacks under the IIT scrutiny were committed by the Syrian armed forces. See also Russia, [Statement on the First Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team \(IIT\)](#), 9 April 2020.

¹³ The UK and Germany requested OPCW Technical Assistance in regard to the chemical incident involving Sergei and Yulia Skripal in 2018 and the one involving Alexei Navalny in 2020, respectively. See OPCW, [Incident Salisbury](#), 2022; and OPCW, [Case of Mr Alexei Navalny](#), 2022. On Russia's position on these cases, see, for example, Russian Federation, [Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin, Permanent Representatives of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Fifty-Ninth Meeting of the Executive Council](#), EC-M-59/NAT.3, April 18, 2018; Russian Federation, [Request for Circulation of a Document at the Ninety-Eighth Session of the Executive Council](#), EC-98/NAT.8, October 7, 2021.

¹⁴ Ramsay, G. and Robertshaw, S. [Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik, and Targeted Disinformation](#), King's College London: January 2019.

INDICATIVE SCENARIOS

To illustrate the utility of WMD hybrid threats within the Kremlin's arsenal of hybrid warfare instruments, this section uses indicative scenarios that examine the use of disinformation in the context of targeted assassinations using toxic chemical agents. Scenario #1 focuses on an attempted targeted assassination aimed to influence decision-making in the defense industry of a foreign country. Scenario #2 focuses on an attempted targeted assassination aimed to influence an ongoing election campaign in a foreign country. The scenarios are fictitious but their development has been informed by real-life cases. Information about these cases is provided before each of the scenarios.

A core aspect covered in both scenarios pertains to the impact of disinformation in the context of targeted assassinations using WMD materials. The scenarios specifically focus on the phenomenon of media capture as a critical amplifying factor. Whereas key aspects of the process of detecting and investigating the use of WMD materials in each scenario are also discussed, the principal goal is to draw attention to the challenges that disinformation campaigns may cause in the course of responding to WMD hybrid threats.

The scenarios are intended to facilitate consideration of possible approaches and strategies for countering WMD hybrid threats taking into account the different motivation that may underpin such threats. Each scenario is followed by suggested questions for discussion.

SCENARIO #1: FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND INDUSTRY CAPTURE

Real-Life Cases Informing the Scenario Development

The Kremlin has relied on dubious strategies and tactics such as corruption and coercion to secure and expand its economic influence abroad. Over the years Russia has weaponized oil and gas supply turning these resources into crucial bargaining chips in advancing its foreign policy agenda. The Russian economic footprint manifests through direct (e.g. ownership of assets and companies) and indirect (e.g. the promise of large-scale infrastructure projects or access to the Russian market) control.¹⁵ Strategic assets controlled by Russian companies across Europe include some of the largest telecommunication, metallurgical, and energy businesses.

Emilian Gebrev, the owner of one of Bulgaria's largest defense industrial companies was poisoned with a Novichok-like chemical agent in 2015. The poisoning was detected in the Military Medical Academy, a specialized health-care facility that is part of Bulgaria's WMD defense infrastructure where he was admitted in critical health condition. An independent sample analysis at an internationally accredited laboratory has shown metabolites indicating the presence of organophosphorus pesticide agents in his body.¹⁶ Organophosphorus pesticides act on the same principle as chemical warfare nerve agents. Whilst some organophosphorus pesticides (insecticides) are exempt from the inspection and verification requirements of the CWC, the use of any such agents as weapons is prohibited by Article 2 (1) of the Convention.¹⁷

Bulgaria is the second-largest exporter of ammunition in Eastern Europe after Russia, and has been one of the most significant exporters of Soviet-standard ammunition, small arms, and light weapons destined for Ukraine.¹⁸ In 2020, the Prosecutor's Office in Bulgaria accused three operatives of the GRU, an arm of the Russian intelligence service, of attempted murder.¹⁹ One of the accused persons is also implicated in the 2018 Skripal poisoning.

¹⁵ Shentov, Stefanov, and Vladimirov (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: CSD, 2020.

¹⁶ Kaszeta, D., 'Pesticides as Poisons: Analysis of the Gebrev Case', *Bellingcat*, February 19, 2019.

¹⁷ See Chemical Weapons Convention, [Annex on Chemicals: Schedule 2](#). Section B. Precursors of Schedule 2 lists Fonofos, an insecticide commonly used on corn as an exemption to the Convention's inspection and verification regime. The use of any toxic chemical for purposes that are prohibited by the CWC is covered by the [general purpose criterion](#) contained in Article 2(1) of the Convention.

¹⁸ Gospodinova, V., and Yurdanov, A, „Оръжията на раздора“ [Weapons of Discord], *Capital*, April 26, 2022; Bloomberg TV Bulgaria, „Безлов: Има голям износ на боеприпаси от България за Украйна през трети страни“ [Bezlov: There is significant exportation of ammunitions from Bulgaria to Ukraine through third countries], May 5, 2022.

¹⁹ This press release concerns an ongoing investigation. See Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria, „СГП предоставя информация по досъдебно производство за отравянето на Ем. Гебрев, Хр. Гебрев и В. Тахчиев“ [Press release of the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office regarding the pre-trial proceedings on the poisoning of E. Gebrev, H. Gebrev, and V. Takhchiev], September 15, 2020.

Since 2014, Mr Gebrev had been locked in a prolonged battle over the control of one of his military factories with Delyan Peevski, a former Bulgarian media mogul and member of parliament, sanctioned in 2021 by the U.S. administration under the Global Magnitsky Act. The factory in question became infamous thanks to another plot involving Russia. In 2019, Bulgarian prosecution services detained Nikolay Malinov, the leader of the Russophile movement in Bulgaria, on espionage charges. A critical piece of evidence from the case, shared publicly by the Bulgarian prosecution, showed that Mr Malinov had written to the Russian ultra-orthodox supporter of President Vladimir Putin Konstantin Malofeev, proposing a plan of action for acquiring critical economic assets in Bulgaria to return the country to the Russian sphere of influence.²⁰ One of the assets proposed for acquisition was Gebrev's factory.²¹ While the espionage investigation was still ongoing, a Bulgarian judge allowed Mr Malinov to travel to Moscow to receive a medal from President Putin without properly notifying the Bulgarian prosecution. The judge was subsequently sanctioned on corruption charges by the US Department of State which triggered an administrative investigation in Bulgaria into the conduct of the judge. In July 2022, the Supreme Administrative Court acquitted the judge ruling that there was no misconduct in the way in which the Malinov case was dealt with.²²

The Russian state-controlled media, including RIA Novosti, Sputnik, TASS, Vzglyad, and RT have published a series of articles on the Gebrev case claiming that the accusations by the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office are part of a 'large-scale campaign launched by the West against Moscow' and even if a poisoning really took place, it was an accident due to pesticides found in the salad that Mr Gebrev had before feeling ill.²³ The case has also featured in the Bulgarian pro-Kremlin media online media space where it was claimed that the poisoning was:

- An accident as a result of consuming contaminated food.
- Connected to his activities as a clandestine arms trafficker for the US Central Intelligence Agency.
- Carried out by local oligarchic competitors who hired Russian intelligence operatives to conduct the poisoning.
- Fabricated to worsen relations between Bulgaria and Russia.

²⁰ Trichkova, V., „Прокуратурата разпространи доказателства по шпионския скандал (ОБЗОР)“ [The Prosecutor's office releases evidence in spy scandal (VIDEO)], *Nova TV*, September 12, 2019.

²¹ Webcave, „Прокуратурата публикува уликите срещу Николай Малинов“ [The Prosecutor's office published the evidence against Nikolay Malinov], September 12, 2019.

²² Lex News, „ВАС: Обявеният от САЩ за корумпиран спецсъдия Андон Миталов не е извършил нарушения и правилно не е наказан“ [SAC: The Special Judge Andon Mitalov, declared corrupt by the USA, did not commit any violations and was not properly punished], July 22, 2022.

²³ See, for example, 'US Media Invents Poverty-Stricken Top Secret Russian Unit Tasked with Destabilizing Europe', *Sputnik International*, October 9, 2019. This article claims that the GRU Unit implicated in the poisoning of Mr Gebrev has been made up by the West. See also 'The Prosecutor's Office of Bulgaria Has Accused Three Russians with Attempted Murder' [in Russian], *RT*, January 23, 2020. This article asserts that a formal expertise has shown that a pesticide known as chlorpyrifos was found in the salad that Mr Gebrev before he fell ill.

- Fabricated by the Western media to discredit the Russian intelligence service by referring to a unit (i.e. GRU Unit 29155) that does not exist.²⁴

Scenario #1 Summary

Scenario #1 examines the threat of foreign influence in industry sectors of national strategic significance, e.g. defense. It describes a poisoning incident that takes place after the corporate leadership of a leading military industry enterprise in the fictitious country of Middleland makes a decision to re-orient the enterprise's production lines. The assumption is that the intelligence service of the neighboring country of Coastland is behind the attack, as the move undertaken by the enterprise leadership is likely to hinder cooperation with entities in Coastland causing them economic losses. The scenario presents possible ways in which a disinformation campaign regarding the incident could manifest itself and provides indicative questions for consideration of strategies and tools that could be leveraged to counter foreign influence in the media sector.

Background

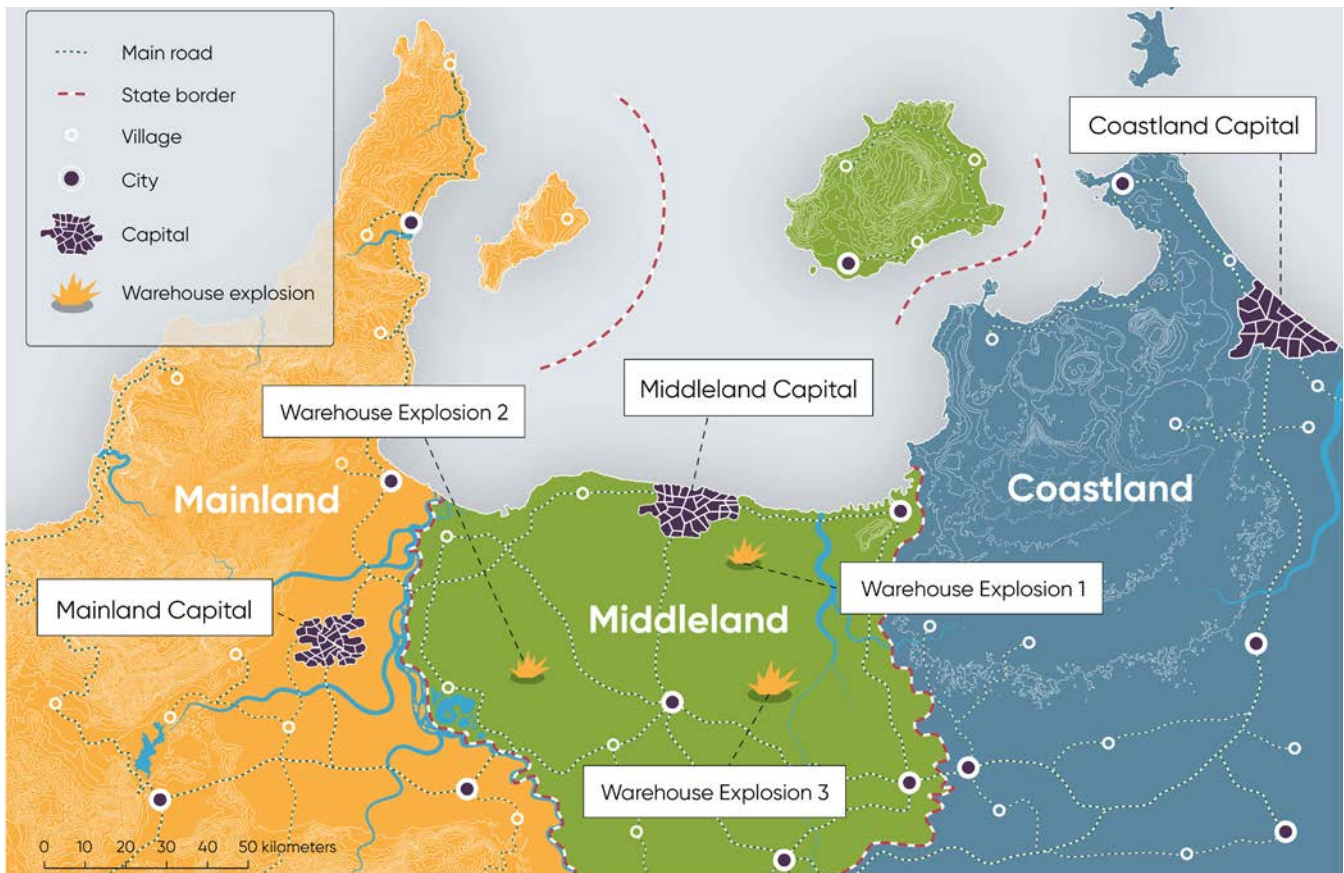
Middleland is situated in a region dominated by the resource-rich country of Coastland. The country has recently joined a trade and security alliance which Coastland views as a threat to its economic and strategic interests in the region. Mainland is also a member of this alliance.

Authorities in Middleland are investigating explosions at several warehouses of a local leading military enterprise with a sizeable market share in the region. The targeted enterprise is an important partner of Coastland's arms industry. The explosions take place after the company's board of directors announces a major plan for modernization and production of armament that will no longer be compatible with Coastland's arms standards.

Figure 1 shows a map of the region and the location of sites where the explosions have taken place. The plot discussed in the *Case description* below takes place in the Middleland Capital, the capital city of Middleland. The internationally accredited laboratory mentioned in that section is located in Mainland Capital, the capital city of Mainland.

²⁴ The listed narratives have been identified as a result of media monitoring research that has focused on media outlets that publish pro-Kremlin narratives in Bulgaria. The methodology used for the media monitoring research is based on previous work by the Center for the Study of Democracy on analyzing the Kremlin's influence and in particular the ways in which the Kremlin's media capture manifests itself in the Bulgarian media space. See, for example, Galev, T. et al. *Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries: Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018.

Figure 1. Scenario #1: Map of the Region



Source: CSD.

Case Description

The owner of the targeted military company, a prominent entrepreneur in Middleland and his wife are found unconscious in a car near their home. A passer-by calls an ambulance and is also admitted to hospital with nausea, shortness of breath, and seizures. The news is immediately picked up by the local media.

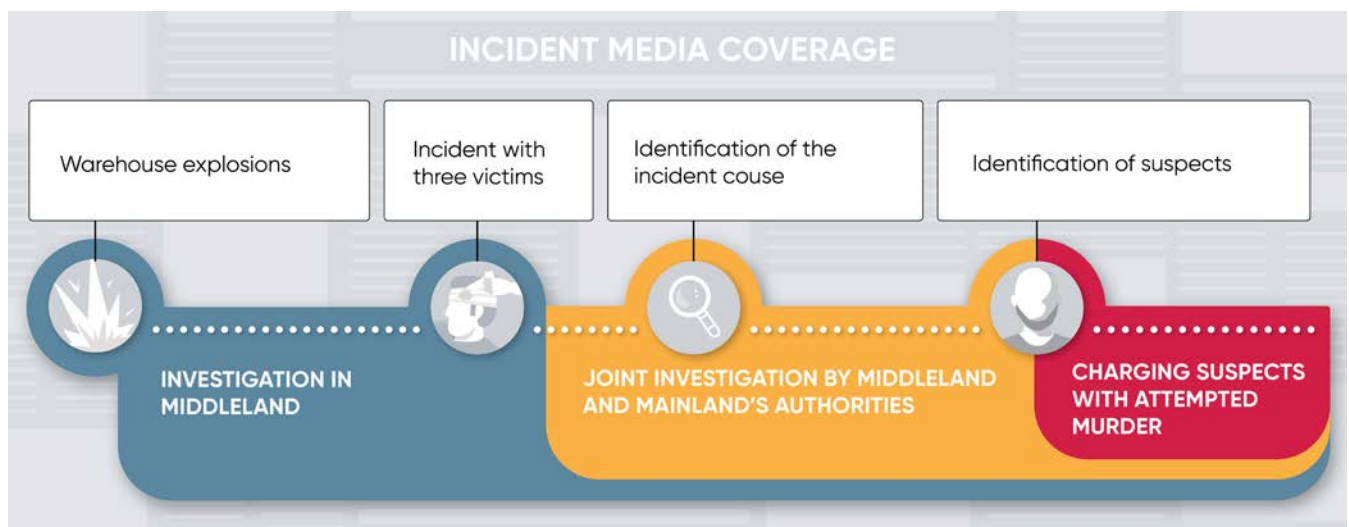
Traces of organophosphate pesticide agents which are similar in their action to chemical warfare nerve agents are found on the handles of the entrepreneur's car. A specialized internationally-accredited laboratory in Mainland confirms the results of the analysis of collected samples.

Authorities in Middleland and Mainland treat the incident as an attempted murder and cooperate on its investigation. Security camera footage from the underground parking of the company's head office shows the entrepreneur and his wife getting into his personal vehicle prior to the incident. The footage also shows that two other individuals have had access to the vehicle earlier that day. The individuals are identified. Further investigation reveals that they have ties with the intelligence service of Coastland and they had visited Middleland at the time of the explosions in the company's warehouses. The individuals are indicted on charges of attempted murder.

The state media in Coastland dubs the incident a ‘major conspiracy’ that was staged by the intelligence services of Mainland and Middleland to discredit the political leadership of Coastland. Multiple fringe outlets in Middleland systematically spread these claims. This narrative also reaches the local mainstream media and gains popularity on social networks.

Figure 2 below highlights the fact that the events described in the scenario take place within the context of a continuous media coverage. Media coverage comprises online and print publishing, television and radio broadcasting, and the use of social media. The figure seeks to facilitate consideration of the processes of information sharing, fact-finding, and fact-checking to mitigate and counter disinformation threats.

Figure 2. Scenario #1: Media Coverage of the Incident



Source: CSD.

Questions for Discussion

- How could the spread of competing narratives about the cause of the incident impact public perceptions of the response measures adopted by the authorities in Middleland and Mainland?
- What strategies could public and civil society stakeholders use to ensure that the information provided to the media is accurate?
- What strategies could end-users use to verify the reliability of media sources?
- What policies and/or measures could be implemented to manage the risk of foreign influence in the media sector?

Scenario Highlights

The information provided in the *Background* section provides the general context of the incident. The primary assumption is that Coastland is a regional power which is capable of exercising influence over the political, economic, and strategic affairs of its neighbors, (e.g. Middleland). The fact that Middleland has recently joined an alliance that Coastland perceives as adversarial matter, as this can limit the extent to which Coastland would be able to exercise its relative power vis-à-vis Middleland in future. The decision of the military enterprise to change its production lines will make this enterprise significantly less dependent on its cooperation with entities in Coastland (i.e. from a trade partner, the enterprise will become only a competitor). If successful, the belligerent posture of Coastland (e.g. explosions at warehouses and storage facilities) may enable its government to continue to exercise control over its neighbor despite Middleland's membership in the rival alliance.

The *Case description* section is underpinned by the following assumptions: (1) whilst the symptoms of the passer-by are typical of some natural health conditions (e.g. stroke), there are several victims in a critical condition at the same site which signals poisoning; (2) the analysis of victims' samples at the hospital in Middleland shows traces of toxic chemical agents; (3) forensic analysis of the vehicle is performed in a timely manner.

This section further allows considering two other issues. The first concerns the relationship between the government of Coastland and the country's military industry. The involvement of intelligence operatives from Coastland in the attack signals collusion between Coastland's public and private entities. The second concerns the implications of the case for the international chemical prohibition regime. The provisions of the CWC prohibit the development, production, stockpiling, and use of toxic chemical agents (e.g. organophosphorus pesticides) as weapons. The assumption is that Middleland is a State Party to the CWC and can also request technical assistance from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) besides the bilateral assistance that the country has already requested from Mainland.²⁵

As regards the media coverage of the incident in Coastland, it is worth deconstructing the narrative that the local state media uses. This narrative claims that the incident was fabricated questioning the credibility of all collected evidence (e.g. results of medical tests, forensics data, security camera footage, etc.). Assuming that the state media in Coastland makes no attempt to establish and present the relevant facts surrounding the case over time, it is likely that this form of media coverage is deliberately chosen, i.e. there is an intent to mislead/manipulate the public which amounts to disinformation.

²⁵ OPCW, [Responding to the Use of Chemical Weapons](#).

The fact that fringe media outlets in Middleland disseminate the misleading narrative systematically is a sign of an organized effort, i.e. the assumption is that multiple different online media outlets continuously promote this claim, including, for example, by sharing/re-printing articles that appear on the state media in Coastland. The scale and nature of this effort signal that the fringe media outlets in Middleland could be part of a broader media ecosystem that seeks to popularize views that serve the interests of a particular state, i.e. Coastland. Two relevant aspects that could be considered, also as part of the *Questions for discussion*, include the factors that may enable the development of such a media ecosystem and the steps and measures that could be put into place to address its malign effects.

SCENARIO #2: FOREIGN INTERFERENCE WITH A NATIONAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Real-Life Cases Informing the Scenario Development

The Kremlin has a notorious track record of interfering with political processes of foreign countries to secure decision-making outcomes that serve Russia's economic, strategic, and foreign policy interests. This includes efforts to manipulate election results to ensure that candidates whom Russia's leadership favored would come to power.²⁶

During the presidential election campaign in 2004 in Ukraine, the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko suffered severe dioxin poisoning.²⁷ He fell sick after a dinner with representatives of the Ukrainian security service. Initially admitted to hospital in Kyiv, Mr Yushchenko was subsequently transferred to a specialized clinic in Austria where doctors established that he was poisoned with TCDD, the most toxic of the organic compounds known as dioxins. Dioxins can cause multiple harmful effects at once. The level of dioxin found in Mr Yushchenko's blood was 1,000 times higher than normal which signaled that the poisoning could not have occurred naturally.²⁸

Once in the body, dioxins typically do not cause illness immediately (i.e. symptoms take a few days to develop) which makes it practically impossible that Mr Yushchenko was poisoned during the dinner. Mr Yushchenko was campaigning in Crimea shortly before the poisoning and some of his close associates have suggested he could have been poisoned there. The incident remains unresolved.²⁹

Mr Yushchenko's principal opponent in the presidential campaign was Viktor Yanukovich who was also the preferred candidate of the Kremlin.³⁰ Russia's interference with the Ukrainian presidential elections produced a modest victory for Mr Yanukovich in October 2004 which spurred mass protests known as the Orange Revolution. Amidst continuing public discontent and piling evidence of election fraud, the results were annulled and a presidential run-off revote took place in early 2005. The revote was won by Viktor Yushchenko who remained in office until 2010.

²⁶ FBI, [Russian Interference in 2016 U.S. Elections](#); Bulckaert, N., 'How France Successfully Countered Russian Interference during the Presidential Election', *Euractiv*, July 17, 2018.

²⁷ Schechter, A. et al., 'Dioxins: An Overview', *Environmental Research*, vol. 101:3, 2006, pp. 419-428.

²⁸ Mendoza, J., 'Who Is Viktor Yushchenko? What You Need to Know about the Former Ukrainian President?', *USA Today News*, March 1, 2022.

²⁹ Chivers, C.J., 'A Dinner in Ukraine Made for Agatha Christie', *The New York Times*, December 20, 2004.

³⁰ Dickinson, P., 'How Ukraine's Orange Revolution Shaped Twenty-First Century Geopolitics', *Atlantic Council*, November 22, 2022.

Scenario #2 Summary

Scenario #2 examines the threat of foreign influence in a national elections campaign. It describes a poisoning incident that takes place in the midst of an ongoing election campaign in the fictitious country of Middleland. One of the two main candidates for the post of Prime Minister is poisoned during an official dinner. The underlying assumption in the scenario is that the neighboring country of Coastland has orchestrated the attack to intimidate the targeted candidate and facilitate an election win for his opponent, who pledges deepened trade and security cooperation with Coastland if elected. The scenario presents possible ways in which a disinformation campaign regarding the incident could manifest itself and provides indicative questions for consideration of strategies and tools that could be leveraged to counter foreign influence in the media sector.

Background

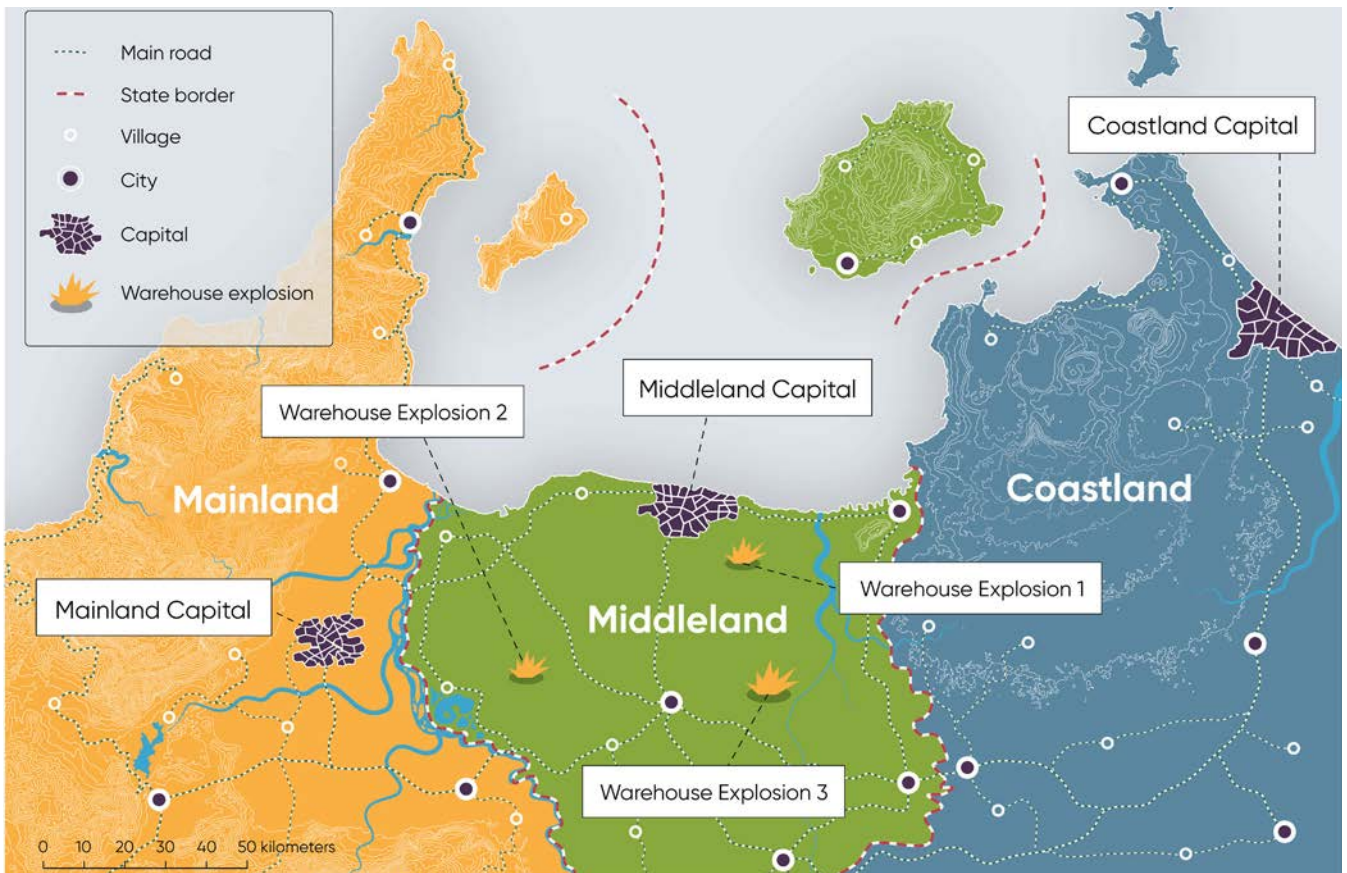
Middleland and Mainland are situated in a region dominated by the resource-rich country of Coastland. Both countries seek to join a trade and security alliance which Coastland views as a threat to its economic and strategic interests in the region. Recently the government of Middleland has cancelled a number of major defense contracts with Coastland, including a lease agreement for a military base that Coastland operates on the territory of Middleland.

Authorities in Middleland have accused the intelligence service of Coastland of acts of sabotage against several military industrial enterprises on the territory of Middleland. The political leadership of Coastland denies the accusations.

Middleland is facing elections with two political parties competing for the majority vote and the right to form a government. Party 1 which is currently in power in Middleland campaigns for greater economic, security, and political independence from Coastland. Party 2 campaigns for increased economic and security cooperation with Coastland emphasising the shared cultural and historical heritage between the two countries.

Figure 3 shows a map of the region and the location of sites where the explosions have taken place. The plot discussed in the *Case description* below takes place in the Middleland Capital, the capital city of Middleland. The victim is transferred Mainland Capital, the capital city of Mainland.

Figure 3. Scenario #2: Map of the Region



Source: CSD.

Case Description

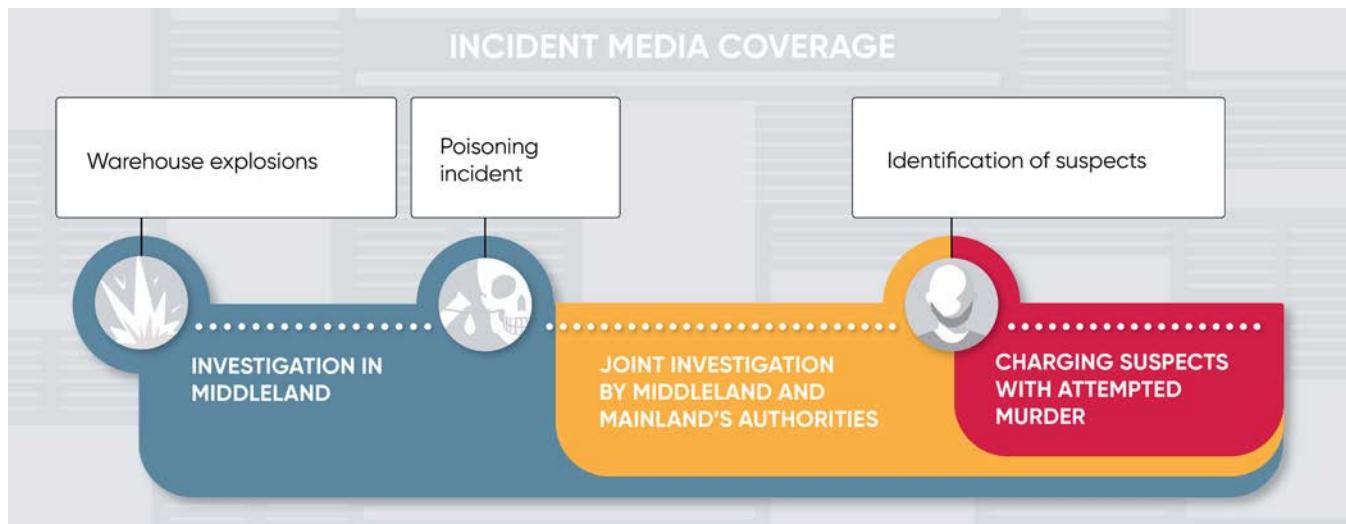
Few days before the elections, the leader of Party 1 falls seriously ill and is admitted to hospital with severe abdominal and back pain and skin lesions. He is diagnosed with an acute dioxin poisoning and the levels of dioxin in his blood signal a deliberate poisoning. On security grounds, he is transferred to a specialised clinic in the neighbouring country of Mainland. The news is immediately picked up by the media. Authorities in Middleland seek assistance from Mainland on the investigation of the case.

In the two weeks prior to the poisoning, the leader of Party 1 attended several major rallies and formal events. Footage from a recent charity dinner at which he delivered a keynote address shows that this event was also attended by a local oligarch with close business ties to Coastland. At the event, the oligarch is accompanied by an individual who is identified as an operative of the intelligence service of Coastland. The footage shows this individual interacting briefly with one of the waiters near the table where the leader of Party 1 is sitting. The investigation reveals that the waiter in question has fled Middleland shortly after the charity event. It also reveals that the intelligence operative also visited Middleland at the time of the explosions at the military facilities. Authorities in Middleland bring charges of an attempted murder against the operative and the 'waiter'.

Meanwhile, the state media in Coastland continuously presents the incident as a 'severe allergic reaction.' Fringe online media outlets in Middleland systematically begin spreading this claim. This narrative also reaches the local mainstream media and gains popularity on social networks.

Figure 4 below highlights the fact that the events described in the scenario take place within the context of a continuous media coverage. Media coverage comprises online and print publishing, television and radio broadcasting, and the use of social media. The figure seeks to facilitate consideration of the processes of information sharing, fact-finding, and fact-checking to mitigate and counter disinformation threats.

Figure 4. Scenario #2: Media Coverage of the Incident



Source: CSD.

Questions for Discussion

- How could the spread of competing narratives about the cause of the incident impact on public perceptions of the response measures adopted by the authorities in Middleland and Mainland?
- What strategies could public and civil society stakeholders use to ensure that the information provided to the media is accurate?
- What strategies could end-users use to verify the reliability of media sources?
- What policies and/or measures could be implemented to manage the risk of foreign influence in the media sector?

Scenario Highlights

The information provided in the *Background* section provides the general context of the incident. The primary assumption is that Coastland is a regional power which is capable of exercising influence over the political, economic, and strategic affairs of its other countries in the region, Middleland and Mainland. The aspirations of these two countries to join an alliance that Coastland perceives as adversarial matter, as these aspirations can determine the extent to which Coastland would be able to exercise its relative power within the region in future (e.g. Middleland has already deprived Coastland of a strategic asset – a military base). The upcoming elections in Middleland present a window of opportunity for Coastland to consolidate its influence within the region: if Party 2 comes to power in Middleland, the new government may revisit the plans to join the alliance. Such an outcome coupled with the increasingly belligerent posture of Coastland (e.g. explosion attacks in Middleland) may have implications for Mainland's geopolitical aspirations forcing the government in the country to reconsider its position.

The *Case description* section is underpinned by the following assumptions: (1) both the diagnosis and the cause of the health condition of the leader Party 1 can be decided upon quickly: the described symptoms are typical of an acute dioxin poisoning and the abnormally high level of dioxin found in his blood excludes the possibility of an accidental exposure to the toxic agent; (2) there are mechanisms for cooperation between law enforcement and security authorities of Middleland and Mainland; (3) scientific and technical data about the activity of the toxic agent are a critical factor in the incident investigation and the identification of suspects.

This section further allows considering two other issues. The first concerns the connection between the local oligarch and the intelligence operative from Coastland. It is possible that the oligarch is not involved in the planning of the attack. Instead, by dint of being an influential figure in Middleland, he provides the operative and their aide (i.e. the 'waiter') with an opportunity to gain access to the leader of Party 1. The second concerns the implications of the case for the international chemical prohibition regime. The provisions of the CWC prohibit the development, production, stockpiling, and use of toxic chemical agents (e.g. dioxin) as weapons. Dioxins are not commonly produced or used for commercial purposes but mainly exist as by-products of chemical industrial processes. Assuming that Middleland is a State Party to the CWC, its government could request technical assistance from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).³¹ Whilst the OPCW does not have a mandate to attribute chemical weapon use, a technical assistance visit, for example, can provide for an independent analysis of victim samples.

As regards the media coverage of the incident in Coastland, it is worth deconstructing the narrative that the local state media uses. This narrative accepts the fact that the leader of Party 1 suffered a health condition but rejects the evidence (i.e. results of medical tests, event footage, etc.) of the cause of this health condition. As such, the narrative presents only a partial picture of the incident omitting/obscuring certain information. Assuming that the state me-

³¹ OPCW, [Responding to the Use of Chemical Weapons](#).

dia in Coastland makes no attempt to establish and present all relevant facts surrounding the case over time, it is likely that this form of media coverage is deliberately chosen, i.e. there is an intent to mislead/manipulate the public which amounts to disinformation.

The fact that fringe media outlets in Middleland disseminate the misleading narrative systematically is a sign of an organized effort, i.e. the assumption is that multiple different online media outlets continuously promote this claim, including, for example, by sharing/re-printing articles that appear on the state media in Coastland. The scale and nature of this effort signal that the fringe media outlets in Middleland could be part of a broader media ecosystem that seeks to popularize views that serve the interests of a particular state, i.e. Coastland. Two relevant aspects that could be considered, also as part of the *Questions for discussion*, include the factors that may enable the development of such a media ecosystem and the steps and measures that could be put into place to address its malign effects.

CONCLUSION: COUNTERING DISINFORMATION THREATS RELATED TO WMD

The integration of the use of WMD materials and related information within Russia's hybrid warfare tactics poses multi-faceted challenges to the integrity and resilience of international norms against the proliferation and use of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. Whilst the Kremlin has been relatively effective in utilizing diverse tools for spreading and institutionalizing self-serving disinformation narratives, Russia's response to counter-messaging appears slow and generally inadequate.³² This in turn presents a window of opportunity to expose and even pre-empt the Kremlin's effort to take control on the discourse in issues of strategic significance.

Addressing the challenges posed by disinformation requires a concerted action on several fronts at once. Enforcing regulatory compliance to promote the transparency of media ownership and funding is a key step toward improving the media landscape within countries and reducing the risk of media capture. Covert work on detecting foreign influence operations needs to be coupled with overt initiatives to enhance media literacy and public sensitivity to social manipulation (e.g. fact-checking), efforts to strengthen strategic communication, and standard-setting initiatives that advance quality journalism and responsible media coverage. The availability of technology-based solutions for identifying and deterring disinformation campaigns needs to be leveraged both by public and private actors.

³² Maddox, J., *Russia's Active Measures: Recent CBRN-enabled Influence Operations*, presentation at an international conference on *Countering Hybrid Threats: Policy Options for Building Resilience to the Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, November 30, 2022.

ANNEX 1: PILOTING OF THE TRAINING GUIDANCE

The material presented in this training guidance was piloted during a series of expert-level workshops for Bulgarian stakeholders representing the public and the private sector. The concept of Scenario #1 was presented during [two expert-level training workshops](#) that the Center for the Study of Democracy held in October 2022 in Plovdiv and Varna. The slides used during this presentation are provided below. Scenario #2 was used for an interactive discussion during an [expert-level training workshop](#) in June 2022 in Sofia. The feedback collected during that workshop was used for fine-tuning the scenario concept. In conjunction with the development of this training guidance, the Center for the Study of Democracy has recently published a [policy brief](#) titled *Countering hybrid threats in Bulgaria*. This publication was presented at an international conference on *Countering Hybrid Threats: Policy Options for Building Resilience to the Kremlin Playbook in Europe* that was held on 30 November 2022 in Sofia.

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Hybrid threats and the role of state institutions

Dr Tatyana Novosiolova
Goran Georgiev



3-5 October 2022

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Overview

- Discussion scenario: hybrid threats involving the use of non-conventional weapons
- Identification of disinformation narratives



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Hybrid threats

"Hybrid campaigns are multidimensional, combining coercive and subversive measures, using both conventional and unconventional tools and tactics (diplomatic, military, economic, and technological) to destabilise the adversary. [...] The threats posed by non-conventional weapons [chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear] fall in a category of their own because of the potential scale of the damage they can cause. As well as being difficult to detect and attribute, they are complex to remedy." [emphases added]

Source: European Commission, [Increasing resilience and bolstering capabilities to address hybrid threats](#), 13 June 2018

Hybrid CoE
The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats

Source: [Hybrid CoE webpage](#).

EU vs DisInfo

Source: [EU vs Disinfo webpage](#).

NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Source: [NATO StratCom CoE webpage](#).

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Non-conventional weapons

- Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons
 - 1925 Geneva Protocol
 - 1970 Treaty on the Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT)
 - 1975 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC)
 - 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention
- Countering CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) security risks
 - United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004)
 - EU Action Plan to enhance preparedness against CBRN security risks (2017)

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Russia and the threat of non-conventional weapons

The Soviet biological weapons programme

- Programme development after 1975
- Sverdlovsk anthrax outbreak of 1979
- Presidential Decree of April 1992 for ending bioweapon activities.
- Trilateral disarmament process (1993)
- Russian behaviour within the BTWC after 2000 and BW allegations against other States Parties

The Sverdlovsk Anthrax Outbreak of 1979

Matthew Meselson, L. Anissa Gubareva, Wendy Hugh-Jones, Alexander Languet, Elena Popovic, Alexis Shadrin, Olga Yampolskaya

In April and May, 1979, an unusual anthrax epidemic occurred in Sverdlovsk, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Several patients exhibited an extraordinary combination of symptoms: meningitis, septicemia, and pulmonary edema. The epidemiological data show that the epidemic was a point source originating from the military facility for the production of anthrax spores. The outbreak spread of anthrax among the city population was the cause of widespread concern, and the epidemic spread of anthrax spores to the civilian population was the cause of widespread concern. The outbreak of anthrax spores in the military facility caused the outbreak of an epidemic among the civilian population.

Conclusion

The following review has been prepared for the purpose of providing information on the Sverdlovsk anthrax outbreak of 1979. It is based on the information available to the authors at the time of writing. It is not intended to be a definitive statement on the cause of the outbreak, but it does provide a basis for further investigation.

1979 • 1979 • 1979


Source: M. Meselson et al. [The Sverdlovsk Anthrax Outbreak of 1979](#), Science, vol. 266:5188 (1994), pp.1202-1208.

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Russia and the threat of non-conventional weapons

Challenging the international chemical prohibition regime

- Dubrovka incident of 2002.
- Investigation of the use of Novichok nerve agent in 2018 and 2020.
- Russia's support for Syria within the Chemical Weapons Convention despite the evidence of CW use by the Assad regime.



OPCW
Conference of the States Parties

Twenty-Seventh Session
29 November – 3 December 2021
C-26/DEC.10
1 December 2021
Original: ENGLISH

DECISION

UNDERSTANDING REGARDING THE AEROSOLISED USE OF CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM-ACTING CHEMICALS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT PURPOSES

The Conference of the States Parties,
Underlining the general obligations of each State Party in Article I of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (hereinafter "the Convention") and further underlining the comprehensive nature of the prohibitions with respect to chemical weapons, which are not limited to chemicals specifically listed in the Annex on Chemicals to the Convention,
Recalling that, pursuant to paragraph 1 of Article II of the Convention, "Chemical Weapons" encompasses, inter alia, "[t]oxic chemicals and their precursors, except where intended for purposes not prohibited under the Convention, as long as the types and quantities are consistent with such purposes"; and further recalling that, under article 3, of Article II of the Convention,

Source: CSP-OPCW, [Decision: Understanding regarding the Aerosolised use of CNS-acting Chemicals for Law Enforcement Purposes](#), 1 Dec 2021.

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Incidents involving the use of toxic agents



Source: ["Salisbury poisoning: Police Identify 'Novichok Suspects'"](#), BBC News, 19 July 2019.



Source: Council of Europe [Newsroom](#), 4 Feb 2021.



Source: H. Siddique and A. Roth, ["Russia Responsible for Alexander Litvinenko Death, European Court Rules"](#), Guardian, 21 Sep 2021.



Source: A. Schecter et al. ["Dioxins: An Overview"](#), Environmental Research, vol. 10:13 (2006), 419–428.



Source: ["Bulgarian Prosecutors Identify Three Russians Suspected in 2015 Poisoning Case"](#), RFE/RL, 21 Feb 2020.

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CWC and the misuse of toxic chemicals

Chemical weapon

Toxic chemicals and their precursors, except where intended for purposes not prohibited under this Convention, as long as the types and quantities are consistent with such purposes.

Toxic chemical

Any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals. This includes all such chemicals, regardless of their origin or of their method of production, and regardless of whether they are produced in facilities, in munitions or elsewhere.

[Chemical Weapons Convention \(Art. 2\)](#), 1997.



Source: OPCW



Source: A. Coles ["Public Inquiry to be Held into the Death of the Novichok Victim Dawn Sturgess"](#), Sky News, 18 Nov 2021.

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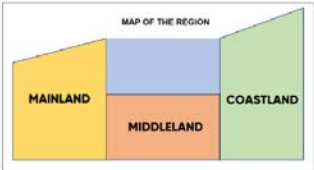
Interactive exercise overview

- Discussion scenario that examines the challenges to countering hybrid threats in the digital space.
- The scenario is fictitious.

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Discussion scenario: background information

Middleland is situated in a region dominated by the resource-rich country of **Coastland**. The country has recently joined a trade and security alliance which **Coastland** views as a threat to its economic and strategic interests in the region. **Mainland** is also a member of this alliance.



Authorities in **Middleland** are investigating explosions at several warehouses of a local leading military enterprise with a sizeable market share in the region. The targeted enterprise is an important partner of **Coastland's** arms industry. The explosions take place after the company's board of directors announces a major plan for modernisation and production of armament that will no longer be compatible with **Coastland's** arms standards.

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Discussion scenario: case description

The owner of one of the targeted military companies, a prominent entrepreneur in **Middleland** and his wife are found unconscious in a car near their home. A passer-by calls an ambulance and is also admitted to hospital with nausea, shortness of breath, and seizures. The news is immediately picked up by the local media.

Traces of organophosphate pesticide agents which are similar in their action to chemical warfare nerve agents are found on the handles of the entrepreneur's car. A specialised internationally-accredited laboratory in **Mainland** confirms the results of the analysis of collected samples.

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Discussion scenario: case description (cont.)

Authorities in **Middleland** and **Mainland** treat the incident as an attempted murder and cooperate on its investigation. Security camera footage from the underground parking of the company's head office shows the entrepreneur and his wife getting into his personal vehicle prior to the incident. The footage also shows that two other individuals have had access to the vehicle earlier that day. The individuals are identified. Further investigation reveals that they have ties with the intelligence service of **Coastland** and they had visited **Middleland** at the time of the explosions in the company's warehouses. The individuals are indicted on charges of attempted murder.

The state media in **Coastland** dubs the incident a 'major conspiracy' that was staged by the intelligence services of **Mainland** and **Middleland** to discredit the political leadership of **Coastland**. Multiple fringe outlets in **Middleland** systematically spread these claims. This narrative also reaches the local mainstream media and gains popularity on social networks.

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Discussion scenario: incident timeline

INCIDENT MEDIA COVERAGE

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Scenario case: question for discussion

1. How could the spread of competing narratives about the cause of the incident impact public perceptions of the response measures adopted by the authorities in Middleland and Mainland?
2. What strategies could public and civil society stakeholders use to ensure that the information provided to the media is accurate?
3. What strategies could end-users use to verify the reliability of media sources?
4. What policies and/or measures could be implemented to manage the risk of foreign influence in the media sector?

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Development of methodology for media monitoring



Source: CSD, [The Kremlin Playbook in Europe](#), CSD, 2020.



Source: CSD, [GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021: Bulgaria](#), GLOBSEC, 2021.

The methodology draws upon the findings of previous CSD studies on pro-Kremlin disinformation in Bulgaria. Comparative analysis shows that Bulgaria is among the EU Member States that are the most vulnerable to foreign influence and the spread of disinformation narratives. Local vulnerabilities stem from deeply rooted historical and cultural ties with Russia; widespread pro-Kremlin influence over the media sector; and the capacity of pro-Russian informal networks to influence decision-making.

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Methodology for media monitoring

- 50 media outlets with online publishing and 50 public groups and pages on Facebook were identified based on data collected as part of previous CSD studies.
- Traditional media sources: the identified media outlets are of different types (e.g. some are entirely online whereas others primarily broadcast on TV or radio) and aimed at different target audiences. Based on their editorial policies and economic/political dependencies (e.g. ownership patterns, ties to interest groups), these outlets fall into one of three groups:
 - 1) Outlets that systematically publish pro-Kremlin disinformation
 - 2) Outlets that try to balance pro-Kremlin disinformation with alternative viewpoints / positions
 - 3) Outlets that do not publish pro-Kremlin disinformation

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Methodology for media monitoring

- 1) Outlets that systematically publish pro-Kremlin disinformation
 - Media outlets that publish only pro-Kremlin disinformation and other types of propaganda (e.g. News Front)
- 2) Outlets that try to balance pro-Kremlin disinformation with alternative viewpoints
 - Media outlets that systematically publish both pro-Kremlin disinformation and "Western" positions.
 - This category includes popular Bulgarian media outlets with ties to local oligarchic networks with business dependency on Russia
- 3) Outlets that do not publish pro-Kremlin disinformation
 - Media outlets that systematically aim to expose pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.

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Methodology for media monitoring

- Publishing period under monitoring: January 2011 – May 2022
- Research tools used: Sensika and CrowdTangle
- Research activities:
 - Stage 1: Mapping keywords and terminology related to high-profile incidents involving the use of non-conventional weapons
 - Stage 2: Estimating the frequency of use of the selected words and terminology during the publishing period under monitoring
 - Stage 3: Generating representative and non-representative samples
 - Stage 4: Analysis of the media content in both samples

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Use of Boolean search

Topic	Sub-topics	Sub-topic keywords	Master Queries
Chemical attacks in Syria	Guta chemical attack (2013)	Гута OR "Фей-дмазиски инцидент"	Сирия OR ал-Асад OR "Башар Асад" OR Гута OR
	Khan al-Assaf chemical attack (2013)	"Хан ал-Асад" OR Асило OR "Мабитатуб Шаруф"	"Фей-дмазиски инцидент" OR "Хан ал-Асад" OR
	Jibar chemical attack (2013)	Джабар	Асило OR "Мабитатуб Шаруф" OR Джабар OR
	Kafz Zaha chemical attack (2014)	"Хафз Зам" OR "Пропаганска Хама"	"Хафз Зам" OR "Пропаганска Хама" OR Талиманс
	Talmanes chemical attack (2014)	Талиманс	OR Сарам OR "Хан Шайбу" OR "Латанас" OR
Lattin chemical attack (2015)	Латинс	"Лат-Дуна" AND "Химически атакс" OR	
Khan Shaykhun chemical attack (2017)	"Хан Шайхун" OR Латанас	"Химически атакс" OR "Химически атакс" OR	
Douma chemical attack (2018)	"Дуа-Дуна"	"Химически атакс" OR "Химически атакс" OR	
Following opponents	Alexander Litvinenko (November 2006)	Литвиненс AND (политикс) OR политикс OR политикс OR	отрова OR отрова OR отрова OR отрова OR
	Emilian Gafarov (April 2013)	Радиоактивс OR радиоактивс OR радиоактивс OR	отрова OR отрова OR отрова OR отрова OR
	Sergei Skripal (March 2018)	Скряпал OR Солдатурс AND (испанс) OR испанс OR	политикс OR политикс OR политикс OR политикс OR
	Alexei Navalny (August 2020)	Навалнис AND (испанс) OR испанс OR испанс OR испанс OR	радиоактивс OR радиоактивс OR радиоактивс OR
	International non-proliferation regime	"Организационс за забрана на химическото оръжие" OR CSDO	отрова OR отрова OR отрова OR отрова OR


Source: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2022.

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Media monitoring tools used during the study



Sensika Technologies is a private Bulgarian company that specializes in Big Data in the media space. For the purposes of the current study, Sensika is being used for monitoring online media outlets and media outlets with online publishing.



CrowdTangle is a social media monitoring platform that is owned by Meta (Facebook and Instagram). This platform allows collecting quantitative metadata from public groups and pages on Facebook.

Source: Official logos of Sensika Technologies and CrowdTangle

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Pro-Kremlin narratives concerning the Gebrev poisoning

As a result of the media monitoring, several groups of pro-Kremlin narratives concerning the poisoning of Emilian Gebrev were identified as follows:

- Emilian Gebrev got poisoned by accident while having dinner.
- The poisoning of Emilian Gebrev is a result of his activity as an illicit arm dealer affiliated with the CIA.
- Emilian Gebrev was poisoned by local competitors who hired GRU agents to execute the attack.
- The poisoning of Emilian Gebrev was deliberately staged to damage the relations between Bulgaria and Russia.
- GRU Unit 29155 does not exist but was fabricated by the Western media.

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Media capture typology

```
graph TD; MC((Media Capture)) --- AC(Advertising Capture); MC --- GC(Government Capture); MC --- OC(Ownership Capture); MC --- CC(Cognitive Capture);
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Source: CSD

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Fact-checking resources

[Factcheck.bg](http://factcheck.bg) – an initiative of the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria that was launched in May 2021 covering nationally and internationally significant issues.

[BNR Factcheck](http://bnr-factcheck.com) – this resources allows verifying news statements on social and political topics of national significance, and provides links to other relevant resources.

[AFP Proveri](http://afp-proveri.com) – an initiative of the Bulgarian branch of Agence France-Presse for fact-checking regarding nationally and internationally significant issues.

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Questions for discussion

1. What measures could help protect and safeguard the media space from the impact of disinformation that serves foreign interests?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of disinformation deterrence, on the one hand, and of disinformation prevention, on the other?
3. To what extent could strategic communication be regarded as an instrument for countering disinformation and what determines its effectiveness?

