

Children in the Disinformation Spotlight

“The OPCW is not a theatre”, the UK’s OPCW envoy, Peter Wilson, stated on April 26. But trying to discredit the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and use it as a platform for the disinformation campaign was exactly what Russia was attempting last week. As often, children were put in the disinformation spotlight.



First, an interview with a 11-year-old Syrian boy was internationally broadcast on Russia Today, shared on social media through In the Now – an offspring of Russia Today but with no traces of Russia in its branding – and promoted by Russian diplomats. Later the same boy was brought to the Hague to tell what he had experienced.

The interview was presented as “evidence” for the key claim of Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaign: that the chemical attack in Syrian Douma was a fake. The same disinformation was spread in several languages.

First problem is that, contrary to the reporter’s claim, according to the Intercept’s investigation the interview appears to be filmed at a Syrian army facility where Russian military advisers were present.

Secondly, numerous testimonies, findings of medical NGOs, authenticated photographs and videos, and reports from WHO partners, all correspond to gas intoxication of the patients.

And thirdly, contradicting Russia's claim that there was an organised OPCW briefing on the subject, there was in fact no such thing. Instead, 17 countries stated that "Russia is trying to create the false impression that the OPCW has convened this meeting at Russia's request. Nothing could be further from the truth".

The Director General of the OPCW distanced himself from the event and "informed Russia that such a meeting, in which "witnesses" will claim to have been hired to simulate a chemical weapons attack, runs against the work currently being carried out in Syria by OPCW investigators; if these "witnesses" have useful information on the incident, they should first be presented to the FFM to be interviewed."

Abuse of eye witnesses has a crucial role in Russia's ongoing disinformation campaign on the Douma chemical attack. There are several reports that Syrian doctors are forced under pressure and threat to say that the chemical attack has not occurred.

See below a timeline on how Russia built two major disinformation campaigns on Salisbury poisoning and Douma chemical attack. Click on the image for interactive links to the debunks and original sources.

Children's names and photos revealed

There is a deeply rooted tradition to use children in pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns without following any norms of journalistic ethic and practises. Children's names and photos are revealed and published and further used to serve the aims of the disinformation campaign. We have seen this earlier with the faked story of a 13-year-old Russian-speaking German girl, Lisa, and with the years' long disinformation campaign claiming that "Scandinavian countries take kids from Russian families".

During the past week a further variation of the same disinformation narrative was published in Georgia, claiming that incest has been legalised in Norway and that the UN has issued a new order on "sexualising five-year-old children". Both claims are false.

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