

“Russian Disinformation at the OPCW: Failed Strategy or Discord?”

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Introduction

On May 2, 2023, Russia's flagship state-owned media channel, *First Channel*, published a televised report documenting Russian combatants' use of riot control agents (RCAs) in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine.¹ While chemical weapons on the battlefield in Ukraine had been the focus of speculation to this point, the report was incontrovertible evidence of Russia's flagrant violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, of which it is a founding member. In response to the fallout, Russia responded by employing several disinformation strategies in the international forum charged with implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (hereafter OPCW), to deny culpability and deflect from the accusations it faced in this international body. Yet the consequences of Russia's initial broadcast on its own state television reverberated. Some six months later, Russia lost its seat on the Executive Council of the OPCW for the first time since the Convention was brought into force in 1997. This was highly significant for the OPCW and its States Parties and raises important questions about the presence of disinformation in international politics and inside international organizations themselves.

The OPCW and its States Parties are tasked with ensuring that the obligations of the Chemical Weapons Convention are observed and implemented. States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention agree to destroy all existing chemical weapon stockpiles and prohibit the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer, or use of chemical weapons. The OPCW came into existence as an international body in 1997, but its history goes back much farther. Discourse around an agreement to cover the use of chemical weapons

¹ "Российские Силы Отбивают Значимое Село Спорное в Донецкой Народной Республике [Russian Forces Recapture Town of Spornoe in the Donetsk People's Republic]." *Первый Канал* [*First Channel*]. May 2, 2023. <https://www.1tv.ru/news/issue/2023-05-02/21:00#6>.

emerged as early as the 1925 Geneva Protocol, where states agreed not to *use* chemical weapons in war. However, the Geneva Protocol did not prevent the development, production, or possession of chemical weapons. In 1968, the Disarmament Conference in Geneva designated a Biological Weapons Convention and a Chemical Weapons Convention, and thus the two were formally separated. It was not until 1992 that a draft of the Chemical Weapons Convention was formally adopted by the Conference on Disarmament. In 1993, the Chemical Weapons Convention received its first 130 signatories. Finally in 1993, the Convention formally entered into force and the OPCW came into existence.²

The discovery of this *First Channel* report put Russia's use of chemical weapons on the battlefield in Ukraine squarely on the agenda of the OPCW and its States Parties. The broadcast was clearly intended for a domestic audience as positive war propaganda, but once discovered by the international community, the video caused serious issues for Russia internationally. Most notably, it was one cause (perhaps among several others) of Russia losing its re-election to the body's Executive Council and thus damaging its international standing. This paper provides evidence that supports the idea that when a state violates an international convention and then attempts to cover up this violation up with disinformation, they are employing a potentially ineffective strategy with broad ramifications. This paper reveals an aspect of Russia's information vulnerability, and ultimately, suggests the transcendent importance of an international organization that maintains rules and the centrality of facts in its operation. Finally, this paper concludes that neoliberal institutionalist notions about rules, principles, and their effect on the behavior of states have held up in the case of Russia in the OPCW.

² "History," The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, n.d. <https://www.opcw.org/about-us/history>.

The role of disinformation in international relations today is of the utmost scholarly and policy importance. As disinformation has become increasingly salient, and strategies for its propagation formalized, it has emerged as a threat to global security and democracy.³ According to a Department of State Global Engagement Center Special Report, the Russian Federation has emerged as a particularly aggressive violator and a “leading threat.”⁴ Disinformation as foreign policy is a tactic increasingly seen in forums of international organizations. However, this paper demonstrates that disinformation is not a categorically effective strategy and needs to be considered in a more multifaceted light for effective strategies against it to be developed.

Central Questions and Research Design

This paper examines a case study with reasonable evidence that asks questions like: Do rules affect the actions of states in international organizations? Do strategies of disinformation allow states to claim adherence to rules, while simultaneously circumventing them? What weaknesses might exist in a disinformation strategy, particularly as illustrated in the case of the Russian Federation at the OPCW? These three central questions are split into two separate lines of inquiry. The first two questions examine the role of rules and disinformation as forms of cheating in international organizations and whether those rules provide disincentive to states in those organizations. Neoliberal institutionalists and neorealists are both interested in the idea of cheating (in this case disinformation) in international relations, but fundamentally neoliberal institutionalists place faith in the institution’s rules and structures as negative incentive. Placing

³ Gerrits, André W.M. “Disinformation in International Relations: How Important Is It?” *Security and Human Rights* 2019, no. 1–4 (December 1, 2018): 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-02901007>.

⁴ “GEC Special Report: Russia’s Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda.” Department of State. Global Engagement Center, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

disinformation in this conversation between scholars of international relations is the primary goal of this paper.

Using the same case study and evidence, the second goal of this paper is to ask whether Russian disinformation has been effective in circumventing these rules, thus changing our understanding of disinformation in international relations. In essence, this paper is interested in whether disinformation has been an effective tool for Russia at the OPCW. These questions can be separated into two lines of inquiry: 1) understanding the role of rules and principles and their effect on state behavior and disinformation's place in that picture 2) disinformation as a tool for Russia in its international relations. While these topics ask different questions, they are connected and should both be of concern for academics and policymakers alike.

This paper uses Russian violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and its subsequent attempts to use disinformation as a tool to obfuscate responsibility as a case study. This paper uses this case study because it is an example of a significant, deviant case that highlights the role of rules in international organizations affecting state behavior. A seminal point of this case (the vote that saw Russia removed from the OPCW's Executive Council) put realists and neoliberal institutionalists into conversation in a vivid example of states choosing to recognize rules and norms over objective power. This paper uses a method of observation using case-study analysis. In its process tracing methodology, this paper connects key variables to its outcomes. By highlighting these key decisions and events, this paper provides evidence towards its claims and disputes alternative explanations.

Disinformation in the IR Canon

Scholars across different schools of IR define, assess, and analyze disinformation differently.

Some scholars suggest that disinformation is a result of organizational and institutional dysfunction.⁵ Others study disinformation as just another example of “hybrid warfare,” and suggest its inevitability.⁶

Scholars within the realist school of international relations identify disinformation as an inevitable action of great powers in their contestation for influence. In other words, a state may decide to use disinformation as a tool to benefit itself strategically.⁷ Prominent realists like Kenneth Waltz argue that international politics exist in a “self-help system.”⁸ In other words, states should be understood always as relying on “the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves.”⁹ In light of this anarchic nature of international politics, states are understood as only seeking to ensure their own survival and position within the system.¹⁰ Given this understanding of the world, Waltz and others do not expect to see cooperation apart from a struggle for power and power balancing.¹¹ In other words, the only legitimate purpose for the existence of an international organization is to maintain or balance power. Within this logic, one can see how realists may argue that disinformation in international politics is just another example of this struggle for power without a judge.

⁵ Barnett, Michael N., and Martha Finnemore. “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations,” *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (1999): 699–732. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081899551048>.

⁶ Gerrits, “Disinformation in International Relations,” 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁸ Waltz, Kenneth N. “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (October 1, 1993): 63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539097>.

⁹ Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1979: 111.

¹⁰ Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” 49, 59.

¹¹ Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony*. 1st ed. Princeton Paperbacks. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005: 7. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400820269>.

For classical realists like Kenneth Waltz, the existence and role of international organizations in the post-Second World War era was only the result of American hegemony.¹² Realists believed that as the world turned away from unipolarity, international organization would diminish as well.¹³ Yet this prediction did not line up with the observations of the moment. Robert Keohane responded directly to many of the positions of Waltz in his book *After Hegemony* and pointed out this incongruence. Keohane argues that, in fact, there existed “extensive patterns of international agreement” across issues and that international organization was not seeing the type of decline that realists had predicted.¹⁴ For neoliberalists like Keohane, international institutions and organizations are created and desired by states. Keohane saw that in our increasingly interconnected world, states were coming together out of common interest and common benefit.¹⁵ Through a logic of transaction costs and economics, the argument of Keohane and other neoliberalists formed a rational choice argument, whereby given the chance to cooperate, states will find it is in their best interest to participate.

While a leading thinking in the neoliberalist school of IR, Keohane did not go as far as liberal institutionalists like David Mitrany who emphasize the need for rules, institutions, and norms to ensure policy coordination.¹⁶ This paper highlights the point that these institutionalists make about rules and principles in shaping the behavior of states, mainly that states recognize their legitimacy and importance.

¹² Keohane, *After Hegemony*, 9.

¹³ Waltz, Kenneth N. “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (July 1, 2000): 5–41. <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560372>.

¹⁴ Keohane, *After Hegemony*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-8. ;Keohane, Robert O. "The Functional Theory of Politics. By David Mitrany. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975. Pp. XXV. 294. \$18.95.)." *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 2 (1978): 805-06. doi:10.2307/1954263.

Returning to the topic of disinformation, neoliberalists, and neoliberal institutionalists alike, suggest that disinformation is not natural to the intentions of international cooperation and therefore is a symptom of dysfunction or what Keohane would describe as “discord” in international politics.¹⁷ However, Keohane does not argue that the alternative to “discord” or “harmony” is always perfectly achieved between states in these spheres. Keohane provides three concepts—“harmony, cooperation, and discord”—to explain the “patterns of rule-guided policy coordination” that emerge in international politics. This framework helps us understand the occurrence of disinformation in international politics broadly and the case study of Russian disinformation in the OPCW discussed later.

The OPCW is an example of a rule-guided organization with clearly identified goals and aspirations: “to achieve our vision of a world free of chemical weapons and the threat of their use, and in which chemistry is used for peace, progress, and prosperity.”¹⁸ In other words, the OPCW is an example of an international organization with, as scholars Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore articulate, a “clear criteria for ‘success’.”¹⁹ Given this grounding in rules and clear direction, what explains the discord observed in the OPCW? In explaining his concept of discord, Keohane encourages us to ask, “Are attempts made by actors to adjust their policies to each others’ objectives?” Keohane follows, “If no such attempts are made, the result is discord: a situation in which governments regard each others’ policies as hindering the attainment of their goals, and hold each other responsible for these constraints.”²⁰ Clearly these concepts provide a plausible explanation for the disinformation and discord seen in the case study of this paper, yet

¹⁷ Keohane, *After Hegemony*, 51.

¹⁸ “Mission: A world free of chemical weapons,” The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, n.d. <https://www.opcw.org/about/mission>.

¹⁹ Barnett and Finnemore, “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations,” 704.

²⁰ Keohane, *After Hegemony*, 52.

the constructivist camp of international relations responds to this conversation in yet a third and important way.

Scholars Martha Finnemore and Michael N. Barnett articulate in their article “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations” a gap in the neoliberal debate with realists and a gap in the understanding of the power of rules and values in international organizations. While the constructivist critique from Finnemore, Barnett, and others is not central to this paper’s analysis of disinformation, this critique does show a different understanding of power and discord in international organizations. From constructivist literature, we understand that it is not enough to say that rules exist; we must also look at how those rules are applied, misused, manipulated and so on by state actors. This constructivist application looks closely at the way the institution as a bureaucracy itself “shape[s] IO behavior.”²¹ From Alexander Wendt, fundamentally, constructivists are concerned with “how are things in the world put together so that they have the properties they do.”²² Applying this constructivist perspective, like the one Finnemore and Barnett do, to the study of IOs, we see there also exists a Weberian bureaucratic power that is created when people come together and create these institutions to perform specific functions.²³ In this way, constructivists “treat IOs as agents, not just as structure.”²⁴ By treating IOs in this way, Russian disinformation and the discord within the OPCW could be analyzed differently as competition with the technical elements of the organization and not other states. This would be a valuable approach for further research.

²¹ Barnett and Finnemore, “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations.” 700.

²² Wendt, Alexander. “On Constitution and Causation in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 5 (December 1, 1998): 103. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598001028>.103

²³ Barnett and Finnemore, “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations.” 699.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 700.

Defining Disinformation

Disinformation in international politics has become increasingly salient.²⁵ Russia, as a leader in disinformation strategy, has gone so far as to make disinformation a “matter of established policy” both in its foreign policy and its domestic information system.²⁶ The threat of disinformation to established order has been highlighted time and time again by scholars, but in an increasingly complex information space, finding the source in the mess can be difficult.²⁷ Among scholars today, there exists a broad understanding of disinformation, while there is also disagreement over how to define it.²⁸ To focus on disinformation is to focus on an extremely broad topic.

In the interest of providing a clear explanation and definition of disinformation, I will first provide the definition of disinformation I will be using in this paper. Second, I will use a framework of the “Russian disinformation ecosystem” found in a 2020 special report from the Global Engagement Center of the Department of State to help locate this research spatially. Using this report’s framework, I will argue that the instances of Russian disinformation are in two “pillars” of the environment: “official government communications” and “state-funded global messaging.”²⁹ The case of Russian disinformation in the OPCW has taken the form of statements and social media posts from official sources and exemplifies the way different systems can interact, mutually reinforce, and at times contradict each other. This idea is important to the second line of inquiry (disinformation as a potential tool in international

²⁵ Gerrits, “Disinformation in International Relations,” 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ Espaliú-Berdud, Carlos. “Use of Disinformation as a Weapon in Contemporary International Relations: Accountability for Russian Actions against States and International Organizations,” *El Profesional de la Información* 32, no. 4 (2023): 7. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.jul.02>.

²⁸ Don Fallis, “What Is Disinformation?” *Library Trends* 63, no. 3 (2015): 401–26, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014>.

²⁹ “GEC Special Report: Russia’s Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda.” Department of State. Global Engagement Center, August 2020. <https://www.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/>.

relations) described in this paper's central questions and design section. While this mapping is helpful as a framework, ultimately this paper argues that the report's conclusions fall short in a few key aspects when applied to the case study of the OPCW.

In his 2015 article "What is Disinformation?" Don Fallis addresses the broad definitions, understandings, and analyses available to scholars interested in disinformation. Fallis sets out to provide a reasonable conceptual analysis of disinformation. Fallis adds that, in part, the motivation for his work comes from the observation that emerging definitions of disinformation are either too broad or too narrow.³⁰ That is to say that without a proper conception, disinformation is coming to either mean too much or too little. This is a clear dilemma for scholars interested in disinformation. If disinformation has emerged as a leading threat to security and democracy, it follows that we should know and define the topic of study as clearly as possible.

Fallis' application of conceptual analysis to disinformation provides a methodologically rigorous definition of the term. According to Fallis, to conduct a conceptual analysis we "identify a concise set of necessary and sufficient conditions that correctly determines whether or not something falls under the concept in question."³¹ Fallis identifies two features that are particularly important to our own understanding of disinformation as it pertains to international forums. First, "disinformation is non accidentally misleading information."³² This seems obvious enough, but in identifying disinformation in this way, we differentiate it from *misinformation*. To Fallis, the party spreading disinformation must intend for it to mislead from the outset. This is important because if we were to include all types of false information, then our definition would

³⁰ Fallis, "What Is Disinformation?" 401.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 403.

³² *Ibid.*, 406.

become too broad. Misinformation is prevalent everywhere we look, and parties can unknowingly spread this false information. However, under this definition we understand them to be disseminators of disinformation only when they actively intend to mislead others.

Second, “disinformation is misleading information.” While this seems to be redundant to the point of the first feature, it adds an important emphasis. To quote Fallis, this type of misleading information must be “likely to create false beliefs.” While “disinformation is not a ‘success term’,” it must at least have the potential to deceive.³³ Fallis uses the example of the satirical publisher *The Onion* to illustrate this point. *The Onion*’s headlines and published material are often so clearly absurd that they have no real potential to deceive anyone.³⁴ This clarification is crucial as particular instances of Russian disinformation often seem far from plausible.

In summary, disinformation must, firstly, be intentionally misleading information. Second, disinformation must have the potential to mislead, even if the definition does not require its success.³⁵ We should understand disinformation then for the purposes of this research to be “misleading information that has the [intended] function of misleading.”³⁶

Examples of Russian disinformation in the forums of international organizations deserve attention and illustrate the dynamics of disinformation as a tool in international relations. To understand exactly how and where Russia employs this strategy, we must first understand the larger system. In August 2020, the Department of State’s Global Engagement Center released a report titled “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem.”³⁷ In this report, the

³³ Fallis, “What is Disinformation?” 406.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 410.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 406.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 422.

³⁷ “GEC Special Report,” Department of State.

Department of State set out to provide an overview of how Russia spreads disinformation and what its propaganda structures look like. The authors of this report identify five main pillars of the Russian disinformation ecosystem: “official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation.”³⁸ Russian disinformation, as seen in the OPCW, is primarily nested in the first pillar labeled “official government communications.” But, as I will demonstrate in my case study, Russia’s strategy to maintain influence at the forum of the OPCW has not been isolated to this pillar. Contradictory messaging in its state-funded media meant for a domestic audience and its official government communications has caused friction.

The GEC report adds that these pillars are more obvious in their connection to Russian authorities and offers less “plausible deniability” to the Russian Federation compared to other areas of examination like proxy sources and other affiliated mechanisms whose connection to official Russian sources are less clear.³⁹ While each pillar of the Russian disinformation ecosystem is distinct in its function and practice, the report concludes that the pillars are constantly interacting, mutually reinforcing one another, but also allow for contradiction. In the words of the report, the system allows “for varied and overlapping approaches that reinforce each other even when individual messages within the system appear contradictory.”⁴⁰ However, the evidence of this case study presented in the next section appears to put this conclusion into question and presents important questions within the conversation between realists and neoliberal institutionalists.

³⁸ “GEC Special Report,” Department of State, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Case Study–Russian Violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention

This section chronicles the persistent threat of chemical weapons in Ukraine and describe a few key events regarding the threat of chemical warfare since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Next, it describes the May 2, 2023 news report from Russia’s state-owned media agency *First Channel* that documented Russia’s own use of riot control agents (RCAs) as a method of warfare in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine.⁴¹ This broadcast was the catalyst for Russia’s most recent disinformation campaign in the OPCW and likely contributed to its removal from the Executive Council of the OPCW during the 28th Session of the Council of States Parties on November 29, 2023.

Russia and Ukraine have traded numerous accusations alleging the use of chemical weapons. Chemicals and their role on the battlefield in Ukraine were a topic of conversation as early as May of 2022, when the two sides traded accusations over the shelling of a warehouse of ammonium nitrate fertilizer in the Kramatorsk area of eastern Ukraine.⁴² Since then, industrial sites housing chemicals have continued to be a source of concern. While shelling and active targeting of these sites is a threat that involves the release of chemicals, they are not considered as instances of chemical weapons as a *method* of warfare. On February 6, 2023, the Russian Federation announced that its state Investigative Committee had begun investigating reports of Ukrainian forces using chemical weapons near Bakhmut and Soledar. At the time of this

⁴¹ “Российские Силы [Russian Forces].”

⁴² Zinets, Natalia, and Timothy Heritage. “Shelling Damages Ukrainian Warehouse Storing Ammonium Nitrate - Local Authorities.” *Reuters*, May 11, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/shelling-damages-ukrainian-warehouse-storing-ammonium-nitrate-local-authorities-2022-05-11/>; “Evidence of the Use of Toxic Chemicals Against Russian Servicemen and Civilian Population.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, October 11, 2023. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_organizations/organizacia-po-zapreseniu-himiceskogo-oruzia/1896481/?lang=en.https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_organizations/organizacia-po-zapreseniu-himiceskogo-oruzia/1896481/?lang=en.

announcement, these claims remained unsubstantiated, and the Russian Investigative Committee has presented no evidence to support them.⁴³

On May 2, 2023 the concern over the use of chemical weapons in the war in Ukraine came to a head when Russia's primary state-controlled media agency *First Channel* broadcast a video report on its 9 p.m. evening news program showing Russian soldiers of the 88th Brigade boasting the use of so-called "bird-cherry" (or K-51) tear grenades to "smoke out" entrenched enemy combatants in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. In the report, a tank commander is quoted as saying "We are trying to force them out with smoke." In response, the correspondent says, "The [Ukrainian] nationalists are smoked out in the literal sense of the word." In the conclusion of the segment, the brigade commander says, "Now that we have started using them, the enemy has decided gas masks would help." He pauses before adding, "The gas masks don't help."⁴⁴ This video, published on Russia's state-owned media channel, documented Russian soldiers boasting of their use of riot control agents as a method of warfare against Ukrainian combatants, thus documenting their own violation of Article I, paragraph 5 of the Chemical Weapons Convention.⁴⁵ Implementation of the convention is administered by the OPCW, the international organization highlighted in this case study.

Weeks went by without any international response to the May television report. But on October 6, 2023 the German delegation to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons sent a *note verbale* to the Russian Federation's permanent delegation requesting a formal response to its alleged use of RCAs as a method of warfare as part of the 104th Session of

⁴³ Faulconbridge, Guy, Jon Boyle, and Grant McCool. "Without Giving Evidence, Russia Says It Probes Ukraine Use of Chemical Weapons." *Reuters*, February 6, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/without-supplying-evidence-russia-says-its-investigating-alleged-ukrainian-use-2023-02-06/>.

⁴⁴ "Российские Силы [Russian Forces]."

⁴⁵ "The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (the Chemical Weapons Convention or CWC)," entered into force April 29, 1997, Article I, Paragraph 5, <https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention>.

the Executive Council of the OPCW.⁴⁶ The Executive Council's 104th Session was the first formal gathering of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention since the report had been published. Thus, the report and Russia's use of RCAs in Ukraine entered squarely onto the priorities of the OPCW and its States Parties at this time.

In response to this letter, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation responded, informally, with a press release titled "Press release on the outcomes of the 104th session of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)."⁴⁷ In this press release, officials of the Russian Federation dismissed the letter as an "anti-Russian demarche" and claimed the accusations "speak to the intention of the Euro-Atlantic allies, their satellites, and accomplices to carry out provocations using toxic chemicals and subsequently lay responsibility for these acts with the Russian Federation." In this way, the press release did not name and deny the allegations, instead it dismissed the *note verbale* as anti-Russian provocation. The press release then claimed the "K-51 grenade shown during this staged incident" was taken "when capturing positions held by Ukrainian militants and foreign mercenaries." This claim directed blame away from Russian combatants onto Ukrainian ones. Finally, the press release changed the topic completely and compared this *note verbale* to "A similar scenario [that] has been rehearsed on numerous occasions in the Syrian Arab Republic by NATO countries' intelligence agencies, involving armed formations of the Syrian opposition and pseudo-humanitarian organisations similar to the infamous White Helmets." Finally, at the end of the press release, the authors provided a link to a page of new evidence of Ukrainian use of chemical

⁴⁶ "Note Verbale from the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Technical Secretariat of the OPCW," EC-104/NAT.6. Technical Secretariat of The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, 2023.

⁴⁷ "Press Release on the Outcomes of the 104th Session of the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, October 18, 2023, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/regprla/1910114/.

weapons on the battlefield.⁴⁸ This page highlights thirteen separate instances including photo and video evidence of Ukrainian possession or use of chemical irritants and targeting of industrial chemical plants that have still never been formally brought to the Technical Secretariat of the OPCW under the mechanisms afforded to members by the Organization and the Convention.⁴⁹ Elements of this press release were reflected in an informal response to the German *note verbale* six days later on October 12, 2023.

In its formal response to the German delegation, Russia mirrored the informal “press release” response. Comparing the “press release” and the *note verbale*, it is obvious that Russia borrowed much of the same language with only slight modification. In this formal *note verbale* response, Russia once again dismissed the allegations: “This kind of insinuation indicates the intention of the Euro-Atlantic allies, their satellites and accomplices to carry out provocations involving chemicals in order to blame the Russian Federation for these crimes afterwards.” Next, the letter carries out a similar diversion of attention towards the topic of Syria: “A similar scenario has already been test run many times in the Syrian Arab Republic by the intelligence services of NATO countries with the involvement of paramilitary structures of the Syrian opposition and pseudo-humanitarian organizations like the notorious White Helmets.” This again intends to divert attention away from itself onto a completely separate topic. Finally, the letter references the same page of evidence alleging Ukraine’s preparation to use chemical weapons with the support of its Western partners posted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Unlike the press release, this letter does address the allegations of the German *note verbale* directly: “In response to the new request of the Federal Republic of Germany, we emphasize once again that

⁴⁸ “Note Verbale from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Technical Secretariat of the OPCW,” EC-104/NAT.7. OPCW: Technical Secretariat of The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, 2023.

⁴⁹ “Evidence of the Use of Toxic Chemicals,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

the riot control agents are not used by the Russian forces in the special military operation.” In this letter, we see for the first time Russia addressing the *First Channel* report in question. First, they respond, “Regarding the K-51 grenade demonstrated to the Russian military due to a misunderstanding during the presentation story, it fell within the hands of the Russians as a trophy capturing positions of Ukrainian militants and foreign mercenaries.” Second, they claim that “The video sequence with a drone throwing down a K-51 grenade, shown in the mentioned televised report, was actually taken from the digital media seized at the position of Ukrainian militants.” Recalling the video segment, these responses do not line up with the correspondent’s own description or the interviews with either the tank driver or commander of the 88th Brigade shown in the clip. The video report highlights in the clearest terms that those interviewed in the clip were Russian soldiers who were professing their own use of these grenades to “smoke out” Ukrainian combatants from trenches. The press release from October 6 along with the official response on October 12 do not provide adequate explanations regarding these allegations and, in fact, are almost entire pieces of disinformation themselves. These statements fit the definition of disinformation provided in this paper as they contain “misleading information” and most certainly have the “function of misleading.”⁵⁰ But, this case also seems not only to attempt to “mislead” but also to point the discourse of States Parties in a false direction away from the initial topic.

On November 29, 2023, after a month of conversation among States Parties in the OPCW about Russia’s potential violation and repeated showings of the video evidence within the organization, Russia faced a re-election vote to the Eastern European Group of the Executive Council of the OPCW. Russia had been a representative of the Executive Council for the

⁵⁰ Fallis, “What is Disinformation?” 422.

Organization's entire existence. The Council of States Parties are charged with electing the 41 members of the Executive Council to serve a two-year term under Article XIII, paragraph 23 of the Chemical Weapons Convention.⁵¹ During the 28th Session of the Council of States Parties, Russia now faced an uncertain re-election to another term. Ultimately, Russia lost the vote and will not participate on the Executive Council during the next term. This is highly significant.

In the case of Russian RCA use in Ukraine, we can see that the *First Channel* report was produced for a domestic audience as information. While this news story was for the purposes of propaganda, it did not contain any disinformation (misleading information for the purpose of misleading). However, after the video was discovered, it moved to the sphere of international politics as it created discord between two separate pillars of the Russian disinformation environment: The official government communications were in direct conflict with its state-funded domestic messaging.⁵² When Russia attempted to explain this contradiction, they resorted entirely to disinformation.

Employing a strategy of disinformation to obfuscate responsibility and its obligations as a State Party to the Convention proved to be ineffective for Russia as it lost its re-election to the body's Executive Council. This sequence of events is evidence that Russia's ecosystem of disinformation, lies, and faulty evidence, however comprehensive, has led to Russia's loss of international standing and suggests the importance of values, facts, and consistency in international relations and policy. Returning to Keohane's discussion of "harmony, cooperation, and discord," it seems that in this case we are seeing a clear demonstration of the tension between cooperation and discord. Keohane concludes his discussion of the three with an

⁵¹ "The Convention," Article XIII, Paragraph 23, Subsection C.

⁵² Phillips, Lennie, and David Crouch. "Commentary: Have Chemical Weapons Been Used in Ukraine?" The Royal Services Institute. June 20, 2023. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/have-chemical-weapons-been-used-ukraine>.

interesting point, “Discord, which is the opposite of harmony, stimulates demands for policy adjustments, which can either lead to cooperation or to continued, perhaps intensified, discord.”⁵³

Based on Keohane’s commentary here, should we expect to see Russia brought back into alignment and adjust its policy, or will we see even more intense discord? Will disinformation and lies provide Russia an alternative strategy and path forward?

While there may be other ways to read what unfolded at the OPCW and other ways to interpret Russia’s loss in the executive council election, the role of disinformation should not be dismissed as irrelevant, unimportant, or just part of the power game. This falls short of explaining these events. Some may choose to explain Russian disinformation in this case study as the ultimate example of power contestation in an anarchic system. Reduced most simply, this alternative explanation would argue that disinformation is warfare.⁵⁴ This perspective would, hypothetically, define this case study as a paradigmatic one. A paradigmatic case is one which exemplifies Russian disinformation and its contradictions at work. In other words, the events that unfolded after the Russian *First Channel* report would represent a prime example of the Russian disinformation environment working as we would expect it to. Recalling the authors of the Global Engagement Center report, we should expect a “disinformation and propaganda ecosystem that allows for varied and overlapping approaches that reinforce each other even when individual messages within the system appear contradictory.”⁵⁵ Indeed, in this case, we have contradictory messages, but they do not in the end fuel or reinforce the purposes of the whole ecosystem, but instead demonstrate Russia’s informational weakness at an international level in an international system that still holds rules to be important for cooperation.

⁵³ Keohane, *After Hegemony*, 63.

⁵⁴ Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics.” 49, 59.; Gerrits, “Disinformation in International Relations,” 5.

⁵⁵ “GEC Special Report,” Department of State, 5.

This section highlights a few particularly key choices and events that, had they gone differently, would support this alternative explanation. First, there is currently no evidence to indicate that Russia has sought to remove or edit the video report in question, even as the report continues to have a significant impact among States Parties and its reputation at the OPCW. Authoritarian logic would say that, from the beginning, if a potentially damaging video exists and it is within your control to make it disappear (to claim plausible deniability or to claim your enemy has manufactured it), any self-interested state would take measures to ensure that happens. Why then did Russia not remove or edit the video, and then seek to deny the video's existence? As was detailed above, Russia continues to go out of its way to dodge questions over the video by providing conflicting explanations, manufacturing found-footage arguments, and claiming that the report was simply a "misunderstanding during the presentation of the report," even as the interviews in the report itself place it only at the feet of Russian combatants.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the video remains available through state-funded channels. The information provided to its domestic audience in the report proved its own violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and left the pieces of its legitimacy to be hastily picked up by its diplomats abroad.

Here we see why the analysis of the Russian ecosystem in the GEC report is inadequate. In the GEC report, contradictory information is understood merely to serve the ecosystem's functionality. But here that contradictory information has unintended consequences on the international front that no amount of disinformation can wish away.

Second, Russia's compilation of evidence of Ukraine's alleged intention and preparation to use chemical weapons (including RCAs) on the battlefield suggests that Russia does not seek

⁵⁶ "Note Verbale from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Technical Secretariat of the OPCW," 2.

to “normalise the topic.”⁵⁷ In other words, it still cares about its legitimacy, adhering to the Convention, and appearing in good standing with international norms. To this point, Russia has provided this evidence on its Ministry website and allegedly passed the evidence to the Technical Secretariat of the OPCW but has yet to enact any of the formal mechanisms and procedures afforded to it as a State Party to the Convention. Why has Russia not submitted this evidence and begun formal proceedings to see its evidence investigated? This suggests that either Russia does not have the evidence to substantiate its claims, or it is simply choosing not to follow through on its evidence. The latter seems unlikely given that there is an array of mechanisms available to States Parties that have been used repeatedly since the Convention came into force. This is why this paper suggests that, once again, the instance of displaying Russia’s use of chemical weapons on its own state-controlled media has dealt a damaging blow to its reputation and Russia continues to struggle to repair the damage. This paper suggests that Russia is working to repair the damage because it cares for both its international standing and appearing to be in good standing with international law, even if it continues to violate it and use disinformation as a strategy to obfuscate responsibility.

Third, Russia has lost its place on the Executive Council of the OPCW for the first time in the organization’s history. The Council of States Parties are charged with electing the 41 members of the Executive Council to serve a two-year term under Article XIII, paragraph 23 of the Chemical Weapons Convention.⁵⁸ Russia’s exclusion from the Executive Council was highly unusual. This is not only because Russia is a large and powerful player, but also because, according to subsection (c.) of Article XIII, paragraph 23, “As a basis for this designation it is understood that, out of the five States Parties [of the regional group], one member shall, as a rule,

⁵⁷ Phillips and Crouch, “Commentary: Have Chemical Weapons Been Used in Ukraine?”.

⁵⁸ “The Convention,” Article XIII, Paragraph 23, Subsection C.

be the State Party with the most significant national chemical industry in the region as determined by internationally reported and published data.” In the run-up to this election, Russia claimed during this most recent Council of States Parties that this subsection of the convention gave them an unequivocal position on the Executive Council. In response, fellow members of the regional group and the body as a whole pointed to the second half of subsection (c.), “in addition, the regional group shall agree also to take into account other regional factors in designating these four members.” In this debate, and in the subsection itself, is the question of how should power work in international organizations.

If Russia had its way and a realist understanding of international relations prevailed here, we would see that members of the Executive Council remain those with the most power—in this case, the states with the most industrial capacity. Yet the results of the election indicate that, when given the chance to vote, states recognized and acted on the second half of this subsection. They took into account Russia’s illegal invasion of one of its neighbors and fellow regional members and its documented violation of Article I, paragraph 5 of the CWC. This vote supports this paper’s larger hypothesis about rules and international law in international relations in two ways. First, by losing its place on the Executive Council of the Organization, Russia was clearly reprimanded for its actions despite its lies and obfuscations. Its reputation and standing were damaged by the incongruence in its disinformation ecosystem. Second, this vote shows that international politics are indeed affected by rules and states’ adherence to them. A majority of states, in this case, chose to highlight the “other regional factors” like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its use of riot control agents as a method of warfare, over factors such having a “significant chemical industry.” Thus, this paragraph and subsequent election put an established tension between realists and neoliberal institutionalists into vivid conversation.

Conclusion: Failed Strategy or Discord?

This paper set out to answer questions such as: Do rules affect the actions of states in international organizations? Do strategies of disinformation allow states to claim adherence to rules, while simultaneously circumventing them? What weaknesses might exist in a disinformation strategy, particularly as illustrated in the case of the Russian Federation at the OPCW? These three questions were loosely split into two lines of inquiry: 1) understanding the role of rules and principles and their effect on state behavior and disinformation's place in that picture 2) disinformation as a tool for Russia in its international relations. In addressing both these lines of inquiry, this paper addressed both the role of disinformation in international relations and how policymakers should understand its place in international organizations.

Regarding the first question—Do rules affect the actions of states in international relations?—this paper concludes that, yes, they do. Russia has demonstrated a continued interest to appear in good standing with the Chemical Weapons Convention and its rules, even if it is through a façade of disinformation. Russia continues to take steps to appear in line with rules and international norms, therefore we can conclude that rules do affect the actions of states in international relations. Next in answering the question—Do strategies of disinformation allow states to claim adherence to rules, while simultaneously circumventing them?—this paper concludes that, in the case of the OPCW, Russia attempted to appear in line with rules by employing disinformation, but that ultimately this was not an effective tool to maintain its international standing in this Organization's Executive Council. This paper does not sufficiently address why Russia may want to appear in line with rules, while in practice circumventing them. This would be a topic for further research. However, for the purposes of this paper, when put to a vote, states chose to recognize rules and adherence to those rules over the industrial power of

Russia and the influence that it holds in the OPCW. This suggests evidence of the importance of rules and international law in international relations. Finally, regarding its final question—What weaknesses might exist in a disinformation strategy, particularly as illustrated in the case of the Russian Federation at the OPCW? —this paper highlights that Russia’s employment of a disinformation ecosystem is not a foolproof strategy and that contradictory messaging within its ecosystem ultimately led to major repercussions. Russia’s use of chemical weapons and failed attempts to deny responsibility also brings into question the conclusions of the 2020 GEC Special Report that argued that “This ecosystem approach is also well-suited to reinforce Russia’s general aims of questioning the value of democratic institutions, and of weakening the international credibility and international cohesion of the United States and its allies and partners.” The report ultimately concluded, “The ecosystem approach is fitting for this dynamic because it does not require harmonization among the different pillars.”⁵⁹ Yet, in this case, this paper argues that contradiction in its disinformation ecosystem was not harmonized and that it has been challenged greatly, even leading to a blow in its international standing.

This case study and analysis is only a small point of reference in a grand history and literature of international politics in international organizations. While this is significant and timely, many questions for further research remain. First, some instances of Russian disinformation are so implausible that they cannot be assumed to mislead anyone. These instances inhabit a sort of grey zone in Fallis’ definition. At the end of his article, Fallis admits that “In my new analysis of disinformation, I have not specified *how likely* it must be that a piece of information will cause false beliefs in order for it to count as misleading.” Are some pieces of

⁵⁹ “GEC Special Report,” Department of State, 5-6.

Russian disinformation so extreme that they cannot be considered disinformation? Should we categorize and analyze these as something different entirely?

Second, has this paper underutilized the insights of the constructivist lens? From Barnett and Finnemore we see that IOs can be understood as having power themselves and “[taking] on a life of their own.”⁶⁰ Applied to the case, we can see that, as an organization, the OPCW does have significant “control over technical expertise and information” and therefore takes on a significant aspect of IO power.⁶¹ Therefore, another interesting point of potential research is presented. Should we understand Russia’s disinformation campaigns and trials in the OPCW as a struggle with the technical elements of the Organization itself?

The events in the OPCW over the past few years have asked serious questions and presented interesting topics for study for scholars and policymakers alike. The topic of disinformation, particularly that coming from the Russian Federation, remains critical. Interest should continue to be paid to the effectiveness of disinformation strategies and international responses to them.

⁶⁰ Barnett and Finnemore, “The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations,” 704.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 707.

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