

Targeting the Truth:

*The Impact of a Russian Disinformation Campaign on the
OPCW's Investigation of the 2018 Chemical Attack in
Douma, Syria*

Emma Prebreza (721129)

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First reader: Prof. Dr. Michal Onderco
Second reader: Dr. Clara Egger

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Abstract

In contemporary international relations, disinformation is increasingly recognised as a security threat, able to disrupt governance, sow doubt, and manipulate the public opinion. A particularly dangerous subset of this phenomenon is the spread of false narratives about Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) weapons. Despite its growing relevance, the impact of state-led CBRN disinformation on international bodies remains empirically understudied. This thesis addresses this gap by investigating a critical case of a Russian disinformation campaign that targeted the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) following a 2018 chemical attack in Douma, Syria. Specifically, this study examines the impact of Russia's false narratives on the OPCW's policy responses to the attack, which attempted to deny the attack, shield the Assad regime, and discredit the organisation. To do so, a qualitative single case study design is employed, informed by the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) (Kingdon & Stano, 1984), with the *policy stream* being systematically measured through the five institutional design features of Koremenos et al. (2001): *Membership, Scope, Centralisation, Control, Flexibility*. Data is drawn from an analysis of 54 official documents and 9 semi-structured interviews, with relevant experts on the topic. The findings reveal that the OPCW demonstrated considerable resilience, as Russia's campaign ultimately failed to prevent decisive policy responses. However, this resilience also came at a cost, as the campaign imposed a significant strain on the OPCW by increasing its operational burden. In doing so, it highlighted the tangible threat that CBRN disinformation poses to the broader non-proliferation and disarmament regime by attempting to erode trust in evidence-based institutions and the international norms they uphold.

Keywords: CBRN disinformation, Russian Disinformation, OPCW, Chemical Weapons, Syria

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List of Abbreviations

CBRN	Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear
CW	Chemical Weapons
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
DG	Director-General
FFM	Fact-Finding Mission
IIT	Investigation and Identification Team
JIM	Joint Investigative Mechanism
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MSF	Multiple Streams Framework
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
PR	Permanent Representative
TS	Technical Secretariat
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

1. Introduction

In September 2015, Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war by launching airstrikes to help Bashar al-Assad regain key territories from rebel groups (Moran et al., 2025a). However, Russia's involvement extended beyond military support. Over the years, Moscow also engaged in a multi-dimensional disinformation campaign aimed at denying the Assad regime's war crimes in the eyes of the public and undermining the work of international investigative bodies (The Syria Campaign, 2017).

One of the most serious violations of the Assad regime has been its repeated use of chemical weapons. Despite Syria's formal accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013 (OPCW, 2025d), the country has since conducted several deadly attacks with chemical nerve agents. One study suggests that, contrary to previous estimates, there have been at least 336 chemical attacks since the beginning of the war, with 98% attributed to the Syrian government (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2018). Among the most notorious were the 2013 sarin gas attack on Ghouta, with over 1,100 casualties (SNHR, 2021), and the 2017 Khan Shaykhun attack, with over 90 deaths (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

On April 7, 2018, the city of Douma, east of Damascus, became the target of another chemical attack. The Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) later concluded that a Mi-8/17 helicopter dropped two chlorine gas cylinders on residential buildings, killing 43 people and injuring dozens more (OPCW, 2023). While Douma was not the deadliest attack, it became the focal point of an extensive disinformation campaign by Russia. Diplomatic officials, state-affiliated media, online influencers, and bots flooded the online space and official forums with false narratives about the attack and the investigation by the chemical watchdog, the OPCW. According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), Russian disinformation actors spread at least 47,000 tweets about Syria, with the largest spike occurring after Douma. Russian embassies and official government accounts played a leading role, with their officials attempting to manipulate the narrative both online and offline, including in the OPCW's official fora. Altogether, the campaign included outright denials of the attack (Channel 4 News, 2018; Hadjimatheou, 2021), accusations that Western-backed humanitarian groups had staged it (Brabant, 2019), deliberate efforts to discredit the investigations of the OPCW (Kelley, 2023), and more.

This incident was not isolated, but rather an example of a dangerous phenomenon of the spread of Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) disinformation. The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) defines CBRN disinformation as “misleading and deceptive information..., that can potentially cause serious political, financial, and physical harm to governments, international organisations, the scientific community, academia, industry, and the population at large” (Marelli & Diaz Garcia, 2022, p. 1).

Despite the widespread recognition of the dangers of disinformation, the particular impact of false CBRN narratives, aside from the pandemic (Hersman, 2020), is a relatively new focus within international relations. Most literature on the topic does not employ empirical data or centers its focus on non-state actors spreading disinformation (e.g., Diaz Garcia & Marelli, 2023). However, as the information landscape rapidly evolves and discourse on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) gains prominence amid ongoing global conflicts, scholars argue that this issue will become increasingly relevant for policymakers (e.g., Bajema & Gower, 2022; Stein, 2024). For example, if a state, influenced by misleading information, perceives a heightened risk of attack from its adversary, it may become more inclined to launch a pre-emptive strike. In an alternative situation, disinformation could disrupt crucial communication channels and increase the likelihood of flawed decision-making (Cook, 2024a). In the worst case, misleading or false information could escalate a military conflict (Fowler et al., 2022).

The recent actions of relevant international bodies also signal a growing recognition that CBRN disinformation is not just a narrative problem, but an emerging security threat with tangible consequences for international arms control efforts. For example, in June 2025, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will convene a special technical meeting on the impact of AI-generated misinformation, citing its disruptive potential during emergency situations (IAEA, 2025). Similarly, at the 9th Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), the UK Director of Defence and International Security urged member states to unite against disinformation, which have hampered the Convention’s work (Lillie, 2022).

As the only governing body with a mandate to verify, investigate, and attribute chemical weapons use under one of the most widely ratified arms control treaties, the OPCW is a key institution in upholding the standards of these efforts. By continuously attacking the credibility of the OPCW’s scientific work, Russia sought not only to shield Syria from the consequences

of chemical weapon use but also to weaken its credibility when it comes to future conflicts. Yet, despite the recognised relevance of the topic (e.g., Cook, 2024a; Fowler et al., 2022), there is a lack of empirical studies on cases of CBRN disinformation and none that have explored how disinformation surrounding Douma impacted the OPCW's work. Consequently, this thesis is guided by the following research question: *How did Russia's disinformation campaign about the 2018 use of chemical weapons in Douma, Syria, impact the OPCW's policy responses to the attack?*

Notably, the focus of this thesis is not an assessment of the OPCW's response to disinformation. Rather, the focus rests on assessing the effect of state-led CBRN disinformation campaigns on the security of the global regime. The Douma case is considered a critical case, as it sought to control the global narrative around a grave violation of international law. Thus, this study provides relevant insights for policymakers and international institutions in anticipating and countering similar challenges in the future.

The research uses a qualitative approach, combining analysis of official OPCW documents with expert interviews. To ensure systematic measurements of the OPCW's policy responses, I turn to the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) (Kingdon & Stano, 1984). However, instead of assessing MSF's three streams individually, I first employ the *problem* and *political* stream to provide the contextual background for the case. Then, I focus in-depth on the *policy* stream, choosing to work with the five institutional design features by Koremenos et al. (2001) as my deductive framework. This method has two theoretical contributions. First, it expands on the studies that apply MSF to an international setting, illustrating its flexibility for non-domestic levels. Second, it provides a more concrete measurement for the policy stream, which, despite emphasis on institutional context, does not provide a rigid list of concepts to consider. While this flexibility is valuable, applying Koremenos et al. (2001)'s concepts ensures a systematic approach.

The thesis is structured as follows. The literature review begins by outlining key concepts, including the use of disinformation as a tool in information warfare, existing knowledge on CBRN disinformation and its strategic impacts, and Russia's role as a major proliferator. Next, MSF is introduced, with a focus on its key concepts and theoretical assumptions. The third chapter details the research design and methodology, including how MSF is applied to the Douma case. The subsequent chapters present the analysis results, followed by a discussion and a reflection on the study's limitations.

2. Literature Review

This chapter lays the groundwork for analysing the impact of Russian disinformation on the OPCW investigation into the chemical weapons attack on Douma. The review begins by conceptualising disinformation, distinguishing it from related terms, and situating it within the broader framework of information warfare. It then explores disinformation's strategic role in influencing governance and international security, followed by a discussion on CBRN disinformation. This includes an examination of its objectives, dissemination methods, and impacts, with particular attention to state-sponsored efforts. Finally, a central theme is Russia's strategic use of CBRN disinformation as part of its information warfare tactics.

2.1 *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Other Key Concepts*

In recent years, disinformation has gained significant attention in both scholarly and policy circles. The 2025 Global Risk Report highlights misinformation and disinformation as the top short-term (two-year) global concern (World Economic Forum, 2025). In international relations and security studies scholarship, disinformation is recognised as a tool *information warfare* (Golovchenko et al., 2018), or “the utilisation of information to achieve specific strategic objectives over an adversary” (Joyner & Lotrionte, 2017, pp. 826-827). While the spread of false narratives as a tool of information warfare is not a novel phenomenon (Bastian, 2019), information and communication technology (ICT) have significantly increased its speed, reach, and influence. Social media, for instance, has not only transformed the way states interact with each other and communicate with the public (Smith & Taqa, 2024), but it has also made it much easier for a variety of actors to engage in false narratives (Bajema & Gower, 2022; Gerrits, 2018). Some have even referred to the last decade as the “post-truth” era (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), a term that gained popularity as the Oxford Dictionary's 2016 Word of the Year (Flood, 2016).

Although *disinformation*, *misinformation*, *propaganda*, and *fake news* are often used interchangeably (Guess & Lyons, 2020), they differ in motivation and source (Cummings & Kong, 2019). Most scholars differentiate between disinformation and misinformation based on intent (e.g., Bjola & Papadakis, 2020; Fallis, 2015; Shu et al., 2020). As argued by Lanoszka (2019), “whereas disinformation is information that is incorrect by intent, misinformation is information that is incorrect by accident (p. 230). A similar distinction is also reflected in the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation by the European Commission, which defines

disinformation as “verifiably false or misleading information” that is intentionally “created, presented, and spread for economic gain” or to deceive the public (European Commission, 2018). However, the boundary between disinformation and misinformation is not always clear. Cook (2024a) notes that individuals may unknowingly spread disinformation, for reasons including a lack of media and information literacy (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022).

State-sponsored disinformation, the focus of this thesis, also overlaps with *propaganda* and frequently is a part of it (Lanoszka, 2019). Both share a common strategic purpose of deliberate manipulation to further political or ideological goals (Hellman, 2024). Especially in the context of Russian propaganda, disinformation serves as a crucial tool in its hybrid warfare strategy, manifesting through state-controlled media, online bots and trolls (Soares et al., 2023), as well as official diplomatic channels (Legucka, 2022). For instance, in the “Lisa case,” Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov endorsed a fabricated story about a Russian-German girl named Lisa, who was supposedly raped by migrants in Berlin (Meister, 2022). Finally, *fake news* is often used as a synonym for disinformation. However, the concept is inadequate for accurately describing false information, as it does not capture its complexity (Kapantai et al., 2021), and has been heavily politicised as a tool for undermining journalism (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

2.2 Strategic Impacts of Disinformation

The OECD warns that the proliferation of disinformation poses significant risks not only to individual decision-making but also to societal stability, policy implementation, and trust in democratic institutions (OECD, n.d.). This highlights the need to examine disinformation as a strategic tool, able to disrupt governance.

Gerrits (2018) argues that disinformation as a tool of foreign policy is highly effective in exploiting pre-existing societal divisions, making it a primarily political rather than a mere informational issue. Hence, the proliferation of falsehood is a form of *information-psychological warfare*, intending to disrupt the adversary’s information space and gain a strategic advantage (Pomerantsev, 2015). The effectiveness of a false narrative, however, highly depends on *framing*, or the perspective from which a problematic situation can be made sense of (Rein & Schön, 2002). For instance, Lewandowsky et al. (2013) argue that the Bush administration’s “war on terror” narrative played a crucial role in sustaining public belief in the false claims about Iraq’s possession of WMDs.

Yet, some scholars remain rather skeptical about the influence of disinformation on policymaking. Lanoszka (2019) argues that it must overcome three conditions to do so; (1) the inherent uncertainty embedded in international anarchy that casts doubt on information from adversaries, (2) the embedded biases of both policymakers and the general public (insofar as their opinion on foreign policy matters), and (3) the countermeasures against disinformation that exist despite political divisions.

2.3 Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Disinformation

While modern disinformation tactics are used across various geopolitical contexts, one particularly concerning area is its use in application in cases involving CBRN weapons. However, only a few scholars have explored this timely issue, with most research remaining descriptive and hypothetical. Consequently, there is a general lack of empirical evidence in understanding the actual impact of disinformation on international policy responses.

To conceptualise CBRN disinformation, this thesis mainly draws on the definition of Marelli and Diaz Garcia (2022) presented in Chapter 1. According to the authors, the increased prominence of the spread of false narratives about CBRN weapons can be partly explained by the nature of the topic, which makes it particularly prone to trigger fear and anxiety, and the nature of digital technologies that exacerbate their reach.

A report on nuclear disinformation published by The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) highlights that while a malicious information campaign is probably not powerful enough to cause a full crisis escalation, the overwhelming flow of information can heavily influence decision-makers (Cook, 2024b). On the one hand, the constant influx can create pressure to respond hastily. On the other hand, information overload can also result in decision paralysis (Cook, 2024b). On a similar note, Hersman (2020) suggests that the online environment could significantly transform the nature of crisis management by making the path to war less predictable. She uses the "wormhole" metaphor to explain how conflicts can escalate quickly, with disinformation allowing a state to jump from a small conflict to a large one. For instance, Bajema and Gower (2022) make use of a hypothetical scenario and speculate that today the Cuban Missile Crisis would have played out very differently due to the sheer speed, volume, and variety of available information. In a contemporary scenario, a successful disinformation strategy could also potentially conceal or downplay evidence of the use of

CBRN weapons and make it easier to fake compliance with relevant arms control and disarmament treaties (Golub, 2021).

2.4 (CBRN) Disinformation as a Tool of Russian Foreign Policy

As explained by Marelli and Diaz Garcia (2022), CBRN disinformation can be spread by both state and non-state actors, including terrorists, extremists, and organised crime groups. In this regard, ArgiQ (2021) explains: “Most countries suffer from misinformation, and some deliberately orchestrate disinformation campaigns.”

For Kremlin, information warfare became a key tool for spreading the Russian narrative and confusing “Western public opinion” (Nocetti, 2019). Snegovaya (2015) traces the historical roots of Russia’s disinformation to Soviet era’s *reflexive control* approach, which aimed to manipulate an adversary’s decision-making and mislead them into making choices that favoured Soviet interests instead. Likewise, Rid (2020) draws a parallel between contemporary disinformation tactics and the Cold War’s *active measures*, arguing the consequences remain the same: both replace facts with emotions and reinforce a dangerous “us vs. them” narrative. Thornton (2015) argues that Russia’s disinformation strategy is effective because it exploits Western liberal democracies’ reliance on truth and transparency, which makes it difficult to counter disinformation without compromising their values. Today, as illustrated by the question guiding this thesis, Russia’s disinformation campaigns are multi-dimensional, encompassing, but not limited to, “real or invented news media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, vox pops by concerned citizens, YouTube videos, and direct approaches to individual human targets” (Nocetti, 2019, p. 2).

Using CBRN disinformation, Moscow frequently frames its actions as that of a saviour to legitimise itself as a global peacekeeper actor dedicated to strengthening the non-proliferation system (GPWMD, 2025). A central target of this strategy has been its aggression against Ukraine. Following the 2022 invasion, Russia intensified a two-decade disinformation campaign alleging that activities on Ukrainian territory violated the BWC (Zanders, 2023). Citing documents seized from occupied research facilities, Kremlin accused the US and EU of funding these alleged violations. However, despite multiple complaints to the UNSC and the convening of a formal consultative meeting under the BWC, Russia failed to persuade the international community (Zanders, 2023).

Nevertheless, prior to Ukraine, Russia had consistently deployed disinformation to deflect blame from the Assad regime in the eyes of the global audience for chemical attacks during the Syrian civil war. While the BWC example was addressed on an institutional level, unlike the CWC, the treaty is not governed by a separate international organisation. In contrast, the disinformation campaign surrounding Douma had a direct influence on the OPCW, affecting its investigative efforts. To assess the OPCW's responses to the 2018 chemical attack in Douma, the following section establishes the theory and the conceptual framework that will guide the collection and analysis of empirical data.

3. Theory

This thesis draws on The Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) by John W. Kingdon, a widely recognised theory in public policy studies that explains how issues gain prominence on the policy agenda (Kingdon & Stano, 1984). In this chapter, I begin by outlining MSF's core theoretical propositions and their relevance to international policymaking, followed by an explanation of the theory's three streams.

MSF emerged from the Garbage Can Model (Cohen et al., 1972), a critique of the rational approach to public administration decision-making. Instead of systemic and perfectly informed problem-solving, MSF suggests that policymaking is a dynamic and non-linear process. It introduces the *stream* metaphor to explain how policies gain traction in diverse institutional contexts. Here, the *problem*, *political*, and *policy* streams flow independently, interacting to create moments of (mis)alignment that may enable or hinder policy change (Cairney & Jones, 2016). In sum, “a problem X and solution Y will not get on the agenda unless the problem is recognised, a solution is considered to be available, and political conditions are conducive...” (Mucciaroni, 2012, p. 321).

Although MSF is most frequently applied to the federal/national governance level, in recent years, more scholars have utilised it in international contexts (Jones et al., 2016). For instance, Sus (2024) applied MSF to study how the *Strategic Compass* arrived at the policy agenda of the EU, highlighting its use for analysing organisational policymaking. Simultaneously, MSF is flexible enough to accommodate diverse and unpredictable policymaking environments, which makes it particularly suitable for case study research (Cairney & Jones, 2016).

3.1 Problem Stream

The problem stream is concerned with how problematic situations are framed and how they consequently get recognised as requiring political action (Hoefer, 2022). Therefore, the situations themselves are not necessarily the “problem,” but must be defined as such by relevant actors. Through *framing* actors can emphasise certain aspects of an issue to promote their desired interpretation and strategically steer other actors’ views (Knaggård, 2015). Similarly, tools such as media reports and various indicators (e.g. official statistics) are essential for bringing attention to an issue. Particularly effective are *focusing events* such as a crisis or a disaster, which Saikaly (2009) argues may be the necessary extra push for a problem to become visible. Still, the way problems are framed affects not only the policies considered, but also which actors become interested and which institutions get involved. As such, it affects the work of various actors at various stages of the decision-making process (Knaggård, 2015).

3.2 Political Stream

The political stream attempts to describe the political landscape surrounding a problem. It is concerned with variables such as political power, public sentiment, or interest groups (Cairney & Jones, 2016; Saikaly, 2009). As noted by Hoefer (2022), the key takeaway from this stream is that policymaking is not a logical and goal-driven process. Instead, success depends on the effective alignment of all political elements at play, in a way that resonates with decision-makers during the short window that action can be taken.

3.3 Policy Stream

The policy stream is about the available solutions to a given problem. As such, it includes all actors and processes involved in proposing, developing, refining, and presenting policy proposals (Saikaly, 2009). Policy communities consisting of researchers, government officials, interest groups, and other actors brought into the issue through its framing, exchange ideas in what Kingdon calls the *primeval soup* (Saikaly, 2009). In addition, certain individuals or groups, otherwise known as *policy entrepreneurs*, can utilise various strategies to push for specific policy outcomes and achieve their ideological preferences (Hoefer, 2022). A key concept to be considered within this stream is *feasibility*. Essentially, for a realistic policy solution, both the formal and informal institutional conditions must be favourable (Bolukbasi & Yildirim, 2022).

The fourth chapter will illustrate how the three streams function as an analytical framework for contextualising Russian disinformation surrounding the 2018 Douma attack.

4. Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology to investigate the impact of Russian disinformation on the OPCW's policy responses to the 2018 Douma chemical attack. Utilising a qualitative case study research design, the chapter details the rationale for this approach, the methods of data collection, and outlines the deductive analytical framework informed by MSF. Furthermore, it addresses the strategies implemented to ensure the validity of the findings and justifies selecting the Douma case over other recorded chemical attacks. Finally, the operationalisation of key variables and the systematic process of data analysis are described in detail.

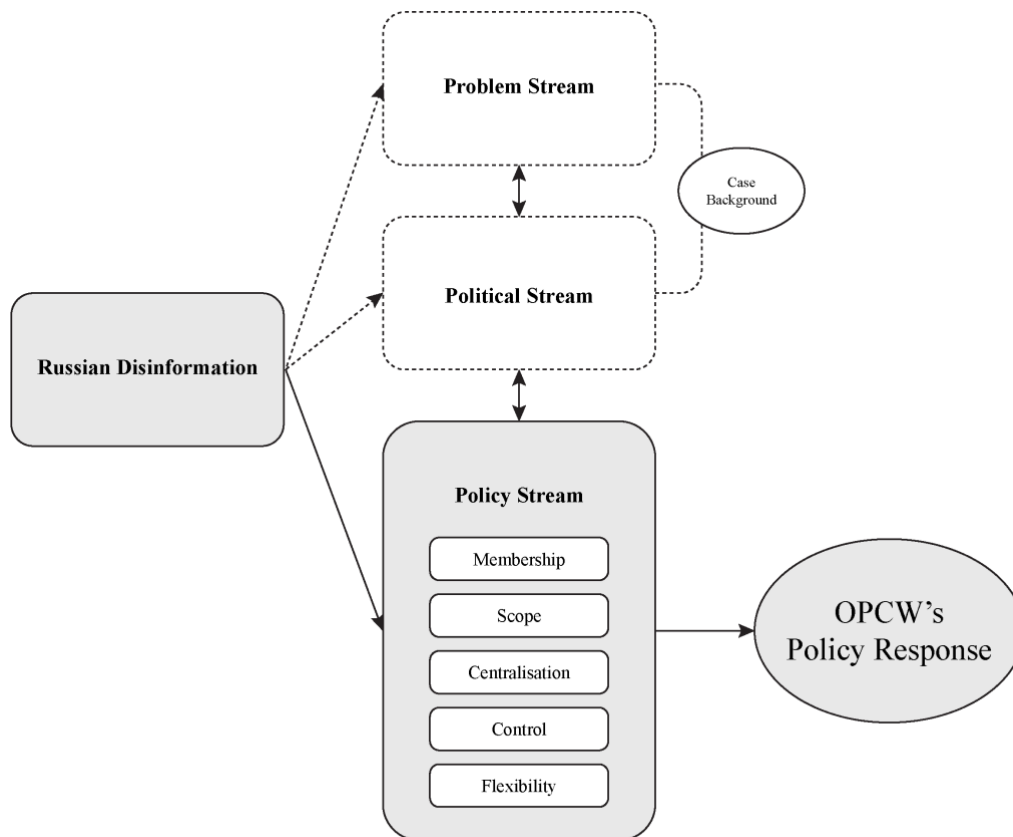
4.1 Research Design

A qualitative case study research design informs the collection and analysis of empirical data. It is deemed more appropriate than a quantitative approach for the following reasons. First, understanding how disinformation impacted OPCW's policy responses requires analysing aspects such as institutional dynamics, which cannot be captured through numerical data. Second, because the topic of CBRN disinformation is relatively new, there is limited existing data to quantify trends or establish broad patterns. Similarly, by examining a single case, the goal is to contribute to the understanding of a broader class of similar cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

The MSF (Chapter 3) is applied to analyse the case. The *problem* and *political* streams establish the broader decision-making context in which the OPCW operated following the Douma chemical attack. However, the *policy* stream serves as the key analytical lens for answering the research question. Informed by the five institutional design features by Koremenos et al. (2001), the policy stream provides the deductive framework for collecting and analysing empirical data. Importantly, while the policy stream is the central focus of this analysis, the three streams are understood not as mutually exclusive entities, but as interacting forces that shape policy and can each be impacted by disinformation. Thus, this study focuses on the policy stream, while recognising that elements from other streams may come up in the analysis. *Figure 1* visualises this analytical process.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



To ensure a comprehensive analysis, this thesis employs document analysis and semi-structured expert interviews, an approach frequently seen in qualitative case studies (Bowen, 2009). While documents provide insights into official narratives and institutional responses of the OPCW, the information in them may be incomplete to answer the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Thus, interviews with relevant experts on the case fill gaps that may not be visible in public records and provide a more detailed account of the situation. The collected data is analysed using a deductive approach, applying the five concepts outlined in the *policy* stream (Figure 1).

4.2 Validity

Although qualitative research is valuable for its exploratory power, it inherently involves interpretation, which can introduce a degree of subjectivity (Flick, 2013). Given my prior education, which often emphasised the risks of (digital) disinformation, could shape my interpretation, I adopted several validity-enhancing strategies based on Creswell and Creswell

(2023). First, triangulating multiple data sources strengthens the study’s credibility by ensuring that the limitations of one method are balanced by insights from another (Lune & Berg, 2017). Second, to enhance accuracy, findings were shared with interview participants who expressed interest in reviewing them, as part of the member-checking approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Finally, conflicting perspectives were deliberately included in the reporting of the results to promote a more balanced and objective approach.

4.3 Case Selection

While case studies are often criticised for lacking generalisability, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that they are particularly valuable in *critical cases*, where if a hypothesis holds, it is likely to apply more broadly. Although Russian disinformation was deployed in other major chemical attacks like Ghouta (2013) and Khan Shaykhun (2017), I consider Douma to be critical, as it not only experienced the highest surge in disinformation (The Syria Campaign, 2022), but the OPCW’s institutional environment was markedly different from the other two attacks (Table 1). Notably, Russia blocked the renewal of the Joint Investigation Mechanism (JIM) at the UNSC in 2017, which limited the OPCW’s ability to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons use (The Syria Campaign, 2022). In addition, the Douma investigation was targeted by internal whistleblower leaks, which were later amplified by Russia and threatened the OPCW’s legitimacy (EU vs Disinfo, 2020). Consequently, if disinformation can affect an institution like the OPCW, it raises broader concerns about the vulnerability of international bodies in charge of non-proliferation and disarmament.

Table 1

Attack	Death Toll	Problem Stream	Political Stream	Policy Stream	Disinformation
Ghouta (2013)	1,100 +	Largest chemical attack in the modern age; Considered a crossing of Obama’s famous “red line” speech (Moran et al., 2025b).	Syria and Russia blamed opposition; US considered military strikes but reached agreement with Russia, leading to Syria’s accession to the CWC.	No FFM; JIM later created to oversee Syria's chemical disarmament.	Limited: Syrian government claimed rebels staged the attack (Human Rights Watch, 2013); Russia questioned Western intelligence

					findings (Wintour & Roberts, 2013).
Khan Shaykhun (2017)	90 +	Syria violates the CWC; Strong Western condemnations; Attack occurred early in Trump's presidency.	US airstrikes in response (Starr & Diamond, 2017); Russia, militarily involved in Syria since 2015; Russia vetoed the JIM's renewal at the UNSC in 2017.	FFM confirmed sarin use; JIM attributed the attack to the Syrian government .	Some: Claims that the attack was staged by the White Helmets; Denials of the attack by the Russian government, state media, and online trolls (The Syria Campaign, 2022).
Douma (2018)	43	Another violation of the CWC by Syria only one year since Khan Shaykhun; Immediate response by Western states and humanitarian organisations.	Retaliatory strikes by US, France, and UK; Blocking of OPCW investigations by Russia; Whistleblower leaks from the FFM investigations	JIM no longer active; The IIT established and attributed the attack to the Syrian government .	Most: Highest surge in disinformation overall (The Syria Campaign, 2022); Direct attempts to undermine the OPCW's credibility and investigations from 2018 until 2023.

The following section expands on Douma's background through the lens of the three streams.

4.4 Problem Stream

The Douma incident constituted a clear *focusing event* that elevated the use of chemical weapons in Syria to the forefront of the international agenda. As a near-universal treaty with 193 members, the CWC outlaws an entire category of WMD - the first multilateral treaty to do so (Thakur & Haru, 2007). Today, 100% of the world's declared chemical weapons stockpiles have been destroyed (OPCW, 2025b), and adherence to the treaty's principles has become a global norm (Thakur & Haru, 2007). Hence, the Assad regime's repeated violation of the treaty, despite Syria's obligation under the CWC (OPCW, 2025d) represented a direct challenge to international security.

Relevant indicators swiftly brought the issue into the spotlight, as graphic images and videos of victims seemingly suffocating from inhaling toxic chemicals spread online immediately after the attack (Al Jazeera, 2018). Similarly, open-source evidence by organisations such as Bellingcat became key in shaping the narrative, which verified the content through geolocation and metadata analysis to confirm the location and timing of the attack (Amnesty International, 2018). As the body responsible for overseeing compliance with the CWC, the OPCW could not ignore the problem. On April 10, the Director-General announced that the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), was preparing to deploy to Syria to investigate the allegations (OPCW, 2018b).

4.5 Political Stream

The political stream was shaped by intense geopolitical tensions and diplomatic confrontations, as well as deliberate attempts to influence institutional outcomes. On 9 April, an emergency UNSC meeting was convened, where Western states called for an urgent investigation and accountability. At the same time, Russia began using diplomatic channels to promote disinformation, denying the attack had taken place, or claiming it was staged by Western-backed groups (UNSC, 2018).

Notably, on April 14, the US, France, and the UK launched coordinated strikes targeting Syrian government sites associated with Syria's chemical arsenal (Cohen & Liptak, 2018). In defending the retaliatory strikes, leaders of the three nations all emphasised that their actions were taken to uphold the integrity of the CWC and to respond to Syria's continued violations of its obligations (Cohen & Liptak, 2018).

At the same time, Russia intensified its disinformation efforts. While a comprehensive account of Russian disinformation narratives is beyond the scope of this section, *EU vs Disinfo* identified three key messages at the core of Russia's campaign: (1) the footage of victims was staged by the White Helmets, (2) the chemical attack itself was entirely fabricated, and (3) Western states were using the incident to divert attention from unresolved questions surrounding the 2018 Salisbury poisoning (EU vs Disinfo, 2018a). In one instance, Russian state TV used footage from behind-the-scenes of a Syrian movie to show White Helmets "staging" civilian deaths (EU vs Disinfo, 2018b). In another, a report accusing the White Helmets of running a cross-border organ trafficking operation in Syria was presented as the Russian MFA (EU vs Disinfo, 2019). Notably, on April 26th, Russia brought 17 alleged

witnesses to hold a press conference at the OPCW headquarters to strengthen its claims that the attack was fabricated (Wintour, 2018). In 2019, Russia also exploited two whistleblower leaks from the FFM investigations to spread the narrative that the attack was staged. All these and more claims have consequently been amplified by an intricate web of online influencers, journalists and researchers linked to Kremlin (The Syria Campaign, 2022).

4.6 Policy Stream

Headquartered in The Hague, the OPCW operates through three principal organs that each played a role in responding to the 2018 Douma chemical attack. At the highest level, the *Conference of State Parties* (CSP), comprising all member states to the CWC, oversees the treaty's implementation and the work of the other organs (OPCW, 2025a).

The Executive Council consists of 41 rotating members and is “required to carry out all functions and powers entrusted to it by the Convention”, including cases of non-compliance by a state party (OPCW, 2025a). Hence, most diplomatic exchanges surrounding Douma and Russian disinformation were covered during the Council's meetings.

Finally, the *Technical Secretariat* (TS), led by the Director-General, is responsible for conducting investigations and publishing reports (OPCW, 2025a). Ahmet Üzümcü served as the DG of the TS until July 2018, after which he was succeeded by Fernando Arias (OPCW, 2025a). Additionally, the Secretariat oversees the work of both the FFM, established in 2014 to confirm the illegal use of chemical weapons in Syria, and the IIT, created in June 2018, to identify perpetrators of the attacks (OPCW, 2018a).

4.7 Operationalisation

4.7.1 Conceptualising Russian Disinformation

Building on the literature, this study operationalises the independent variable as any misleading or false narratives surrounding the 2018 chemical attack in Douma propagated by Russian actors, which aim to discredit the work of the OPCW and the event itself. Disinformation, rather than misinformation, is considered the most relevant and analytically appropriate term, as it reflects the understanding that the narratives were spread purposefully. The multi-dimensional nature of disinformation is acknowledged, considering its spread through both official and unofficial channels such as social media (Andriukaitis et al., 2018; Rodgers, 2024;

The Syria Campaign, 2022). Nevertheless, the study remains limited in capturing the influence of all these variables. Therefore, only disinformation narratives that are explicitly referenced in official OPCW statements, formal diplomatic negotiations, or press statements will be considered. This approach assumes that it is these formal channels that are most likely to have influenced the OPCW's policy dynamics.

4.7.2 Measuring the Policy Stream

The policy response of the OPCW to the Douma attack is the dependent variable of this study. Despite MSF highlighting elements of the policy stream, including institutional context, it does not provide a policy measurement guide. To address this, I turn to the five features of institutional design by Koremenos et al. (2001) to support my analysis and formulate the following analytical expectations regarding their influence on the OPCW's policy responses.

- (1) Who belongs to the OPCW? (*Membership*): The OPCW is a highly inclusive organisation, encompassing a broad range of interests. This naturally increases the heterogeneity of opinions that the organisation has to account for and is thus expected to influence the process of reaching a consensus in response to Douma and Russia's disinformation. I choose to examine the role of *policy entrepreneurs* here and see whether any actors stood out in their efforts to influence the OPCW's response to the case. Similarly, it is expected that disinformation will arise in this category when proliferated by Russia and its allies or brought up by State Parties in official statements.
- (2) What issues are within the OPCW's mandate? (*Scope*): The organisation's focus is primarily scientific, focusing on verification, assistance to member states, and technical investigations into alleged use (OPCW, 2025c). While the IIT assigned responsibility for Douma to the Syrian government, this attribution remained technical, not judicial (OPCW, 2023). As a result, the OPCW's scientific scope likely constrained its ability to respond to disinformation during its investigations.
- (3) How much independent decision-making power does the OPCW have? (*Centralisation*): The OPCW's authority is mainly in the hands of the member states through the CSP and the Executive Council. While the TS has operational autonomy in conducting investigations, it is subject to oversight and strategic decisions of the State Parties. Consequently, I expect that the OPCW's partial centralisation enabled the TS

to conduct the Douma investigation independently but limited its ability to respond to disinformation.

(4) How are decisions within the OPCW made? (*Control*): Decision-making in the OPCW aims for consensus, with voting by a two-thirds majority in the CSP and a simple majority in the Council, if consensus fails (OPCW, 2025a). As with membership, I expect that these arrangements meant that the OPCW's institutional response to disinformation was constrained by the need for broad political consensus, leading to cautious actions.

(5) How flexible is the OPCW's mandate to accommodate unanticipated circumstances such as disinformation? (*Flexibility*): The CSP has the authority to establish subsidiary bodies if needed (CWC, 1997). While this demonstrates institutional adaptation, flexibility rests on the collective decisions of states. Here, I expect that while the OPCW was somewhat flexible, the organisation remained committed to impartiality and evidence-based conclusions.

4.8 Data Collection and Measurement

4.8.1 Documents

Bowen (2009) argues that for document analysis, data is selected rather than collected based on its relevance. Hence, a purposive sampling strategy was used to select documents that reflect how the OPCW's responses to the Douma chemical attack may have been influenced by Russian disinformation. The primary criterion for selection was the document's relevance to the OPCW's decision-making processes concerning the Douma incident. Only statements published between the attack itself in April 2018 and the end of 2023, when the 3rd IIT report attributing the attack to the Syrian government was published, were considered. Documents were mainly sourced from the OPCW's official online archive, along with an open-source online search using keywords for official government statements, minimising reliance on unverified content. In total, 54 documents were selected for analysis (Appendix A). While the sample allowed for the identification of recurring themes concerning the key actors, the sheer number of State Parties meant that including the specific viewpoint of every single country on this matter was beyond the scope of this research.

Finally, I developed a deductive codebook to measure the policy response of the OPCW and address the analytical expectations formulated in the previous section (Appendix B). The predefined codes are derived from the five institutional features, and each one is accompanied by observable indicators for how policy responses were articulated.

4.8.2 Expert Interviews

A purposive sampling approach was used to identify experts with direct knowledge of the Douma attack and Syria's use of chemical weapons in general, Russian disinformation strategies, and the OPCW's policymaking. Emphasis was placed on reaching people with direct experience in working at the OPCW, preferably throughout 2018-2023. Participants were reached via email or LinkedIn, with a description of the study and its objectives. If requested, they were sent the general points for discussion. Prior to the interview, interviewees signed an informed consent form, which explained the process of collecting and handling the interview data to maintain research integrity (Appendix E).

Together, 9 participants were interviewed throughout April and June 2025. *Appendix C* lists the length of each interview, including the professional affiliation of the participant. Because of geographical distance limitations, 7 interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and 2 were conducted in person. To maintain consistency, the interviews were guided by a semi-structured guide centred around the five institutional features (Appendix D). This approach was preferred because it allowed me to adhere to a framework, but remain flexible enough in exploring interesting discussion points raised by participants (Knott et al., 2022) or adapting to their expertise.

4.9 Data Analysis

Collected data was systematically analysed using a deductive approach, reviewing both documents and interviews based on the predefined scheme for measuring policy (Section 4.6.2). As I collected my documents before conducting interviews, I first made a Microsoft Excel sheet, in which I chronologically ordered my selected documents based on date. To familiarise myself with the data, I first read through each document and wrote down short summaries by hand. Then, I uploaded the documents into Atlas.ti, creating a project with 5 code groups, each representative of one of the institutional features. In the first round of the open coding process, I kept close to my framework, highlighting relevant parts of the text, assigning them interpretive codes, and merging them under their respective groups. In the

second round, I reviewed the codes again, assigning them to different groups if relevant, merging similar codes, and shortening my descriptions for clarity.

A similar approach ensued with analysing my interview transcripts. After obtaining the participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed with the help of an online software. The transcriptions were subsequently imported as a new project into Atlas.ti for the first round of descriptive coding. During this process, I highlighted intriguing quotes made by interviewees with the purpose of including them in the results. In the second round, I reviewed each category and conducted a similar clean-up process as mentioned above.

Following the coding process of both data sources, I compared the codes in each of the predefined categories and wrote down initial impressions. When writing my results, I began drafting the story for each group using document data, which I then expanded on with the interview findings.

5. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the document analysis and expert interviews, structured around the five concepts to measure policy. *Membership* captures the diversity and role of State Parties, *Scope* refers to the legal and operational boundaries of the OPCW's mandate, *Centralisation* reflects the extent of independent authority by the OPCW, and *Control* relates to the oversight mechanisms by states. Due to a lack of evidence for *Flexibility*, the concept was excluded. In what follows, each section will detail the findings for the respective category in a chronological order of the investigation, supported by relevant quotes from the empirical data.

5.1 Membership

The OPCW's diverse range of political interests, played a key role in the response to the Douma attack and the ensuing disinformation campaign. Notably, the code group was the most prevalent, showcasing how the heterogeneity of opinions shaped the decision-making within key bodies and highlighted the actions of prominent policy entrepreneurs.

The initial phase saw key Western states quickly assume proactive positions. Almost immediately after the attack, on April 14th, French intelligence issued a national assessment that unequivocally concluded a chemical attack had occurred, and that the Assad regime was to blame. While Sico van der Meer, a former research fellow at Clingendael Institute acknowledged the step as beneficial to the OPCW's mission (Interview #H), arms control expert Kristoffer B r ck noted that while France may have had access to classified intelligence, it also inevitably opened itself up to criticism from states that claimed the report was part of a staged narrative (Interview #E). While the French did not address disinformation, they pointed to Russia's role in providing a "constant political cover to the Syrian regime" (Doc_1), a sentiment later repeated by the US and the UK. Several interviewees noted that around 2016, Russia significantly escalated its global disinformation efforts, marking a shift toward a more "adversarial" stance. In the case of Douma, van der Meer described it as "an experiment to see how far they could go."

While not the primary focus of this thesis, the coordinated disinformation efforts between Russian state actors and aligned non-state actors deserves mention. Interviewees frequently pointed to the active role of notorious social media personalities and independent journalists, especially those affiliated with the *Working Group on Syria, Media and Propaganda*. Notably,

two interviewees reported being personally targeted by their disinformation efforts (Interviews #A and #H).

At the first Executive Council meeting after the attack, the DG reported that despite the promised cooperation, the Syrian-Russian alliance cited having to solve undefined security issues before allowing FFM's direct access to Douma. This delay immediately became a point of suspicion, with states like the US accusing Russia of manipulating the narrative to tamper with evidence. During the same meeting, France accused Syria of violating the CWC and highlighted the inconsistency of the narratives pushed by Russia, calling the efforts "so crude that they would be laughable if they did not relate to a population that has been ravaged, terrorised, and victimised for seven years" (Doc_4). As explained by several experts, "muddying the waters" with multiple, often contradictory storylines represents a common Russian disinformation tactic (Interview #A). Dr. Bowsher explained that the goal is not to convince everyone, but rather to "sow enough doubt" to undermine confidence in legitimate findings (Interview #C). On a similar note, both Dr. Zanders and van der Meer added that it allows Russia to revisit said narratives at later stages and reintroduce a sense of familiarity with the broader audience (Interview #D).

The US and the UK echoed France's forceful stance towards Russian disinformation, with the US going so far as to describe Russia as "morally complicit" in Syria's actions (Doc_5), and the UK presenting concrete evidence to refute Russia's claims (Doc_6). As argued by both Zanders and Bowsher, the UK's role in the Douma investigation was closely linked to the Salisbury poisonings that occurred only a month prior. Bowsher noted a post-Salisbury "hangover," explaining that "Douma became an event for the UK to really leverage its position" and denounce "the use of CW in any context."

Contrastingly, Russia sought to present itself as both a cooperative party and a victim of Western manipulation. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson M. Zakharova denounced the delay in the FFM's access as "unacceptable" and blamed the Troika's retaliatory strikes for hindering the operation (Doc_10), despite previous statements justifying the delay on security grounds (Doc_8). Disinformation was not a term solely used against Russia but was applied the other way too. On one occasion, the head of the Russian delegation stated: "We are increasingly hearing statements regarding a disinformation campaign to discredit the OPCW, allegedly initiated by Russia. [...] we have consistently advocated for honest, transparent work in all areas." (Doc_40)

Throughout 2018, Russia intensified its efforts to deny the Douma tragedy. On 26 April, it hosted a briefing at the OPCW headquarters featuring alleged Syrian witnesses. In his remarks at the briefing, Russia's PR describe the allegations of the attack "a provocation disguised as a use of chemical weapons" (Doc_12), and accused the West of hypocrisy in not attending the briefing (Doc_16). However, as Santiago Oñate, a diplomat with long experience at the OPCW explained, following Assad's fall in 2024, Western journalists discovered that the witnesses' statements had likely been manipulated, reinforcing the argument that Russia's claims were deceptive (Interview #F).

Still, the Troika and Russia were not the only active states in the discussion. Bürck spoke of three broader "camps": "Those who were forceful in condemning Syria [...], those not as forceful against Syria, but also not supportive, and then those that are perpetrators of disinformation that forcefully defend Syria from any allegations." Part of the first group were most Western countries. In a Joint Statement, 17 of them called Russia's briefing "nothing more than a crude propaganda exercise" and called its efforts "attempts to undermine the multilateral framework" (Doc_15). China showcased characteristics of the second group. Despite not siding with one side or the other, in a Joint Statement with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the countries voiced "deep concern regarding the attempt to accuse States Parties of using chemical weapons on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations..." (Doc_19). Finally, Iran frequently echoed Russia's disinformation about the fabrication of the attack. For example, the Iranian Representation formally circulated a statement based on findings from the Iranian Academy of Medical Sciences, which criticised the "ambiguities" surrounding Douma and described the conclusions made by the Troika as "unacceptable" (Doc_18).

The following months were marked with heated discussions surrounding the final FFM report, which confirmed that a chemical attack had taken place, as well as the establishment of the IIT. While most countries supported the OPCW's findings, Russia presented an individual assessment in which it scrutinised the FFM's methodology and continued insisting on the "staged character of the incident" (Doc_30). Here, Mr. Oñate explained that Russia's argument rested on the premise that all declared Syrian chemical weapons had been destroyed, and therefore no attack could have taken place, despite evidence that the declarations were not proven to be incomplete.

Similarly, Russia quickly took advantage of the internal FFM leaks, using them to fuel the narrative of a biased investigation, which allowed parties to unfairly "point the finger at the

Syrian authorities” (Doc_35). A comment made by the Russian PR to the OPCW took the matter even further, claiming that they proved the cylinders were “manually dragged into the premises by White Helmets provocateurs” (Doc_36). Finally, Russia sought to advance its narrative beyond the OPCW at the UNSC: “Here [the UNSC] they were stronger in their condemnations, but also weaker in their arguments” (Interview #F). Nevertheless, these moves were largely resisted by Western nations with a seat at the Council.

5.2 Scope

Policy discussions about the operational boundaries of the OPCW, with particular emphasis on the TS’s mandate in attribution powers, were the 3rd most frequent code group of the analysis. Overall, this category was primarily shaped by Russia’s attempts to challenge the legitimacy of the OPCW’s procedures and resist the expansion of its mandate.

From the outset of the investigations, Western nations emphasised their support for the “independent, impartial and professional work” of the FFM. Specifically, the definition of the FFM’s role, as outlined in official documents (e.g. Doc_23) and supported by several interviewees, was to simply “gather facts” on chemical weapons use. However, quite early on, the West has expressed their desire for a mechanism to attribute blame not only for Douma, but other alleged chemical attacks in Syria. The Troika, in particular, recalled the previous “impartial and independent” investigations of JIM (Doc_5), and while this mechanism was no longer active in 2018, there was a general sentiment among Western states that attribution powers should return and any efforts to undermine the OPCW’s work should be curbed.

In contrast, Russia’s statements about the impartiality of the OPCW’s scientific work were generally filled with doubt and represented another theme of its disinformation efforts. The country raised objections to the FFM’s reliance on remote investigation practices and external data sources, which they asserted originated from Syrian opposition groups as well as the White Helmets (Doc_23). Material from the whistleblower leaks was also leveraged to support criticisms of the FFM’s methods, prompting doubts from the Russian Delegation such as, “Is it really possible to build a solid building on shaky foundations?” (Doc_35).

A significant development that altered the perceived and actual scope of the OPCW was the June 2018 decision by the CSP to establish the IIT. Recalling its broad authority under the Convention’s scope, the CSP “affirmed” that identifying those responsible for chemical

weapons use did fall within the Convention's purview (Doc_21). With 82 states in favour and 24 against, including Russia, China, Syria, and Iran, this decision reflected a majority desire to ensure that violations of the Convention do not go unaddressed.

The reform was met with significant resistance from Russian officials, who saw it as a “wholly anomalous” step outside of the organisation’s “strictly technical” mandate (Doc_20). Perhaps the most direct challenge came from Kalamonov, head of the Russian Delegation, during the 4th Special Session of the CSP (Doc_20). He raised concerns about issues such as the “unbalanced geographical basis of staff,” a “selective approach” to witness testimonies, and specifically criticised the handling of the chain of custody. Picking apart the chain of custody, Dr. Zanders explained, was a common tactic of Russian disinformation. He explained that the original protocol was developed in the late 1990s, when the CWC was based largely on artificial scenarios. Although it has since been updated, Russia’s narratives often continue to cite the outdated version to undermine the OPCW’s field operations (Interview #D).

A tension in perspectives on the legality of the IIT within the Convention also emerged among interviewees. On one hand, experts like Oñate argued that attribution was legitimate in light of evolving circumstances, where it was “not enough to say chemical weapons were used” (Interview #F). Van der Meer echoed this position, stating that the move was necessary for the OPCW to “remain relevant” in an era where member states were once again using chemical weapons (Interview #H). On the other hand, those like Bürck were a little more critical. While he agreed with the moral ground behind its mandate, he explains that “under the concept of implied powers” in international law, “the wording there [in the CWC] does not fully support attribution as the main task”, he argued (Interview #E).

5.3 Centralisation

The concept of *Centralisation*, was the 2nd most frequent code group of the analysis. Drawing primarily on official statements made by the TS, this section explores the degree to which the central authority of the TS was exercised or constrained in the face of strategically deployed disinformation narratives.

The documents revealed that from the onset of the investigations, the TS took charge of the situation by initiating “internal discussions” and informing the Syrian and Russian delegations about the FFM’s deployment (Doc_2). This occurred only two days after the initial allegations

of chemical weapons use were made. In doing so, it made clear to both delegations that the FFM's work in Douma would follow the relevant international framework. Several states acknowledged the Secretariat's leadership during this period. The US and the UK praised the Secretariat's ability to rapidly dispatch inspectors under complex circumstances (Doc_5,6), and the Joint Statement by Western states welcomed the DG's decision to "distance himself from this event" (Doc_15).

Nonetheless, the TS also encountered practical challenges, which limited its ability to exercise fully centralised control. For example, in a later update to the Executive Council, the DG reported that access to sites in Douma was contingent not only on approval from the UN, but as well as conditions set by Syria and the Russian Military Police (Doc_23). Likewise, the fact that some witness interviews were conducted in Damascus, rather than in Douma, suggests that the FFM faced further limitations in its operational freedom even after security conditions were deemed safe (Doc_11).

These limitations were not only logistical but reflected deeper tensions between technical work and politics, some of which were exacerbated by disinformation. Dr. Bowsher highlighted "heated arguments" between the Secretariat's personnel and state representatives. Ultimately, she emphasised, the OPCW "is a membership organisation... It has to satisfy its members, who are also its donors" (Interview #C). A former OPCW investigator echoed this view. In his words, the OPCW is "political first and technical second" (Interview #A). However, the TS also retained an important degree of leverage, as it "has a lot of knowledge that the Member States often do not have," making them reliant on its expertise (Interview #H).

Russia's diplomatic proclamations repeatedly challenged the Secretariat's individual authority. In several statements, its representatives criticised the FFM for limiting the range of its evidence collection, claiming that it had "simply decided not to gather (witness) testimonies," despite the OPCW disproving these claims as untrue. Moreover, they accused the Secretariat of bias and suggested that the timing and content of OPCW press releases were "made under the pressure" of Western states (Doc_16). Although unsubstantiated, these allegations fed into wider efforts to question the OPCW's impartiality.

The IIT helped centralise the investigation and, to some extent, address disinformation through a systematic rebuttal of alternative narratives. According to its 3rd report, the IIT "considered the views of the Syrian Arab Republic and of the Russian Federation that the incident had been

'staged by terrorist armed groups' with the support of Western States" (Doc_44). Likewise, it also ruled out the manual placement theory that occurred in the whistleblower leaks, concluding that the evidence was "inconsistent with the damage observed on both cylinders..." Oñate provided relevant insights on the matter, explaining that the IIT was always "open to scrutiny" and thoroughly investigated and responded to claims raised by State Parties, including those made by Russia, which led to the inclusion of some rebuttals in the final report (Interview #F). However, Dr. Bowsher cautioned that this thoroughness may also come at a cost.: "It is a huge amount of work and, [...] one of the tactics [by Russia] is to just keep sending more stuff in... The constant need to respond also erodes the legitimacy of the team" (Interview #C). Though agreeing that disinformation "made the organisation's life more difficult," interviewee #G argued that rather than having a meaningful impact, it was "more of a nuisance."

5.4 Control

Attempts to control decision-making, along with frequent references to past cases where voting shaped the international response to the use of CW by Syria, were prominent. This section explores how different actors tried to leverage these mechanisms to shape the OPCW's response to Douma, particularly through disinformation or selective framing of past events.

Apart from diplomatic disinformation, the Douma discussion frequently centred around Russia's veto of JIM's renewal. Early on into the incident, the US accused Russia of exerting control over the international response to CW use in Syria and standing "in the way of every effort... to address this unacceptable situation." Its Representation also criticised Kremlin's repeated use of veto in the UNSC, noting it had been used "six times over the past year to block...resolutions," and that by blocking JIM, Russia effectively "took away the world's ability to attribute the chemical weapons attacks in Syria" (Doc_5). The UK echoed these statements. At a conference convened by France, then-prime minister Boris Johnson stated that "Russia's response was not to enforce the ban on chemical weapons but to use its veto in the Security Council to protect Assad by shutting down the international investigation" (Doc_17). These accusations were met not only with denial, but with Russia's own counternarratives that sought to deflect blame and reframe the situation. The Russian delegation placed "full responsibility for the fact that the Mechanism no longer exists" on Western states (Doc_20).

This concept was also characterised by Russia attempting to exert more control over the OPCW's organs, mainly in reaction to the IIT's establishment. Advocating for increased control

by State Parties, Russia stated that "the work of the OPCW's in-the-field missions should be under the control of its management bodies" and rooted in "clear instructions" (Doc_24). Russia also called for reviving the principle of consensus-based voting, stating that the "existing vote counting de facto allows the minority to impose its will on the majority" (Doc_25). However, the viability of consensus was questioned by some interviewees. Participant #A noted that pushing for a vote can be more effective than pursuing a consensus that might "effectively say nothing." Similarly, Bürck explained that by the time of the Douma attack, sustained opposition from Russia and its allies meant that "any attempts to reach a consensus had been long abandoned" (Interview #E).

A pivotal display of *Control* occurred in April 2021, when Syria's rights and privileges under the CWC were suspended. The decision, entitled "Addressing the Possession and Use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic," passed with 87 votes in favour, 15 against, and 34 abstentions (Doc_41). Although this decision did not emerge from Douma alone, it was a direct reaction to Syria's repeated failure to comply with the Convention's obligations based on the findings of the FFM and the IIT in several chemical incidents. As such, it represents a key policy response of the OPCW.

As in other instances during the investigation, the Russian Federation was the loudest in resisting the resolution, calling it a "black day in the history" of the OPCW and accusing the supporting states of "attempting to pass themselves off as the judges called to determine who and how well one is behaving in the international arena..." (Doc_40). This strong opposition was echoed by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, comprised of six post-Soviet states. In a Joint Statement, they warned the OPCW of the detrimental impact this "politically driven decision" could have on its international position and its status as a "Nobel Peace Prize laureate" (Doc_38). Iran also took a rather strict stance in the explanation of its negative vote. Its delegation not only used its time to undermine the work of the IIT and criticise the alleged negligence of the full picture in Syria, but also argued against the perceived illegality of the matter.

Targeting fence-sitters, or states not firmly aligned with any major position represented a crucial, less visible dimension of the struggle for influence. Dr. Jeffrey W. Knopf, explained that many of these countries tend to sympathise with opponents of the Western order due to their own histories as victims of their colonial rule (Interview #I). Building on this point, Interviewee #A added that Russian officials often approach specific delegates directly,

“managing to persuade them that there is something in what they say... They’re very good at it, you know, because intelligent people get taken in by it.”

5.5 *Reflecting on Disinformation*

In addition to the main findings, experts shed light on disinformation’s potential impact on the broader multilateral CBRN framework.

All participants agreed that the information environment surrounding Douma was influenced by a long-term Russian disinformation campaign targeting not only the Syrian conflict, but multilateralism as a whole. In this challenging environment where the support for international organisations is weakening, Dr. Knopf argued, disinformation “takes a difficult job and makes it even harder” (Interview #I). The overarching tactic, as explained by van der Meer, is to “weaken the truth” by creating widespread uncertainty (Interview #H). Cultivating a vague but persistent feeling that “there was something weird with investigation” among the public and policymakers alike, not only undermines the convictions about what the truth is, but also causes a disengagement and blurring of existing norms (Interviews #A, #C, #H).

This raising of doubts and sowing mistrust among the public has tangible political consequences. Van der Meer argued that when the truth is sufficiently muddled, it can directly influence politicians to avoid taking “the strongest measures” in response to proven violations and paralyse the international community’s ability to enforce accountability. According to Bürck, this erosion of norms can be particularly dangerous in other CBRN areas where their societal establishment is weaker (Interview #E). Dr. Zanders provided a concrete example, noting that as geopolitical tensions rise, foundational treaties like the nuclear NPT may face growing pressure from similar disinformation tactics (Interview #D).

Despite this, experts also pointed to important sources of resilience. Oñate remained cautiously optimistic, emphasising that while international organisations like the OPCW are not equipped to combat disinformation directly, they can mitigate its effects by remaining transparent and faithful to their mandates (Interview #F). According to many, the OPCW’s response serves as an example, as it remained scientifically objective (e.g Interview #C, #H, #I). Those like van der Meer affirmed this, noting that the organisation’s “scientific work is very good” and that it creatively adapted by tackling false narratives directly in its reports. In addition to this institutional integrity, another expert pragmatically explained that those who understand the matter well enough, should be able to see through the disinformation (Interview #G).

6. Discussion

This master thesis addressed the question of how an intense Russian disinformation campaign impacted the policy responses of the OPCW to the 2018 chemical attack in Douma, Syria. Through critical reflection and connection with the existing literature, this chapter will explain that while disinformation caused disruption, it did not stop the OPCW from taking clear action.

On one hand, the empirical data revealed that despite its harmful intent, Russia's disinformation campaign failed to prevent the OPCW from fulfilling its core mandate under the CWC, enabling it to unequivocally condemn yet another violation by the Assad regime. As such, the OPCW was also able to implement decisive policy measures, demonstrating its resolve to address Syria's long-term pattern of non-compliance, of which Douma had become a focal point. These included successfully establishing an attribution mechanism despite strong resistance, persistently calling for Syria's full compliance, and ultimately stripping the country of its voting rights in an exercise of *Control*. In several cases, disinformation was called out by important political actors, and as the discussions with experts revealed, majority of the political actors saw through its destabilising intentions and were able to utilise the OPCW's structures to enforce consequences. As a result, the findings partially support the work of Lanoszka (2019), who argues that for disinformation to successfully influence policymaking, it must overcome barriers such as the prevailing balance of power and the opinions of key policymakers. Thus, despite significant efforts from Russia and its allies, the opposing political coalition led by the West and other nations condemning the attack, ultimately proved more influential.

On the other hand, Russian efforts were not entirely without consequences. For one, they demonstrate how a sophisticated state-sponsored disinformation campaign operates in practice, validating key insights from the literature. Despite the primary focus on diplomatic exchanges, Russia's influence was multidimensional, making use of alternative media groups or the online sphere to increase their reach (Nocetti, 2019). Furthermore, the campaign was highly political. As exemplified by the *Membership* concept and argued by Gerrits (2018), Russia was strategic with the nature of their statements, which went beyond factual contestation to directly targeting geopolitical rivals. A prime example of this strategy were their accusations against the UK, which explicitly drew connections to the Salisbury poisonings, occurring only a month prior to Douma. This tactic of shifting blame to the West and framing the conflict in an *us vs. them* manner, is consistent with Rid's (2020) observations about the nation's Cold War strategies.

What also stood out were mentions of more covert disinformation practices by interviewees and the deliberate targeting of fence-sitters. Though the exact degree of these tactics is difficult to measure, they underscore that disinformation represents a valid tool of information warfare (Pomerantsev, 2015).

Apart from exacerbating polarisation within the political bodies, the campaign's impact was most acutely felt in Russia's deliberate targeting of the OPCW's internal mandate (*Scope*) and its leadership (*Centralisation*), thereby creating obstacles to a seamless investigation in an effort to help Syria fake compliance with its treaty obligations (Golub, 2021). The initial expectation was that the OPCW's mandate would constrain direct responses to disinformation. The findings generally support this position, yet it was not expected that the expansion towards attribution would become another vector for Russia's efforts. Ultimately, this underscores that CBRN disinformation is not simply about distorting facts but also about undermining existing institutions to fuel one's agenda (Marelli & Diaz Garcia, 2022). Although the TS, along with the FFM and later the IIT, upheld their professionalism and avoided engagement in political discussions, it could be interpreted that disinformation pushed them into a reactive stance. While the IIT's rebuttal of certain narratives signalled a form of resistance, the very need for such efforts, and their resource cost, highlight the campaign's success in diverting focus, consistent with authors who warn about the effects of an information overload (Cook, 2024a).

Although a clear account of Russia's ideological goals surrounding Douma remains purely interpretive, interviews suggest that by shielding the Assad regime, Russia was also continuing its efforts of undermining the multilateral order. This approach ultimately culminated in Russia directly confronting the OPCW's work with politically motivated counter-narratives, a tactic that exemplifies the risk of eroding the trust required to uphold international agreements (OECD, n.d.).

Finally, a brief reflection on the conceptual framework is warranted. Despite the lack of empirical evidence for *Flexibility*, or the OPCW's ability to adapt its procedures specifically in response to disinformation, the organisation did show adaptation. Despite not being a direct response to Douma only, the IIT's establishment was arguably the most significant step during this period. However, the data framed this development almost exclusively as a question of *Scope*, that is, whether attribution fell within the OPCW's legal mandate. Hence, it was deemed as most appropriate to omit this concept from the results.

7. Conclusion

This master thesis addressed the following research question: *How did Russia's disinformation campaign about the 2018 use of chemical weapons in Douma, Syria, impact the OPCW's policy responses to the attack?* To answer the question, an analysis of 54 official documents along with 9 expert interviews was conducted, based on the Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon & Stano, 1984) and the five institutional concepts introduced by Koremenos et al. (2001): *Membership, Scope, Centralisation, Control, and Flexibility*. Together the concepts served as a conceptual framework to measure the OPCW's policy response systematically.

It can be concluded that the OPCW remained resilient in the face of targeted disinformation efforts, managing to implement key policy measures, including the controversial establishment of an attribution mechanism, and maintain the support of most of its State Parties. At the same time, this research highlights a degree of strain as a result of the long and intense narratives pushed by Russia and its allies, consistent with their broader use of information warfare to advance their foreign policy objectives (GPWMD, 2025; Zanders, 2023). From shielding the Assad regime by denying the chemical attack happened, shifting the blame on other state and non-state actors, increasing the operational burden on the TS, to fuelling political polarisation and threatening established norms, the results highlight that the threat of CBRN disinformation is not negligible, and may continue to rise (Marelli & Diaz Garcia, 2022). In this case it showed that when the truth is targeted, as it was during Douma, it is not just about challenging a specific investigation. It has the potential to shift the organisation's focus, challenge its legitimacy, and harm the trust and norms that international agreements rely on (Hellman, 2024). By constantly trying to "muddy the waters" and forcing key organisations to spend valuable time and resources defending their findings, these campaigns risk creating a world where impunity is normalised. Although the norms against chemical or biological weapons seem to remain strong, as pointed out by interviewees, the implications for other areas of CBRN non-proliferation and disarmament could be damaging.

7.1 Recommendations

From these findings, several key recommendations arise for both theoretical inquiry and practical policymaking. The first recommendations are of theoretical nature. Despite the traditional use of MSF on national level, this study and those of authors like Sus (2024), underscore the framework's relevance for the multilateral context. As such, researchers and

policymakers aiming to study the effect of external factors on the behaviour of international organisations, would benefit from this approach. However, as recognised earlier, a potential limitation of the MSF, is its lack of conceptual guidance. Consequently, those seeking to study the policy responses in detail should consider using the work of Koremenos et. al (2001), or a similar conceptually rich framework, as a complementary analytical tool.

The lack of empirical data on *Flexibility* in response to disinformation presents another, practical implication. Koremenos et al. (2001) suggest that flexibility is crucial for adapting to unforeseen circumstances. However, my findings imply that existing institutional flexibility mechanisms might not be explicitly designed or readily adaptable to address sophisticated state-sponsored disinformation. Therefore, moving forward, it is crucial that policymakers, particularly within bodies like the OPCW, prioritise the proactive development of specific resilience strategies against disinformation. The first and most crucial step for all relevant policymakers is to fully recognise disinformation as a modern strategic weapon capable of disrupting governance structures and undermining existing norms (Diaz Garcia & Marelli, 2023). This recognition, which moves beyond viewing disinformation as mere propaganda, is foundational to developing effective countermeasures (Fowler et al., 2022). Building upon this, it is recommended that international organisations focus on building internal capacity through regular education and training programs on the nature, tactics, and goals of disinformation. This proactive approach ensures that staff at all levels are better prepared to recognise and appropriately respond to such threats, as pinpointed by interviewees. Such initiatives could explore potential collaboration with existing projects focused on combating WMD disinformation, such as the G7 Partnership (GPWMD, 2025). Furthermore, despite the reality that organisations like the OPCW may not be mandated to directly engage in the political nature of disinformation, they can significantly mitigate its effects by staying transparent and accountable. Thus, even with the risks associated with a resource drain, the OPCW could strategically enhance its communication efforts. This might include holding regular technical briefings where complex findings are clearly explained, and where public concerns can be addressed directly.

This study also highlighted a current literature gap concerning CBRN disinformation. It is recommended that part of the research funding within arms control organisations should be allocated to interdisciplinary research focused on tackling this evolving, multidimensional threat (Andriukaitis et al., 2018; Nocetti, 2019). Additionally, future research should consider

investigating other cases, similar or different from Douma, where disinformation has targeted the non-proliferation regime.

7.2 *Limitations*

Several limitations of this thesis should be acknowledged. The first limitation concerns the breadth of the analysed disinformation tactics. While acknowledging the diverse and multidimensional channels Russia employs, as detailed by the literature (e.g., Nocetti, 2019; Soares et al., 2023), as well as expert interviewees, this study's scope was primarily confined to disinformation within official diplomatic exchanges. As such, the influence of Russia's social media campaigns on public perception surrounding the Douma incident, and any potential secondary effects on the OPCW's operational environment, could have been missed. Nevertheless, this choice was intentional, based on the understanding that an international organisation like the OPCW, in its formal policy-making capacities, is primarily accountable to and shaped by the diplomatic actions and official stances of its State Parties, rather than direct engagement with online content.

This also relates to a second, theoretical, limitation. To provide a systematic and in-depth answer to the research question concerning the OPCW's policy responses, the analysis was focused exclusively on the *policy* stream, meaning the other streams, while acknowledged, were not subjected to the same detail. For instance, within the *problem* stream, a more detailed understanding of the framing strategies or use of different indicators, such as those made by organisations like Bellingcat could offer further understanding of the case. Within the *political* stream, a deeper exploration of how disinformation influenced the broader public sentiment or the role of other interest groups aside from State Parties could expand on the political dynamics. Nevertheless, the inherent interconnectedness of the MSF streams, a core tenet of the framework, ensured that important elements of the problem and political dynamics were visible in the analysis.

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Appendix A

Documents selected for analysis

No.	Name	Type	Date	Available at
1	Chemical attack of 7 April 2018 (Douma, Eastern Ghouta, Syria) Syria's clandestine chemical weapons programme	National Assessment	4/14/2018	Website of the French Ministry
2	Opening Statement by the Director-General to the Executive Council at its Fifty-Eighth Meeting	Note	4/16/2018	OPCW Archive
3	Statement by the Head of the Russian Delegation, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW, Ambassador A.V. Shulgin at the 58th Meeting of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council	Statement	4/16/2018	Website of the MFA
4	Statement by H.E. Ambassador Philippe Lalliot, Permanent Representative of France to the OPCW at the Fifty-Eighth Meeting of the Executive Council	Statement	4/16/2018	OPCW Archive
5	Statement by H.E. Ambassador Kenneth D. Ward, Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the OPCW at the Fifty-Eighth Meeting of the Executive Council	Statement	4/16/2018	OPCW Archive
6	Statement by H.E. Ambassador Peter Wilson, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the OPCW at the Fifty-Eighth Meeting of the Executive Council	Statement	4/16/2018	OPCW Archive
7	"Statement by H.E. Ambassador Dr Alireza Jahangiri Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the OPCW at the Fifty-Eighth meeting of the Executive Council"	Statement	4/16/2018	OPCW Archive
8	Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's response to a media question regarding the OPCW experts' access to Douma	Comment	4/17/2018	Website of the MFA
9	Update by the Director-General on the Deployment of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission to Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, to the Executive Council at Its Fifty-Ninth Meeting	Update	4/18/2018	OPCW Archive

10	Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's comment on the OPCW inspectors' visit to Douma, Syria	Comment	4/21/2018	Website of the MFA
11	OPCW Fact-Finding Mission Visits Second Site in Douma, Syria	Press Release	4/25/2018	OPCW Archive
12	Introductory Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW H.E. Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the Briefing for the CWC States Parties with the Participation of the Residents of Douma (Syrian Arab Republic), The Hague, 26 April 2018	Statement	4/26/2018	OPCW Archive
13	Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW H.E. Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the Briefing for the CWC States Parties with the Participation of the Residents of Douma (Syrian Arab Republic), The Hague, 26 April 2018	Statement	4/26/2018	OPCW Archive
14	Closing Remarks by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW H.E. Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the Briefing for the CWC States Parties with the Participation of the Residents of Douma (Syrian Arab Republic), The Hague, 26 April 2018	Statement	4/26/2018	OPCW Archive
15	Joint Statement by Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America	Statement	4/26/2018	OPCW Archive
16	Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW, 28 April 2018	Statement	4/28/2018	OPCW Archive
17	Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's keynote speech on 18 May 2018 at the Paris conference to fight against impunity for the use of chemical weapons.	Speech	5/18/2018	UK Government Website
18	Islamic Republic of Iran Request for Circulation of a Document	Statement	5/24/2018	OPCW Archive
19	Joint statement on behalf of the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation, the	Statement	6/4/2018	OPCW Archive

	Syrian Arab Republic, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela			
20	Statement by Mr. G.V. Kalamanov, Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation at the Fourth Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties	Statement	6/26/2018	OPCW Archive
21	Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use	Decision	6/27/2018	OPCW Archive
22	OPCW Issues Fact-Finding Mission Reports on Chemical Weapons Use Allegations in Douma, Syria in 2018 and in Al- Hamadaniya and Karm Al-Tarrab in 2016	Press Release	7/6/2018	OPCW Archive
23	Interim Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018	Report	7/6/2018	OPCW Archive
24	Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Eighty-Eighth Session of the Executive Council	Statement	7/12/2018	OPCW Archive
25	Statement by Georgy V. Kalamanov, Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation, Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade at the IV Chemical Weapons Convention Review Conference	Statement	11/21/2018	OPCW Archive
26	OPCW Issues Fact-Finding Mission Report on Chemical Weapons Use Allegation in Douma, Syria, in 2018	Press Release	3/1/2019	OPCW Archive
27	Report of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018	Report	3/1/2019	OPCW Archive
28	Statement by H.E. Ambassador Sabine Nölke, Permanent Representative of Canada to the OPCW at the Ninetieth Session of the Executive Council	Statement	3/12/2019	OPCW Archive
29	United States Statement Regarding the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission Report on Investigation into Chemical Weapons Use in Douma, Syria	Statement	3/13/2019	OPCW Archive
30	Russian Federation Request for Circulation of a Document	Note	4/26/2019	OPCW Archive
31	People's Republic of China Statement by H.E. Ambassador Xu Hong Head of the Permanent Representation of the People's Republic of China to the	Statement	7/10/2019	OPCW Archive

	OPCW at the Ninety-First session of the Executive Council			
32	Venezuela Statement on behalf of the members of the Non-Aligned Movement that are States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention and China delivered by H.E. Ambassador Haifa Aissami Madah, Permanent Representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the OPCW at the Ninety-Second session of the Executive Council	Statement	10/8/2019	OPCW Archive
33	Remarks at an Arria-Formula Meeting on Syria Chemical Weapons	Comment	1/20/2020	Website of the US Mission to the UN
34	Director-General's Statement on the Report of the Investigation into Possible Breaches of Confidentiality	Briefing	2/6/2020	OPCW Archive
35	Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Ninety-Third Session of the Executive Council	Statement	3/10/2020	OPCW Archive
36	Comment of the Permanent Representation of the Russian Federation to the OPCW	Comment	4/30/2020	OPCW Archive
37	Statement by the delegation of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Twenty-Fifth session of the Conference of the States Parties — Explanation of vote on agenda item 9(d)	Statement	4/20/2021	OPCW Archive
38	Joint statement by the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization at the second part of the Twenty-Fifth session of the Conference of the States Parties to the CWC (CSP-25)	Statement	4/20/2021	OPCW Archive
39	Statement by the Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation at the Second Part of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the CWC under agenda subitem 9(d) "Addressing the threat from chemical weapons use"	Statement	4/20/2021	OPCW Archive
40	"Statement by the Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation at the Second Part of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the CWC under agenda	Statement	4/20/2021	OPCW Archive

	subitem 9(d) ""Addressing the threat from chemical weapons use""			
41	Decision addressing the possession and use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic	Decision	4/21/2021	OPCW Archive
42	Statement by the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the OPCW at the Twenty-Fifth session of the Conference of the States Parties — Explanation of vote on the draft decision "Addressing the possession and use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic"	Statement	4/21/2021	OPCW Archive
43	Third Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team Pursuant to Paragraph 10 of Decision C-SS-4/DEC.3 “Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use” Douma (Syrian Arab Republic) – 7 April 2018	Report	1/27/2023	OPCW Archive
44	Briefing to the Members of the United Nations Security Council on the 3rd report of the IIT	Briefing	2/7/2023	OPCW Archive
45	Statement by H.E. Ambassador Heinz Walker-Nederkoorn, Permanent Representative of the Swiss Confederation to the OPCW at the 102nd Session of the Executive Council	Statement	3/14/2023	OPCW Archive
46	Statement by H.E. Ambassador Susannah Gordon, Permanent Representative of New Zealand to the OPCW at the One Hundred and Second Session of the Executive Council.	Statement	3/14/2023	OPCW Archive
47	Statement of the Federal Republic of Germany by H.E. Ambassador Thomas Schieb, Permanent Representative of Germany to the OPCW at the 102nd Session of the Executive Council	Statement	3/14/2023	OPCW Archive
48	"Statement of the Republic of Poland by H.E. Ambassador Margareta Kassangana Permanent Representative of Poland to the OPCW at the 102nd session of the Executive Council"	Statement	3/14/2023	OPCW Archive
49	"Statement by H.E. Ambassador Aiga Liepina Permanent Representative of the Republic of Latvia to the OPCW at the 102nd Session of the Executive Council"	Statement	3/14/2023	OPCW Archive
50	Remarks at a UN Security Council Arria-Formula Meeting Hosted by Russia on the OPCW	Comment	3/24/2023	Website of the US Mission to the UN

51	Statement by Mrs. Isis Jaraud-Darnault, Political Coordinator of France to the United Nations Security Council Arria-Formula Meeting	Comment	3/24/2023	Website of the Ministry
52	Statement by H.E. Ambassador Brendan Rogers, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the OPCW at the Fifth Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to Review the Operation of the Chemical Weapons Convention	Statement	5/15/2023	OPCW Archive
53	"Statement by H.E. Ambassador Adia Sakiqi Permanent Representative of the Republic of Albania to the OPCW at the Fifth Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to review the operation of the Chemical Weapons Convention"	Statement	5/15/2023	OPCW Archive
54	"Statement of the European Union by H.E. Ambassador Consuelo Femenia Permanent Representative of Spain to the OPCW at the 104th session of the Executive Council"	Statement	10/10/2023	OPCW Archive

Appendix B

Deductive Codebook for Document Analysis

Code	Indicators
Membership	States or coalitions advocating for specific policy responses to Russian disinformation.
	States advocating for or resisting specific OPCW actions related to Douma.
	Statements discussing the broad or diverse membership of the OPCW.
Scope	References to the legal and operational boundaries of the OPCW's mandate.
	Explicit mentions that disinformation lies outside the OPCW's formal mandate.
Centralisation	References to the independent powers of the Technical Secretariat.
	Statements describing the OPCW's authority (e.g., the IIT) to decide investigative methods or report findings.
	Mentions of the specific procedures or steps the OPCW uses to validate findings and ensure credibility.
Control	Cases where decision-making rules enabled or hindered policy action.
	Mentions of states advocating for more/less oversight over OPCW decisions.
	References to how decision-making rules affect policy responses (e.g., need for political consensus).
Flexibility	Mentions of the OPCW modifying or attempting to modify its procedures.
	Mentions of whether the OPCW can or cannot change its approach in response to challenges.

Appendix C

Expert Interviews

Interview	Name (if applicable)	Affiliation	Date	Length (in minutes)	Length (in words)
A	N/A	Former OPCW Inspector	07/04/2025	56:48	8153
B	Henk Cor van der Kwast	Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the OPCW	07/04/2025	37:28	4436
C	Dr. Gemma Bowsher	Lead for Global Health Security, Centre for Conflict & Health Research at King's College London	08/04/2025	56:30	9491
D	Dr. Jean Pascal Zanders	Independent Research/Consultant at The Trench	11/04/2025	1:16:	9055
E	Kristoffer Bürck	Expert on Arms Control Law at University of Giessen and Peace Research Institute Frankfurt	24/04/2025	47:52	6394
F	Santiago Oñate (O.B.E)	Diplomat with long expertise on the OPCW/International Lawyer	09/05/2025	01:04:03	7440
G	N/A	CBW Arms Control Expert	22/05/2025	53:14	7788
H	Sico van der Meer	Former Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute	13/06/2025	01:05:04	10211
I	Dr. Jeffrey W. Knopf	Professor and Program Chair, Nonproliferation and Terrorism Studies, Middlebury Institute of International Studies	18/06/2025	36:22	6275

Appendix D

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Theme	Key Questions	Secondary Questions
<u>Introduction</u>	Thank the interviewee for their participation. Present myself, briefly explain background of this study and more information about the topic (including a definition of disinformation), and purpose. Ask the participant (once again) for permission to record, and whether he/she has any questions at this point.	<i>Probing techniques for the interview: Asking follow-up questions such as “How?” or “Could you elaborate on...?”.</i>
<u>Background on the Case</u>	Can you introduce yourself, and explain how your expertise relates to the case of this study?	
	<i>[Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, the Assad regime has repeatedly violated the international law governing the use of chemical weapons.]</i>	
	Where does the Douma attack fall in the broader context of chemical weapons use in Syria context?	Did the Douma attack differ from the previous chemical attacks in Syria in any way?
		Were there any unique challenges in responding to this specific attack?
	How did Russia’s involvement since 2015 in the war affect the reality of chemical weapons use in Syria?	
<u>Background on Disinformation</u>	How would you describe the broader information environment surrounding the Douma attack?	
	Are you aware of any false or misleading information efforts that emerged in response?	Are you aware of any state actors who participated in their dissemination? If so, how?
		How do you think these narratives impacted the global perceptions of the Douma attack?
		How do you think these narratives impacted the scientific work of the OPCW?
		How do you think disinformation influenced perceptions of the OPCW as

		an international body?
<u>Membership</u>	How would you describe the role of OPCW member states in shaping the institutional response to the Douma incident?	
	The OPCW is a highly inclusive and diverse organisation. In your opinion, how did this impact the OPCW's response to the Douma attack?	How did the OPCW's diverse membership impact the ability of the OPCW to address the misleading or false narratives about Douma?
		Were certain members more active or influential in shaping discussions about disinformation?
		How did Russia's membership affect the institutional discussions?
<u>Scope</u>	How do you view the OPCW's institutional scope when it comes to responding to efforts trying to challenge its work?	Are there tensions between the OPCW's scientific role and the political narratives surrounding Douma?
	How do you think the establishment of the IIT, that expanded the OPCW's mandate to identify perpetrators of the Douma attack, affected the case?	In your view, how does the work of the IIT differ from JIM, whose mandate extension was blocked in 2017?
		Are you aware of any other efforts that would have expanded the OPCW's scope?
<u>Centralisation</u>	How would you describe the balance between independent decision-making and member state oversight in the OPCW?	How did the organisation navigate pressure from state actors attempting to challenge its findings?
	Do you think more institutional independence would have changed the OPCW's response to disinformation?	
<u>Control</u>	How important was political consensus in addressing Douma?	Were there moments where reaching consensus was challenged by Russia's position or actions?
	How did the decision-making processes in the CSP or the Executive Council influence the OPCW's ability to respond to false narratives?	
<u>Flexibility</u>	How would you assess the OPCW's ability to adapt to unexpected circumstances?	
	How can the OPCW address	How were these

	disinformation within the lines of its institutional mechanisms?	mechanisms applied during the Douma case?
	In your view, did the OPCW demonstrate signs of learning or changing its approach over the course of the Douma investigation?	
<u>Closing Questions</u>	<i>[If not answered yet]</i> Overall, how influential was the disinformation case surrounding Douma?	
	In your view, how influential are disinformation campaigns for the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime?	
	What lessons do you think international organisations could learn from the OPCW's experience handling disinformation in the Douma case?	
	Are there any further comments you have on the case, that you feel you have not had the chance to voice during the interview?	<i>If yes, what are they? If not, thank the participant for the interview and ask if they have any questions for you.</i>

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form Template

Erasmus School of
Social and
Behavioural Sciences

Information sheet and consent form

Information sheet

Introduction

Dear participant,

*Thank you for taking part in this master's thesis research project conducted by Emma Prebreza. Together with several other participants, you will be interviewed for a study about the **impact of Russia's multidimensional disinformation campaign on the policy responses of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to the 2018 chemical attack in Douma, Syria**. This project is carried out in the context of the Master's programme International Public Management and Public Policy at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences (ESSB) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The purpose of this study is to better understand the impact of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) disinformation on the institutions governing the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime.*

In case of further questions, you can contact the supervisor of this MSc thesis Dr. Michal Onderco at onderco@essb.eur.nl.

Data collection

To proceed with the interview, both the interviewee and the student will sign this consent form. The interview will take either online through MS Teams or at a physical location, based on the availability of both parties. The questions will be centred around the Douma case, the disinformation campaign surrounding it, and the institutional responses of the OPCW, with attention to features such as its membership, scope, centralization, control, and flexibility,

*The interview will be **recorded** and later transcribed to proceed with the analysis. Data will be analysed systematically, following a framework developed by the student.*

Potential inconvenience & risks

There are no physical, legal or economic risks associated with your participation in this study. It is not mandatory to answer all questions. Your participation is voluntary, and you can stop at any time.

Reimbursement

There is no reimbursement or monetary benefit for participating in the study.

Confidentiality & data protection

The collected data in the form of interview transcripts will be used for an aggregated analysis and no confidential information or personal data will be included in the research outcome. Your participation will be kept confidential in the following ways: Your name and other personal information (unless given permission) will be omitted from the study. Only the area of expertise/organisation will be reported based on your instructions (e.g. policymaker at [name of institute]). The data will be stored in a secure location and will be kept for 5 years.

Data sharing

Please note that the final thesis project, without the interview transcripts, will be published in the Erasmus University Thesis Repository at thesis.eur.nl. Throughout the process of researching and writing my thesis, the

interview data will be shared with Dr. Michal Onderco, the supervisor of this thesis. Similarly, they can be shared with the 2nd reader upon request, who is involved in the assessment process.

Voluntary participation & individual rights

Your participation is voluntary and you can stop at any time. When you participate in the research, you have the rights to request more information about the data collection, analysis or withdraw the consent and ask data erasure before the dataset is anonymized or manuscript submitted for publishing. You can exercise your rights by contacting Emma Prebreza.

If you have any complaints regarding the processing of personal data in this research, please contact Emma Prebreza at 721129ep@student.eur.nl

Consent form *CBRN Disinformation: The Douma Case and the OPCW (the title of the study may change)*

Upon signing of this consent form, I confirm that:

- I've been informed about the purpose of the research, data collection and storage as explained in the information sheet;
- I've read the information sheet, or it has been read to me;
- I've had an opportunity to ask questions about the study; the questions have been answered sufficiently;
- I voluntarily agree to participate in this research;
- I understand that the information will be treated confidentially;
- I understand that I can stop participation any time or refuse to answer any questions without any consequences;
- I understand that I can withdraw my consent before the dataset is submitted for approval.

Additionally, I give permission to:

	Yes	No
I give permission to audio record the interview		
I give permission to use quotes from my interview		
I give permission to use my name with the quote(s)		
I give permission to indicate my area of expertise. <i>If yes, indicate the official title:</i>		
I am interested in being contacted with the final results of the thesis		

Identification of research participant
(As it should appear in the thesis):

Date:

Signature:
