

# RUSSIAN CHEMICAL WEAPONS DISINFORMATION: RUSSIA'S JULY 2024 NOTE VERBALE DEBUNKED

POLICY BRIEF | AUGUST 2024



## CONTEXT

The Russian Federation (Russia) repeated allegations that Ukraine is using chemical weapons against its forces in a Note Verbale circulated to member states of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on the eve of its Executive Council session in July 2024. The Global Partnership's Counter WMD Disinformation Initiative analysed Russia's tactics and debunked the disinformation contained in the Note Verbale.

## BACKGROUND

Russia has made a series of false allegations regarding WMD, particularly in the wake of its war of aggression against Ukraine. These allegations include [false assertions](#) of biological weapons development (leading to Russia's invocation of Articles V and VI of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention) as well as targeted narratives about chemical weapons use and accusations made against the OPCW. Russia has an established [history](#) of spreading disinformation at the OPCW on the issue of chemical weapons use. These campaigns concern CW attacks by the Assad regime in Syria, the Novichok attacks in the United Kingdom, the Novichok poisoning of Alexander Navalny, and most recently battlefield use in Ukraine. Russia was also responsible for a foiled [cyber-attack](#) against the OPCW in 2018.

In November 2023, Russia lost its seat on the Executive Council of the OPCW. Alongside its continued disinformation campaign, Russia is accused of using riot control agents as a weapon of war in Ukraine, in violation of Article I of the Chemical Weapons Convention. These allegations have led to a new round of US sanctions.

## WHAT TACTICS ARE BEING USED IN THE NOTE VERBALE?

In its most recent disinformation campaign, Russia employed several tactics, including:

- **Flooding the information space.** Overwhelming the OPCW with a large volume of materials containing false allegations. This is part of a broader tactic known as a [firehose of falsehood](#).
- **False Flags.** Alleging that state actors have launched, or are preparing to launch, attacks against Russia using prohibited agents, often with the support of key member states.
- **Misrepresentation of evidence.**
  - Claiming that issued patents or patent applications are evidence of nefarious activity (the issuance of a US patent does not make it legal to produce the patented device).
  - Framing CBRN preparedness activities as evidence of offensive plans.
  - Doctoring video evidence by sharing incomplete video footage to falsely suggest soldiers convulsing.
- **Appeal to emotions.** Sharing graphic images, videos, or textual descriptions to evoke feelings of disgust, fear and outrage.

## WHY IS THE EVIDENCE PRESENTED IN THE NOTE VERBALE NOT CREDIBLE?

**Video 1:** Russia alleges that a video posted online shows the commander of Magyar Birds, a Ukrainian tactical aerial reconnaissance group, filling ammunition cylinders with unspecified toxic chemicals. Russia is selectively interpreting the container markings as evidence of chemical warfare agents. The more likely explanation is that the markings refer to “Бойова частина Осколковий: Combat unit [Warhead] anti-personnel [fragmentation]”, indicating a traditional high explosive fragmentation (HE-frag) warhead.

**Video 2:** Russia alleges that drone UAV-sourced footage shows a Russian soldier convulsing following the dropping of munitions, again suggesting the role of a chemical agent. The video provided is incomplete, and a longer version is available showing a munition dropped on two soldiers, with a follow-on munition dropped on the single Russian soldier flailing in the water. The first munition dropped (0:06), prior to the imagery shown in the video, is a modified F-1 grenade (or clone thereof). The F-1 is a cast iron-bodied, high-explosive fragmentation defensive hand grenade. The second munition dropped (0:19) is a modified VOG-17M. The VOG-17M is a 30 mm, high-explosive fragmentation automatic grenade launcher (AGL) round.

There is no evidence of chemical agents being used within these munitions. The F-1 grenade appears to detonate and injure the personnel with fragmentation, with one soldier flailing in the water and bleeding from the mouth. The VOG-17M is dropped a distance away from the soldier. He then struggles to keep afloat in the water (likely due to injuries, as well as the weight of his body armour and other equipment) leading to him drown.

**Video 3:** Russia alleges that a video showing a UAV-dropped munition is releasing a non-specified chemical agent due to a white smoke cloud emanating from the drop-zone. No additional information was offered to support this speculation, and no specific agent or munition can be confirmed from this video.

**Patent Document:** A patent is included in the Note Verbale, US9200877B1, describing a munition designed to carry chemical and biological agents. The patent does not appear to bear any relation to the events reported throughout the evidence pack. Given that the remainder of the document pertains to UAV-dropped munitions, there is no link to small arms ammunition. Small arms rounds are not fired by, or dropped from, any known Ukrainian or Russian UAVs.

## WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THIS DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN?

By spreading this false narrative, Russia has several objectives:

- **Undermine confidence** in the OPCW and its role as an independent investigatory body.
- **Discredit technical assistance** from OPCW delivered in July 2024 to Ukraine.
- **Distract attention and dilute discussion** relating to allegations of Russia’s own use of chemical weapons in Ukraine.
- **Polarise the multilateral system** by making unsubstantiated claims requiring a response and affirmation of alignments by member states.
- **Sow doubt** regarding Western/NATO/Ukrainian intentions by creating an information environment in which it is difficult to tell fact from fiction.
- **Undermine support** for Ukraine and justify further Russian military aggression.

## CURRENT REALITIES

- ◆ **There is no credible evidence that Ukraine is in contravention of any of its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention.** The evidence provided by Russia to the OPCW is incomplete, speculative and circumstantial. Key items of evidence have been misrepresented to bolster Russia's repeated spurious allegations.
- ◆ **Multiple credible allegations of CW use have been levelled against Russia in Ukraine.** Allegations regarding chemical attacks have been described in Ukraine's most recent statement to the OPCW and have been supported by international partners. These allegations fit into a larger pattern of Russian chemical weapons use against Ukrainian service personnel. Russia has a track record of using, or supporting the use of, chemical weapons, as demonstrated by its actions during the Syrian conflict and in the Novichok attacks in the United Kingdom.
- ◆ **The OPCW remains a vital independent multilateral institution that protects the rules based international order,** which Russia has continued to flout since its illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.
- ◆ **Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns divert international attention away from Russia's own violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention.** In addition, they represent continued attempts to discredit the OPCW and associated institutions where it has deployed similar tactics, such as the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and the United Nations Security Council.

Russia's current allegations on chemical weapons use by Ukraine are not new and fit into a broader pattern of disinformation related to weapons of mass destruction. It is critical that the international community continues to systematically uncover and refute falsehoods, which pose a serious and present danger to the global nonproliferation and disarmament architecture.

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