

COUNTERING BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS DISINFORMATION: TACTICS, MOTIVATIONS AND REALITIES



BWC FIFTH WORKING GROUP ON THE STRENGTHENING OF THE CONVENTION AND MEETING OF STATES PARTIES BRIEFING NOTE | NOVEMBER 2024

We expect to see continued state-sponsored and state-adjacent biological weapons disinformation in the lead up to and during the Fifth Session of the Working Group on the Strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) on 2-13 December 2024 as well as during the Meeting of States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention 16-18 December 2024. In anticipation, the Global Partnership's Counter WMD Disinformation Initiative has analyzed past disinformation campaigns spread by Russia and its allies to highlight their common characteristics.

FALSE ALLEGATIONS

Since the onset of Russia's war in Ukraine, Russia has made a series of false allegations accusing the United States and Ukraine of conducting prohibited activities in U.S.-assisted laboratories in Ukraine. These laboratories conduct peaceful biological activities that promote public and animal health and contribute to regional biosafety and biosecurity. The assistance provided by the United States through its Cooperative Threat Reduction Program falls under BWC Article X, which requires States Parties to facilitate the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials, and information for the peaceful use of biology.

In June 2022, Russia submitted a diplomatic note and Aide Memoire containing questions to the United States and Ukraine regarding the activities of the Ukrainian laboratories. The Aide Memoire consisted primarily of misrepresented documents, some of which were illegible, and unsubstantiated 'evidence' of alleged non-compliance. Despite receiving a response from the United States requesting legible copies of the referenced documents, Russia chose to call for a formal consultative meeting under BWC Article V, which opened on 26 August 2022. At the Formal Consultative Meeting, the United States and Ukraine provided detailed descriptions of the peaceful nature of their cooperative biological activities. In addition to the United States and Ukraine, 42 other States Parties present at the Formal Consultative Meeting dismissed Russia's allegations as unfounded.

In addition to leveling false allegations through diplomatic channels, Russia has also propagated disinformation about biological weapons through state-sponsored news agencies, proxy outlets, and social media channels. These media outlets often reference Russia's claims made in the context of the BWC and serve as a force multiplier, amplifying Russian falsehoods so they reach audiences outside of the diplomatic arena.

It is important to acknowledge that Russian disinformation campaigns about biological weapons are not new. Since the early 2000s, Russia has continually spread disinformation about peaceful biological threat reduction activities, including those conducted through the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program — a program that Russia itself was a participant in and that was established to dismantle the Soviet WMD architecture and re-employ Soviet bioweapons scientists in peaceful public health roles. For example, the Russian Federation has long alleged that the Richard Lugar Center in Georgia, which was built with funds from the Nunn-Lugar Program, is being used to research and develop biological weapons. Like the Ukrainian facilities described above, the Richard Lugar Center is a peaceful public health facility, one that contributed significantly to Georgia's COVID-19 response. These more recent campaigns are also in line with historical efforts by the Soviet Union to spread disinformation about biological weapons. Russia's current allegations regarding laboratories in Ukraine are a simply a continuation a decades-long effort to discredit other States Parties by accusing them of non-compliance.

False allegations about biological weapons are designed to create confusion, accuse others of nefarious acts, and further a narrative of grievance. These include:

- Accusations that States Parties are using Article X of the BWC as a cover for prohibited activities.
- Suggesting that naturally occurring disease outbreaks are the result of biological weapons research.
- Claiming that biological facilities are conducting unethical experiments on human research subjects.
- Mischaracterizing research on natural disease vectors or animal hosts as efforts to spread pathogens deliberately.

DISINFORMATION TACTICS

Producers of disinformation often use the following tactics and techniques as part of their malicious efforts:

- **Discrediting opponents** by:
 - Referencing an opponent's history of colonialism or imperialism.
 - Claiming that opponents show a disregard for international rules, procedures, and norms.
 - Manipulative referencing of an opponent's historical biological weapons development or use.
 - Framing opponents as corrupt or mercenary.

- **Distortion or creation of false evidence** by inflating the importance of unrelated, inconsequential, or misinterpreted pieces of information to imply nefarious activity.
- **Using sources that appear 'authoritative'** but are misquoted, affiliated with the disinformation purveyor, or lacking in relevance, real credentials or expertise.
- **Appealing to emotions** by:
 - Exaggerating the risks associated with an opponent's conduct (whether real or falsely alleged).
 - Referencing past crises or atrocities and linking them to current events.
 - Describing the victims of alleged unethical medical experimentation

MOTIVATIONS FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is regularly used by Russia to obfuscate or justify its own actions and undermine adversaries. Common motivations include:

- **Misdirection:** Disinformation targeting Ukraine is being used to distract from activities within Russia such as significant upgrades to its military biological facility at Sergiev Posad-6.
- **Confusion:** A 'firehose' of disinformation is being used to overwhelm the information space, making it difficult for individuals to distinguish between false and accurate information. This creates an environment where malicious activity can remain undetected.
- **Justification:** Russia has repeatedly used false accusations of biological weapons development in Ukraine, often by NATO allies, and the promotion of false narratives regarding broader WMD threats as justification for its illegal war on Ukraine.
- **Undermining Trust:** Disinformation about bioweapons undermines trust in and support for the rules-based international system, including multilateral disarmament fora.

CURRENT REALITIES

A key component of countering disinformation is understanding the current realities that such malicious campaigns try to mask or disrupt. The reality is:

- **Biological weapons disinformation campaigns can be used as a distraction** from other ongoing events.
- **The BWC is a vital legally binding multilateral treaty** that established the norm against biological weapons and is a key part of the rules-based international system.
- **There is no credible evidence** that Ukraine is in breach of its obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention.
- **Russia's current actions are not new**, Russia has a long history of employing disinformation campaigns to misdirect and justify its illegal activities in other countries. These same tactics and similar narratives are being reused today.

ACTIONS TO COUNTER BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS DISINFORMATION

There are several actions that diplomats can take to counter Russia's disinformation campaigns and to prepare for an increase in disinformation during the BWC Fifth Meeting of the Working Group. These actions will help your delegations build resilience to BW disinformation campaigns and include:

- **Learn about common disinformation tactics, narratives and motivations** in advance of, and during meetings, such as the BWC Fifth Meeting of the Working Group and the Meeting of States Parties.
- **Share accurate and correct information** and call out attempts to pollute and sidetrack BWC negotiations.
- **Follow the GP Counter WMD Disinformation Initiative** to learn more about the common tactics, narratives and motivations behind biological weapons disinformation.

Please scan this QR code for more helpful counter BW disinformation resources:



LEARN MORE ABOUT THE GP WMD COUNTER DISINFO INITIATIVE AT [GPWMDCOUNTERDISINFO.COM](https://gpwmdcounterdisinfo.com)