

# BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS DISINFORMATION: RUSSIA'S JANUARY 2025 NOTE VERBALE DEBUNKED

POLICY BRIEF | MARCH 2025



## BACKGROUND

In January 2025, Russia circulated a note verbale to the BWC Implementation Support Unit with the request it be shared with all States Parties to the BWC. This document highlighted a briefing given by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev, Deputy Head of the Radiological, Chemical and Biological Defense Forces of the Russian Federation on 24 December 2024. Similar to past efforts by Russia, this note verbale focused on falsely accusing the United States of leading illicit biological activities in violation to the BWC. However, while this note included many features, disinformation narratives, and tactics observed in the past in communications issued by Russia, this note featured a new region, Africa, as its target. While Russian accusations may be old news to many who have had to manage and endure the “firehose of falsehoods” in the past, this shift of focus may engage new audiences who are less familiar with these narratives and tactics. In this policy brief we highlight these commonly used approaches found in the latest note verbale from Russia so that readers can better understand the manipulative approaches underlying such notes.

## DISINFORMATION TACTICS

The note verbale shared by Russia contains several of the common narratives they have built their disinformation campaigns around and have regularly used for years. Outlined below are the excerpts from the Note Verbale that reflect these narratives.

### “Suspicious outbreaks”

One common narrative to be aware of is fear mongering about “suspicious outbreaks.” Generally, this narrative implies that naturally occurring outbreaks are the result of US biological weapon experimentation. Often this narrative will provide descriptions of potential “clues” to alleged nefarious activity in an effort to discredit the opponent. In this narrative, ***the occurrence of outbreaks of disease are used to insinuate nefarious activity and the existence of work to combat disease is used as “evidence” that something suspicious is occurring.***

Example 1: “First, concerns are voiced about regular outbreaks of, for example, anthrax and tularemia in one region, or foot-and-mouth disease and plague in another one. Such alarms are raised usually at the meetings of US ambassadors with representatives of local health ministries.” (Page 1, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

Example 2: “There is a clear trend: pathogens that fall within the Pentagon's area of interest subsequently become pandemic, with US pharmaceutical companies becoming beneficiaries.” (Page 5, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

### Human experimentation

Another common narrative is the claim that western countries (often the US) are conducting biological experiments on human research subjects. Allegations of ethical violations (lack of informed consent, exploitation of individuals in fragile settings) evoke strong emotions in readers, including disgust and/or outrage. ***This approach often encourages readers to make a mental shortcut that combines an accusation in a different setting and the same accusation being made closer to home.***

Example: “American-funded biological projects in Nigeria are aimed at combating HIV. As volunteers, Nigerian citizens take part in the clinical evaluation of antiviral drugs from the Pentagon-affiliated company Gilead. I would like to remind you that this pharmaceutical company also tested its drugs on Ukrainian citizens.” (Page 4, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

## Fulfillment of “Western” goals around WMD use

Another common disinformation narrative focuses on the idea that US oversees biological activities are being disguised as peaceful or protective but are, instead, designed to serve “Western” geopolitical/military goals that may harm other nations. ***This type of narrative exploits divisions amongst communities that were already distrustful of certain countries such as the US.***

Example 1: “It is designed to obtain pathogens in endemic areas and natural foci, control and manage the biological situation in order to serve US interests.” (Page 1, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

Example 2: “The online media outlet Geopolitics has published an article about the joint efforts of DTRA and the US non-profit organization RTI International to monitor infectious diseases in Africa, which, according to the publication, is a component of the Pentagon's broader ‘biological espionage’; initiative.” (Page 7, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

## COMMON TACTICS AND MOTIVES

In addition to recycled disinformation narratives, Russia also employed recycled tactics to spread disinformation through this communication, with the common motive of discrediting its opponents and strengthening its global standing. Outlined below are the excerpts from the Note Verbale that highlight the common tactics and motives Russia regularly uses.

### “Western” colonialism

This tactic ***leverages distrust from historical exploitation*** to suggest that the US furthers its interests while harming locals. It implies that US overseas biological activity is part of a neocolonial agenda. At the same time, ***Russia uses these messages to position itself as a friend and partner working to support states in Africa.***

Example 1: “Now the focus of interest has shifted to Africa. The United States Administration views the region as an infinite natural reservoir of dangerous infectious agents and as a testing ground for experimental medical products.” (Page 1, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

Example 2: “As a result, participating states involved in this system lose their national sovereignty in the field of biological safety and security and become fully dependent on the United States.” (Page 2, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

### Discrediting opponents

This tactic often lists military organizations, U.S. government organizations (such as the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency and Department of Defense), government contractors (e.g., CH2M Hill, Metabiota), and people who have worked in the region, and ***reframes their work in nefarious terms***. By listing a large volume of organizations and associations (some trusted and some not) and, at the same time, implying their work is linked to suspicious activity, ***this approach diminishes each organization's individual credibility***, even if they are a part of approved and well-known global health programs that provide large amounts of local aid.

## Risk increasing language

Disinformation usually uses risk increasing language, such as suggesting that common people may not even know they were exposed to biological agents, to **increase attention and perception of risk**. This includes listing many bio/military programs and implying they have a dual use intent. In this way, this language links the mere existence of a biological program or lab with its potential for causing widespread harm, which **evokes a foreboding feeling of risk in the reader, a feeling of immanent harm, and/or that risks are not being honestly communicated to the people who would suffer them**.

## Disregard for rules, laws, norms

Another tactic aims to diminish the credibility of the “Western” nations by claiming that the US or allies are casually breaking rules, laws, or norms. At the same time, **Russia seeks to create a contrast and establishes itself as a rule-follower in many diplomatic spaces and uses rule-breaking as a reason to admonish others**.

Example: “While the stated goals are to monitor infectious diseases and assist developing countries, in practice we see a buildup of US biological military capabilities, which circumvents the BWC commitments.” (Page 5, Briefing by Major General Aleksey Rtishchev)

## CURRENT REALITIES

**The narratives and tactics used in disinformation campaigns about biological activities are largely recycled. Audiences should be aware of these approaches so they can identify when attempts are being made to manipulate them.**

Russia has used the narratives and tactics identified in this note verbale for years. The global community has observed Russia’s continued disinformation attempts to justify their ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Now, the international community is seeing Russia reuse their playbook to target the African continent.

African leaders in particular should be wary of such disinformation narratives and tactics as they undermine and threaten peaceful research and cooperative threat reduction efforts including those facilitated under Article X of the BWC .