

Countering the Misuse of CBRN
Materials and Related Information
Online Conference, MASC-CBRN
23 November 2022

RUSSIAN ALLEGATIONS OF BIOLOGICAL WEAPON ACTIVITIES IN UKRAINE

Ralf Trapp, International Disarmament Consultant
Chessenaz, France

Overview

Early BW misinformation campaigns

Some characteristics

Allegations against the US and Ukraine

From allegations to Article V BWC

Claims made by Russia at the FCM under BWC-Art. V

Misrepresentations in the RF claims

BW misinformation – why and how

Possible Consequences

Caution: This presentation focuses on Russian claims regarding alleged BW activities of the US in Ukraine. The history of biological warfare is full of misrepresentations, false allegations, misperceptions and propaganda. Russia (and previously the Soviet Union) are not the only countries that have engaged in this practice.

Early Soviet/Russian BW misinformation campaigns

1949 – 1988: Soviet campaigns alleging US use of biological weapons (3 major campaigns, 10 campaigns of lesser international significance)

- 1951-1953, Korean War, claims of US use of BW
 - 1988: archival material confirmed that the information was false
- 1982: Pakistani antimalaria research lab was allegedly developing genetically engineered “killer mosquitos”, US funded and for release in Afghanistan; the lab had to be closed
- 1983 – 1988: claims that HIV had been developed at US military labs and released in Africa to destroy African populations
 - 1992: Primakov (head Foreign Intelligence) and Kalugin (former KGB General) confirmed that the AIDS story was fabricated by the KGB

As from 1998: Senior military officials previously involved in the Russian BW programme began resurrecting old misinformation stories; new claims (foot-and-mouth disease outbreak and SARS in 2003 characterised as deliberate BW uses)

January 2020: SARS-COV-2 “likely elaborated in NATO biolabs”

Some characteristics of the past and current campaigns

In the past: typically started with publications placed in (often somewhat obscure) foreign media and then repeated by Soviet media agency/outlets

In recent years: official Russian government sources (MFA, MOD, FSB), too, have begun releasing BW accusations targeting US and other countries' biosecurity efforts

Today: Internet / social media are used as multipliers in the dissemination of misinformation

Involving / aligned with propaganda efforts of other States (Iran, China, North Korea, ...)

Frequent target: US support for the transformation of former Soviet BW facilities in the CIS under the Nunn–Lugar CTR program

Example: Lugar Centre in Tbilisi, Georgia (built under the Nunn–Lugar program)

See: F. Lentzos in Bull. Atomic Scientist 19 November 2018; BWC/MSP/2018/WP.11

Also to remember:

During 1970/1980ies, the Soviet BW misinformation campaign took place alongside an ever expanding Soviet offensive BW programme, in violation of the BWC

2012: incoming President Putin gives 28 tasks to the Russian MOD as strategic orientations

Task 4: Development of weapons based on new physical principles: radiation, geophysical, wave, genetic, psychophysical, etc.

Note: this was removed from government website within a months, and explained as relating to threats emanating from foreign countries

Examples for allegations against the US and Ukraine

April 2021: Novoross.info reports that **US biolaboratories in Ukraine have been developing *new biological weapons*, refers to an accidental leak or a local experiment in Odesa, Lviv, Kharkiv, and claims that Russian and Chinese intelligence know that biological laboratories in Ukraine pose a very serious danger *because the world is already experiencing the pandemic.***

January/February 2022: Russian State and other media outlets as well as bloggers associated with previous disinformation campaigns claim that the US had *established a network of bioweapons labs* in the Ukraine and was conducting experiments that indicated military work on dangerous pathogens

6 March 2022: Major General Igor Konashenkov states "In the course of a special military operation, the facts of an emergency *cleansing by the Kyiv regime of traces of a military biological program being implemented in Ukraine*, funded by the US Department of Defense, were uncovered." According to TASS, the US and Ukraine attempted to destroy samples of "plague, anthrax, tularemia, cholera and other deadly diseases"

biological



Select existing tags

01.01.2022 - 21.11.2022

LANGUAGE

COUNTRY/REGION

Clear

CASES PER PAGE

286 results for "biological"

DATE ⁱ	TITLE	OUTLETS	COUNTRY ⁱ
14.11.2022	A biolab leak would benefit the US	es.news-front.info	US, Ukraine
07.11.2022	The US created COVID-19 and biological weapons in Ukraine	baltnews.com	US, Ukraine
21.10.2022	Components of biological weapons were being created in Ukraine	geworld.ge	Russia, Ukraine, US
26.09.2022	Russia presented evidence of US biolabs in Ukraine at the Convention on biological Weapons	sputniknews.lat	Russia, Ukraine, US
19.09.2022	US develop biological weapons at the border with Russia	odysee.com, Sputnik France - Twitter	Ukraine, Russia, US
19.09.2022	The US admitted conducting biological experiments on Ukrainian citizens	RT Online - Facebook, tass.ru, RT Online - Facebook, rtvi.com, belta.by, RIA	Russia, US, Ukraine

From allegations to Article V BWC

21 December 2021: Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, alleged that American military contractors are secretly smuggling “tanks filled with unidentified chemical components” into Ukraine.”

24 February 2022: Begin of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

9 March 2022: MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that Russia “has documents showing evidence that the US had supported a bioweapons program in Ukraine”

11 and 18 March 2022, 13 May 2022: Russia called for meetings of the UN Security Council to discuss its allegations. U.N. High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu affirmed that the United Nations is “not aware” of any biological weapons program in Ukraine.

16 May 2022: Sergei Ryabkov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs: Russia plans to “move forward with the launching of the official investigation by the UN Security Council” into allegations about biological laboratory activities in Ukraine

12 June 2022: MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova indicated that Russia plans to invoke Article V of the Biological Weapons Convention

29 June 2022: Russia triggered the Article V mechanism of the BWC

Claims made by Russia at the Formal Consultative Meeting under Art. V BWC

Culture collection at Mechnikov Anti-Plague Research Institute inconsistent with Art. I BWC (422 cholera “storage units”, 32 anthrax “storage units” in the absence of relevant outbreaks in recent years)

- However: such culture collections are needed to support a wide range of research and diagnostic work, the diseases are endemic in Ukraine, and exchanges between labs are normal practice

Research documents on transmission (influenza in wild birds, insectivorous bats in Georgia and Ukraine) indicative of BW delivery work

- This is normal practice for the study of pathogen transmission by wildlife – zoonotic diseases and animal hosts/reservoirs and risk of spill-over to humans

Discovery of drones with 30 L reservoirs capable of spraying bioagents (evidence: letter from a Turkish equipment manufacturer for export control purposes)

- Analysis of documents suggests that these were Chinese made drones for use in agriculture

US patent application with potential application in BW

- Filed by a private entity and as such not a BWC violation; other countries including RF have had patent applications filed that could raise similar questions – US suggested sharing best practices for identifying and handling patent applications for inventions that may raise security concerns

Misrepresentations in RF claims

Provisions of the 2005 Cooperation Agreement (US DoD and Ukrainian MoH)

- Storage of pathogens at laboratories funded by US – malign intent vs. collaboration and proper storage
- Transfer of “copies of all strains collected” vs. real text: “requested samples”
- Data sharing on disease surveillance: indicator of malign intent vs. essential practice in PH collaborations among countries
- Data classification : blanket classification (RF) vs. mutual respect for classifications by partners of a collaboration agreement

Provisions of the Technical Assistance Plan to certain recipients in the MoD of Ukraine

- Evidence for “US funding of military-biological activity” vs. legal requirement to improve the ability of multiple Ukrainian entities – including Regional Sanitary and Epidemiological Departments of the Ministry of Defence – to safely collect, store, and transport clinical samples to regional Ukrainian laboratories for standard analysis

Misrepresentations (2)

BWC Confidence Building Measures

- RF: Cooperation between US and Ukraine was not reported in CBMs
- US: none of this was hidden:
 - Several BWC Working papers about Article X Cooperation have described these activities
 - Information is available on public websites, such as the National Academy of Agrarian Sciences of Ukraine's Institute of Veterinary Medicine's homepage
 - Many presentations have been made at scientific conferences and many publications issued
 - BWC CBM forms don't contain a section on bilateral assistance in areas such as biosafety, biosecurity, and disease surveillance

Specific research projects

- Migratory birds study involved scientists from Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Poland, the WOAHP reference centre in the UK, and academic universities in the US and Sweden
- Native bat study: Ukrainian scientists are working with experts in public, animal and environmental health from the Republic of Georgia and the US
- BTRP fully supports publication of all study results and requires study summaries to be publicly available.

Outcome of the FCM

Procedural Report

- “States Parties welcomed the fact that the delegations of the Russian Federation and Ukraine and the United States had sought to clarify their positions with respect to the concerns raised by the Russian Federation. States Parties noted that the consultation was fully in conformity with the conclusions of the final document of the Third Review Conference relevant to the application of Article V of the Convention”
- No consensus was reached regarding the outcome of the Formal Consultative Meeting.

65 States Parties expressed a view in formal statements (including Russia, US and Ukraine)

8 supported Russia’s right to invoke the meeting, supported the consultative process, but stopped short of accusing non-compliance. China went furthest, calling for more US efforts to respond to the questions posed, listed additional questions, and supported Russia’s call for follow-up action (Art. VI BWC – complaint with the UN Security Council)

Switzerland: “[expressed its] firm view that the allegations made have not been substantiated; that the conclusions drawn are neither convincing nor credible; and allow in no way to draw the conclusion that the obligations of the United States and Ukraine under the BWC have been violated.”

BW misinformation - why and how?

Why:

Influencing domestic audiences

Influencing public opinion in other countries

- In the past, targeting countries in Africa (AIDS), Latin America & Arab world (COVID-19)
- Ukraine case: justification for invasion, demonisation

Even though unlikely to impress the professional communities dealing with the BWC, the accusations can be exploited for political reasons

EU - EEAS special report on Coronavirus disinformation, 2020: RF was using disinformation to amplify divisions, sow distrust and chaos and exacerbate crisis situations and issues of public concern

How:

Consistent with the “firehose of falsehood” propaganda model (RAND corporation report 2016): high-volume and multichannel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; lacking commitment to objective reality; and lacking commitment to consistency

Possible consequences

Matthew Meselson (Harvard University):

The worst possible event would be a true allegation of BW use by a state (and, since 1975, particularly a state party to the BWC).

The next worst thing was a false allegation of BW use.

Such an allegation would suggest that a state party is violating the BWC with impunity.

It would also imply that BW have utility and are desirable for states to possess.

Filippa Lentzos (King's College London):

By claiming that biological weapon labs exist where they do not, Russia is hastening the death of that taboo — creating the appearance that reliance on these weapons is greater than it actually is, possibly encouraging other nations to pursue them.

Instead of a summary

<https://blog.prif.org/2022/03/22/russian-allegations-of-biological-weapons-activities-in-ukraine/>

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/10/bioweapons-ukraine-russia-disinformation/>

<https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/65052/documents>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10736700.2021.1964755?journalCode=rnpr20>

https://cisssm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2021-10/NonProliferationReview%20Supplemental%20material_rnpr_a_1964755_sm5635.pdf

<https://thebulletin.org/2022/10/russias-alleged-bioweapons-claims-have-few-supporters/>

Thank you for your attention!

Comments and Questions?

<https://ralftrapp.net> and <https://cbwnet.org/de>
Email ralf.trapp@gmail.com