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- DISINFORMATION STRATEGIES
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DISINFORMATION

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WHY DOES RUSSIA DISINFORM ABOUT BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS?

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John V. Parachini
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The article analyses Russian false claims regarding biological weapons use by Ukraine or the USA during the latest round of the Russian invasion. The authors concentrate on the specifications of the narrative, chronology of the claims' development, and the main actors involved, as well as the logic behind the use of this particular narrative in the international arena. They also explain how such Russia's behaviour and disinformation can jeopardise the international non-proliferation regime.

Part of Russia's disinformation activities throughout its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has been to make a series of false claims about Ukrainian nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Russian officials have repeatedly alleged that the United States is funding and directing biological activities in Ukraine and other countries that surround Russia. Such disinformation is not new, as Russian, and before them Soviet, officials have a long history of making false claims about U.S. military promotion of biological weapons in other countries.¹

What is new is how persistent Russian representatives have been about spreading false claims in the media, and raising them in international diplomatic forums – reiterating these claims despite continued international rejection. This behaviour reflects a historical low point for Russia, which was a depository country for the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Its continual promotion

of spurious claims in diplomatic forums risks eroding the international consensus to prevent the development, production, and use of biological weapons.

Russia is weakening support for the BWC among other nations, not because the nations are not committed to the goals of the convention, but because they are reluctant to get involved in a political struggle between the major powers over issues that do not directly affect their own country. Overwhelmingly, state parties to the BWC do not believe Russia's claims, and have indicated this in recent international forums. However, only a few countries have actively and publicly countered Russia's false claims, and admonished it for doing so. The net result is a weakening of the BWC as an international arms control body to reinforce a norm against biological weapons. To more effectively counter Russian disinformation, this essay analyses some of the significant

¹ Milton Leitenberg, "False allegations of biological-weapons use from Putin's Russia," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 27, Issue 4-6, 12.10.2021, Full article: [False allegations of biological-weapons use from Putin's Russia \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com).

false narratives, exposes their spuriousness, and considers why Russian officials continue to promote them, despite consistent international rejection of their claims.

Origin of U.S. Assistance to Ukraine and Other Neighbouring Republics

Since 1994, the United States and other countries have provided billions of dollars in funding to secure former weapons research facilities and provide non-weapons work for scientists in the former Soviet republics. Although Russia received assistance from the United States just like other countries in the region, Russian leaders continue to make false claims about the assistance, even though they received it. An annual report to the U.S. Congress on the Cooperative Threat Reduction programme provides detailed descriptions of the type of assistance provided to Russia and other countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Kazakhstan.²

In 2005, the United States and Ukraine concluded an agreement where the U.S. Department of Defence's Biological Threat Reduction Program agreed to provide funding to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. As stated in the agreement.

In order to assist Ukraine in preventing the proliferation of technology, pathogens, and expertise that are located at the Scientific Research Institute of Epidemiology and Hygiene (Lviv), the Ukrainian Scientific Research Anti-Plague Institute (Odessa), the Central Sanitary Epidemiological Station (Kyiv), and other facilities in Ukraine

identified by the Ministry of Health of Ukraine, and that could be used in the development of biological weapons, the U.S. Department of Defence shall provide assistance to the Ministry of Health of Ukraine at no cost, subject to the availability of funds appropriated for this purpose....³



The disinformation alleging that Ukrainian laboratories are working for the United States to develop biological weapons did not begin when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, but had been ongoing for years

The main emphasis of this funding was to assist with the biosecurity and accountability of any research at public health facilities. The reference to “the proliferation of technology, pathogens, and expertise” highlights the potential for any pathogen to be used for pernicious purposes, but this did not involve any research or development for such purposes. On the contrary, the objective of the assistance was to support biosecurity and biosafety at laboratories in Ukraine.

Like the assistance that the United States provided to Russia, which is described in the Cooperative Threat Reduction annual report, the United States has provided similar foreign assistance to many countries' public health and scientific research facilities. The United States declares the assistance to

2 In the 2007 Cooperation Threat Reduction Program report to Congress that is a discussion of the programme support to Russia for biosafety and biosecurity at former Soviet biological weapons laboratories on Russian territory. See, Cooperative Threat Reduction Annual Report to Congress Fiscal Year 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070926093921/http://www.dtra.mil/documents/oe/ctr/FY07%20CTR%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf>.

3 U.S. Department of State, “Agreement Between the United States of America and Ukraine: Signed in Kyiv,” *Treaties and Other International Acts Series 05-829*, 29.08.2005, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/05-829-Ukraine-Weapons.pdf>.

the Biological Weapons Convention under the agreements Article X Cooperation and Laboratory Support provision.⁴ In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing this type of assistance to foreign countries needs to be encouraged and not castigated falsely by dubbing it as a clandestine weapons programme.

Russia's False Narratives on Biological Weapons are Part of its War Disinformation Campaign

The disinformation alleging that Ukrainian laboratories are working for the United States to develop biological weapons did not begin when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, but had been ongoing for years. This false narrative initially emerged during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Russia alleged that the Ukrainian laboratories that received U.S. assistance were responsible for the outbreak.⁵

In April–June 2020, Russia issued false claims that the SARS-CoV-2 virus could have been developed in what they claimed were “U.S. laboratories” in Ukraine and Georgia. In both countries, the laboratories are owned and operated by national authorities, not the U.S. This false narrative was actively promoted in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia by pro-Russian media outlets and politicians.⁶

In Ukraine, some of the main promoters of this narrative were pro-Russian Ukrainian opposition politicians. For example, according to an extensive study of Russian disinformation by the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism,” the claim that SARS-CoV-2 virus was created by the U.S. laboratories located in Ukraine was initially released by the Opposition Platform-For Life political party.⁷ This false claim was then aired on Ukrainian television and then re-broadcast by other television channels. Some of these channels were controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk – a Ukrainian politician close to Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁸

To elevate these false claims for domestic political gain, these Russian sympathisers asked the Ukrainian president and security services to provide information regarding the “work of 15 military biolaboratories of the USA, which threatened the lives and health of Ukrainians, about what the European media have been reporting.”⁹ As evidence, they cited old articles in Serbian, Bulgarian, and obscure pro-Russian media as their sources. Their request was actively spread through pro-Russian TV and on-line media outlets, as well as numerous anonymous Telegram channels. Contrary to the Russian disinformation surrounding the activities of the labs in Ukraine and Georgia, they were actually providing important public health services, such disease surveillance and testing, including on SARS-CoV-2.

4 Meeting of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction, “Article X Cooperation and Laboratory Support: The Example of the Biological Threat Reduction Program: Submitted by the United States of America, 2020 Meeting, Geneva, November 22-25, 2021, BWC/MSP/2020/WP.11, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/342/19/PDF/G2134219.pdf>.

5 Milton Leitenberg, “False allegations of biological-weapons use from Putin’s Russia,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 27, Issue 4-6, 12.10.2021, Full article: False allegations of biological-weapons use from Putin’s Russia (tandfonline.com).


6 COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index, Foreign Policy council “Ukrainian Prism”, 2020, <https://dri.org.ua/>.

7 COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index, Foreign Policy council “Ukrainian Prism”, 2020, <https://dri.org.ua/>.

8 COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index, Foreign Policy council “Ukrainian Prism”, 2020, <https://dri.org.ua/>.

9 Dmitry Zolotukhin, COVIDism: Viktor Medvedchuk is looking for “American biolabs” in Ukraine,” *PetriMazepa*, 4.04.2020, (Дмитрий Золотухин, COVIDiotism: Виктор Медведчук ищет «американские биолaborатории» в Украине), https://petrimazepa.com/covidiotism_viktor_medvedchuk_ischet_amerikanskie_biolaboratorii_v_ukraine.

The Russia narrative consisted of several false accusations that were repeated without evidence. First, Russian military and official spokespeople claimed that the United States owned 15 military laboratories in Ukraine, and that Ukrainians did not have any control over them. The 2005 agreement between the United States and Ukraine clearly states that the U.S. will not own the facilities. The agreement is with the Ukrainian Ministry of Health, which receives the assistance for disease surveillance, biosecurity, and biosafety at facilities that are under its jurisdiction or the jurisdiction of other Ukrainian ministries.



Russia's disinformation narrative about biological weapons has taken on many different forms, and has been repeated every few weeks via different communication means, formats, and forums

Second, part of the Russian narrative is that Ukraine violated the 1972 BWC by allowing such laboratories on its territory, despite full transparency about these activities on the part of Ukraine and the United States. Ukraine is a member of the BWC in good standing, and has filed regular “Confidence Building Measure” reports with the UN as part of its compliance with the BWC. Similarly, the United States regularly discloses to the UN as part of its compliance with the BWC all the assistance it has

provided to Ukraine, as well as other nations that receive similar disease surveillance, biosafety, and security assistance.

A third claim by Russian officials was that the U.S. Department of Defence and Ukrainian laboratories were working on “ethnic weapons” to use against Russia. In a Russian Ministry of Defence briefing on alleged evidence that was widely reported in the Russian media, General Igor Kirillov, the head of the Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Protect Troops of the Russian Armed Forces asserted that “The available documents confirm numerous cases of the transfer of biological samples of Ukrainian citizens abroad. With a high degree of probability, we can say that one of the tasks of the United States and its allies is the creation of bioagents that can selectively affect various ethnic groups of the population.”¹⁰ The next day, Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebezhenia repeated this claim to the UN Security Council, stating that they were attempting “to create bioagents capable of selectively targeting different ethnic populations.”¹¹ Examining the evidence of this claim of research on a “Slavic weapon”, Russian biological scientist Eugene Lewitin, in a letter signed by more than 800 other Russian biologists, urged Russian journalists to stop repeating “false, absolutely groundless and hatred-inciting statements about allegedly found evidence of the development of biological weapons in Ukraine laboratories.”¹² As the Putin regime has clamped down on dissent and controlled information available to the Russian public, attempts to disprove the government’s narrative line have largely disappeared.

10 “Russian MoD on US Biolabs: One Goal Was to Create Bioagents That Can Target Certain Ethnic Groups,” Sputnik News, 10.03.2022, <https://sputniknews.com/20220310/russian-mod-on-us-biolabs-one-goal-was-to-create-bioagents-that-can-target-certain-ethnic-groups-1093747598.html>

11 Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebezhenia at UNSC briefing on biological laboratories in Ukraine, 11.03.2022, https://russiaun.ru/en/news/110322n_u.

12 Robert Mackey, “Russia Is Lying About Evidence of Bioweapons Lab in Ukraine, Russian Biologists Say, The Intercept, 17.03.2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/17/russia-ukraine-bioweapons-misinformation/>. See also, “Stop the lies on Ukrainian bioweapons!, *Change.org*,” Petition · Stop the lies on Ukrainian bioweapons! · [Change.org](https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-lies-on-ukrainian-bioweapons).

A Chronology of Recent Disinformation on Biological Weapons During Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

President Vladimir Putin, senior Russian military leaders, and Russia's diplomats, have all made false and misleading statements to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and deflect attention from its aggression once it stalled. Over the course of the year-long war, Russia's disinformation narrative about biological weapons has taken on many different forms, and has been repeated every few weeks via different communication means, formats, and forums.

The False Biological Weapons Narrative as the Invasion Starts

Russian authorities began to spread disinformation about biological laboratories through diplomatic channels and quietly through social media channels, from the outset of the Ukrainian invasion. On February 28, 2022, for example, the Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina posted that Russia was conducting a "special military operation" to eliminate Ukraine's unconventional military capabilities. The post stated that "There is the USA who stuffed Ukraine with biolaboratories, which, not out of the question, have been used for studying methods of the Russian people elimination on a genetic level."¹³ This statement amplified the Russian narrative that the research focused on genetic weapons that could infect ethnic Russian nationals – a claim which was totally false. Moreover,

considering the multi-ethnicity of the Russian state, achieving such aims would be technically impossible.

When Russia's invasion of February 24 did not result in the quick victory that Russian officials expected, their propaganda efforts regarding biological laboratories in Ukraine intensified. On March 6, the Russian Ministry of Defence claimed that it had recovered documents in Ukraine that showed U.S. funding to support military-related biological work. On March 10, Major General Igor Konashenkov, chief spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), said that "the American side planned to conduct work on pathogens of birds, bats, and reptiles in Ukraine in 2022, with a further transition to studying the possibility of carrying African swine fever and anthrax... The purpose of this and other Pentagon-funded biological research in Ukraine, was to create a mechanism for covert spread of deadly pathogens."¹⁴ Since then, the MoD became the main source of disinformation regarding biolaboratories and the development of biological weapons. Neither the United States nor Ukraine were ever conducting research to use birds or bats as delivery vehicles for biological weapons. Instead, Ukrainian scientists were conducting research on diseases commonly found in farm animals; since birds and bats fly to many different locales, they frequently are the carriers of diseases.

Also, on March 10, at a press conference in Turkey, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov requested an explanation from Ukraine on the matter of biolaboratories, and condemned the

13 Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, "Remarks of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina," 28.02.2022, <https://vidovdan.org/slika-dana/primjedba-ambasade-ruske-federacije-u-bosni-i-hercegovini-remarka-posol%D1%8Cstva-rossi%D0%B9sko%D0%B9-federaciji-v-bosnii-i-gercegovine/>.

14 "US-Funded Bio Labs in Ukraine Conducted Research into Bat Coronavirus, Russian MoD Says," *Sputnik News*, 10.03.2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1254528.shtml>

United States for violating the respective international conventions.¹⁵ He also claimed that work in the Ukrainian laboratories was “absolutely not peaceful.”¹⁶ Minister Lavrov claimed that the United States was conducting secret biological weapons research in Ukraine and other countries bordering on Russia.



The Russia disinformation efforts frequently involved the use of documents in the public domain, which they purposely misinterpreted or took out of context, and then linked to major conspiracies

Russian diplomats continued the disinformation offensive by raising false claims in other diplomatic forums. On March 11, Russian Representative Nebenzya made a lengthy presentation in the UN Security Council accusing Ukraine and the United States of a plot to use migratory birds and bats to spread pathogens.¹⁷ Moscow initiated a second UN Security Council meeting on March 18, to reiterate its false claims about biological weapons research in Ukraine.

Russian officials continued to make false claims throughout the month, with new details to keep the narrative fresh. On March 17, 2022, Russian media, citing the Russian MoD, claimed that in a biolaboratory in the Ukrainian city of Kherson, staff were destroying documents about their work. The Russian MoD claimed that the documents contained information about several pathogens leaks that caused mass diseases in Kherson and in the uncontrolled territories of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions in 2018.¹⁸ What actually happened was that the World Health Organization instructed the Ukrainian authorities at these laboratories to destroy materials as a precaution against Russian bombardments that might breach the biosecurity measures of these civilian public health laboratories.¹⁹

Distorting Public Information

The Russia disinformation efforts frequently involved the use of documents in the public domain, which they purposely misinterpreted or took out of context, and then linked to major conspiracies – in these case illegal biological activities. In late March 2022, the Russian MoD developed a story suggesting that financier George Soros, President Biden’s son Hunter, and the Pentagon were all responsible for illegal biological activities in Ukraine.²⁰ Both Soros

15 “Replay: Russian FM Sergei Lavrov holds press conference,” France 24, 10.03.2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/video/20220310-replay-russian-fm-sergei-lvov-holds-press-conference>.

16 Press Conference of FM Lavrov in Turkey, YouTube, 10.03.2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qsVh0ulzhc>.

17 Russia makes claims of US-backed biological weapon plot at UN, 11.03.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/11/russia-un-claims-us-backed-biological-weapon-plot-kremlin-foreign-fighters-ukraine>.

18 “The Ministry of Defense published documents on the connection of the United States with biolaboratories in Ukraine, *RIA Novosti*, 17.03.2022, <https://ria.ru/20220317/bezopasnost-1778678969.html>.

19 Jennifer Rigby and Jonathan Landay, “Exclusive: WHO says it advised Ukraine to destroy pathogens in health labs to prevent disease spread,” *Reuters*, 11.03.2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-who-says-it-advised-ukraine-destroy-pathogens-health-labs-prevent-2022-03-11/>.

20 Glenn Kessler, “The truth about Hunter Biden and the Ukrainian ‘bio labs,’” *Washington Post*, 29.03.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/29/truth-about-hunter-biden-ukrainian-bio-labs/>.

and Biden's son were frequent topics for the Russians, American right-wing media and commentators, and promoters of conspiracy theories.²¹ On March 24, Russia officials presented documents and diagrams that they claimed were evidence of connections between Ukrainian research institutions run by the Ministries of Health Care and Defence of Ukraine, the Pentagon, the U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. private military companies, and those working as contractors for the U.S. Department of Defence. They claimed to show proof of funding that connected President Biden's son and Soros.²² For the next two weeks, the Russian MoD continued to post documents amplifying these false claims on the ministry's Facebook page.²³ The same documents were also widely disseminated by the Russian media.²⁴

These claims have been refuted by independent American and Ukrainian organisations. As the Ukraine organisation

StopFAKE.org has pointed out, these "Fake documents serve as the 'evidence base'" by Russian government officials and aligned propagandists.²⁵ Glenn Kessler, respected Washington Post journalist and author of the "Fact Checker" column, conducted a detailed examination of the alleged links between Hunter Biden, George Soros, and investments in biological laboratories in Ukraine. He found that the Russian case alleged connections where there were none, took information out of context, and amplified American right-wing conspiracy narratives that had no basis in fact.²⁶

Despite the statements by the UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs,²⁷ of the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv,²⁸ and numerous articles by experts²⁹ and fact-checking organisations that debunked the false assertions,³⁰ the Russia authorities continue to push the false narrative about U.S.-Ukrainian collaboration on biological weapons.

- 21 Briefing on analysis of the documents regarding military-biological activities of the USA at the territory of Ukraine (Брифинг по результатам анализа документов, касающихся военно-биологической деятельности США на территории Украины), Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation official Facebook page, 24.03.2022, <https://fb.watch/cquWVjwCMv/>
- 22 Briefing on analysis of the documents regarding military-biological activities of the USA at the territory of Ukraine (Брифинг по результатам анализа документов, касающихся военно-биологической деятельности США на территории Украины), Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation official Facebook page, 24.03.2022, <https://fb.watch/cquWVjwCMv/>
- 23 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation official Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/mod.mil.rus/>
- 24 E.g., the US conducted biological experiments on Ukrainian military personnel, Vesti (США проводили биоэксперименты на украинских военных), 24.03.2022, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2693933>
- 25 How and Why Russian propaganda are "looking" for US biolaboratories in Ukraine and around the world? (Як і навіщо російська пропаганда «шукає» біолабораторії США в Україні та світі?), StopFake, 23.09.2022, <https://www.stopfake.org/uk/yak-i-navishho-rosijska-propaganda-shukaye-biolaboratoriyi-ssha-v-ukrayini-ta-sviti/>
- 26 Glenn Kessler, "The truth about Hunter Biden and the Ukrainian 'bio labs,'" *Washington Post*, 29.03.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/29/truth-about-hunter-biden-ukrainian-bio-labs/>.
- 27 United Nations, "United Nations Unaware of Any Biological Weapons Programmes in Ukraine, Top Disarmament Official Affirms, as Security Council Considers New Claims by Russian Federation," 13.05.2002, United Nations Unaware of Any Biological Weapons Programmes in Ukraine, Top Disarmament Official Affirms, as Security Council Considers New Claims by Russian Federation | UN Press.
- 28 U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, "Biological Threat Reduction Program," <https://ua.usembassy.gov/embassy/kyiv/sections-offices/defense-threat-reduction-office/biological-threat-reduction-program/>.
- 29 John R. Walker, "Russia has a long history of lying about biological weapons," *Washington Post*, 21.03.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/21/bioweapons-ukraine-russia-propaganda-war-history/>. See also, Robert Petersen, "Lies, damned lies and Russia statistics," *CBRNe World*, June 2022, pp. 57-61.
- 30 Glenn Kessler, "The truth about Hunter Biden and the Ukrainian 'bio labs,'" *Washington Post*, 29.03.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/29/truth-about-hunter-biden-ukrainian-bio-labs/>.

Another example of the misuse of public information by the Russians occurred at the end of March 2022. Igor Kirillov, a senior Russian MoD official, claimed that the Ukrainian Motor Sich enterprise asked the Turkish company that produces the Bayraktar TB2 drone if the drones could be modified to spray viruses from the air across Russian territory. This allegation was repeated by multiple sympathetic international media outlets.³¹ What Russian propagandists took out of context was standard language from an “EU questionnaire for import and export control of dual-use material.”³²

Moreover, in the document the Russians claimed as evidence, which was posted to Twitter by scandalous Bulgarian journalist and purveyor of conspiracy theories Dilyana Gaytandzhieva,³³ the Turkish company official indicated that a drone cannot be equipped with a spraying device.³⁴ Ukraine never modified the Turkish drones with aerosol spraying capability. Russia chose to focus its disinformation on the Turkish Bayraktar drones purchased by Ukraine, because of the success these drones had on the battlefield.

Exploiting the UN as a Platform

On April 6, 2022, Russia organised an Arria-formula meeting at the UN, which any member state can convene outside the

Security Council chambers. The meeting was entitled “Threats to International Peace and Security Emanating from Military Biological Activities in Regions Across the Globe.” All speakers invited by the Russian delegation repeated the false claims about biological weapons research. In addition to remarks by Russia’s UN first deputy, there was a video presentation by Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, who as the Russian defence ministry’s Chief of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops, has served as the main spokesperson spreading disinformation about U.S. biological weapons activities. Journalists from Bulgaria and Russia in attendance further pushed the disinformation narrative about biological weapons research in Ukraine.³⁵

Russia’s effort to further the UN as a platform for its disinformation narrative evoked responses from the United States and other Western states. Ireland’s Permanent Mission to the UN issued a statement arguing that Russia “has repeatedly sought to mask the awful human cost of its unprovoked war on Ukraine with baseless and unfounded claims against Ukraine and the United States.” The Irish statement went on to argue that “Russia should stop trying to use the Security Council, including the Arria-format, as a platform for its disinformation campaign, to paint itself as the victim of its own aggression, in the face of the heinous actions it has committed in Ukraine.”³⁶

31 Boyko Nikolov, “Ukraine asks Turkey if Bayraktar UAV can ‘spray 20L of aerosol’”, Bulgarianmilitary.com, 21.03.2022, “Russia: Ukraine asked Baykar to equip drones with chemical sprays,” <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2022/03/31/ukraine-asks-turkey-if-bayraktar-tb2-uav-can-spray-20l-of-aerosol/>.

32 Robert Petersen, “Lies, damned lies and Russia statistics,” *CBRNe World*, June 2022, p.60.

33 Who is Dilyana Gaytandzhieva: unmasked from China to England as Kremlin’s spin doctor; *Autonomija*, 4.08.2022, <https://autonomija.info/who-is-dilyana-gaytandzhieva-unmasked-from-china-to-england-as-kremlins-spin-doctor/>

34 Boyko Nikolov, “Ukraine asks Turkey if Bayraktar UAV can ‘spray 20L of aerosol’”, Bulgarianmilitary.com, 21.03.2022, “Russia: Ukraine asked Baykar to equip drones with chemical sprays,” <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2022/03/31/ukraine-asks-turkey-if-bayraktar-tb2-uav-can-spray-20l-of-aerosol/>.

35 United Nations, “Arria-Formula Meeting of the UN Security Council – Threats to international peace and security emanating from military biological activities in regions across the globe,” *UN Web TV*, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1g/k1gt473a5m>.

36 Permanent Mission of Ireland to the UN, “Statement at Arria-formula Meeting on Military Biological Activities” 6.04.2022, <https://www.dfa.ie/pmun/newyork/news-and-speeches/securitycouncilstatements/statementsarchive/statement-at-arria-formula-meeting-on-military-biological-activities.html>.

Norway's UN mission issued a statement arguing that "Russia has failed to offer any credible evidence for its accusations. Providing us instead with unsubstantiated claims and mere insinuations."³⁷ Western nations criticised Russia's bold exploitation of the UN chambers to further its disinformation narrative about biological weapons. Nonetheless, Russia stuck to this disinformation narrative, and kept spreading its lies.

Another claim made by the Russian MoD's Expert Centre of Biological and Chemical Threats was that the Scientific and Technology Centre in Ukraine "was function[ing] as a funding agency for research of interest to the Pentagon, including biological weapons development."³⁸ The International Scientific and Technology Centre in Ukraine, commonly referred to as STCU, was the Ukrainian version of the International Science and Technology Centre in Moscow. It operated in much the same way with funding from the United States, Canada, and the EU. Despite the similar origin and mission, Russian defence officials claimed without evidence that the Ukrainian centre was working on biological weapons and was supporting regional centres in other countries to do the same. While it is true that the centre provided support to scientists in other centres in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, the support was for civilian scientific work.

Twisting the Purpose of Scientific Research

Any foreign country that provided scientific support for a Ukrainian entity could find itself at the centre of Russian disinformation, suggesting that the collaboration was a secret effort to develop weapons. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed on April 16, 2022, that Germany "closely coordinated its work on biological security with its US allies, who established a network of at least 30 biological laboratories in Ukraine."³⁹

In 2013, the German Foreign Ministry started to provide countries in Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe with biosafety and biosecurity projects, designed to "tackle biological threats, such as the intentional misuse of biological pathogens and toxins or outbreaks of highly pathogenic disease and pandemics."⁴⁰ In 2016, at the initiative of the German foreign ministry, the German Army's Institute of Microbiology collaborated with the Institute of Experimental and Clinical Veterinary Medicine in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The collaboration involved German scientists working with Ukrainian scientists on molecular diagnostics, to study the pathogens that cause anthrax, brucellosis, leptospirosis, and African swine flu, all common pathogens with implications for farms animals and which can also infect humans.⁴¹

37 Statement by Minister Counsellor Tor Henrik Andersen, "Arria: Ukraine," 6.04.2022, <https://www.norway.no/en/missions/UN/statements/security-council/2022/arria-ukraine/>.

38 Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defence, 14.04.2022, <https://www.facebook.com/mod.mil.rus/photos/a.1492313031011448/3205119306397470/>

39 Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's interview with "RT" TV Channel, Moscow, 16.04.2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 16.04.2022, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1809592/

40 Roman Goncharenko, "No evidence of biological weapons in Ukraine," *DW*, 3.05.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/are-russias-claims-of-ukrainian-biological-weapons-a-propaganda-ploy/a-61673434>

41 Roman Goncharenko, "No evidence of biological weapons in Ukraine," *DW*, 3.05.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/are-russias-claims-of-ukrainian-biological-weapons-a-propaganda-ploy/a-61673434>

In March 2022, Russian officials repeated the claim that COVID-19 grew out of activities in laboratories supported by the United States; this time they alleged that it may have originated in laboratories located in Moldova and Georgia. On March 7, 2022, a representative of the Russian MoD claimed that the African swine virus had been developed in a Georgian biolaboratory in 2007⁴² – an allegation that was widely republished. A few days later, M. Alexandrov, an expert at the military-political studies centre at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), proposed to use rocket strikes against these laboratories, in case Georgia would not allow Russian inspectors there. He also argued that “If Georgia rejects, we should say that we will destroy these laboratories by a strike. In conditions when we have an operation in Ukraine, a few cruise missiles against Georgia will be a small detail that nobody notices in the world. The West may shout. But what will be the reason? Why have they created the biolaboratories aimed against Russia?”⁴³

German officials had warned that Russia could use biological or chemical weapons in Ukraine. Russian turned around this expression of concern as evidence of Ukraine’s capabilities. In other statements by Russian officials, they also made allegations about U.S. biological laboratories in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.⁴⁴ Russia claimed that Ukraine and the United States were involved in developing chemical and biological weapons when Western countries

worried that Russia was considering the use of these types of weapons against Ukraine. The fear was that Russia was creating an equivalency: if adversaries were working on these capabilities, then Russia might be justified in using them.

Top Russian Officials Promote Disinformation

Since March 2022, the Russian media and Ministry of Defence officials have actively promoted the biological weapons threat and associated conspiracy theories. Russian allegations about biological laboratories in Ukraine were among the top spurious justifications for the Russian invasion, such as “de-Nazification,” “de-militarisation,” and “the liberation of Ukraine.”

While the disinformation narrative was initially spread by the Russian ministries of defence and foreign affairs, eventually even Vladimir Putin used his office to convey the false narrative to Russian lawmakers and the Russia public. Speaking to the Russian Council of Lawmakers in April 2022, Putin argued that the “entire course of recent events, including the Kyiv regime’s claims to possess nuclear weapons, the deployment of a network of Western biolabs on Ukrainian territory, the seamless supplies of cutting-edge weapons to Ukraine, has confirmed that our reaction to those cynical plans was correct and timely.”⁴⁵ Putin wanted to justify the failed attempt to quickly topple the democratically elected Kyiv government, by claiming that Russia

42 Moscow again states that the new stamp of African swine plague was developed in Georgia (Москва вновь утверждает, что в Грузии вывели штамм африканской чумы свиней), Echo Kavkaza, 7.03.2022, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31740594.html>

43 Russian expert proposed to strike Lugar laboratories in Tbilisi with missiles (Российский эксперт предложил нанести ракетный удар по лаборатории Лугара в Тбилиси), Echo Kavkaza, 16.03.2022, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31756233.html>

44 How and Why Russian propaganda are “looking” for US biolaboratories in Ukraine and around the world? (Як і навіщо російська пропаганда «шукає» біолабораторії США в Україні та світі?), StopFake, 23.09.2022, <https://www.stopfake.org/uk/yak-i-navishho-rosijska-propaganda-shukaye-biolaboratoriyi-ssha-v-ukrayini-ta-sviti/>

45 President of Russia, Meeting with Council of Lawmakers, 27.04.2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68297>.

needed to protect itself from Ukrainian capabilities. Other Russian officials had frequently articulated this false narrative during the weeks immediately following Russia's stalled invasion, but by April, as Russian military forces were in retreat in several areas, Putin himself became the messenger of the false narrative to the Russian people. He added a patina of legitimacy to these false claims in his address to Russian legislators.



Russian allegations about biological laboratories in Ukraine were among the top spurious justifications for the Russian invasion, such as “de-Nazification,” “de-militarisation,” and “the liberation of Ukraine.”

In late May, Maria Zakharova, Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, addressed students at the Ural University who asked how the Ukrainian people could be responsible for the onset of the war. Zakharova's rambling response was, “...I did a study, but you might just be interested, this is also your life as well. ... Forgive me: thirty biological laboratories, thirty! There are not Ukrainian biolabs, there are Pentagon labs!”⁴⁶

Maria Zakharova's somewhat incoherent and defensive response is illustrative of how pro-Putin spokespeople readily default to the false narrative about biological labs,

to deflect attention away from Russia's aggressive military operations against neighbouring Ukraine. It shows that when Russian officials are challenged on some aspects of their invasion of Ukraine, they consistently default to the falsehoods about biological activities in Ukraine.

It is noteworthy that Russian propaganda refers frequently to “evidence,” which in reality is fake documents or statements distributed by unnamed sources.⁴⁷ For example, in summer 2022, there were numerous cases of false claims regarding additional “US” or “NATO” labs located in the territories Russia temporarily occupied.

The False Narrative Shifts to Genetic Code

In September, the Russian disinformation narrative shifted again, claiming that the United States was working in Ukrainian labs on biotechnology, to modify the genetic code of prospective Russian soldiers. This narrative echoed conspiracy theories that started at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that coronavirus was some diabolical creation to weaken Russians.

In late October 2022 at the Security Council meeting, the Russian representative to the UN accused Ukraine and the United States of preparing mosquitoes to be used against Russian military personnel. Russian officials claimed that the mosquitoes would be spread by drones, to infect Russian soldiers in the Kherson region in the spring.⁴⁸

46 Partial transcript of Maria Zakharova comments at Ural Federal University, E1RU, 21.05.2022, Maria Zakharova spoke to students in Yekaterinburg. A brave student from Yekaterinburg argued with the representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry Zakharova about the special operation on May 20, 2022, News of Yekaterinburg. <https://www.e1.ru/text/politics/2022/05/21/71347715/>

47 How and Why Russian propaganda are searching US biolaboratories in Ukraine and around the world? (Як і навіщо російська пропаганда «шукає» біолабораторії США в Україні та світі?), StopFake, 23.09.2022, <https://www.stopfake.org/uk/yak-i-navishho-rosijska-propaganda-shukaye-biolaboratoriyi-ssha-v-ukrayini-ta-sviti/>

48 Alona Mazurenko, “Combat mosquitoes” follow “dirty bomb”: Russian representative to UN tells more frenzied lies, Ukrainska Pravda, 28.10.2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/10/28/7373988/>

The biolab narratives have been added to Russia's anti-Western, anti-US rhetoric. China has repeated Russia's disinformation narrative, and supported Russia in many international forums where it has presented its disinformation narratives about biological weapons activities. For example, during a March 8, 2022 press conference, a spokesperson from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the USA of controlling the biolabs in Ukraine, where, according to him, Americans had been storing and developing biological weapons, and that the Russian Federation had discovered these viruses during the military operation.⁴⁹ Later at the UN, China echoed Russian concerns on biolabs but was careful not to directly accuse Ukraine or the United States.⁵⁰

Russian Use of International Diplomatic Forums to Repeat Narratives

As Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine grinds on, it continues to spread its false narratives about US and Ukrainian biological weapons activities in international forums. Despite having had their claims refuted in several international forums, the Russians cling on to this line of disinformation.

In July 2022, Russia requested via the BWC's Article V a formal consultative meeting to lodge allegations about Ukrainian laboratories. According to two noted experts on the agreement, this "represents a significant escalation of Russia's efforts" and

they note that "Russia will face substantial hurdles in convincing the world that its claims are true."⁵¹ They proved to be correct. Calling for an Article V to review Russia's claims kept the false narratives alive, and brought them once again to the attention of the diplomats from the 184 countries that are signatories to the agreement, as well as the international media that cover the deliberations.

Continuing to perpetuate their lies about U.S. foreign assistance to Ukrainian human and animal health laboratories, undermines the spirit of cooperation which the BWC urges countries to provide one another in Article X of the convention on biosafety and biosecurity. Nations have started to band together to issue joint statements. This international response to Russia disinformation regarding U.S. support for biosafety and biosecurity, has expanded beyond just the interests of Ukraine. For example, prior to the BWC Article V formal consultative meeting, a group of countries issued in August a joint statement supporting the U.S. international assistance on biosafety and biosecurity. A joint statement on the Contribution of Cooperative Threat Reduction Partnerships to Global Health Security was signed by the governments of the United States of America, Armenia, Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, Liberia, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Ukraine in August.⁵² States party to the BWC held the 9th Review Conference from November 28 to December 16, 2022, in Geneva, Switzerland. While some countries had planned to work towards strengthening

49 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, Briefing, 8.03.2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/202203/t20220308_10649759.shtml

50 United Nations Not Aware of Any Biological Weapons Programmes in Ukraine, Senior Disarmament Affairs Official Tells Security Council, Reliefweb, 28.10.22, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/united-nations-not-aware-any-biological-weapons-programmes-ukraine-senior-disarmament-affairs-official-tells-security-council>

51 Filippa Lentzos, Jez Littlewood, "Russia finds another stage the Ukraine "biolabs" disinformation show," Bulletin of Atomic Scientist, 8.07.2022, Russia finds another stage for the Ukraine "biolabs" disinformation show - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (thebulletin.org).

52 Joint Statement on the Contribution of Cooperative Threat Reduction Partnerships to Global Health Security, State Department, 29.08.2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-contribution-of-cooperative-threat-reduction-partnerships-to-global-health-security/>

the agreement, including ways to bolster Article VI of the convention, ultimately, they did not reach a consensus resulting in a final declaration, but rather they did agree a work plan for an intersessional working group, listing numerous topics for states to discuss annually until the next review conference in 2027.

Russia Sticks with its Claims Despite International Rejection

Given that Russia's false accusations were largely rejected at the BWC FCM meeting in September, and again during the UN Security Council in October 2022, why do Russian officials cling to these false claims? What can possibly be the rationale that motivates them to continue repeating these claims?

To summarise, some of the main Russian disinformation narratives on biological weapons promoted since March 2022 are:

- Laboratories in Ukraine are really controlled by the Americans. Even if Ukraine controls activities at these laboratories, the work is in support of American biological weapons programmes.
- The activities in these laboratories on Ukrainian territory are in violation of the Biological Weapons Convention.
- Some of the research at these laboratories seeks to develop "ethnic" weapons that can be used against Russians.
- Ukraine was working on the means of delivery of a biological weapon that includes specially trained birds, bats, and mosquitoes.
- The United States was conducting experiments on Ukrainian soldiers to make them into genetically modified "super soldiers."
- Some of the financing behind companies working in the laboratories comes from Hunter Biden and George Soros.

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine was motivated in part to pre-empt the United States or Ukraine from using biological weapons against Russians.

We suggest several candidate explanations for why the Russians continue to perpetuate these false claims, despite consistent international rejection of them. First, *Russia's disinformation on U.S. and Ukrainian biological activities serves as justification for the unprovoked invasion.* The Russian public is a primary audience for Russian disinformation about biological weapons. To maintain support and justify the "special military operation", the Putin regime needs a rationale. As the bodies of Russian soldiers are sent back to the motherland, Putin's regime will inevitably need an argument to justify the sacrifice so many Russian families are making. Eliminating the biological weapons in Ukraine falsely claimed by Russian officials is the argument. Not only is Russia's invasion justified to protect its country from biological weapons, but by doing so Russia is upholding international law. Russia's claim is that Ukraine and the United States are violating international law, and Russian forces are punishing them for doing so and fighting for the interests of the international community.

To excuse its actions in Ukraine, Moscow has attempted to manipulate international law (covering up their activities by reference to different conventions, especially energetically within United Nations activities) or to draw parallels to U.S. actions in other parts of the world, primarily its invasion of Iraq. In this case, Moscow is attempting to draw a clear parallel to U.S. reasoning for its military intervention in Iraq in 2003, based on the belief that Saddam Hussein continued to seek weapons of mass destruction.).

The clear connection with the United States, by stressing "American biolaboratories" and "America's support for biological weapons

development” is a rhetorical diversionary tactic. This is consistent with the Russian argument that the so-called “special military operation” was in response to actions taken by Washington and its NATO allies. The rationale is that a country that works on biological weapons is evil and needs to be opposed in diplomatic forums and on the battlefield. Characterising the United States as a country that does not abide by international law shifts attention away from Russia’s own illegal chemical and biological activities, called out in the U.S. State Department’s annual arms control compliance report.⁵³



To undercut the Russian disinformation narrative about U.S. and Ukrainian biological weapons, more states need to issue public statements countering Russia’s false claims

Support from a few of Russia’s close allies is another explanation. Even though the Russian charges have been refuted by many states in international forums, states such as China give the claims a patina of legitimacy by repeating Russia’s false claims, and arguing that Russia is within its rights as a member of the BWC to lodge these concerns. Even procedural support for Russia in UN meetings enables Russia to repeat its false claims, and confuse both domestic and international audiences about biological weapons and Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. By sowing doubt in some international audiences, Russia gains some political flexibility.

Finally, *it is possible that Russian officials have come to believe their own lies.* As noted above, regime spokespeople refer to publicly available documents that are taken out of context as evidence of U.S. involvement with biological weapons around the globe. Russian leaders could be desperate for success in the war with Ukraine and they are not seeing the truth in all of this. If they can’t win on the battlefield, they are trying to win in the information sphere. Repeating lies about biological weapons activities has become a standard part of the Putin regime’s rhetoric. They have repeated these allegations in different forms so many times that Putin and his close supporters may believe their own rhetoric.

Undercutting Russia’s Disinformation Narrative on Biological Weapons Activities

The absurdity of the Russian disinformation narratives does not stop top Russian diplomatic and military officials from promoting these false accusations. These officials are determined to spread disinformation they think will resonate with some international audiences, in an effort to undermine Ukrainian and U.S. standing as responsible signatories of international agreements like the BWC. Spreading doubt about U.S. adherence to international agreements resonates with anti-American sentiment in different countries around the world. Russian officials do not perceive any downsides to making these false claims. On the contrary, they see benefit from creating confusion in the minds of people around the globe who are unaware of how other countries have refuted Russia’s false claims in multiple international forums.

53 U.S. Department of State, “Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments,” April 2022, pp. 38-40, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-Adherence-to-and-Compliance-with-Arms-Control-Nonproliferation-and-Disarmament-Agreements-and-Commitments-1.pdf>.

To undercut the Russian disinformation narrative about U.S. and Ukrainian biological weapons, more states need to issue public statements countering Russia's false claims. The statements by Ireland and Norway at the April Arria-formula meeting was a start. The statements by other nations at the BWC Article V Formal Consultative Meeting in September was another example of when states other than the United States and Ukraine have exposed the falsity of Russia's claims.

Statements by states that have benefitted from international assistance for the safety and security of their human and animal laboratories is another step for nations to take. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a dramatic boom in the construction of laboratories working on pathogens around the world. Helping many of these countries develop good biosafety and biosecurity practices is an important objective of the BWC's Article X.

Finally, every Russian false claim needs to be countered. Russian officials who continue to spread lies about biological activities are undermining the international norm banning the production and use of biological materials as weapons, and this must be stopped. States which are parties to the treaty need to not hold back and

step up to counter the false Russian claims via statements and votes in international forums. Failing to condemn Russia's disinformation in international forums enables it to continue exercising its malign influence, and erodes the integrity of an important arms control treaty.

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