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Is the U.S. Really Targeting Russians With Bio Weapons?

One expert says there are easier ways to kill off a population

By Evan Gershkovich

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President Vladimir Putin on Monday held a conference with the Civil Society and Human Rights Development Council fielding questions on the topics *du jour* — theater director Kirill Serebrennikov's embezzlement trial and the recent knife attack on journalist Tatiana Felgenhauer.

At one point, council member Igor Borisov raised concerns that foreigners were taking photos of Russians, for unknown — potentially malicious — purposes, he implied.

But that was no concern of Putin's. He brushed the question aside to pivot to an altogether more unexpected concern: That foreigners are collecting biomaterials across Russia — "purposefully and professionally." This, the president seemed to suggest, was the more nefarious affair.

“Why are they going to different ethnic groups and to people living in different geographical locations across Russia?” the president asked. “Why are they doing this?”

That night, Franz Klintsevich, the deputy chairman of the Federation Council’s Committee for Defense and Security, offered a theory.

“I’m not saying that this is about preparing a biological war against Russia,” he wrote on his Facebook page. “But those scenarios, without a doubt, are being developed. That is to say, in case the need suddenly arises.”

It wasn’t long until some of Russia’s most infamous officials were adding to the charged rhetoric. The collection of Russian fluids, organs and tissues, said Gennady Onishchenko of the Duma’s committee on education and science, is “nothing other than proof that the United States has not ceased its offensive military program."

To cap it off, Onishchenko claimed there was a "belt of biological warfare facilities" surrounding Russia in neighboring Georgia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Ukraine.

The U.S. explanation

In July, Russian state-run network RT discovered that the U.S. Air Force had put out a request to acquire samples of synovial fluid, which fills joint cavities, and ribonucleic acid (RNA) from Russians. They would be “collected from Russia and must be Caucasian,” the request read. The samples, the Air Force said, would further research on the musculoskeletal system.

Bo Downey, a spokesperson, told RT that the ongoing study by the Medical Air Force Molecular Research Center required further samples. Because the first data set sent by an American company had included samples collected in Russia, the second set would need Russian samples too.

“The main thing here is the task of keeping the research clean," Downey told the Meduza news outlet.

Mikhail Davydov, the head of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, told The Moscow Times that there was nothing new about how Russian samples were being collected.

“This has been going on for twenty years,” he said, adding that the practice was reciprocal. “We send material to various countries, and they send material to us.”

Could a U.S. bio-weapon really kill off Russians?

In the past, there has been some speculation that a specific ethnic group could be targeted with a biological weapon, potentially through a process known as “RNA interference.”

The process, discovered by Andrew Fire and Craig Mello in 1998 — which earned them the Nobel Prize in 2006 — renders certain genes inactive. It is thought to be a promising technology for the treatment of diseases like arthritis by “silencing” malignant genes.

But could RNA interference be used to target the Russian ethnic group? Konstantin Severinov, a professor of molecular biology and biochemistry at the Skolkovo Institute of Science and

Technology and Rutgers University in the U.S., says it would be “impossible.”

“For it to work, the weapon would have to target a group of people with a shared specific genetic marker while excluding anyone who doesn’t have that marker,” he explained.

“In a modern country the size of Russia — or the United States or China, for example — these kinds of specific markers just don’t exist, since people living there have long, mixed genetic histories. The guy standing next to you on the metro in Moscow could be more dissimilar to you genetically than some guy on the subway in New York.”

Mikhail Gelfand, deputy director of the Institute for Information Transmission Problems of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said that the goal of studying genetic material is primarily to cure diseases, not to develop weapons.

“If such weapons were possible, we would have already cured cancer by now,” he said. “That would be relatively easy: The patient is right in front of you, so you don’t have to drop something out of an airplane and hope it lands on people below.”

Gelfand also said that, hypothetically, it could be possible to develop a biological weapon but only to target some very isolated group that hadn’t been in contact with anyone else for thousands of years.

“It is probably possible if you spend a lot of money to develop a weapon that could exterminate the inhabitants of some isolated island,” said Gelfand. “But it would be much easier to just show up and kill them.”

‘Majorly deceived’

On Thursday, Onishchenko called the American explanation a "clumsy, ill-conceived legend.”

“If the person who had been explaining this had revealed their actual goals, they would have had to shoot him,” he said, adding he was proposing new legislation that would protect Russians’ "biological security."

But there have been worries over the extraction of biological materials before. In 2007, the Federal Customs Service banned their export after Nikolai Patrushev, the then- head of the FSB, expressed concern to Putin over the development of biological weapons.

Perhaps, some have wondered, the head of state was misinformed again.

Gelfand, in an earlier interview with the NSN radio station, put it bluntly. “Someone majorly deceived Vladimir Putin,” he said.

A Russian Twitter user echoed the point — and, in turn, made light of the fuss: “Someone misled Putin again. A bunch of biomaterial has been sitting at the entrance to our building for several weeks and no one’s taking it away.”

Another user joked: “Left some biomaterial in the elevator for the CIA.”

On Thursday, Russian media reported that the laboratory accused of exporting Russian

biomaterials was among ten organizations that received the Russian government's award for service quality on Nov. 1. The announcement was signed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

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