

# The Unravelling of the Chemical Weapons Convention

On first sitting down to discuss state sponsored assassinations with Milton Leitenberg on March 16th, I thought I knew roughly where the conversation would go. Poisonings, deniability, maybe a bit of cold war continuity, well-trodden ground (see *CBRNe World* 06-2024 pp21-29). But it didn't stay there for long.

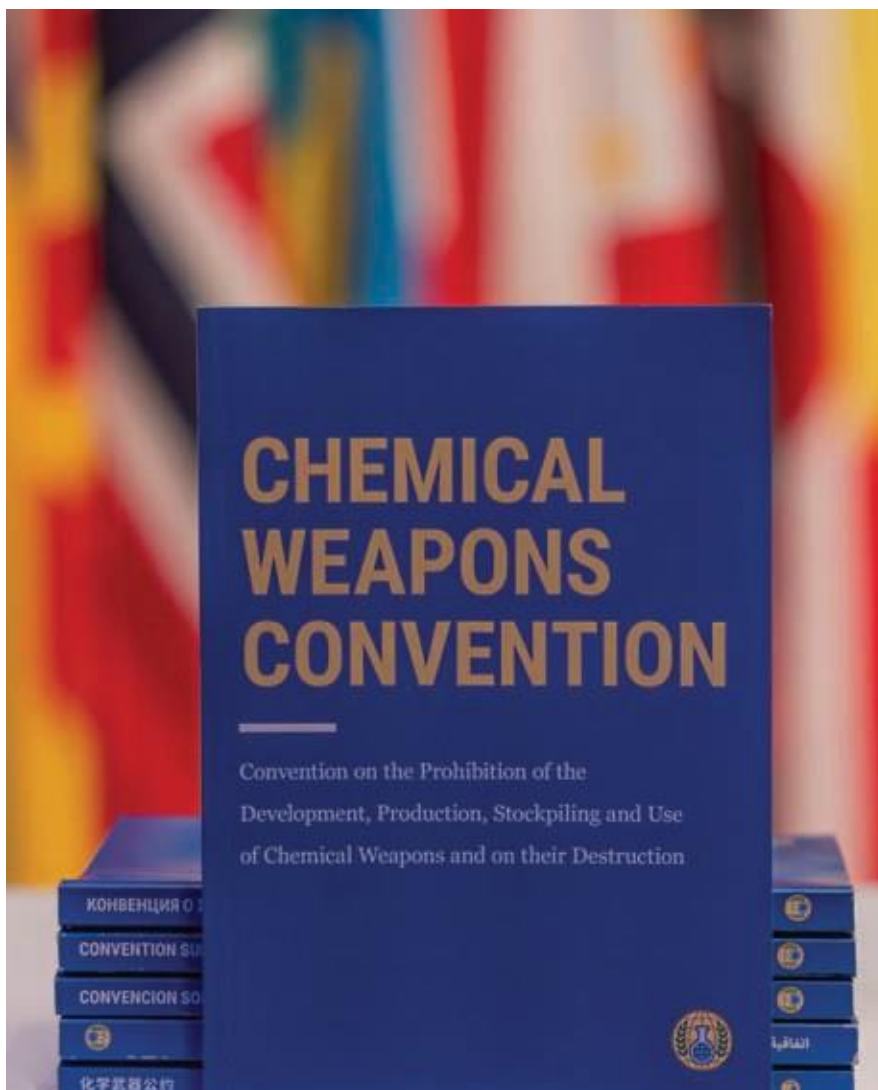
Quite quickly, the conversation pulled away from individual cases and methods, and what started as a review of assassinations became something far broader; Russia's open disregard for the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), its sustained efforts to undermine the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and a pattern of behaviour that was deliberate, not incidental. The assassinations were just the spectacular visible edge of something much deeper.

The images in question are familiar. A former intelligence officer slumped on a park bench in southern England, a dissident collapsing mid-flight over Siberia, a journalist deteriorating rapidly, his body succumbing to something no one can quite identify. Each time we see the cycle repeat, global headlines, diplomatic expulsions, public outrage, and the inevitable blame game. Each time it is framed as something extraordinary, a line crossed, a message sent - yet taken together it is clearly a pattern, no longer a series of anomalies.

There is a persistent habit in western commentary of interpreting these attacks as theatre. The use of exotic agents, such as polonium, Novichok, or rare toxins is often read as

deliberate signalling. Not just about killing someone, but about demonstrating reach, capability and consequences. It's a compelling

narrative, but according to Leitenberg, while true, is off the mark. "The primary purpose," he says, "is to kill the individual. Just like a bullet."



The book on Putin's worst read list ©OPCW

He doesn't dress it up. There's no talk of signals or strategic messages, no attempt to elevate the act into something more complex than it is. "I don't want him alive. I don't want him talking. I don't want him telling people stories... just do him in. Period." It's not theatre, or a warning shot, it is removal, and that distinction matters because once you remove the primary assumption of messaging, the entire framework shifts. The choice of agent, the visibility of the act, even the fallout, all become secondary to a much more basic objective. Elimination.

What is more revealing than the method, though, is the underlying structure. For years, the Russian assassination operations were regarded as murky, deniable, fragmented and difficult to pin down. Intelligence agencies operated in the shadows, and even when suspicions were strong, attribution was contested. However, investigations, particularly those conducted by organisations like Bellingcat, have fundamentally changed what we can know. By assembling travel records, telecoms data, and open-source information, they have reconstructed the Russian operations with remarkable precision; people's movements tracked across borders, day-to-day timelines, operatives identified, followed and linked.

What emerges from these investigations is not chaos, but structure. "There is a direct line from Putin's office to the general and right to the operatives," Leitenberg says, "three steps, and that's it, a straight line of responsibility right from the top. These aren't rogue actions, they're ordered, and this compression of command matters," says Leitenberg. It means fewer opportunities for dissent, fewer barriers to action, and a system designed for speed and control rather than diffusion.

The idea that such operations are warnings still lingers, and to be fair it's not entirely without basis. In some cases, individuals linked to assassinations have been publicly rewarded and promoted. The perpetrators of the Litvinenko poisoning were not hidden away; one

was brought into the Duma, shielded from extradition and repeatedly placed before the television cameras. In Navalny's case the operatives were reportedly decorated.

That visibility is inevitably read as signalling, internally, externally, to those who might consider following a similar path; and intelligence agencies have taken it seriously. In the aftermath of Navalny's poisoning, Leitenberg notes, there were indications that western services reassessed risk exposure to defectors. But even here, he remains unconvinced that messaging is the primary objective. "I still believe the point of it is... 'kill him'" he says. "Get him out of the way." Which raises a more uncomfortable question, what if the message we think we're seeing isn't always intentional?

The identification of polonium-210 in the Litvinenko case has often been treated as evidence of deliberate signalling with a rare, unmistakable agent chosen precisely for its traceability. But that assumption doesn't hold up under scrutiny. "Why look for polonium?" Leitenberg asks. "That's not the first thing you would test for." It's a simple question, but it cuts straight through the narrative. "I would doubt they expected it to be found," he says. And if they didn't? Then the idea that this was designed as a message starts to collapse. The visibility becomes incidental, not intentional, a byproduct of detection rather than design. That possibility complicates the story. It suggests that what appears as calculated signalling, may sometimes result from investigative success rather than strategic intent.

To understand the present, it helps to step into the past. State sponsored assassination is not uniquely Russian. Iran has targeted dissidents abroad, Israel has conducted operations against militant leaders, and North Korea has carried out high profile killings. Unfortunately, it's a recurring feature of international politics. Russia's approach has a particular lineage as the Soviet Union established its first poison laboratory as early as 1921, under Lenin. Throughout the Stalin years and beyond, assassination remained a tool

of statecraft, used selectively, often covertly, and across borders. Yet even then, poisoning was never the dominant method.

"Despite the KGB poison institute," Leitenberg notes, "99.9% of the people they killed didn't die that way." Most were shot, imprisoned, sent to labour camps, or removed through more direct means. Poison carries symbolic weight, but its use was rarer. What has changed is not the existence of these practices, but the context in which they're now applied. Today they sit alongside, and increasingly in tension with, the international system built specifically to prevent the use of chemical weapons altogether.

This is where the focus shifts, because the real story is not the assassinations themselves, but the context. At the centre of it all is the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), supported and enforced by the OPCW. Together, they represent one of the most comprehensive disarmament regimes ever constructed, a framework designed not just to prohibit the use of chemical weapons, but to eliminate stockpiles, monitor compliance and enforce accountability.

On paper, it's robust. In practice, however, it's under strain. A former senior OPCW official warned recently that violations going without sanctions weaken the norm. More starkly, the prohibition itself is beginning to look less absolute than it once did. Leitenberg goes further, speaking far more bluntly. "The most important thing you must get across," he says, "is that Russia does not care about the CWC, or the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) either." There is no ambiguity, no diplomatic phrasing, and certainly no attempt to soften the edges. "They have complete disregard for both treaties." Even more than that, he emphasises that "they are actively trying to tear them down... along with the OPCW." That effort plays out in multiple ways. Part of it is direct, such as challenging investigations, disputing findings, and slowing processes within the OPCW itself. Enough friction, applied consistently, begins to degrade the

system's ability to function. Reports take longer, conclusions are contested, it's impossible to reach consensus.

In addition, a significant part of the strategy sits elsewhere, in the information space. Russian BW disinformation has been an increasing problem over recent years (see *CBRNe World* 02-2026 pp47-50), and it is not a side issue here. It is an instrumental part of the overall Russian government effort to undermine the BWC.

Leitenberg has spent decades tracking false biological weapons allegations and disinformation campaigns and notes that "These campaigns... were totally unprecedented." From cold war era accusations to more recent claims, the pattern is consistent: repeated false allegations, often built on selectively framed or misrepresented information, amplified across multiple channels and sustained over long periods of time. In the last few years, Russian officials produced a steady stream of detailed briefings - dozens of them - alleging the existence of biological weapons programmes run by the US and in particular Ukraine and Georgia, the two countries which Russia invaded, they also included all former Soviet republics in which the United States had converted former Soviet biological warfare facilities into public health institutes. Each briefing, and public statement, drew on open-source material, reinterpreted to fit the required conclusion<sup>34</sup>. Individually, such claims can often be dismissed, but collectively their impact becomes more difficult to overcome. The objective is not necessarily to convince, it's to overwhelm, to flood the information space with false narratives so clarity becomes difficult, the contamination is very great he adds. "And it damages, destroys." This behaviour is pervasive, to the point that when Russia began the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the hashtag #USBiolabs began trending on X<sup>5</sup>.

In an environment already shaped by fragmented media ecosystems, rapid information cycles, and the growing influence of synthetic media, this strategy is particularly effective. The lines between verified fact and plausible fiction begin to blur, and so does the ability to build consensus around any single version of events. Within the OPCW, the effects are tangible. The continuing challenges of investigations, disputed findings, and obstructed processes accumulate and weaken the organisation's ability to function effectively, weakening the norm itself. The CWC's strength does not lie solely in its legal framework but depends on the shared belief that violations will be identified, condemned, and addressed. Undermine that belief, and the system begins to falter, with that faltering already visible. Disputes over attribution are more frequent. Consensus within the international community has become harder to achieve, and in some cases, clear violations pass without meaningful consequences, absorbed into a landscape of competing claims and counterclaims. This isn't about bending the rules, it's about breaking the mechanism that enforces them, not through a single, dramatic rupture, but via sustained, incremental pressure applied across multiple fronts. Apply enough pressure often enough, and the system doesn't collapse all at once, but degrades gradually, exactly as intended. Russia doesn't just disregard the CWC in terms of its choice of weapons for assassination.

Another area of concern is the Russian use of chemicals on the Ukrainian battlefield since the full-scale invasion in 2022. "There are definitional thresholds by which the international community judges the use of cw agents." Leitenberg says. Certain agents are seen as less severe than others and some uses are framed as marginal, ambiguous, or technically distinct. "Riot control agents, for example, occupy a grey area. They are prohibited in

warfare under the CWC but are still often perceived as less severe than traditional chemical weapons."

Leitenberg explains. Each unpenalized usage chips away at the CWC prohibition of use, and over time these small shifts aggregate to erode what was once a clear boundary. This takes place incrementally, not dramatically. The danger is not in any one incident but in the cumulative effect.

Looking ahead, there is no clear answer. Some believe this trajectory is closely tied to political leadership and that a change at the top in Russia could lead to fewer assassinations and other violations of the CWC. "I think once Putin is gone... much of it will go away," Leitenberg says, but he moderates that assessment. "For 20 years Putin has shown everybody how it is done. It was already in the system, there was a tradition, but Putin enormously increased the precedent.". Practices become embedded and normalised, particularly institutional ones, and persist even when leadership changes. This means that even if the frequency of such acts may decline, the underlying capability and the precedent will remain, which brings the focus back to the bigger picture.

Poisonings dominate headlines because they are dramatic, visible, and deeply unsettling, but they are not the main story, they are symptoms. What stands behind them is far more consequential: the steady erosion of a system designed to prevent chemical weapons use altogether. Russia isn't just stepping outside that system; it is steadily working to weaken it with deliberate actions and little regard for the consequences. Or, as Leitenberg puts it more plainly, "They don't care about the rules, and they're trying to break the thing that enforces them. Russia's use of poisonings is one aspect, but they accompany Russia's active efforts to undermine the CWC and the BWC."