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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHY DOES RUSSIA DISINFORM ABOUT BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS?	3
<i>Hanna Shelest, John V. Parachini</i>	
RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION GOES NUCLEAR	18
<i>Polina Sinovets, Khrystyna Holynska, John V. Parachini</i>	
RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION STRATEGY IN THE FIELD OF NUCLEAR SECURITY: EXAMINING KEY NARRATIVES	27
<i>Oleksandr Yaroshchuk</i>	
UKRAINIAN NUCLEAR PLANTS IN THE FOCUS OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE	37
<i>Volodymyr Solovian</i>	
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AS A TARGET AND A TOOL IN RUSSIAN INFORMATION AND MANIPULATION CAMPAIGNS.....	46
<i>Olga Chyzhova</i>	
"WE ARE INTERFERING:" THE INFORMATION WAR FROM NATO ENCIRCLEMENT TO A COUP D'ETAT	57
<i>Carl Mirra</i>	
EXPOSING THE ROOTS OF DISINFORMATION ABOUT NATO ENLARGEMENT	71
<i>Iryna Bohinska</i>	
NATO RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION	80
<i>Ahan Gadkari</i>	
ACCESS TO OFFICIAL INFORMATION FOR COUNTERING DISINFORMATION: KEY FINDINGS AND STEPS FOR UKRAINIAN POLICY MAKERS	88
<i>Tetyana Oleksiyuk</i>	

UKRAINIAN NUCLEAR PLANTS IN THE FOCUS OF RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE

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At the first stage of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukraine's nuclear energy facilities were among the main targets of the Kremlin. The Russians managed to seize Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant (ChNPP). After a series of military defeats, Russia has been trying to "sell" their control over the ZNPP as a victorious outcome of the war. This article analyses the main narratives of Russian propaganda regarding the issue of the ZNPP. The author determines the importance of the topic for Russian propaganda in the international dimension, and indicates Moscow's plans to use the nuclear plant as a tool to blackmail the West and Ukraine.

Introduction:

In the early spring of 2022, control over the Ukrainian nuclear power plants was of considerable interest to Russia for propaganda purposes, since one of the reasons publicly voiced by the Kremlin for the attack on Ukraine was the fiction of Kyiv's desire «to obtain nuclear weapons»¹. The capture of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant (ChNPP) was accompanied by brutal violations of the fundamental principles of nuclear safety. Throughout the year, Russian forces have used the ZNPP as a de facto military base. A garrison of about 500 Russian soldiers, dozens of pieces of

military equipment and ammunition depots are placed on the territory of the ZNPP². Thus, Russia is using Ukrainian nuclear facilities as a shield, since the Ukrainian side is limited in its counterbattery capabilities, due to the factor of nuclear safety.

Therefore, the Kremlin openly violates international agreements on the non-use of nuclear facilities for military purposes. The 3,000 nuclear plant workers (pre-war personnel numbered 11,000) and about 20,000 residents of Energodar, the satellite town of the ZNPP, with a pre-war population of 50,000, became hostages of the Russian army³. Another criminal practice of the occupiers lies in reprisals against the


1 Russia will not let Ukraine obtain nuclear weapons – Lavrov, "tass.com", 2.03.2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1414915>

2 Russia continues militarization of ZNPP, plans strikes on Ukrainian power substations – ISW, "interfax.com.ua", 21.02.2023, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/892927.html>

3 Ядерний терор. Як Росія взяла в заручники АЕС і енергодарців, "https://texty.org.ua", 26.01.2023 <https://texty.org.ua/projects/108780/yadernij-teror-yak-rosiya-vzyala-v-zaruchnyky-aes-i-enerhodarciv/>

plant's personnel, in particular, the hostage taking of those ZNPP employees whom the Russians suspect of disloyalty⁴.

The biggest danger to nuclear safety today lies in the destruction of high-voltage lines connecting the ZNPP with the Ukrainian power grid, because of Russian shelling, which has destabilised the plant's functioning. Furthermore, there are grave concerns because of the cases of artillery shells hitting the site of the ZNPP near the dry cask storage, which stores 174 containers in 24 assemblies of spent nuclear fuel⁵. The leakage of radioactive materials can cause an environmental disaster on a regional scale. Moreover, the Russians continue to conduct artillery strikes in the immediate vicinity of the nuclear plant.



the Kremlin openly violates international agreements on the non-use of nuclear facilities for military purposes

On February 10, 2023, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) published a statement by Ukraine's nuclear regulator spelling out that, unless Ukraine resumed control of the station and safety examinations had been carried out, none of the six power reactors at the ZNPP would be permitted to generate electricity⁶. However, the Kremlin regime considers the ZNPP to be its «prey», so the occupiers continue in their attempts to switch the plant over to

the Russian energy system. There is also the possibility of «false flag» operations organised by Russia, aimed at discrediting Ukraine and carrying out nuclear blackmail of the West.

Russia's actions can be seen as a sign of the failure of attempts to agree on a safety zone around the ZNPP, the idea that has been proposed several times by the Ukrainian side and the IAEA. Obviously, the military-political command of Russia is not going to make any concessions, because the introduction of a security zone would be considered by the war-oriented part of Russian society as another Kremlin defeat.

The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in the Distorted Reality of Russian Propaganda

Even Russian propaganda could not hide the facts of the brutal violation of the international nuclear safety regime. Therefore, Russia does not even hide its actions. On the contrary, Russian propaganda operates according to the principle of «accusation in a mirror». Regarding the issue of the ZNPP, Moscow's main propaganda construct is the assertion that Ukraine is shelling the nuclear plant with the aim of causing a nuclear accident. For example, Russian state-run media outlet «Russia Today» highlighted Rosatom director-general Alexey Likhachev's claim that «Ukrainian artillery strikes on the ZNPP have created a risk of a nuclear disaster»⁷. At the same time, Russia is portrayed as a guarantor of the safety of nuclear facilities⁸.

4 Op.cit

5 Russians shell Zaporizhzhia NPP again, leaving one employee wounded, "hromadske.ua", 7.08.2022, <https://hromadske.ua/en/posts/russians-shell-zaporizhzhia-npp-again-leaving-one-plant-employee-wounded>

6 Update 146 – IAEA Director General Statement on Situation in Ukraine, "iaea.org", 10.02.2023, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/update-146-iaea-director-general-statement-on-situation-in-ukraine>

7 Ukrainian attacks risk 'nuclear disaster' – Rosatom, "RT", 21.11.2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/566950-zaporozhye-nuclear-shelling-ukraine/>

8 Демилитаризация Запорожской АЭС исключена полностью, "vesti.ru", 17.10.2022, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2995734>

Russia's information support of its activities at the ZNPP varies, depending on the target audience. Accordingly, three target groups can be determined:

- Russia's domestic audience,
- local residents (ZNPP personnel and residents of Energodar)
- the international mass media, especially in countries where informational influence and the presence of key Kremlin propaganda mouthpieces (such as RT and Sputnik) remains.

The point of concentration of these informational efforts by Moscow is the accusation of Ukraine shelling around the ZNPP. It is the core message for both internal and external audiences. Since the end of summer 2022, relevant accusations are regularly voiced at all levels of the Russian power vertical, including the top Kremlin leadership⁹.

The topic of the ZNPP shelling resonated most intensively in the Russian media on the eve of the arrival of the IAEA mission led by Director General Grossi at the plant, which took place on September 1. The Russian authorities banned Ukrainian and international journalists from covering the visit of the IAEA representatives to the ZNPP. Instead, the occupation administration actually used the IAEA as embellishment of its own propaganda picture. For example, «letters from concerned citizens of Energodar» were handed to the international observers with complaints about the shelling by the Armed Forces of Ukraine¹⁰.

Control over the ZNPP is a symbol that Russian propaganda uses as one of the achievements of the so-called «special military operation» and a bright symbol of its new conquests. The Russian federal media actively cover the events related to the ZNPP, while the main consumers of this media product are the millions of Russians who are still under the informational influence of the Kremlin.



Russian propaganda operates according to the principle of «accusation in a mirror».

Regarding the issue of the ZNPP, Moscow's main propaganda construct is the assertion that Ukraine is shelling the nuclear plant with the aim of causing a nuclear accident

The analysis of the media content of the Russian information space proves that the main thesis in the context of the ZNPP is the accusation against the political leadership of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine of an attempt to carry out a «terrorist attack» aimed at contamination of the surrounding territory, including the Russian regions, with radioactive waste¹¹. In this way, Russian propaganda tries to justify in the minds of Russians the «reason» for the military operation – namely, the necessity to establish control over the nuclear energy facilities of Ukraine in connection with Kyiv's plans to create a «dirty bomb»¹².

9 Путин назвал обстрелы ЗАЭС актом атомного терроризма, "iz.ru", 12.10.2022, <https://1409014/2022-10-12/putin-nazval-obstrely-zaes-aktom-iadernogo-terrorizma>

10 Жители Энергодара передали Гросси обращение в связи с украинскими обстрелами, "RT", 1.09.2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/1043767-zhiteli-energodara-grossi-obraschenie>

11 Атомоград под прицелом. "ukraina.ru", 4.11.2022, <https://ukraina.ru/20221104/1040479861.html>

12 Russia says Ukraine is preparing a "dirty bomb", 27.10.2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/10/russia-says-ukraine-is-preparing-a-dirty-bomb-is-it-true-and-what-does-it-mean/>

The next direction of information activities aimed at domestic Russian consumers is the depiction of a fake reality about the humanitarian situation in Enerгодar. «The residents of the city are grateful to the servicemen of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, who protect the city of Enerгодar», – this is the main thesis that is replicated among all the video reports on air of the federal TV channels¹³.



Russian information policy does not have a solid grounding in the Ukrainian territories occupied since February 24, 2022. After a year of war, Russia has failed to generate new narratives that may inspire local residents, and ensure an effective informational influence

The Russian mass media also regularly spread fake news about failed «attacks by Ukrainian saboteurs» in order to generate a victorious narrative and strengthen militaristic sentiments in Russian society. For example, in September 2022, the Russian mass media spread information about over 40 motor boats, divided into two groups and carrying more than 250 Ukrainian special operations troops and foreign mercenaries, who reportedly tried to land on the coast of the Kakhovka reservoir, not far from Enerгодar, where the nuclear power plant is located¹⁴. It is obvious that, from a military point of view, Ukraine's bridgehead near Enerгодar or the ZNPP makes no sense until its Armed Forces are prepared for counteroffensive operations

in the Zaporizhzhia region. Therefore, it is not surprising that these reports of the Russian military did not receive any factual confirmation and, in the end, were questioned and even ridiculed on a number of Telegram channels that are loyal to the Russian authorities.

Why did Russian Propaganda not Take Root in the Occupied Territories?

Russian information policy does not have a solid grounding in the Ukrainian territories occupied since February 24, 2022. After a year of war, Russia has failed to generate new narratives that may inspire local residents, and ensure an effective informational influence. The author's survey of the local mass media controlled by collaborators revealed the key narrative of Russian propaganda directed at Enerгодar residents and the ZNPP personnel: «The special services of Ukraine are preparing provocations and terrorist attacks against the residents of Enerгодar and the ZNPP's employees»¹⁵. The main goal of such fake messages is to intimidate local residents, demoralise them and force them to collaborate. In addition, Russia is trying to convince local residents that Ukraine is deliberately shelling power lines in order to cause an emergency at the ZNPP and leave the city without electricity.

However, these efforts are ineffective because the traditional topics of Russian informational warfare against Ukraine, which can be easily fed to Russian consumers, are based on fictional facts, and contradict the experience of Ukrainian

13 Специальный корреспондент телеканала «Россия 24» Ольга Курлаева побывала в Энергодаре..., "zp-news.ru", 30.01.2023, <https://zp-news.ru/other/2023/01/30/82527.html>

14 Can the UN's mission to Europe's largest nuclear power plant prevent a Chernobyl-style catastrophe?, "RT", 4.09.2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/562075-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-power-plant/>

15 E.g. Can the UN's mission to Europe's largest nuclear power plant prevent a Chernobyl-style catastrophe?, "RT", 4.09.2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/562075-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-power-plant/>

citizens living in the occupied territories. Also, Ukraine's successful counteroffensive operations in the fall of 2022, as well as the announced spring offensive of the Armed Forces of Ukraine raise the question of whether Russia will be able to keep the ZNPP under its control at the end of the 2023 military campaign. An eloquent piece of evidence of the failure of Russian propaganda at the local level is the systematic lack of personnel to ensure the operation of the occupied nuclear plant.



Russia is trying to use the image of a «dirty bomb» rooted in the minds of Western societies after September 11, 2001, as the most dangerous weapon that could hypothetically end up in the hands of international terrorists

Under these conditions, Russia resorts to its usual tactics – it tries to buy the loyalty of locals with money. Representatives of the occupation administration regularly make statements that Russia will take care of the safety and economic well-being of the ZNPP workers and their families. The occupiers and collaborators regularly try to convince the nuclear plant personnel that Rosatom is a more reliable and stable company than Energoatom, which is «falling apart»¹⁶. «Unlike Energoatom, where everyone steals, bonuses are not paid, in Rosatom there are no problems with financial support at all», «Zelensky introduced sanctions against us, workers of the ZNPP», – such messages are

quite often published in local pro-Russian Telegram channels¹⁷. At the same time, fake reports that Ukraine will prosecute the employees of the ZNPP who cooperate with the Russians are spreading. It is worth noting that these messages of the occupiers are blatantly false, since the Ukrainian government has fulfilled all its obligations to the plant staff and paid salaries, including to those who were deprived access to the workplace by the occupiers

The Case of the ZNPP: How Russia is Trying to Mislead International Audiences

At the core of Russia's information strategy regarding international audiences lies the threat of a nuclear incident. Indeed, a comparison of the situation at the ZNPP with the disasters at the Chornobyl NPP and the Fukushima NPP attracts the attention of distant observers in any corner of the world. For sure, we cannot rule out the risk of a man-made disaster as a result of provocation or hostilities. However, it is worth noting that most experts claim that the scenario of critical damage to the core of the reactor at the ZNPP is highly unlikely, considering the design features of the plant's power units and construction of the VVER-1000 type reactors, installed at the ZNPP¹⁸. However, this does not stop the mass media, including the Western ones, from speculating on the topic of a nuclear disaster.

Moscow actively plays along with this narrative, at the same time placing all the blame on the shoulders of Kyiv. For example, the head of Russia's Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, accused Ukraine of

16 Запорожская АЭС – Росатом, https://t.me/zaes_energoatom/1242]

17 Op.cit

18 Expert reaction to Russian attacks at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, "sciencemediacentre.org", 4.03.2022, <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/expert-reaction-to-russian-attacks-at-the-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-power-plant/>

«nuclear terrorism» for having targeted the plant, saying that the facility is only safe due to the presence of Russian troops there¹⁹. Earlier, in October 2022, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told journalists about Kyiv's plans to use a «dirty bomb» and to blame Moscow for the disaster²⁰.

Thus, Russia is trying to use the image of a «dirty bomb» rooted in the minds of Western societies after September 11, 2001, as the most dangerous weapon that could hypothetically end up in the hands of international terrorists. In the first days of the full-scale invasion, Putin justified his decision by countering the alleged desire of Kyiv to start a nuclear programme²¹, which turned out to be utter nonsense.

The last doubts in the minds of the adepts of Kremlin conspiracy theory were to disappear after the visits of the IAEA mission to the nuclear plants of Ukraine in 2022. However, Russian propaganda continues to ignore objective reality. Sometimes it works. For example, India's news website carried the following comment by the former ambassador to Turkey and Uzbekistan, M.K. Bhadrakumar: «... there is always a possibility that Ukraine is a nuclear threshold state. So, in these kinds of anarchical conditions, they can always go nuclear and they can always make the dirty bomb»²².

In the publications of RT and Sputnik (Russian state media aimed at external propaganda), Russia portrays itself as the defender of the ZNPP. An illustrative example of such news is the following headline: «Russia has started installing a «protective dome» over the nuclear waste storage at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant»²³. Such reports are misleading, because they do not contain an explanation of the cause of the security crisis at the ZNPP, which consists of the fact of unprovoked aggression and an attempt to annex the territory of a sovereign state.

Another noticeable motive of Russian propaganda «for export» is the discrediting of the IAEA, because the organisation did not unilaterally accuse Ukraine of wrongdoing, as Moscow wanted. RT disseminated the statements of the occupying administration of the ZNPP, in which the reports of the IAEA observation mission are called «provocative ones»²⁴. A number of foreign mass media outlets picked up this thesis. It is worth pointing out that the mass media of the countries of the Global South continue to draw information from Russian news resources, such as RT and Sputnik. The key problem is causality violation, as a result of which the circumstances of the occupation of the ZNPP and the facts of the violations of international nuclear safety standards are blatantly ignored²⁵.

19 Europe's largest nuclear plant secure only thanks to Russian army – Moscow "RT", 22.12.2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/568745-zaporozhye-nuclear-power-plant/>

20 Op.cit

21 Путин оценил заявление Украины о намерении получить ядерное оружие, "Vedomosti.ru", 22.02.2022, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2022/02/22/910549-putin-otsenil-zayavlenie-ukraini>

22 Russia-Ukraine war anniversary: Why this former diplomat thinks Putin's nuclear threat 'is more of a hoax', "wionews.com", 24.02.2023, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/russia-ukraine-war-anniversary-why-this-former-diplomat-thinks-putins-nuclear-threat-is-more-of-a-hoax-565617>

23 Russia starts building 'protective dome' at Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, 17.12.2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-starts-building-protective-dome-at-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant/2766586>

24 Europe's largest nuclear plant secure only thanks to Russian army – Moscow "RT", 22.12.2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/568745-zaporozhye-nuclear-power-plant/>

25 For example, the author of an article published in an Indian news resource Republicworld.com refers to the comments of representatives of Rosenergoatom (a subsidiary of the Russian state-run nuclear energy agency Rosatom) and local collaborators, while not citing any comments from the Ukrainian side. "Republicworld.com", 27.01.2023, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/znpp-official-lashes-out-at-iaea-over-its-claims-about-explosion-in-nuclear-power-plant-articleshow.html>

In addition, regarding the informational dimension of the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail, it is worth mentioning the accusations made by Russia that Ukrainian forces are storing Western-supplied missiles and artillery shells in nuclear power plants. Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergey Naryshkin claimed that Kyiv has been using the plants as cover for ammunition stockpiles²⁶. It is worth noting that IAEA's inspections of Ukrainian nuclear plants have found no military equipment, debunking claims from Russia²⁷. Therefore, such information leaks, inspired by Russia, are an attempt to strengthen the position of opponents of military support to Ukraine, through the spread of misinformation in the social networks.

Russian Narratives on the ZNPP in the Global Dimension of the Information Confrontation

A hidden tool of Russian propaganda regarding the ZNPP is Rosatom State Holding Company (it manages more than three hundred companies in Russia, which are involved in all stages of nuclear weapons and electricity production). The involvement of Rosatom employees in attempts to alienate the ZNPP is an established fact. Despite that, the company was not sanctioned due to dependence on its services by a number of European countries and the USA. Thus, Rosatom continues to strengthen its presence abroad by creating conditions for strategic

dependence on its services and the Russian technological base. As of today, the company is constructing or maintaining nuclear power plants in Bangladesh, Belarus, Egypt, India, Iran, China, Türkiye and Hungary²⁸. The Russian «peaceful atom» has opened many doors of international politics for the Moscow's informational influence. Given that the mass media in Rosatom's client countries, as a rule, are dependent on the governments, the external activities of this company have an indirect influence on the perception of the ZNPP issue in various regions of the world.

It is against this background that China has released its 12-point peace plan on the Russia-Ukraine war. In the document «China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis», one of the points is «Keeping nuclear power plants safe»²⁹. It states «China opposes armed attacks against nuclear power plants or other peaceful nuclear facilities, and calls on all parties to comply with international law, including the Convention on Nuclear Safety (CNS), and to resolutely avoid man-made nuclear accidents»³⁰. According to the assessment of most observers, Beijing's peace plan is based on preconceived notions about the nature of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which makes it unacceptable for Ukraine and the West. It is significant that a year ago, Beijing was silent about attacks against nuclear power plants, while today provisions of its plan are consonant with the Russian position regarding the security situation at the ZNPP.

26 Ukraine storing weapons at nuclear plants – Russia, “RT”, 23 January 2023, [<https://www.rt.com/russia/570349-ukraine-stockpiling-ammo-plants/>]

27 No military equipment found in Ukrainian nuclear plants, IAEA says, “news.sky.com”, 24.01.2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-latest-putin-could-make-final-push-on-invasion-anniversary-as-belarus-president-warned-over-joining-war-12541713?postid=5292961#liveblog-body>

28 M. Samus, V. Solovian, Development of a possible mechanism for exclusion of Russian Federation from the UN Security Council and IAEA, 2022, <https://analytics.intsecurity.org/en/mechanism-exclusion-russia-un-security-council-iaea/>

29 China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis, 24.02.2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html

30 Op.cit


In any case, the points of the Chinese initiative are too vague to become the reliable basis of any agreement. Therefore, this initiative should be considered in the context of the information confrontation between the PRC and the USA. Accordingly, the topic of the ZNPP may appear in the public rhetoric of Chinese diplomacy. Considering the pro-Russian orientation of the «Chinese plan», Beijing's position will align with the Russian vision of a settlement of the ZNPP issue.

Conclusion

Security and technological challenges make stable operation of the ZNPP impossible. Therefore, the captured nuclear plant is mainly of propaganda value for Moscow. It is a symbol of the occupation of Ukrainian territories, which the Kremlin can sell to its own population as an «achievement» of the so-called «special military operation». Being unable to achieve their strategic goals, the Russian military-political leadership is forced to look for alternative «victory outcomes» of the war. Thus, the nuclear plant is an extremely valuable «asset» for Russian propaganda.

Russia's information policy on the temporarily occupied territories has no solid ground under its feet. Regarding the situation in Energodar, a direct indicator of this tendency is the inability of the Russians to attract a sufficient number of Ukrainian personnel to ensure the operation of the ZNPP. At the same time, Russian propagandists and collaborators continue attempts to increase loyalty among Energodar residents through promises of material benefits. The Russian information policy in the occupied regions focuses on undermining the trust of local Ukrainians in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, due to the spread of numerous falsehoods. The result of these informational efforts depends on the situation at the front, because Ukraine's military successes nullify all the techniques of Russian propaganda.

Regarding the international information track, Russia will make maximum efforts to insert the topic of the ZNPP into the discourse of the countries of the Global South. The statement that only Russia can guarantee the safety of the ZNPP will remain the main thesis of Russian external propaganda. The challenge for Ukraine is that the mass media of the countries of the Global South continue to draw information from Russian news resources, such as RT and Sputnik.



Being unable to achieve their strategic goals, the Russian military-political leadership is forced to look for alternative «victory outcomes» of the war. Thus, the nuclear plant is an extremely valuable «asset» for Russian propaganda

However, with the exception of a critical aggravation of the security situation, it is unlikely to expect an increase in interest towards the ZNPP in the international media, since the safety of Ukrainian nuclear plants is only a matter of regional importance. It remains in the shadow of the topic of the hypothetical application of nuclear weapons, which would directly affect the system of international relations on a global scale. Therefore, in order to actualise the issue, Russia may carry out provocative attacks on the infrastructure of the ZNPP.

Rosatom will probably be involved in the information campaign, which once again emphasises the need to introduce sanctions against the flagship of Russian nuclear energy. At the same time, China, which recently presented its own vision for the settlement of the Russian-Ukrainian war, included a clause on the «safety of nuclear facilities» in its peace plan. Therefore, Beijing can start its own information campaign, in which special attention will be devoted to the topic of the ZNPP.

As for the development of the situation in the short-term perspective, it is worth noting that Russia's information policy regarding the ZNPP is directly dependent on the situation on the frontline. Therefore, it is quite likely that the military and political command of Russia will try to use the factor of the nuclear plant in order to force Ukraine to negotiate. Moreover, Moscow will try to influence the resoluteness of Western governments by scaring their societies with the consequences of a hypothetical nuclear disaster.

In these conditions, Kyiv should intensify efforts to enhance global awareness about the current state of security at the ZNPP and the possible challenges. Ukraine's information strategy regarding the ZNPP issue should

correspond with the monitoring activities of the IAEA mission. At the same time, the topic of nuclear security should become a priority within the framework of promoting the Ukrainian Peace Formula. Special attention should be paid to the countries of the Global South.

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