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RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION STRATEGY IN THE FIELD OF NUCLEAR SECURITY: EXAMINING KEY NARRATIVES

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This article examines the key Russian strategic and tactical narratives on nuclear security during Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Particular attention will be given to Russian claims that Ukraine is developing a "dirty bomb," that Ukraine is shelling the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, and that the Ukrainian nuclear industry is decaying. The Russian disinformation campaign against the Ukrainian nuclear energy sector is part of a broader Russian strategy of nuclear blackmail against Ukraine and the West.

Russian Strategic and Tactical Narratives

As suggested by Anton Shekhovtsov, narratives can be classified in two levels – strategic and tactical. He believes strategic narratives “reflect the long-term vision of Russian political and kinetic warfare.”¹ These narratives reflect deep-seated beliefs and promote critical political ideologies, programmes, and strategies. They are meant to give a general picture and shape the overall (dis)information strategy. Strategic, or metanarratives, have remained primarily unmodified since Russia's first invasion of Crimea and Donbas in 2014.

Tactical narratives, on the contrary, can suit individual needs, adjust to the opponent, and explain strategic narratives by pointing attention to more minor issues. They “serve

individual steps that aim to strengthen the validity of strategic narratives.”² Their essential characteristics are intense emotionality and extreme manipulativeness. They are often illogical and contradict each other; they distract and mislead.

Since 2014, Russia has used both strategic and tactical narratives on a massive scale in its political warfare and PsyOps operations. Several aspects should be emphasised. First, the narratives are usually static at the core and adjusted on the periphery. For instance, the metanarrative “Ukraine is a neo-Nazi state” was used as a framework for claims that the Ukrainian government is unconstitutional, or that Ukrainians were creating plans to deprive the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine of their rights. In both cases, the pro-Kremlin sources have drawn parallels to the Nazi

- 1 A.Shekhovtsov, *Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West*, “Euromaidan Press”, 2023, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/01/06/russian-propaganda-war-related-strategic-and-tactical-narratives-and-their-audiences/>
- 2 A.Shekhovtsov, *Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West*, “Euromaidan Press”, 2023, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/01/06/russian-propaganda-war-related-strategic-and-tactical-narratives-and-their-audiences/>

Germany style of government. Second, there are usually one primary and several (sometimes a few dozen) supplementary narratives. For instance, in the nuclear-related field, they simultaneously claim that Ukraine is developing nuclear weapons and “dirty nuclear bombs”, that Ukraine is building nuclear weapons at the Chornobyl or Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants, as well as at other nuclear sites.



Disinformation on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is a part of Russia's set of strategic narratives. Those narratives are used to amplify the metanarrative: that Ukraine is a dangerous state

Disinformation on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is a part of Russia's set of strategic narratives. Those narratives are used to amplify the metanarrative: that Ukraine is a dangerous state. Disinformation on the weapons of mass destruction and nuclear security in Ukraine have become a part of the Kremlin's justification for the war. When Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the so-called “special military operation” on February 24, 2022, he used this narrative to back his claims about the alleged danger that comes from Ukraine. The Russian media quickly followed, claiming that the Russian army is going to eliminate the danger and to save lives.

Below is a list of the crucial WMD-related strategic narratives:

1. Ukraine is developing nuclear and radiological weapons, such as dirty bombs.
2. Russia ensures the safety of nuclear power plants in Ukraine, that are now under its control, whereas Ukraine does the opposite.
3. A new ‘Chornobyl’ is imminent in Ukraine unless Russia intervenes.

Metanarrative 1: Ukraine is developing nuclear weapons and/or dirty nuclear bombs

When it comes to nuclear weapons disinformation, Russia has used the following tactical narratives:

- Ukraine threatens to renounce the Budapest Memorandum and develop nuclear weapons.
- Ukraine is developing nuclear weapons.
- Ukraine is building a dirty nuclear bomb.
- The US is helping Ukraine to construct a nuclear/dirty nuclear bomb.

Before the full-scale invasion, Russia had used these narratives non-systematically. According to the *EUvsDisinfo* project that chronicles and debunks pro-Kremlin disinformation in Europe, this narrative only appeared twice.³ In 2016, the Russian propaganda outlet *Politnavigator* alleged that “Ukraine may drop a dirty nuclear bomb on Crimea or Rostov.”⁴ In 2020, Ukraine was accused of “working on a dirty atomic bomb” on *Rossiia 24*'s “60 minutes” programme.⁵ It claimed that “Ukraine admitted in 2018 [that it was working on a dirty bomb]”.

3 *Disinformation database*, EuvsDisinfo, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?disinfo_keywords%5B0%5D=keyword_77386&date=&orderBy=date&offset=0&order=DESC;

4 *Украина может сбросить грязную ядерную бомбу на Крым или Ростов, – политолог (Ukraine may drop a dirty radiological bomb on Crimea or Rostov, a political scientist)*, Politnavigator, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170330195659/http://www.politnavigator.net/ukraina-mozhet-sbrosit-gryaznuyu-atomnyu-bombu-na-krym-ili-rostov-politolog.html>

5 *60 минут (60 minutes)*, Rossiya 24, 2020, <https://archive.fo/z3fza>

Until February 2022, Russia focused on the “bio laboratories story,” whereas the nuclear weapons narrative remained on the side-lines. But it gained prominence before the full-scale Russian invasion. A pro-Kremlin Telegram channel *Voiennyi Obozrevatel* (The Military Observer), was the first to mention Ukraine’s alleged nuclear weapons threat. A screenshot allegedly depicting the preparation of a dirty bomb by the Ukrainian National Corps was shown. As is usually the case in Russian propaganda, no other evidence or information was provided, but it was quickly spread by other pro-Kremlin sources, including the state-owned news media.



Until February 2022, Russia focused on the “bio laboratories story,” whereas the nuclear weapons narrative remained on the side-lines. But it gained prominence before the full-scale Russian invasion

Then, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published the testimony of a pro-Kremlin war blogger Dmitriy Steshin, who claimed that Ukraine was preparing itself for a “large-scale man-made disaster.”⁶ Even though the article

provided no further details as to the nature of this disaster, it claimed that the fact that Ukraine had requested protective clothes and gloves from its NATO partners meant that Ukraine was preparing to use weapons of mass destruction. The propagandist tried to assert that Ukrainians have plans to create dirty nuclear bombs, and that there is a plan to detonate a nuclear reactor if it is captured by the Russian army. The author did not provide evidence, only fake information.

The amount of nuclear-related disinformation increased exponentially after February 19, 2022, when President Volodymyr Zelenskyy delivered a speech at the Munich Security Conference. Zelenskyy said that if Kyiv had no security guarantees, then “Ukraine has the right to consider the Budapest Memorandum as unbinding and all other 1994 agreements that are part of that memorandum to be called into question.”⁷ Reporting it, Russia quickly used the tactic of exaggeration and manipulation. For instance, *RT*, *Perviy Kanal*,⁸ and *gazeta.ru*⁹ claimed that “Ukraine makes a nuclear status threat” and that Ukraine “can reverse the decision to be a non-nuclear nation.”¹⁰ *RIA Novosti* published a story titled “Zelenskyy decided to create a dirty bomb.”¹¹ Outside Russia, the official Iranian news agency FARS republished this claim almost

6 «Грязные бомбы» и второй Чернобыль: Какой шантаж может применить Украина после «несостоявшейся войны» (“Dirty bombs” and the second Chernobyl: What blackmail can Ukraine use after the “failed war”), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 2022, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27365/4546576/>

7 *Zelenskyy’s full speech at Munich Security Conference*, the Kyiv Independent, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference>

8 *Спустя три десятка лет Киеву грозит вернуться ядерный статус (Three decades later, Kyiv threatens to return nuclear status)*, *Perviy kanal*, 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-02-23/421561-spustya_tri_desyatka_let_kiev_grozitsya_vernut_yadernyy_status

9 *Москва прокомментировала слова Зеленского о возможности вернуть ядерное оружие (Moscow commented on Zelenskyy’s words about the possibility of returning nuclear weapons)*, *gazeta.ru*, 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/02/24/17340943.shtml>

10 *Ukraine makes nuclear status threat*, *RT*, 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/549994-ukraine-threatens-renounce-memorandum/>

11 *Зеленский решил создать ядерную бомбу (Zelensky decided to create a nuclear bomb)*, *RIA Novosti*, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220220/bomba-1773903976.html>

verbatim.¹² *Gazeta.ru*, *Vesti.ru*, and *RIA Novosti* alleged that “Ukraine can develop a dirty nuclear bomb.” They also claimed that Ukraine admitted the Budapest Memorandum was invalid.¹³

On the second day of the full-scale invasion, *RIA Novosti* published an article titled “Ukraine has almost created a ‘dirty’ nuclear bomb.” This pro-Kremlin outlet claimed that Ukraine could potentially create such a bomb with the help of the United States.¹⁴ *RIA Novosti*’s unidentified “source” claimed that “research on creating a nuclear explosive device that could be used to construct nuclear warheads was being conducted with both uranium and plutonium. Ukraine’s scientific community has enough experience to create an implosive and an artillery-type device”.¹⁵

On March 6, pro-Kremlin media outlets, such as *RIA Novosti*, *TASS*, *Interfax*, and *RT* promulgated a tactical narrative alleging that Ukraine could have become a nuclear state if Russia had not intervened.¹⁶ They also claimed that Ukraine had started to develop nuclear weapons in 2014 under President Poroshenko: “The implementation by Kyiv of its perilous project “nuclear Ukraine” could

become a reality very soon.” The US was accused of helping Ukraine.

Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant was central to Russia’s “Ukrainian nuclear weapons” strategic narrative in early March 2022. The Russian media claimed that Chornobyl was the place where the bomb could be developed. The claim justified the occupation of the Chornobyl exclusion zone and stated that it was “a site for the development of nuclear weapons.”¹⁷ It was also claimed that in Chornobyl, activities on “creating a dirty bomb and isolating plutonium” had been underway. According to the propaganda, the radiation levels in the Chornobyl zone would mask the process. The Russian news media provided no evidence, even fabricated, to support their claims.

A few examples are illustrative. First, *RIAFAN* interviewed Anatoly Wasserman, a State Duma member, who claimed that Ukraine could easily “create a dirty bomb [in] Chornobyl.”¹⁸ Second, *TASS*, *Radio Sputnik*, *RIA Novosti*, *RT* and *Interfax* claimed that Chornobyl was used as a cover for experiments with radiological weapons.¹⁹ As customary in the Russian news media, all the articles did not meet journalistic

12 *Ukraine threatens restore its nuclear status*, FARS, 2022,

<https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14001201000618/Ukraine-Threaens-Rennece-Is-Nn-Nclear-Sas>

13 *Киев угрожает отказом от документа, гарантирующего неядерный статус Украины (Kyiv threatens to reject document that guarantees Ukraine’s non-nuclear status)*, rg.ru, 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/02/20/kiiev-ugrozhaet-otkazom-ot-dokumenta-garantiruiushchego-neiadernyj-status-ukrainy.html>

14 *Украина почти создала грязную ядерную бомбу (Ukraine has almost created a dirty nuclear bomb)*, *RIA Novosti*, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220225/ukraina-1774945400.html>

15 *Украина почти создала грязную ядерную бомбу (Ukraine has almost created a dirty nuclear bomb)*, *RIA Novosti*, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220225/ukraina-1774945400.html>

16 *Украина могла стать ядерной страной в ближайшее время, сообщил источник (Ukraine soon could become a nuclear state, a source tells)*, *RIA Novosti*, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220306/ukraina-1776879786.html>

17 *Украина была очень близка к созданию ядерного оружия, сообщил источник (Ukraine was very close to creating nuclear weapons, the source said)*, *RIA Novosti*, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220306/ukraina-1776880095.html>

18 “Извлек из-под саркофага”: Вассерман о том, как могли создавать “грязную бомбу” в Чернобыле (“Retrieved from under the sarcophagus”: Wasserman on how a “dirty bomb” could have been created in Chernobyl), *RIAFAN*, 2022, https://riafan.ru/4811-izvlech_iz_pod_sarkofaga_vasserman_o_tom_kak_mogli_sozdavav_gryaznyuyu_bombu_v_chernobile

19 *Источник: на ЧАЭС проводились работы Киева по изготовлению “грязной бомбы” (Source: at the Chernobyl NPP, Kyiv carried out works on “dirty bomb”)*, *RT*, 2022, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/972136-ukraina-zona-chaes-gryaznaya-bomba>

standards. The journalists did not double-check the information. They referred to only one source in the Russian government, whose identity was not revealed. The article mentions only one confidential source. The journalists did not request information from the Ukrainian government or the IAEA which monitors nuclear safety in Ukraine.

The “dirty bomb” narrative resurfaced in October 2022. This time, the Russian government and media promoted the following tactical narratives:

- Ukraine can detonate a dirty bomb and blame Russia.²⁰
- Ukraine has almost finished its dirty bomb.²¹
- The West is assisting Ukraine in constructing a dirty bomb.
- IAEA inspection conclusions on the dirty bomb are obscure.

Russia’s top officials, such as Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, and the major news media, stated that Ukraine was building a dirty bomb and would eventually detonate it while blaming Russia.²² Unlike before, when top Russian officials usually abstained from promoting disinformation messages, from October 2022, they were at the forefront of it. Shoigu’s message became prominent in Telegram and Kremlin media outlets, notably

RIA Novosti, TASS, Sputnik, RT, and RIAFAN. Russian diplomatic accounts on Twitter – e.g. the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Permanent Representative of Russia to International Organizations in Vienna, and the embassies – also promoted it.²³ Sergei Shoigu called on European defence ministers to accuse Ukraine of building a dirty bomb.

The IAEA refuted those claims. The organisation’s report stated that “it had found no sign of undeclared nuclear activity at three sites in Ukraine that it inspected”.²⁴ The agency also found no illegal work at the Chernobyl NPP, contrary to Russian news media allegations.²⁵

Unlike in the first month of the full-scale aggression, when the Russian media claimed that the dirty bomb was being created in the Chernobyl zone, RIA Novosti’s experts speculated that the uranium facilities in Dnipropetrovsk oblast were able to make the bomb.²⁶

Mikhail Ulianov, Russia’s Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna, was promoting these narratives. Both on social networks and in the news media, he insisted on international forums that Ukraine could be building a dirty bomb. He also criticised the IAEA’s inspections of Ukraine, by calling their

20 *Disinfo: Kyiv will detonate a dirty bomb to accuse Russia*, EuvsDisinfo, 2022,

<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/kyiv-will-detonate-a-dirty-bomb-to-accuse-russia>

21 *Disinfo: Work on the creation of a “dirty bomb” is coming to an end in Ukraine*, EuvsDisinfo, 2022,

<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/work-on-the-creation-of-a-dirty-bomb-is-coming-to-an-end-in-ukraine>

22 *Шойгу заявил, что Россия знает о попытках Украины создать “грязную” ядерную бомбу (Shoigu said Russia knows that Ukraine is attempting to create a “dirty” nuclear bomb)*, TASS, 2022,

<https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/16225585>

23 *Explosive words on dirty bombs*, EuvsDisinfo, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/explosive-words-on-dirty-bombs/>

24 *IAEA says no sign of “dirty bomb” work at Ukrainian sites; Kyiv hails report*, Reuters, 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/iaea-says-no-sign-dirty-bomb-work-sites-inspected-ukraine-2022-11-03/>


25 *Chernobyl nuclear plant visit*, IAEA/UNmultimedia, 2022,

<https://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/asset/2731/2731746/>

26 *Украина создает грязную бомбу: как должна ответить Россия (Ukraine creates a dirty bomb: how Russia must respond)*, Eadaily, 2022,

<https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2022/10/25/ukraina-sozdaet-gryaznyuyu-bombu-kak-dolzha-otvetit-rossiya>

conclusions superficial.²⁷ Another promoter of this narrative is Renat Karchaa, an adviser to the general director of Rosenergoatom, who was seen talking to IAEA inspectors during their first visit to the Zaporizhzhia NPP in late August of 2022.²⁸ For instance, he alleged that IAEA's inspections would see nothing at Ukrainian NPPs because Ukraine had already removed all dangerous materials: "Decision to send experts to Ukrainian nuclear power plants is too late, since there is ground to think that materials for "dirty bombs" have already been taken away from them".²⁹



It was one of the key propaganda justifications for gaining control of two nuclear power plants in Ukraine: the Chornobyl NPP and the Zaporizhzhia NPP

RIA also published a quote from Konstantin Gavrilov, head of the Russian delegation at the talks in Vienna on military security and arms control, who warned that the West might transfer to Ukraine uranium shells to be used with the donated weapons.³⁰

The "Ukrainian nuclear or radiological weapons" narrative was instrumental in the Russian disinformation campaign for several reasons. First, it was used as a justification for the invasion. Russia claimed it must protect

itself and the world's security, because Ukraine was violating or might violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It was one of the key propaganda justifications for gaining control of two nuclear power plants in Ukraine: the Chornobyl NPP and the Zaporizhzhia NPP. Second, since 2014, Russia has been creating an image of Ukraine as a dangerous country that poses a threat to Russian citizens. For this reason, narratives that involve the fear of nuclear, radiological, or biological weapons have a strong emotional response. And third, by talking about Ukraine's nuclear or radiological weapons, the Russian government tries to draw parallels between Ukraine, on the one side, and North Korea and Iran, which have been subject to Western sanctions for their attempts to develop nuclear weapons on the other.³¹

Metanarrative 2: The Ukrainian nuclear sector is decaying, which may result in a "new Chornobyl"

The "new Chornobyl" narrative has been at the cornerstone of the Russian metanarrative that nuclear safety in Ukraine is low. For instance, the Russian media promoted fake news that "Ukraine is turning into a European nuclear dumpsite," that "Ukraine will store nuclear waste from all over Europe," that "nuclear waste from Europe and the US will be stored in Chornobyl, and people's attitude does not matter," or that "Ukraine will turn into a radioactive zone."

27 *Postпред России заявил о сохранении угрозы создания Украиной ядерной бомбы (Russia's permanent representative informed on the continued threat of Ukraine's creation of a nuclear bomb)*, RIA Novosti, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20221221/bomba-1840207248.html>

28 *Росэнерго раскритиковал отчет МАГАТЭ о "грязной бомбе" на Украине (Rosenergo criticized IAEA's report on a "dirty bomb" in Ukraine)*, RIA Novosti, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20221118/magate-1832670032.html>

29 *Materials for "dirty bombs" already removed from Ukrainian NPPs, IAEA is late – expert*, TASS, 2023, <https://tass.com/russias-foreign-policy/1562171>

30 *Дипломат предупредил Запад о последствиях поставок ВСУ боеприпасов с ураном (Diplomat warned the West on the consequences of supplying uranium-based ammunitions to the Armed Forces of Ukraine)*, RIA Novosti, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230125/snaryad-1847362826.html>

31 *Fake: Ukraine was preparing to create nuclear weapons*, StopFake, 2022, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-ukraine-was-preparing-to-create-nuclear-weapons/>

For example:

“In Ukraine, a nuclear waste storage facility is being built, allowing Westinghouse to supply nuclear fuel for Ukrainian nuclear power plants massively. In addition, since the stated size of the repository far exceeds the needs of Ukraine, nuclear waste from all over Europe could pour into it.”³²

In March 2022, this narrative was enhanced by other tactical narratives. They used the tactics of blaming others for what you can or plan to do. For example: on March 6, 2022, TASS claimed that “SBU is collaborating with the Azov Battalion to ‘mine’ a reactor and blame the ensuing catastrophe on a Russian missile strike.” The above-mentioned reactor is the accelerator-driven subcritical assembly at the Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology. On March 11, the institute was shelled by the Russian army.³³

The Russian media accused Ukraine of interrupting cooperation with Russia and putting the country on the verge of a nuclear disaster. For instance, the Zvezda TV channel, owned by the Russian Defence Ministry, claimed that Ukraine was facing a second nuclear catastrophe because it was increasing the usage of American nuclear fuel.³⁴ The Kremlin-backed media described agreements with Westinghouse as an upcoming “nuclear apocalypse” and a dangerous “nuclear experiment.” Several propaganda sources claimed that

Ukrainian nuclear power plants would stop working, and that the risks of explosions were increasing.³⁵ Simultaneously, they promoted the narrative that Ukraine was becoming dependent on US fuel supplies and that, consequently, Ukrainian nuclear energy would be subordinated to the US. For example:

“The control over the entire Ukrainian energy sector is being transferred to the Americans. They already took control over the most delicious part, nuclear energy. It has the lowest [operational] costs but can be sold at the highest tariffs. The Americans will be charging generations of Ukrainians.”³⁶

Metanarrative 3: Ukraine shells the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, whereas Russia ensures its safety

The start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked another development of the Russian narrative that “Ukrainian nuclear power plants are decaying and becoming dangerous.” This time, besides Chornobyl NPP, Russian propaganda focused on Zaporizhzhia NPP, occupied by Russia on March 4, 2022. The pro-Kremlin outlet Readovka published, as it claimed, the results of an investigation in which the Kremlin experts warned that the plant “requires not just a major overhaul, but the urgent intervention of Russian power engineers.” Zaporizhzhia NPP, Readovka claims, is “on the verge of functioning” because the

32 *Европа превращает Украину в ядерный могильник (Europe is turning Ukraine into a nuclear dump site)*, Ukraina.ru, 2017, <https://ukraina.ru/20170214/1018296220.html>

33 *Kharkiv nuclear facility safe but poses big risks, says institute director*, Reuters, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kharkiv-nuclear-facility-safe-war-poses-big-risks-says-institute-director-2022-03-11/>

34 *На пороге катастрофы: зачем Украина готовит миру второй Чернобыль (On the verge of disaster: why Ukraine is preparing a second Chornobyl)*, Zvezda, 2016, [https://tvzvezda.ru/news/201604220753-pjdd.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20220331225848/https://tvzvezda.ru/news/201604220753-pjdd.htm)

35 *Westinghouse electric возродит или похоронит украинские АЭС? (Westinghouse electric will revive or bury Ukrainian NPP?)*, news-front.info, 2021, <https://news-front.info/2021/09/01/westinghouse-electric-vozrodit-ili-pohoronit-ukrainskie-aes/>

36 *Американские блоки АЭС на Украине: Эксперты выдвигают сенсационные версии (American nuclear power plants in Ukraine: Experts put forward sensational versions)*, Politnavigator, 2021, <https://www.politnavigator.net/amerikanskie-bloki-aes-na-ukraine-ehksperty-vydvigayut-sensacionnye-versii.html>

life of nuclear power units “came out back in 2015-2018, and the continued operation of rusty equipment threatens a catastrophe.”³⁷

In 2020, an international mission inspected the plant and found no deficiencies. Moreover, since 2016, five out of the six units have been modernised, extending their lifespan by another ten years. The IAEA inspection confirmed that Ukraine adheres to nuclear safety principles.³⁸



Russian propaganda applied its disinformation narratives to the situation around Zaporizhzhia NPP. These narratives pursued three goals: to accuse Ukraine of shelling the station and thus to present Ukraine as a “terrorist regime,” to prevent further deliveries of weapons to Ukraine, and to cut off Ukraine from electricity produced by the plant

Later, Russian propaganda applied its disinformation narratives to the situation around Zaporizhzhia NPP. These narratives pursued three goals: to accuse Ukraine of shelling the station and thus to present Ukraine as a “terrorist regime,” to prevent further deliveries of weapons to Ukraine, and to cut off Ukraine from electricity produced by the plant.

Russia’s disinformation campaign was built on the following narratives:

- Ukrainian “militants” are shelling the nuclear power station. Their actions are acts of nuclear terrorism.
- The West is pushing Ukraine towards a new Chornobyl.
- Ukraine aims to create another Bucha-like provocation.
- Russia does not store weapons in the plant.

The nuclear terrorism narrative is orchestrated by the news media, bloggers, the Kremlin’s proxies, politicians, and the diplomatic corps. Russia’s Ambassador to the UN, Vasil Nebenzia, has constantly claimed that the Russian military ensures safety and repels Ukrainian attacks. He also accused Ukraine of planning a “monstrous provocation” if the army of occupation withdraws.³⁹

Russian propaganda has claimed that Ukraine conducted dangerous experiments at Zaporizhzhia NPP for eight years. The Russian media has also claimed that Ukraine was experimenting with nuclear weapons at the Zaporizhzhia NPP: “Ukraine was close to turning Russian cities into Chornobyl. There was no alternative to Russia’s special military operation.”⁴⁰ Vladimir Rohov, one of the representatives of the occupation administration and a well-known propagandist, claimed that they retrieved

37 *Українська АЭС 7 лет как угрожает миру атомной катастрофой (Ukrainian NPP has been threatening the world with a nuclear catastrophe for seven years)*, Readovka, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221203101226/https://readovka.space/nuclear-disaster>

38 *IAEA Annual Report 2020*, IAEA, 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/reports/2020/gc65-5.pdf>

39 *Небензя предупредил о чудовищной провокации Киева в случае ухода ВС РФ с Запорожской АЭС (Nebenzia warned of a monstrous provocation by Kyiv if Russian troops withdraw from Zaporizhzhia NPP)*, iz.ru, 2022, <https://iz.ru/1378556/2022-08-12/nebenzia-predupredil-o-chudovishchnoi-provokacii-kieva-v-sluhae-ukhoda-vs-rf-s-zaporozhskoi-aes>

40 *Disinfor: Ukraine was close to turning Russian cities into Chornobyl*, EuvsDisinfo, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/ukraine-was-close-to-turning-russian-cities-into-chernobyl>

evidence of those experiments but never publicly showed them. They also accused the West of helping Ukraine to “conduct [dangerous] experiments” and link together the shelling and the experiments by claiming that Ukraine is trying to “hide the traces by giving the green light to [Ukraine] to attack the nuclear power plant, throwing aside their own “green” priorities like unnecessary garbage.”⁴¹



The Kremlin’s nuclear-related narratives have also targeted Ukrainian efforts to achieve nuclear safety and nuclear independence from Russia

Second, the Russian media denied that Russia was using the Zaporizhzhia NPP as a military base. Notwithstanding multiple evidence of Russian military equipment being stored in the vicinity and even inside the plant units,⁴² the Russian media continued to claim that “there is no military equipment on the territory of the Zaporizhzhia NPP.”⁴³

Recently, the Russian media has promoted another narrative: Ukraine stores ammunition in nuclear plants. The first time this narrative appeared was in early March on Pervyi Kanal. It claimed that Ukraine was storing “huge amounts of weapons and ammunition” in Zaporizhzhia NPP power units. In January 2023, the narrative resurfaced when TASS wrote that Rivnenska NPP is used to store Western-supplied weapons: “Russia’s Foreign

Intelligence Service received reliable data that the Ukrainian armed forces store Western-supplied weapons and ammunition on the premises of nuclear power plants. This relates to HIMARS and large-calibre artillery rounds.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

Russia uses narratives as frameworks for information operations, both in hybrid and open military confrontations. The narratives discussed in this article are a part of Russia’s conspiracy theory approach – no evidence, no proof – that aims to stimulate a strong emotional response in the targeted audience.

By promoting nuclear-related narratives, the pro-Kremlin news media create an impression that Ukraine is a dangerous country, and Russia, which borders it, cannot tolerate such a threat. For this reason, fake news about dirty radiological bombs, or Ukraine’s “reckless shelling” of the largest nuclear power plant in Europe came to the forefront of Russian propaganda in 2022, the first year of Moscow’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Russia uses this faked threat to portray Ukraine as a dangerous, reckless, and yet weak country.

These narratives often target foreign audiences. For this reason, the diplomatic corps has widely been used in promoting nuclear danger messages via social networks and disinformation amplifiers, in Europe and beyond. The Russian media outlets want to portray Ukraine as a terrorist, aspiring nuclear state that disobeys international law and order, and poses a threat to the world in a similar way to Iran or North Korea.

41 *Ядерный террор ВСУ (Armed Forces of Ukraine’s nuclear terror)*, ASD.News, 2022, <https://asd.news/articles/voyna/yadernyy-terror-vsui/>

42 *Russian vehicles seen inside turbine hall at Ukraine nuclear plant*, CNN, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/19/europe/ukraine-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant-russian-vehicles-intl-hnk/index.html>

43 *Путин: на территории ЗАЭС нет военной техники, нечего убирать (Putin: There is no military equipment on Zaporizhzhia NPP, nothing to remove)*, Zvezda, 2022, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2022971222-BSx3M.html>

44 *Kiev regime stores Western-supplied ammo at nuke plants, says Russia’s intel agency*, TASS, 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1565645>

Nuclear-related disinformation had been circulating before the full-scale invasion; however, it played a minor role compared with the biological laboratories' narrative. Besides this, Russian officials did not mention the alleged nuclear threat from Ukraine until Vladimir Putin's statement on the so-called "special military operation." In 2022, the highest echelons of the Russian state, including Putin, were much more active in disseminating false narratives and fake news on this topic.⁴⁵

The Kremlin's nuclear-related narratives have also targeted Ukrainian efforts to achieve nuclear safety and nuclear independence from Russia. Since 2014, the Russian news media has promoted two narratives. First, that non-Russian nuclear fuel is dangerous for Ukrainian NPPs. Second, that building a radioactive waste storage unit in Ukraine will turn the country into a nuclear dump site.⁴⁶ In fact, Ukraine has almost completely changed nuclear fuel supplier⁴⁷ and opened a certified storage unit for spent nuclear fuel in the Chernobyl exclusion zone.⁴⁸

Nuclear-related narratives are often coupled with other narratives. For instance, the following narratives are worthy of consideration: that Ukraine is a terrorist state, that Ukraine is controlled by the European/American elites, that Ukraine is a puppet of Western governments.

Finally, when analysing Russian disinformation narratives, it becomes clear that they are still using their favourite tactic: to throw out as many accusations as possible, to distract attention from the truth. Disinformation is a weapon that has the same or even greater destructive force than real armaments.

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45 I. Gretskey, *Russia's propaganda war. Brief*. International Centre for Defense and Security, August 2022, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/08/ICDS_Brief_Russia%C2%B4s_War_in_Ukraine_No9_Igor_Gretskey_August_2022-edit.pdf

46 *Україна примет отработанный атом. Ядерная программа Украины может сделать ее свалкой ядерных отходов Европы (Ukraine will be accepting spent atom. Ukraine's nuclear program could turn it into Europe's nuclear waste dump)*, gazeta.ru, 2014, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2014/07/08/6106605.shtml?updated>

47 *Українські АЕС до 2024 року перейдуть на паливо Westinghouse – Енергоатом (By 2024, Ukrainian nuclear power plants will switch to Westinghouse fuel – Energoatom)*, Suspilne, 2023, <https://suspilne.media/399713-ukrainski-aes-do-2024-roku-perejdut-na-palivo-westinghouse-energoatom/>

48 *Енергоатому дозволили ввести в експлуатацію сховище відпрацьованого ядерного палива (Energoatom received an authorization to open a spent nuclear fuel storage)*, Ukrinform, 2022, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-economy/3467438-energoatomu-dozvolili-vvesti-v-ekspluataciyu-shovishe-vidpracovanogo-adernogo-paliiva.html>

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