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- DISINFORMATION STRATEGIES
- WMD THREATS
- RUSSIA'S MANIPULATIONS

DISINFORMATION

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WHY DOES RUSSIA DISINFORM ABOUT BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS?

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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 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://change.org).

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 навщо 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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RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION GOES NUCLEAR¹

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Prior to the escalated invasion of Ukraine, the political and military leadership of the Russian Federation alleged that Ukraine was planning to regain its nuclear status, and that it would be receiving the help of Western countries.² This claim was repeated on May 9, 2022, almost three months following the 24 February incursion, during the closely watched Victory Day speech by Russia's President Vladimir Putin.³ He declared that Russia could not tolerate Ukraine becoming a nuclear state in its "near abroad", and was forced to take steps to prevent it. These false accusations have been repeatedly refuted by Ukraine, the US, and other Western nations; nevertheless, Moscow continues to disseminate them to Russian and international audiences. Essentially, this should be regarded as one of numerous forms of Russian disinformation that are designed to justify its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, and to maintain domestic and international support for an illegal military operation that has been floundering.

Russia Continues to Push False Narratives

Russia perpetuates three types of false narrative on nuclear and radiological weapons in Ukraine: (i) Ukraine has nuclear weapons aspirations; (ii) it has ready technical capabilities to produce a nuclear or radioactive device of some sort; and (iii) it is benefitting from Western assistance. These three allegations are examined below in greater detail.

Political will to acquire nuclear weapons

By distorting statements made by Ukrainian leaders, Moscow alleges that the political will exists for Ukraine to return to its nuclear status. It is true, of course, that Ukraine's leaders have repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, which formalised the new state giving up the Soviet nuclear weapons on its territory, and declaring its non-nuclear

1 The original article was published at Forum for Ukrainian Studies 23.03.2023, <https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2023/03/23/russias-disinformation-goes-nuclear/>

2 *Обращение Президента Российской Федерации (Address by the President of the Russian Federation)*, "President of Russia," 21.02.2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

3 *Выступление Президента России на военном параде (Speech of the President of Russia at the Military Parade)*, "President of Russia," 9.05.2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68366>.

status.⁴ The Russian media has recently picked up on such statements, and often quotes them out of context to suggest that Ukraine is seeking nuclear weapons capability. To be sure, as far back as 2003, respectable Ukrainian publications aired discussions of the nuclear status being the only way to protect Ukraine from foreign aggression – primarily, Russia.⁵ The Russian media emphasised that the first Ukrainian President, Leonid Kravchuk, who was directly involved in the negotiations on the 1994 Memorandum, said in a series of interviews that Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal under immense pressure.⁶



By distorting statements made by Ukrainian leaders, Moscow alleges that the political will exists for Ukraine to return to its nuclear status

The Russian media repeatedly refers to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's speech at the 2022 Munich Security Conference. In this speech, he expressed concerns that Ukraine had given up its nuclear weapons for nothing, as the security guarantees received from other countries, including Russia, seem

to have never materialised.⁷ The Russian media published headlines, misinterpreting these words as if Ukraine had threatened the world with nuclear weapons.⁸

Russia's misleading and distorting narratives are based on extracting these quotes from the Ukrainian and Western media to give them a patina of legitimacy. Countering false claims and putting circumstances in context takes time and energy, in order to set the record straight. Ukrainian and Western leaders' refutations of false claims about Ukraine's nuclear ambitions sometimes make them seem defensive, and divert attention away from Russia's aggressive behaviour towards neighbouring nations that are charting independent and democratic political pathways.

Technical Capabilities

Russian military and intelligence leaders have alleged that Ukraine currently has or can quickly regain the technical capabilities to create a weapon of mass destruction: if not a nuclear bomb, then at least a radiological bomb. During Russia's Security Council meeting on February 21, 2022, Russian Minister of Defence Sergey Shoigu listed the arguments for how Ukraine could acquire such capabilities quickly, especially if it had extensive Western aid.⁹ On March 3,

4 Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1994, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>.

5 Valentyn Badrak, and Serhiy Zhurets, *Ядерний хід. За і проти (Nuclear Course. For and Against)*, "Mirror Weekly", 21.11.2003, https://zn.ua/ukr/internal/yaderniy_hid_zs_1_proti.html.

6 Aleksey Zakvasin, *Вздохи о потерянном "могуществе": почему на Украине недовольны безъядерным статусом страны (Sighs About the Lost "Power": Why Ukraine Is Dissatisfied with the Country's Non-Nuclear Status)*, "RT на русском (RT in Russian)", 22.08.2019, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/660969-yadernoe-oruzhie-ukraina-kravchuk>.

7 *Виступ Президента України на -58й Мюнхенській конференції з питань безпеки (Speech by the President of Ukraine at the 58th Munich Security Conference)*, "President of Ukraine," 19.02.2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-na-58-j-myunhenskij-konferenciyi-72997>.

8 *Зеленский пригрозил пересмотреть отказ Украины от ядерного оружия (Zelensky Threatened to Reconsider Ukraine's Refusal of Nuclear Weapons)*, "RIA Novosti," 19.02.2022, <https://ria.ru/20220219/memorandum-1773809316.html>.

9 *Шойгу: Украина хочет вернуть себе статус ядерной страны (Shoigu: Ukraine Wants to Regain the Status of a Nuclear Country)*, "IA REGNUM," 21.02.2022, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3513734.html>.

2022, the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia, Sergey Naryshkin, claimed to have evidence of Ukrainian efforts to build nuclear weapons.¹⁰ Russia's political and military leaders have talked about some old Soviet capabilities, such as the Tochka-U missile, which could carry a nuclear payload. The explosions at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant and the physics campus of Kharkiv University were also discussed in the Russian media.¹¹ Russia alleged that Ukrainian forces attacked these facilities to hide any traces of the development of nuclear capabilities.¹² On the contrary, multiple credible sources revealed that the Russian military was responsible for the attacks on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, not the Ukrainian forces.¹³

These allegations are nothing new. Russian concerns about Ukraine's developing nuclear capabilities were repeatedly voiced in 2014, during Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory. After Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, TASS published an interview with experts, claiming that Ukraine would be able to develop nuclear weapons within ten years.¹⁴ In a contradictory and

condemnatory fashion, the Russian media also criticised the idea that Ukraine would even be capable of developing it. Instead, many Russian outlets snidely asserted that Ukraine could not produce a nuclear weapon, and could only create a radiological weapon or so-called "dirty bomb."¹⁵ The Russian media called this type of weapon a "poor man's atomic bomb" and emphasised the ease with which Ukraine would be able to convert its existing limited capabilities to develop it. In 2015, the Russian publication *Military Review* discussed the history of the dirty bomb concept, and concluded that Ukraine would be highly capable of creating them on its territory.¹⁶ There is no evidence that the Ukrainian military or energy authorities have ever pursued the development of radiological weapons in any shape or form.

International Support

Finally, the third line of argumentation centres around the claim that the West, both politically and financially, incentivises Ukraine to develop nuclear weapons, as a means to threaten Russia. An article in a

10 Sergey Naryshkin, *Директор СВР России Сергей Нарышкин о специальной военной операции на Украине (Russian SVR Director Sergey Naryshkin on Special Military Operation in Ukraine)*, 3.03.2022, <http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2022/03/direktor-svr-rossii-sergey-naryshkin-o-spetsialnoy-voennoy-operatsii-na-ukraine-htm>.

11 *МО: боевики взорвали корпус физтеха в Харькове для сокрытия данных по ядерной тематике (MoD: Militants Blew Up a Physics and Technical Institute Building in Kharkov to Hide Data on Nuclear Topics)*, "RT in Russian", 11.03.2022, https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/974640-vzryv-instituta-v-harkove?utm_source=smi2.

12 *Russia Blames Attack at Nuclear Power Station on Ukrainian Saboteurs*, "Reuters", 4.03.2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-blames-attack-nuclear-power-station-ukrainian-saboteurs-interfax-2022-03-04/>.

13 Rob Picheta, *How Dangerous was Russia's Attack at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant?*, "CNN World", 4.03.2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/04/europe/ukraine-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant-attack-explainer-intl/index.html>.

14 *СМИ: Украина может создать ядерную бомбу за 10 лет (Media: Ukraine Can Create a Nuclear Bomb in 10 Years)*, "TASS", 6.09.2014, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1447246>.

15 *На Украине предложили создать ядерные бомбы против России и Венгрии (Ukraine Proposes to Create Nuclear Bombs against Russia and Hungary)*, "RT на русском [RT in Russian]", 10.06.2020, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/754032-ukrainya-yadernye-bomby-rossiya-vengriya>.

16 *Aleksey Volodin, "Ядерная держава" с каменным топором ("Nuclear Power" with a Stone Ax)*, *Военное обозрение (Military Review)*, 14.05.2015, <https://topwar.ru/74824-yadernaya-derzhava-s-kamennym-toporom.html>.

Russian military journal, *Military-Industrial Courier*, talked in 2018 about how China might supply the technology and Saudi Arabia might provide the money for the research that could enable Ukraine to develop a “dirty bomb” or even a nuclear weapon.¹⁷



Russian military and intelligence leaders have alleged that Ukraine currently has or can quickly regain the technical capabilities to create a weapon of mass destruction: if not a nuclear bomb, then at least a radiological bomb

A possible reason why these claims may seem plausible to Russian audiences is that Russia and Ukraine had a long history of joint work on nuclear capabilities during the Soviet era. Ukrainian research institutions, particularly the above-mentioned Kharkiv Institute, played a crucial role in developing Soviet weapons. The Russian media has openly acknowledged the contribution of the Kharkiv Institute in their publications on the topic.¹⁸ A design bureau in Dnipro (Konstruktors'ke byuro “Pivdenne”) was also central to the Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile programme. Russia’s disinformation narratives claim that

Ukraine’s missile production capabilities serve as evidence of its ability to produce launch vehicles for nuclear warheads. This ignores how producing missiles is fundamentally different from producing nuclear weapons.¹⁹ The Russian claim that missile production was equivalent to an intentional effort to also load the missile with nuclear weapons was pernicious conjecture on their part.

The Russian leaders make the strategic argument that they cannot accept Ukraine as a nuclear-armed neighbour because nuclear weapons launched from its territory would strike Russia in just a few minutes.²⁰ The Levada Centre’s polls show that, over the past few years, the fear of imminent global war has been increasing among Russians.²¹ Ukraine is portrayed as a Western proxy, deprived of any decision-making ability, and yet capable of inflicting a devastating nuclear strike on Russia.

Why These Narratives Lack Grounds

Political Will

Ukrainian rhetoric on dissatisfaction with the Budapest Memorandum and renunciation of its nuclear status, can be tracked throughout Ukraine’s history as an independent state. Some of the statements that have received considerable media attention in Russia can be attributed to extremist political groups originating from

17 Sergey Ketonov, *Оружие возмездия украинского изготовления (Weapons of Retaliation Made in Ukraine)*, “Военно-Промышленный Курьер (Military-Industrial Courier)”, 45, no. 758, 20.11.2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/46425>.

18 Ekaterina Prizova, *Как создавалась первая советская атомная бомба (How the First Soviet Atomic Bomb Was Created)*, “Российская газета (Russian Gazette)”, 12.01.2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/01/12/kurchatov-site.html>.

19 Oleg Barabanov, and Richard Weitz, *Ядерные страхи после украинского кризиса (Nuclear Fears Following the Ukrainian Crisis)*, “Россия в глобальной политике (Russia in Global Politics)”, 14.07.2015, [<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/yadernye-strahi-posle-ukrainskogo-krizisa/>].

20 Yevgeniy Tsots, *Ядерное оружие Украины – угроза для России, которую уже не отбить (Ukraine’s Nuclear Weapons Are a Threat to Russia That Can No Longer Be Repulsed)*, “IA Regnum”, 27.0.2022, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3518785.html>.

21 *Страху (Fears)*, “Levada Center”, 12.01.2022, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/01/12/strahi-5/>.

fringe individuals and organisations that lack legitimacy, both in Ukraine and abroad.²² Despite numerous attempts to enter mainstream politics, these groups have little electoral support among Ukrainian voters. Therefore, their rhetoric cannot be rightfully interpreted as representing the majority opinion, nor, moreover, can it serve as evidence of Ukraine's national political objective.



Ukrainian presidents Poroshenko and Zelenskyy have made desperate pleas to revive the international assurance mechanism, and expressed disappointment that it has not been working properly. Trust in the Budapest Memorandum was explicitly stated even in the Military Doctrine of Ukraine

In instances where statements have been made by legitimate Ukrainian political and community leaders, a closer look at the timing of such statements shows that in most cases they were made in response to increased threats from the Russian Federation to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. For instance, Russia's construction of a dam in the Kerch Strait, in close proximity to Ukraine's territory,

was one of the early incidents which forced Ukrainian leaders to question the support guaranteed by the Budapest Memorandum.²³

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to even more frequent claims that renunciation of Ukraine's nuclear status was a mistake, as it did not increase the country's security. Since 2014, Ukraine has asked for consultations on the Budapest Memorandum four times. They never happened, because Moscow repeatedly blocked the meeting.²⁴

Furthermore, Russia's military build-ups over recent years provided Ukrainians with rational reasons to express regret about the renunciation of Ukraine's nuclear status; some of these regrets were expressed by members of the Ukrainian parliament.²⁵ However, the many attempts to revive the Budapest Memorandum through consultations occurred during Zelenskyy's presidency, which underscores the current Ukrainian government's commitment to its non-nuclear status. While the Ukrainian government is upholding its commitment, it wants Russia and the other parties involved in the Memorandum to uphold their own commitments.

Ukrainian presidents Poroshenko and Zelenskyy have made desperate pleas to revive the international assurance mechanism, and expressed disappointment that it has not been working properly. Trust in the Budapest Memorandum was explicitly

22 Polina Sinovets, *Strategic Culture of Ukraine and its Non-Nuclear Status*, "Odesa Center for Nonproliferation," 2022, <http://odcnp.com.ua/ukraine-and-npt-regime/232-strategic-culture-of-ukraine-and-its-non-nuclear-status>, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/01/12/strahi-5/>.

23 Sophie Lambroschini, *Russia/Ukraine: Prime Ministers Meet Today Over Tuzla Dam Dispute*, "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty," 24.10.2003, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1104782.html>.


24 *Zelensky's Full Speech at Munich Security Conference*, "Kyiv Independent," 19.02.2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

25 Mark Sirovoy, "Могли бы шантажировать мир". Арахамия назвал фатальной ошибкой отказ от ядерного оружия ("We Could Have Blackmailed the World." Arakhamia Called Renunciation of Nuclear Weapons a Fatal Mistake), "LIGA", 29.07.2021, <https://news.liga.net/politics/news/mogli-by-shantajirovat-mir-arahamiya-nazval-fatalnoy-oshibkoy-otkaz-ot-yadernogo-orujija>.

stated even in the Military Doctrine of Ukraine, adopted in 2012 – before Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine.²⁶ The military and national security doctrines that were passed *after* the territorial integrity of Ukraine was violated did not express such hope. Notably, even despite the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory, these documents do not refer in any way to a revival of the country’s nuclear status.

Technological Capabilities

Russian claims that Ukraine has – or could easily get – the technological capabilities to quickly build nuclear – or at least radiological weapons, ignore the fact that even if it *wanted* to build one, Ukraine would need to make an extraordinary effort to actually produce a nuclear weapon. Ukraine’s civilian nuclear energy facilities do not possess the necessary technology to produce the fuel required for building a nuclear bomb. Neither does it possess any existing stockpiles of highly enriched uranium. To make a weapon, Ukraine would need to import the necessary enriched uranium or plutonium from another country. After Ukraine eliminated its nuclear arsenal and infrastructure by 2001, 234 kilograms of enriched uranium remained in Ukrainian labs. Then, in 2010, during the Nuclear Security Summit, Ukraine decided to give up that nuclear fuel and transferred it in 2012 to the US as a sign of goodwill.²⁷



Russian claims that Ukraine has – or could easily get – the technological capabilities to quickly build nuclear – or at least radiological weapons, ignore the fact that even if it wanted to build one, Ukraine would need to make an extraordinary effort to actually produce a nuclear weapon

Ukraine does engage in the extraction of natural uranium (which usually consists of 0.03 percent of the mined ore), and processes it into uranium concentrate.²⁸ However, it does not have the capability to enrich uranium, and purchases the nuclear fuel used in its own nuclear power plants from international suppliers. Ukraine has fifteen reactors (13 VVER-1000 and 2 VVER-440) that operate with uranium fuel, enriched up to the level of 3 – 3.5 percent. It was provided to Ukraine by Westinghouse and Rosatom before the war. These suppliers can use either Ukrainian uranium, enriched to the level needed, or buy it in an already enriched form from an enriched uranium supplier such as the French company Areva.²⁹

There was never a uranium enrichment capability in Ukraine during Soviet times; this was one of the technical reasons why Ukraine gave up the nuclear

26 *On the Decision by The National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine On March 8, 2012 “On the New Edition of the Military Doctrine of Ukraine”*, “President of Ukraine”, 8.06.2012, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3902012-14403>.

27 Dmytro Chumak, *The Implications of the Ukraine Conflict for National Nuclear Security Policy*, “SIPRI”, November 2016, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2016/eu-non-proliferation-and-disarmament-papers/implications-ukraine-conflict-national-nuclear-security-policy>.

28 Vladimir Dvorkin, *Ядерное оружие на Украине – фантазии и реальность (Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine – Fantasies and Reality)*, “Независимое военное обозрение (Independent Military Review)”, 24.03.2022, https://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2022-03-24/1_1182_reality.html.

29 *Nuclear Power in Ukraine*, “World Nuclear Association”, 2022, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-t-z/ukraine.aspx>.

weapons it inherited from the collapsed USSR.³⁰ In 2009, when the issue of energy independence from Russia first became relevant for Ukraine, the initiative of President Yushenko to introduce uranium enrichment for non-military nuclear energy purposes was discouraged by its Western partners.³¹ Partly due to the example of Iran using a civilian nuclear programme as cover to develop a uranium enrichment capability that is also applicable to weapons programmes, uranium enrichment is today of great international concern. If a country can enrich uranium for nuclear reactors, then it has the potential to sooner or later also enrich it to highly enriched uranium or weapons-grade material.



There was never a uranium enrichment capability in Ukraine during Soviet times; this was one of the technical reasons why Ukraine gave up the nuclear weapons it inherited from the collapsed USSR

Therefore, since Ukraine does not have any enrichment capabilities to produce weapons-grade uranium, it would need to establish new capabilities, thereby violating IAEA safeguards. According to many expert assessments, Ukraine would need thousands of centrifuges to produce sufficient highly enriched nuclear material for a nuclear weapon. But Ukraine has signed and ratified the Additional Protocol, which gives the IAEA expanded rights to

conduct inspections in order to verify a country's legitimate retention of nuclear material, and to verify that there is no prohibited radioactive material.³² Given that, it would be extremely risky for Ukraine to launch a covert nuclear programme, and an extraordinary effort would be required to initiate a new enrichment program now without being detected. Moreover, in order to do so, Ukraine would need to violate international export controls and obtain the highly enriched material clandestinely. Today, there is a high likelihood of this clandestine effort being detected. Since Ukraine is focused on obtaining conventional weapons to help it counter the Russian invasion, it is highly unlikely that it would risk Western support for its conventional defences by embarking on a long-term high-risk effort to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

Russia's false narratives alleging Ukraine's radiological weapons capabilities highlight the fact that Ukraine uses nuclear power and produces spent nuclear fuel that could be dispersed with conventional explosives, creating a so-called "dirty bomb." While theoretically possible, handling radioactive material and dispersing it with conventional explosives is very complicated, which partly explains why it has never been done. Highly radioactive spent reactor fuel is stored in a water-cooling pool to lower its radiation level and eventually packed in heavy concrete containers for lasting storage. Even if some amount of spent nuclear fuel is obtained clandestinely, handling highly radioactive material remains a formidable challenge.

30 Heorhiy Erman, *Чи може Україна повернути ядерний статус і якою буде ціна (Can Ukraine Return to Nuclear Status and What Will the Price Be?)*, "BBC News Ukraine", 22.02.2022, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-60470444>.

31 Volodymyr Piskovyy, *Професійна складова (Professional Component)*, "ZN.ua", 30.10.2009 https://zn.ua/ukr/energy_market/profesiyna_skladova.html.

32 *Additional Protocol*, "International Atomic Energy Agency", <https://www.iaea.org/topics/additional-protocol>.

To keep a human being safe, one kilogram of lead covering is needed for each gram of gamma radiation-producing material. Thus, a bomb containing 5 kilograms of gamma-radioactive material would weigh 5 tons.

Last but not least, there is the danger of a nuclear reactor blowing up, which could lead to the dispersion of radioactive material over a territory of unknown size. Given Ukraine's experience with and continuing custodianship of the Soviet-era reactor at Chernobyl, Ukraine is not likely to risk another nuclear industrial incident of this type on its territory. However, Russia's military attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant entail a serious possibility of creating just this type of radiological incident. Ukrainian reactor management officials moved 200 metric tons of spent fuel containers at the reactor so that they could be monitored by overhead satellites, in order to detect any attempts to move them further away, which would require special transport capabilities in order to do so safely.

International Support

Russia's narratives concerning Ukraine building a nuclear or a radiological weapon to target Russia include a reference to external support. This false argument plays the most to the fears of Russia's domestic

audiences. Western leaders explicitly and repeatedly refute this claim.³³ While some Ukrainian extremists have argued that nuclear capability would protect it from Russia, Ukraine's elected leadership has been extremely cautious not to stoke up Russian fears.

Given the IAEA inspection provisions under the Additional Protocol, the cost of a clandestine nuclear programme and the risk of it being detected are significant disincentives for Ukraine to pursue a nuclear weapons capability today. Moreover, the international political costs of secretly pursuing nuclear capability after having committed not to do so would threaten Ukraine's relations with its Western partners, and would inevitably undermine one of the main pillars of the country's foreign policy since 2014. Notably, while a legislative bill on Ukraine's withdrawal from the Non-proliferation Treaty was registered back in 2014, it never received serious consideration.³⁴

In sum, to underscore once again, Ukraine accepted the obligations of the Additional Protocol's comprehensive safeguards agreement, which entails "the highest level of trust of the Agency to the state."³⁵ The IAEA regularly checks all the nuclear facilities in Ukraine, including the Neutrons Source Facility in Kharkiv – which Russia often

33 *Fact Sheet on WMD Threat Reduction Efforts with Ukraine, Russia and Other Former Soviet Union Countries*, "U.S. Department of Defense", 9.06.2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3057517/fact-sheet-on-wmd-threat-reduction-efforts-with-ukraine-russia-and-other-former/>; *Disinformation About Russia's Invasion of Ukraine – Debunking Seven Myths Spread by Russia*, "Delegation of the European Union to the People's Republic of China", 18.03.2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/disinformation-about-russias-invasion-ukraine-debunking-seven-myths-spread-russia_en?s=166.

34 Polina Sinovets, *Strategic Culture of Ukraine and its Non-Nuclear Status*, "Odesa Center for Nonproliferation," 2022 <http://odcnp.com.ua/ukraine-and-npt-regime/232-strategic-culture-of-ukraine-and-its-non-nuclear-status>, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/01/12/strahi-5/>

35 Dmytro Chumak, *The Implications of the Ukraine Conflict for National Nuclear Security Policy*, "SIPRI", November 2016, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2016/eu-non-proliferation-and-disarmament-papers/implications-ukraine-conflict-national-nuclear-security-policy>

falsely claims is the main source of Ukraine's "nuclear programme." SIPRI Research Associate Peter Topychkanov has stated that there have never been concerns associated with Ukraine regarding any prohibited nuclear activities.³⁶ Neither the IAEA nor any other actor other than Russia has ever claimed that Ukraine was developing a clandestine nuclear programme. Russia's false accusations about Ukraine's desire to obtain a nuclear weapons capability are just part of its information warfare, which aims to justify the invasion and maintain support for its invasion of Ukraine with Russian domestic and foreign pro-Russian audiences.

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36 Elena Chernenko, "Украине было бы крайне сложно скрыть практические действия по созданию ядерного оружия" (*It Would Be Extremely Difficult for Ukraine to Hide Practical Actions to Create Nuclear Weapons*), "Kommersant", 10.03.2022 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5250345>.

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-atomnuyu-bombu-na-krym-ili-rostov-politolog.html>

5 *60 минут (60 minutes)*, Rossiia 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-renoounce-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 *“Извлечь 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_sozdavay_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 *Постпред 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 Chernobyl)*, Zvezda, 2016, <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 *Disinfo: 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. Gretskiy, *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_Gretskiy_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 вести 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-ekspluataciu-shovishe-vidpracovanogo-adernogo-paliiva.html>

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 Energodar. «The residents of the city are grateful to the servicemen of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, who protect the city of Energodar», – 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 Energodar, where the nuclear power plant is located¹⁴. It is obvious that, from a military point of view, Ukraine's bridgehead near Energodar 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 Energodar residents and the ZNPP personnel: «The special services of Ukraine are preparing provocations and terrorist attacks against the residents of Energodar 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, [\[https://www.rt.com/russia/570349-ukraine-stockpiling-ammo-plants/\]](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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THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AS A TARGET AND A TOOL IN RUSSIAN INFORMATION AND MANIPULATION CAMPAIGNS

Olga Chyzhova
Ukrainian Prism Europe

Information manipulation campaigns have long been a part of Russia's war machine toolkit, preparing public opinion and laying the ground for military operations. The EU has taken some action to prevent the Kremlin's malign influence on its information space, the European Parliament also being a part of that effort. But as a year of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine clearly demonstrates, these measures were not enough to protect the EU from anti-democracy attacks. This article deals with the narratives of Russian propaganda targeted at the European Parliament, the goals of such information manipulation campaigns, and the role of some Members of the European Parliament in such campaigns. Nonetheless, the EP is the most proactive body in proposing policies to counter Russian propaganda.

Introduction

Information had been weaponised by Russia long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and even before the start of the Russian – Ukrainian war in 2014. As a part of the Russian hybrid war machine, it had previously been used to shape public opinion and lay out grounds for the kinetic offensive. Currently, Moscow's disinformation and manipulation campaigns are not only anti-Ukrainian, but also anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-democracy as such. At the same time, the first European External Action Service Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

Threats points out, that “most of the foreign information manipulation in 2022 had centered on narratives supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine”¹.


The European Union was quite late in recognising the threat of information influence, but has been actively looking for solutions to deter it ever since. In 2015, the EU set up the “East StratCom Task Force” to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns in its Eastern neighbourhood. The unit is tasked to “analyse disinformation trends, explain and expose disinformation narratives, and raise awareness of the negative impact of disinformation that

1 *1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats. Towards a framework for networked defence*, European External Action Service, February, 2023
<https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

originates in pro-Kremlin sources”². It manages the project “EUvsDisinfo”, which has collected a database of over 15,000 Russian falsifications, with more than 40% of them being about Ukraine and the war against it³. The EU states and institutions use a Rapid Alert System (RAS)⁴ to share knowledge about disinformation. The Action Plan against Disinformation (2018)⁵ and European Democracy Action Plan (2020)⁶ were adopted by the European Commission, both addressing the issue of information manipulation.

On February 07, 2023, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), announced the launch of the new EU platform to fight Russian and Chinese disinformation. The Information Sharing and Analysis Centre within the European External Action Service will track information manipulation by foreign actors, and coordinate with the 27 EU countries and the wider community of NGOs⁷. In his keynote speech, HRVP Borrell stated: “Russia is using information manipulation and interference as a crucial instrument of its war against Ukraine with an unprecedented intensity and use of instruments. We have to work along three axes: to anticipate and deter

FIMI (*Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference* – author) activities, to take action in support of Ukraine, and finally – to be ambitious in building resilience to authoritarian regimes”⁸.



the European Union agreed upon the 10th package of sanctions against Russia, which also included personal sanctions against eight propagandists who publicly backed the war and media executives responsible for propaganda and censorship

On February 25, 2023, the European Union agreed upon the 10th package of sanctions against Russia, which also included personal sanctions against eight propagandists who publicly backed the war and media executives responsible for propaganda and censorship⁹. The current list of propagandists to be sanctioned in the future was compiled jointly by the EU and the Ukrainian authorities and civil society, and now contains over 150 names¹⁰. As of March

2 *Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force*, “European External Action Service”, 27.10.2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en#11234

3 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?date=>

4 *Factsheet: Rapid Alert System*, European External Action Service”, 15.03.2019 https://eeas.europa.eu/node/59644_en

5 *Action Plan against Disinformation*, European Commission, 5.12.2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1615890082555&uri=CELEX%3A52018J00036>

6 *European Democracy Action Plan*, European Commission, 3.12.2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423>

7 *Disinformation – EU responses to the threat of foreign information manipulation*, European External Action Service, 8.02.2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/disinformation-%E2%80%93-eu-responses-threat-foreign-information-manipulation_en

8 *Disinformation: Opening speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EEAS Conference on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference*, European External Action Service, 7.02.2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/disinformation-opening-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-eeas-conference_en

9 A. Rettman, *EU sanctions add Russian writers who back the war*, Euobserver, 27.02.2023, <https://euobserver.com/world/156761>

10 *Polish EU minister says latest sanctions on Russia are stronger than ever*, Polish Press Agency, 25.02.2023, <https://www.pap.pl/en/news/news%2C1541844%2Cpolish-eu-minister-says-latest-sanctions-russia-strongest-ever:html>

2023, the transmission and distribution (via cable, satellite, IPTV, platforms, websites and apps) of the following Russian media channels is suspended in the EU: Russia Today, Sputnik, Rossiya RTR/RTR Planeta, Rossiya 24/Russia 24, TV Centre International, NTV/NTV Mir, Rossiya 1, REN TV and Pervyi Kanal¹¹.



the European Parliament and its members have themselves become a target for the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, but also a tool to amplify Moscow's own narratives, create confusion, and polarise societies

The European Parliament (EP) in its turn has demonstrated more active involvement in countering the disinformation and manipulation campaigns since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion. In March 2022, the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) presented a report¹² with recommendations for a sanctions' regime and other measures on how to stop malign influences in Europe's information space, including rules on online platforms, the media, cybersecurity, international

cooperation, and election campaigns¹³. As a result, the EP, in its resolution¹⁴ of March 9, 2022, called for the banning of Russian propaganda channels, RT and Sputnik, more funding for the independent media and fact-checking initiatives, and requesting online platforms and tech companies to detect and block accounts spreading disinformation. The Parliament has also established a new special Committee on Foreign Interference (INGE2), which is to present its recommendations in 2023. The EP was also among the first European institutions to openly push for a special Tribunal for Russian war crimes in Ukraine¹⁵. The Ukrainian side, including journalists and human rights activists, is calling for the trial of Russian propagandists for incitement to genocide.

At the same time, the European Parliament and its members have themselves become a target for the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, but also a tool to amplify Moscow's own narratives, create confusion, and polarise societies.

This paper aims to study, based on the example of information campaigns involving the European Parliament, how Russia instrumentalises European democratic institutions, procedures, and values, to sow divisions, manipulate information environments, and as a result undermine democracy.

11 *EU sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine*, European Commission, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-sanctions-against-russia-following-invasion-ukraine_en#sanctioning-disinformation-actors

12 *REPORT on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation*, European Parliament, 8.02.2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0022_EN.html

13 *Foreign interference committee finalizes recommendations*, European Parliament, 3.03.2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20220303STO24640/foreign-interference-committee-finalises-recommendations>

14 *European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation*, European Parliament, 9.03.2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0064_EN.html

15 *Ukraine war: MEPs push for special tribunal to punish Russian crimes*, European Parliament, 19.01.2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230113IPR66653/ukraine-war-meps-push-for-special-tribunal-to-punish-russian-crimes>

Methodology

The Kremlin's information manipulation campaigns target multiple audiences simultaneously, and are tailored to each of these audiences, both domestically in Russia and externally. While Russia has been successful in spreading its narratives abroad via different channels, analysts point out¹⁶¹⁷ that, for foreign experts, it is very difficult to penetrate the Russian information environment. Multiple reasons can be named and argued for this, the main ones being strict state control over media space, but also (unlike at the time of the Cold War) deep mistrust of Western sources, cultivated by years of work by the Russian propaganda machine. Ironically enough, this also seems to be mainly true for Russian-speaking audiences outside of Russia, including in the EU.

This statement can only be supported by the author's own experience in the first weeks of the full-scale war. After the start of the invasion, volunteers from Ukrainian NGOs and communication experts united in an effort to counter the Russian offensive in the information sphere. Among other goals, we aimed to reach Russian audiences, as at that time it was still believed that they simply were not getting accurate information about the situation, and that is why they were not protesting. The group used all available online channels, from social media and messages to even Google Maps. We were very successful in the first week, getting emotional feedback. Russian propagandists even spread the fake report that the USA had spent millions of dollars on those activities,

while everything was actually done by volunteers. But that initial success was only possible as it seemed the offensive was a surprise for the Russian media as well; they were lost, had not received their playbooks, and were sending contradictory messages. As soon as the propaganda machine kicked in, any connection to the Russian audience was lost, accounts of activists on Telegram channels and social media groups were massively blocked, but most importantly, the responses of the Russian audiences stopped demonstrating any emotional response.

Thus, for the purposes of this research, we focus on Russian-language sources to see how they shape opinion and manage to maintain a strong influence on the above-mentioned target group of Russian-speaking audiences in Russia and abroad.

More specifically, we analyse one section of Russia's Disinformation Ecosystem (the model is offered by Max Glicker, Lukas Mejia, Rachel Chernaskey, and Clint Watts¹⁸), namely Russia's openly operating media. Some of these outlets are banned in the EU, but their Telegram channels are still functioning and reaching their audiences. We analyse the official Telegram channels of such media:

- RT in Russian (@rt_russian),
- RIA Novosti (@rian_ru),
- Sputnik (@sputniklive),
- Information Agency Regnum (@na_regnum),
- TASS (@tass_agency),
- Zvezda (@zvezdanews).


16 M. Keylan, *The West Is Failing To Penetrate The Russian Information Space: How We Got Here And What To Do About It*, Forbes, 2.02.2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/melikkaylan/2023/02/02/the-west-is-failing-to-penetrate-the-russian-information-space-how-we-got-here-and-what-to-do-about-it/?sh=6979a79d3b24>

17 D.R. Shedd, I. Stradner, *Waging Psychological War Against Russia*, Politico, 9.07.2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/07/waging-psychological-war-against-russia-00054995>

18 M. Glicker, L. Mejia, R. Chernaskey, C. Watts, *Russia's Disinformation Ecosystem – A Snapshot*, Digital Threat Analysis Center, 23.04.2021, <https://miburo.substack.com/p/russias-disinformation-ecosystem>

The time frame for analysis is for one year, from the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: 24 February 2022 – 24 February 2023.

It is also worth noting that disinformation is far from the only method Russia uses to reach its goals in the information war. Indeed, in the context of the European Parliament, manipulation of facts is even more widespread. For this reason, we analyse the moods, narratives, and wording of all the messages present on selected channels, in regard to the EP and its individual members (containing the search words “European Parliament”, “EP”, “MEP”, Member of European Parliament – *in Rus. ЕП, Европейский Парламент, евродепутат, депутат Европейского Парламента*).



TASS is generally more interested in the daily news, with a specific spotlight aiming to demonstrate the lack of values in the EP and EU in general (40%), while RT mostly aims at legitimising Russian propaganda narratives

While we have quantitative data from the analysis, we find it rather indicative of certain trends, referring to qualitative content analysis as the main method for the research.

Ways of Instrumentalising the European Parliament in Russian Information Campaigns

The European Parliament remains present on all five Telegram channels in focus throughout the year. In total, 279 messages about the European Parliament, its activities, and its members were detected and analysed. The narratives pushed in these posts can be categorised according to their goal and generally aim for:

- devaluation of the EP’s role as an institution – 13%,
- highlighting differences in the EP and legitimising Russian narratives – 25%,
- amplifying the wedge between the overall European and individual national levels and the absence of solidarity in the EU – 15%,
- demonstrating the EP’s interference in third countries – 20%,
- portraying Euroatlantic disunity – 4%,
- demonstrating the lack of values in the West – 23%.

Sometimes the messages are copy-pasted across several channels, but most often the same topics are picked up, though the framing is adapted to each channel’s style and audience. Among the channels analysed, the most attention to the European Parliament was paid by Sputnik (27%), RT (21%) and TASS (21%). It also appears clear that channels have their “specialisation” on one of the six goals mentioned above. For instance, the vast majority of EP mentions on Sputnik (35%) are focused on demonstrating the EP’s interference in third countries, whereas TASS is generally more interested in the daily news, with a specific spotlight aiming to demonstrate the lack of values in the EP and EU in general (40%), while RT mostly aims at legitimising Russian propaganda narratives, with the help of the EP (32%).

Devaluation of the EP’s role as an institution. The narrative questioning the EP’s legitimacy and powers has long been recurrent in the pro-Kremlin media. It is targeted at both European and Russian audiences. On the one hand, it aims at sowing mistrust in EU institutions, and demonstrating its incapability and ineffectiveness in tackling crises. On the other hand, it is called upon to calm down the Russian public and ensure that measures taken in response to Russian aggression are

not serious, and will not affect the Russian population at all. The disinformation narrative that the EP has no real power has been registered and debunked by the “EUvsDisinfo” project repeatedly since 2015¹⁹.

Campaigns instrumentalising such a narrative have been employed throughout the year, and were especially active at times when the European Parliament adopted decisions concerning Russia. The peak of such campaigns can be observed after the EP’s resolutions on the Russian energy resources embargo, listing the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation, calls to create a special tribunal for the Russian and Belarusian leaders, and particularly after Russia’s recognition as a sponsor of terrorism. Each such message is accompanied by a comment that the decisions of the EP are not legally binding and have no real consequences. Furthermore, the EP is often portrayed with sarcasm:

- *“I suggest recognizing European Parliament a sponsor of idiotism...”*; – @zvyezdanews, 23 November 2022;
- *“Russia doesn’t really take to heart the decision of Europarliament...”*; – @rt_russian, 27 November 2022;
- *“MFA Chief Sergey Lavrov believes, resolution of EP on recognizing Russia a “sponsor of terrorism” has to be commented on by doctors’*; – @tass_agency, 23 November 2022;
- *“...we [Wagner Group – author] announce EP dismissed as of today”*; – @rt_russian, 22 November 2022.

This narrative is being spread in 13% of the analysed messages. Its effectiveness highly depends on the lack of knowledge among the audience about the functions and responsibilities of the European Parliament.

Highlighting differences in the EP and legitimisation of Russian narratives.

Despite constantly attempting to undermine the EP’s role, Russian propaganda uses its resolutions, and especially statements and open letters of certain Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to legitimise its own narratives. Every fourth (25%) of the analysed posts seem to follow this exact aim. We will focus more on the role of the MEPs in the next section, while we will now analyse the most popular narratives.

The EP is most often used on the analysed Telegram channels to amplify such narratives common to Russian media disinformation as:

A. Sanctions do not reach their goal: they have no effect on Russia, but are hurting the EU and member states:

- *“The European Parliament warned of an energy catastrophe due to a possible ban on Russian gas imports”*; – @rt_russian, 8 March 2022;
- *“EU predicted catastrophe in case of refusal of Russian gas”*; – @na_regnum, 8 March 2022;
- *“An economic war with Russia for the European Union means inevitable losses, and possibly a bitter defeat, and even catastrophe”*; – @na_regnum, 7 April 2022.

B. Ukraine is corrupt, does not use aid properly, and its further military support will only cause escalation:

- *“... over the eight years of the conflict, the Ukrainian authorities have not fulfilled their obligations”*; – @rt_russian, 24 February 2022;
- *“MEPs opposed the supply of heavy equipment to Ukraine in order to avoid escalation”*; – @rian_ru, 26 August 2022;

19 Disinfo: The European Parliament Is A Bunch of Extremists with No Real Power, EUvsDisinfo, 8.12.2022,

- “Western countries do not want to listen to new demands of Vladimir Zelensky after his lies about a missile attack on Poland”, – @na_regnum, 20 November 2022;

C. It is not so clear who is responsible for the atrocities in Ukraine:

- “Even Members of the European Parliament thought about the fact that the events in Bucha were staged and hide the crimes of the Ukrainian Nazis”, – @na_regnum, 7 April 2022.
- “EP has not found any evidence for “terrorism sponsorship” of Russia, as MEP Gunnar Beck said”, – @sputniklive, 12 August 2022.


D. Human rights, especially freedom of speech, are not respected in the EU:

- “The European Parliament said that media censorship, including the ban on RT and Sputnik, is contrary to the constitutions of EU member states”, – @rt_russian, 30 March 2022;
- “European media seek to discredit anyone who offers an alternative view of the Ukrainian conflict”, – @sputniklive, 7 June 2022.

Amplifying the wedge between the overall European and individual national levels and the absence of solidarity in the EU. Highlighting the EU’s disunity, especially on the issues of sanctions against Russia and providing support for Ukraine, was one of the most popular goals of the Russian Telegram channels.

By far the most often mentioned country in this regard was Hungary. On the one hand, Russian propagandists tried to highlight problems with the rule of law in the EU country, on the other hand, to undermine the democratic procedures in the EU itself (“Classic Western Democracy. Deputy Head of the European Parliament Katarina Barly proposed to deprive Hungary of the right

to vote in the EU. Because Hungary doesn’t vote the way Barley thinks is right,” – @SputnikLive, 3 June 2022). Prime Minister Victor Orban’s sarcastic quote about the corruption scandal in the European Parliament accompanied by memes is intensively spread among all channels to undermine the EP’s power (“And then they said that the European Parliament is seriously concerned about corruption in Hungary”, – @rian_ru, 12 December 2022).

 **Highlighting the EU’s disunity, especially on the issues of sanctions against Russia and providing support for Ukraine, was one of the most popular goals of the Russian Telegram channels**

Both Hungary and Italy are also used multiple times to demonstrate the EU’s disunity on the issue of sanctions against Russia (“Hungary rejected the idea of the European Parliament on the “fair distribution of gas” between the EU countries in the face of its shortage”, – @sputniklive, 18 October 2022; “Italy suffers billions in losses due to anti-Russian sanctions. This is stated in the appeal of the deputies of the European Parliament to the EC”, – @rt_russian, 21 March 2022).

Latvia is the second most mentioned country in this type of posts. The most frequent topics that are raised about this state are related to the commemoration of the communist past and the rights of its Russian-speaking population. Although they more often portray the wedge within Latvia itself than between Latvia and the EU (“In Latvia, MEP Tatyana Zhdanok was arrested for honouring the memory of Soviet soldiers who liberated Riga”, @na_regnum, 9 September 2022).

Other topics used to amplify the different positions of the EU member states include

providing aid to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees (*“Strong disagreements arose between the EU countries and the European Parliament, relating, in particular, to assistance to Ukraine, the reception of refugees and the spending of EU funds”*, – @sputniklive, 13 November 2022).

Demonstrating the EP’s interference in third countries. Another target for criticism of the European Parliament in the Russian media is its attempts to influence the internal policies in non-EU states, especially “punishing” third states for a pro-Russian position.

Most often, such narratives are addressed at Serbia, its refusal to support sanctions against Russia, and as a result the calls from the EP to block Belgrade’s European integration process (*“The President of Serbia stated that after the referendums in Donbas, Zaporizhzhia and the Kherson region, the EU increased pressure on his country, but Belgrade would still not impose sanctions against the Russian Federation”*, – @rt_russian, 1 October 2022).

Quite an intensive campaign to do with Georgia was launched across all analysed Telegram channels, regarding the calls to free the imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili. Such addresses from the EP are also considered to be putting pressure on Tbilisi, and the negative reaction of the Georgian authorities was highlighted (*“We will not allow anyone to blackmail us, tear up the Constitution of Georgia and throw it away”*, – @sputniklive, 16 February 2023).

Among other countries mentioned in this regard were Turkey (*“Democracy in action. The head of the leading faction of the European Parliament threatened Turkey with isolation if Ankara blocked the admission of Finland and Sweden to NATO”* – @sputniklive, 15 May 2022), Armenia (*“the country’s “long-standing orientation” to Russia and its CSTO allies allegedly turned out to be*

“insufficient to ensure security in the region”, – @rt_russian, 28 October 2022), Azerbaijan (*“[Aliiev] stressed the inadmissibility of adopting resolutions “accusing Azerbaijan of what it has never done”*, – @sputniklive, 19 July 2022).

Portraying Euroatlantic disunity. To bring down military and financial support for Ukraine, the Russian media are trying to create the appearance of a split between the EU and the USA and also within NATO. The most common narrative used is that the European Union is being dragged into someone else’s war, but has to pay for it out of its own pocket. As a rule, such statements are promoted by certain MEPs:

- *“In France, they said that the EU ruins itself and enriches the United States, helping Kyiv”*, – @sputniklive, 20 January 2023;
- *“Irish MEP Mick Wallace called for demonstrations against the US-NATO “proxy war” in Ukraine and accused European politicians of dragging it out”*, – @tass_agency, 25 February 2023;
- *“The North Atlantic Alliance was created by the United States in order for the countries of Europe to serve American imperialism”*, – @tass_agency, June 16 January 2023;
- *“Under pressure from US hawks, EU countries are falling into complete oblivion regarding the supply of increasingly heavy weapons to Zelensky”*, – @tass_agency, 21 January 2023;
- *“If an international tribunal is to be created, then the United States should be judged first of all”*, – @sputniklive, 20 January 2023.

Demonstrating a lack of values in the West.

Most of the messages pursuing this goal are constructed as classic news reports, although they mostly contain some manipulative framing. The selection of such news about the European Parliament is very particular, and aims to highlight some faults in the EU

itself and the anti-democratic nature of its decision-making. The largest number of such posts concern the corruption scandal in the EP, as well corruption investigations against former members of the parliament. Quite popular were also the topics of managing the entry of refugees to the EU (“*The EU has proposed building fences at the borders to combat illegal migrants*”, – @rt_russian, 19 December 2022), and banning Russian diplomats and civil servants from accessing their buildings.

Members of the European Parliament as Targets for Attacks and the Voices of Russian Propaganda

Almost half of all the messages (44%) about the European Parliament on the analysed Telegram channels contain the names of parliamentarians. All in all, 66 MEPs are mentioned. As to the country’s representation, there are clearly some “favourites” that are being used by Russian propaganda. The frequency of country mentions does not correlate with the total number of MEPs from the given state. For example, most often Telegram channels pinpoint parliamentarians from France – 28 mentions, Germany – 13 mentions, Poland – 11 mentions, Latvia – 10 mentions, Italy – 9 mentions, and Romania – 8 mentions.

In some rare cases (less than 10%), the Russian telegram channels quote MEPs who are supportive of Ukraine. But that is just to highlight its narratives of the “evil west” and the European Parliament as a collection of extremists of all types. These parliamentarians are targets for criticism and sarcasm from Russian propagandists. The names of lawmakers from Poland are brought up in this context, most frequently:

- “*Anna Fotyga called on the European Commission to take “decisive actions” in relation to the Russian Federation*”, – @rt_russian, 31 July 2022;

- “*The member of the European Parliament from Poland [Robert Biedron] called the terrorist attack committed on the Crimea Bridge a “balm for the heart”*”, – @sputniklive, 8 October 2022;
- “*Ex-head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ex-Minister of Defence of Poland, Member of the European Parliament Radoslaw Sikorsky believes that the West has the right to supply nuclear weapons to Ukraine*”, – @tass_agency, 12 June 2022.

About 27% of the analysed cases of MEPs’ statements on the Russian media are neutral regarding the Russian war against Ukraine. Most of them are also used to strengthen Russia’s manipulative narratives, including:

- highlighting the weakness of the EU (“*Member European Parliament [Marco Zanni] is concerned about the EU’s strategic dependence on third countries, including China*” – @rt_russian, 17 November 2022; Petras Auštrevičius: “*Everything indicates that Russia is winning*”, – @na_regnum, 25 June 2022),
- portraying disregard for human rights in the EU (Sophia inN ‘t Veld: “*The widespread abuse of spyware in EU countries threatens democracy*”, – @tass_agency, 08 November 2022),
- depicting the aggressive West threatening Russia (“*Member of the European Parliament Tomáš Zdechovský supported the idea of dividing the Kaliningrad region between Poland and the Czech Republic*”, – @sputniklive, 30 September 2022),
- sowing disunity in the EU (“*Romanian MEP Mituța called dangerous not only talk about racial or ethnic “purity”, but also Orban himself*”, – @rian_ru, 25 July 2022),
- or just making fun of the EP (“*MEP and former mayor of Riga Nil Ushakov was criticized on social networks for his sneakers (!). Particularly patriotic network users confused the logo of New Balance sneakers with the Z sign*”, – @sputniklive, 7 October 2022).

At the same time, in most cases (63%) the Russian media mention openly pro-Russian Members of the European Parliament or the ones playing into Russian hands. Generally, these are the voices in the democratic institution used to amplify and legitimise the Kremlin's narratives. Each such statement useful to Moscow's propaganda is multiplied across all available Telegram channels.

There is a number of "usual suspects" most often cited on the analysed channels. Each of them has their own topic.


Among the most mentioned MPs is the representative of Latvia, Tatjana Ždanoka. Russian channels circulate her speeches on defending the rights of the Russian-speaking Latvians, and criticism of diminishing communist monuments. The most attention was paid to the case of the detention of the 72-year-old lawmaker at the rally against the demolition of the monument to the liberators.

Similar narratives along with vocal protest against the ban on Russians entering Estonia are often cited, from an Estonian parliamentarian, Yana Toom: *"The Estonian authorities look weak-minded when they deny entry to Russians on already issued visas"*, – @na_regnum, 12 August 2022.

French MP Thierry Mariani is often used on the Kremlin's channels as a voice for two of the most popular disinformation narratives, namely that sanctions against Russia are more harmful to the EU and that the partners should stop providing weapons to Ukraine as it causes escalation:

- *"Member of the European Parliament Thierry Mariani predicted a catastrophe for the EU if it refused to import Russian gas"*, – @na_regnum, 8 March 2022.
- *Arms supplies to Ukraine... is a deliberate creation of a new source of tension in Europe, which will ultimately harm everyone"*, – @na_regnum, 5 June 2022.

The same disinformation and manipulation messages, but also with an emphasis on Euroatlantic disunity, are spread through interviews with Irish MEP Mick Wallace (*"Any war is insane – it's time for people to take to the streets and speak out against this proxy war of the USA and NATO"*, – @tass_agency, 24 February 2023) and even former MEP from France Florian Philippot (*"The EU destroys itself and enriches the USA by helping Kyiv"*, – @na_regnum, 29 November 2022).

 ***in most cases (63%) the Russian media mention openly pro-Russian Members of the European Parliament or the ones playing into Russian hands. Generally, these are the voices in the democratic institution used to amplify and legitimise the Kremlin's narratives***

The most radical and extreme disinformation narratives are voiced by Italian MEP Francesca Donato and actively promoted across Russian Telegram channels. For her messages about the alleged attribution of atrocities in Bucha and made-up Nazi symbols on President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's shirt, Ms. Donato's profile was even blocked by Facebook. Although this fact was also happily spread by the Kremlin's channels as an example of restrictions on freedom of speech in the West.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The case study of the European Parliament is a manifestation of profound disinformation and manipulation flow, targeted at the institutional framework of the European Union. Russia not only uses distortion of information about the rules and procedures of the EP activities, but also takes advantage of European democratic processes.

Telegram channels analysed in this case study refer to two main audiences. The

first one is the Russian domestic audience. And in this regard, using anti-EU and anti-EP narratives may not cause significant harm. But still, a large share of the audience is Russian-speaking minorities in the EU countries. And active manipulation of the minds of this audience poses greater risk in the mid and long-term perspective.

Let us not forget that the informational component of Russian aggression is directly connected to all other layers of the Russian war machine, including the military hostilities. Such alienation and driving a wedge between national and European levels of government, and injecting mistrust between EU citizens and European institutions, might also present challenges from the short-term perspective.

Elections to the European Parliament in 2024 are on the radar of the Russian special services and propaganda outlets. Russia's aim is clearly to dissuade European voters from casting their ballots for traditional political parties, and for them to give preferences to populist and far-right political groupings. This definitely could change the political scene within the European Union for the next political cycle. Thus, the European Parliament as the core legislation body and platform for political representation has to draw more attention to European policies aimed at resistance to disinformation.

During 2023-2024, the relevant EU institutions involved in fighting disinformation should pay more attention to Russian narratives aimed at discrediting the European Parliament within target audiences in the EU member states. Those MEPs who consciously serve the interest of Russia should be exposed to naming and shaming information campaigns, revealing their roles as puppets in the Russian propaganda machine.

Provided that a big share of Russian propaganda is oriented at splitting national and European levels of European decision-

making, the effectiveness of individual country measures taken by the EU will depend on the joint initiatives of EU bodies and national governments in investigating and debunking specific cases of Russian malign influence. It goes without saying that effective countering of propaganda should be coupled with strategic communication efforts, both on the part of the EU and at national levels.

Taking positive note of the new body created by the EU, the Information Sharing and Analysis Centre within the European External Action Service, it is imperative that this institution should be part of coordinated efforts on the level of EU institutions. The case of the EP might be the pilot initiative to deal with in the pre-election period in the EU. Russia tries to reach out to wider audiences, and accordingly, Brussels institutions should not limit themselves only to producing narrow specialised content on Russian disinformation. Ukrainian experience in building the proactive StratCom might be of interest to EU specialists in terms of a robust toolkit, creativity, and time-wise approaches.

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“WE ARE INTERFERING:” THE INFORMATION WAR FROM NATO ENCIRCLEMENT TO A COUP D’ETAT

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Russia’s interaction with NATO includes concerns that its expansion is a security threat. Despite its opposition, Russia has accepted NATO enlargement for political and financial gain. This paper examines Kremlin disinformation concerning two of the alleged leading causes of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014: NATO encirclement and the US “overthrow” of Ukraine’s president. It documents how Russia’s claim that the West provoked it to defend its sphere disintegrates when compared to a historical timeline of paired examples concerning Russia’s response to NATO expansion. A related aim is to illustrate, also through a timeline, that the overthrow of Ukraine’s president was the consequence of a popular uprising.

Introduction

This paper explores the influence of Kremlin narratives regarding two of the alleged leading causes of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014: NATO encirclement and the US “overthrow” of Ukraine’s president Yanukovich. It will document how Russia’s claim that the West “provoked” it to defend its “zone of responsibility” collapses when subjected to a historical timeline of paired examples concerning Russia’s response to NATO expansion. A related aim is to illustrate, also through a historical timeline, that Yanukovich’s departure was strategized among Russian officials before Maidan, and that his ouster was largely the result of a popular uprising, regional economic and political discontent regarding local Party of Regions (PoR) oligarchs, including among some separatists, and Russia’s coercive economic policies.

It will conclude with a brief statement on how an accurate understanding of the causes of war is related to formulating a desirable and lasting conflict settlement.

Russian disinformation became well-known surrounding charges that the Kremlin interfered in the 2016 US presidential elections. The US government indicted some twenty-five Russian citizens and intelligence operatives associated with the Internet Research Agency (IRA), including Putin associate, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who allegedly funded the agency. In November 2022, Prigozhin, acknowledged on his *Telegram* channel, “we interfered...we are interfering.”¹

Russia’s interference in the US is a concern, because it provides the majority of aid to Ukraine. Research indicates that the US far right and left are both susceptible to this

1 Кепка Пригожина [Prigozhin’s cap] “Telegram,” 7.11.2022, https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/1978.

interference. There is a debate concerning the effect of Moscow's falsehoods, but there is an agreement that at minimum it has contributed to undermining citizens' trust in US institutions. A US government report identifies how Kremlin propaganda techniques are organised around master narratives. They include the contention that Russia is a victim of both Western provocations (NATO encirclement) and destabilisation activities, such as that the US "led a violent coup against Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich."² This paper evaluates these two master narratives, because they distort the causes of war and frustrate efforts for a stable conflict settlement.

A related goal of Kremlin propaganda is to weaken the resolve for Ukraine's defence.³ The gradual ascendancy of far-right and far-left politicians in the US Congress, as well as reports of declining weapon stockpiles, present a potential threat to US resolve in maintaining significant levels of aid. A US Senate Committee on Appropriations in May 2022 noted that, "our missile

stockpiles... are stretched very, very thin," while "one third of our stockpile" of Javelin anti-tank weapons has been depleted.⁴



Comparisons of NATO expansion with Moscow's response illustrate how claims that NATO enlargement led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine are misleading

US support remains strong. But polls indicate a 19 percent increase in the population agreeing that the US provides too much aid to Ukraine since the start of the war. More than 1/3 also disapprove of the Biden administration's handling of the war. A press conference by Republican Congressional representatives in November 2022 cautioned that "the days of endless cash and military material to Ukraine are ending." Elsewhere, leftist Senator Sanders

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- 2 A study frequently cited to debunk claims of Russian influence on the US electorate indicates the Kremlin's impact. "It would be a mistake to conclude," the researchers write, that Russian disinformation "did not have any impact" because those efforts did indeed contribute to the erosion of "faith in electoral integrity." G. Eady, T. Paskhalis, J. Zilinsky, J. et al., *Exposure to the Russian Internet Research Agency foreign influence campaign on Twitter in the 2016 US election and its relationship to attitudes and voting behaviour*. "Nature Communications" 14, 62 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-35576-9>. See also D. Freelon and T. Lokot, *Russian Twitter disinformation campaigns reach across the American political spectrum*. "Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review," January 2020, <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/russian-disinformation-campaigns-on-twitter/>. Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for National Security*, 10.01.2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CPRT-115SPRT28110/CPRT-115SPRT28110/context>.
 - 3 S. Ritter, *Ukraine is winning the battle on twitter but not in the real world*, "RT," 1.05.2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/554729-us-ukrainian-perception-donbass/>. RT has enlisted Ritter, a former US marine intelligence officer, who was convicted in 2011 of unlawful contact with a minor.
 - 4 The Javelin remark is from US Senator Roy Blunt and the missile statement is Senator John Boozman's, both supporters of aid to Ukraine. *A review of the President's Fiscal Years 2023 funding request and budget justification for the Department of Defense*, "United States Senate Committee on Appropriations," 3.05.2002, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/a-review-of-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2023-funding-request-and-budget-justification-for-the-department-of-defense>. The US Secretary of Defense told committee members that they can "rest assured" stockpiles will never fall to dangerous levels, but replenishment is a "challenge."

demanding diplomacy, while admonishing NATO “intransigence.”⁵

These observations often arise from misrepresentations of the causes of the war. Russia’s master narrative that the US/ NATO provoked it to invade Ukraine has been popularised by University of Chicago Professor, John Mearsheimer’s “Why Ukraine is the West’s Fault,” a video lecture with 28 million views. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) featured the article version on its Telegram channel.⁶

Comparisons of NATO expansion with Moscow’s response illustrate how claims that NATO enlargement led to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine are misleading. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in December 1991, Moscow considered a range of options in dealing with NATO. Reactions ranged from joining NATO, to forming an alternative security alliance, to diplomatic confrontation, to outright acceptance of NATO enlargement for political or economic

gain. Russia has generally been opposed to NATO enlargement, arguing that it must safeguard its neighbourhood and promote a balance of power (multipolarity) against the weight of US unilateralism. The Kremlin’s cooperation with NATO, the narrative goes, was undermined by a more powerful, deceitful opponent. NATO in turn followed a “neo-containment” policy in case a resurgent Russia emerged, an “open door” that welcomed post-Soviet states.⁷

Eichler classifies this period as “expansion by invitation.”⁸ Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries overwhelmingly supported NATO membership during the 1990s. A summary of public opinion polls from the 1990s consistently show that CEE states favoured NATO membership. Moreover, Gallup surveys illustrate that the vast majority of CEE nations viewed Russia as “the biggest threat.” Simply put, CEE leaders and the public “invited” NATO as a protective alliance, because Russia represents a security threat.⁹

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- 5 *House Republicans on Funding to Ukraine*, “C-Span,” 17.11.2022 [<https://www.c-span.org/video/?524346-1/house-republicans-seek-audit-ukraine-funding>]. The quotation is from Representative Matt Gaetz. The main focus of the press conference was to demand oversight of aid, but the larger context is the reactionary Republican resistance to President Biden’s policy, in addition to their America First ethos. A. Dunn, *As Russian invasion nears one year mark, partisans grow further apart on US support for Ukraine*, “Pew Research Center,” 31.01.2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/31/as-russian-invasion-nears-one-year-mark-partisans-grow-further-apart-on-u-s-support-for-ukraine/>. B. Sanders, *Prepared Remarks*, 10.02.2022 [<https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/prepared-remarks-sanders-senate-floor-speech-on-ukraine>]. Sanders cited the W. Burns memo analysed in this paper that is circulated in Russia media outlets.
 - 6 J. Mearsheimer, *Why Ukraine is the West’s Fault*, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMiSQAGOS4>]. The Russian MFA posted his article, *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault*, “Foreign Affairs,” September-October 2014, 28.02.2022, <https://t.me/MFARussia/11881>.
 - 7 M. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.
 - 8 J. Eichler, *NATO’s Expansion After the Cold War*, Springer: Cham, Switzerland: 2021, p. 3.
 - 9 J. Morrison, *NATO Expansion and Alternative Future Security Arrangements*, Washington, DC: National Defense University, April 1995, p. 80. T. Kostadinova, *East European Public Support for NATO Membership: Fears and Aspirations*, “Journal of Peace Research,” March 2000, v. 37, n. 2, p. 246; The *NATO Review* cautioned in 1997 that Eurobarometer poll data did demonstrate strong support for NATO, but large majorities in Poland and Bulgaria shifted the balance of the results. There was, however, “no majority against NATO.” G. Cunningham, *EU and NATO enlargement: How public opinion is shaping up in some candidate countries*, “NATO Review,” May/June 1997 <http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/docs/EnlargementPublicOppinion.htm#FN1>. J. Esipova and J. Ray, *Eastern Europeans, CIS Residents See Russia, U.S. as threats*, “Gallup,” 4.04.2016, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/190415/eastern-europeans-cis-residents-russia-threats.aspx>

NATO Expansion and Russia's Military-Industrial Complex

In this context, the following timeline demonstrates how Russia's confrontation-collaboration with NATO undermines its claims that NATO encirclement is an existential threat.¹⁰ It establishes how Moscow's confrontation with NATO is frequently followed by a reset, and one that intersects with political and financial dividends. The paired examples of this timeline occur with enough regularity, and at critical moments of expansion and war, to avoid the immediate charge that it is a selective presentation of the record.

One episode that highlights Russia's recognition that NATO membership for nearby states was not a threat occurred in August 1993. Polish president Walesa convinced Russian president Yeltsin to issue a joint statement that Polish entry into NATO was not against Russia's interests. Yeltsin, facing a domestic backlash, tried to recant. His strained position was in part

the result of the tension between Russian "moderates" and hardliners. Anti-NATO officials were angered at Yeltsin's apparent concession.¹¹ Yeltsin's revised position was that Poland had the right to a security arrangement of its choice, but options other than NATO, such as a Pan-European alliance were needed.¹²

Moscow's public presentation of NATO as an existential threat, what Russia's former foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev calls the militant's "favourite canard," must be weighed against closed-door deals with the West. Consider a meeting between Yeltsin and US president Clinton in May 1995. Yeltsin protested that NATO expansion was a humiliation for Russia. The solution was to "postpone NATO expansion for a year and a half or two years," Yeltsin surmised. Clinton made clear that he was not bargaining on NATO expansion or appearing to "slow down" that process, because Republicans in Congress were championing enlargement. Why would a delay of a few years make a difference to Russia if that expansion is a

10 Outspoken Russian journalist, Oleg Kashin, who supports the annexation of Crimea, points out the deceptive quality of Russia's presentation of the NATO threat. "Every Munich speech," is "followed by the inevitable reset, and even without resets, any anti-Western rhetoric in Moscow...always gave the impression of something pronounced purely for...internal use," a form of "cinema" where the space between the "pretend" and real is blurred concerning fears of the West. O. Kashin, *How to distinguish a real Cold War from an imitation*, "Republic," 16.10.2016, <https://republic.ru/posts/74672>

11 The Yeltsin statement is often portrayed as a capricious act, as a result of either drunkenness or Walesa's cunning, but Foreign Minister Kozyrev and Defence Minister Grachev had Yeltsin take a "soberer look" at the statement and "milder language" was used. Yeltsin's late-night agreement with Walesa was already leaked to the press, who sensationalised the incident. A. Kozyrev, *Russia and NATO Enlargement: An Insider's Account* [in] D. Hamilton and K. Spohr, (eds.) *Open Door NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security after the Cold War*, Washington, DC: Foreign Policy Institute, p. 454. During the visit, Yeltsin placed flowers at Katyn, a signal that the historical memory of Soviet tyranny mattered to Poles seeking a security alliance.

12 *Retranslation of Yeltsin letter on NATO expansion*, "US State Department declassified memo," <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16376-document-04-retranslation-yeltsin-letter>. Stature was also a concern. US/NATO should understand that Russia was a privileged state in the region and deserved an elevated place that was a "few degrees warmer" than other nations, in Yeltsin's words. Yeltsin was also trying to slow down what would be called "hasty enlargement." Yeltsin stated that he objected to NATO expansion, yet his approach indicated it was negotiable. Even the hardliners understood that CEE states justifiably sought NATO entry. "The leaders of Central and Eastern European countries," Primakov, an anti-NATO hardliner who replaced Kozyrev as Foreign Minister in 1996 discloses, "declared their firm desire to join NATO." In fact, "their populations—the majority—supported that position." Y. Primakov, *Russian Crossroads: Toward the New Millennium*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 130. The controversial former Duma member Konstantin Borovoy reports he created a pro-NATO group of 40 deputies against some 350 in the anti-NATO camp in 1995. K. Borovoy, *Russia against the USA, Book One*, Self-published manuscript, 2023, p. 61.

humiliation and threat to its existence? It turns out Yeltsin's concerns over his re-election displaced security goals. "We need to hold back [NATO enlargement]," the Kremlin leader explained "until after the elections."

The two leaders' public presentation of NATO expansion differed from their confidential diplomatic agreement. "We need to be careful that neither of us appears to capitulate," Clinton notes, "For you, that means you are not going to embrace expansion; for me it means no talk about slowing the process down." This agreement – support for Yeltsin's re-election by delaying NATO expansion in exchange for Russia agreeing to the Partnership for Peace (PfP) – is "something we should not tell the press," Yeltsin underscores. "When the elections are completed, we can tell the Eastern Europeans and Central Europeans," Yeltsin adds, "the time will come for expansion."¹³ Yeltsin willingly accepted NATO expansion for an electoral boost.

In March 1999, NATO admitted three new members: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Russia's objections were eclipsed by NATO's bombing of Kosovo. An enraged Yeltsin severed relations with the alliance.¹⁴ Tense negotiations over Russia's military role in Kosovo were temporarily relieved when Moscow agreed to operate its forces

under a NATO umbrella, an arrangement backed by Russia's then director of Federal Security Services (FSB), Vladimir Putin, who in August as acting Prime Minister, insisted that the "civilised world" would indeed "cooperate with NATO."¹⁵

The Kosovo crisis strained Russia-NATO relations, while Moscow's struggling economy offered an opportunity for rapprochement. Three months after the Kosovo conflagration, Yeltsin announced at the G-8 Summit that "the fight is over we need to make friends again." Russia's friendly disposition was inseparable from its quest to secure credit from the West. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) soon granted Russia the equivalent of \$4.5 billion in credit.¹⁶ It turns out that Russian officials were illegally laundering billions of dollars in IMF loans. The scheme involved skimming funds "to boost Yeltsin's chances for re-election."¹⁷ Here again there is confrontation, accompanied by reconciliation, in which financial schemes displaced strategic imperatives concerning NATO encroachment.

Against this backdrop, in May 2002, the NATO-Ukraine Commission announced a "qualitatively new and deepened relationship." Later that year, an action plan promoted Ukraine's "aspirations to

13 *Memorandum of Conversation – President Boris Yeltsin of Russia*, "Clinton Presidential Library and Museum-Clinton Digital Archives," 10.05.1995, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101423>.

14 D. Montgomery, *Angry Yeltsin cuts ties to NATO*, "Philadelphia Inquirer," 25.03.1999, p. A01.

15 *Putin pledges cooperation with NATO*, "Agence France Press," 15 August 1999. *Putin: Russia won't enter into hostilities in Balkans*, "Xinhua News Agency," 13.05.1999.

16 *G8 Leaders Promise to Help Russia Deal with Its Debt* "CNN Worldview," 20.06.1999; S. Hedlund, *Russia and the IMF: A Sordid Tale of Moral Hazard*, "Demokratizatsiya," v. 9, 2001, pp. 104-136.

17 US House of Representatives, *Committee on Banking and Financial Services, 160th Congress, Russia Money Laundering Hearing*, 21-22 September 1999 http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/bank/hba59889.000/hba59889_0f.htm; S. Pirani and P. Farrelly, *IMF knew about Russian aid scam*, "Guardian," 16.10.1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/oct/17/russia.business>.

full membership.”¹⁸ Of special importance is that Putin, now president, did not issue a dreadful warning about bringing NATO to Russia’s border. Instead, he declared that “the decision is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners.” Two years later, NATO added seven new members, all from eastern European states. Certainly, this was the moment to draw a line in the sand, to prohibit further encirclement. Yet when asked what he feared most concerning NATO expansion, Putin replied that he “always viewed this process in a positive light,” and again asserted that it was the right of these countries to select their own security alliance.¹⁹

Tensions erupted in 2007-2008, because the US recognised Kosovo’s independence, and announced plans for Georgia’s and Ukraine’s NATO entry. Putin’s respective Munich (2007) and Bucharest (2008) summit speeches issued a stern warning regarding their possible membership, and Russia invaded Georgia in August.²⁰ The Russia-

NATO council was suspended. Putin’s combative mood over NATO encroachment at Bucharest was contradicted by Russia’s agreement at that summit to support a NATO/ISAF war in Afghanistan, a country it once bordered. Russia already provided essential fuel supplies for NATO – 50 percent of the “critical” Regional Command (RC) South, a leaked 2008 cable notes.²¹ (Note that the Russia-NATO council was restored roughly seven months after the Georgia crisis in a period of President Obama’s “reset,” and the then President Medvedev’s overtures, but distrust lingered).

Combating terrorism was the stated strategic imperative for this support, but financial rewards were involved. Russian disinformation sheds light on its stated strategic objectives. Russian technologists circulated a 2008 leaked cable from the then US ambassador to Russia, William Burns.²² This cable is framed as definitive proof that the US was fully aware that Ukraine’s NATO accession was a red line for

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- 18 *Opening Statement by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson at the Ministerial Meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission*, “NATO Press Release,” 15.05.2002, <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020514b.htm>. *NATO-Ukraine Action Plan adopted at Prague*, 22.11.2002, <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2002/11-november/e1122c.htm>. In 2002, NATO participated in joint training exercises at Yavoriv training centre in Ukraine, which Putin did not frame as a security threat at a time when he publicly accepted Ukraine’s cooperation with NATO. The context included a NATO-Russia Council in December 2001 during a post-September 11 posture of cooperation to combat terrorism, *Cooperative Adventure Exchange*, “NATO Press Release,” 17.09.2002, <https://www.nato.int/ims/2002/p021007e.htm>.
- 19 The European Union also added 10 new countries from central and eastern Europe that year along with the European Neighbourhood Policy and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA). *Press Conference following Talks with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi*, “The Kremlin,” 12.04.2004, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22434>, *Meeting with NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer*, 8.04.2004, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/224>.
- 20 Two months before the Bucharest summit, Putin told Ukraine’s president that Russia “had no right to intervene” in Ukraine’s security arrangements. But the stationing of bases there would “force” Russia to take countermeasures. Ukraine’s then president, Viktor Yushchenko, reminded his Russian counterpart that its constitution prohibited NATO bases on Ukrainian soil, and that public opinion was not in favour of joining the alliance. *Press Conference following Talks with President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko and the Second Meeting of the Russian-Ukrainian Intergovernmental Commission*, 12.02.2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24833>.
- 21 K. Volker, *Russian Support for Afghanistan: Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff*, “US State Department, secret memo,” 3.10.2008, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08USNATO357_a.html, Russia indicated “it will continue to support NATO in Afghanistan.”
- 22 For example, *Secret Cable warned US in 2008 Meddling in Ukraine could split the country*, “Sputnik International,” 13.05.2014, <https://sputniknews.com/20140513/Secret-Cable-Reveals-Russia-Warned-US-in-2008-Meddling-in-189793988.html>, *Ukraine: US Ambassador to Moscow’s 2008 Cable: Nyet means Nyet*, “Prada.ru,” 13.05. 2014, https://english.prada.ru/opinion/127556_ukraine_cable/

Moscow. What is omitted intersects with the antagonism/rapprochement pattern. Burns certainly warned that Russia objected to NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. But, just as Foreign Minister Kozyrev complained about hardliners magnifying the NATO threat, Burns concludes that it is “politically popular to paint the US and NATO as Russia’s adversaries and to use NATO outreach to Ukraine and Georgia as a means of generating support from Russia nationalists.”²³ Another overlooked cable expands on why nationalists seized opportunities to drum up threats. Burns observes an increase in Russian arms sales, an industry propelled by defending against enemies, real or imagined. “It is an open secret that the Russian defence industry is an important trough at which senior military officials feed,” Burns wrote, “and weapons sales continue to enrich many.” For these militarists “the primary goal is profit.”²⁴

It is difficult to measure with precision whether profit or concerns over terrorism drove Russia’s strategy to provide military aid for a US/NATO war. Dmitry Rogozin, Russian ambassador to NATO 2008-2011, discloses an economic motive. “Launching defence industry cooperation with NATO

in many areas, especially helicopters, is one of our priorities,” Rogozin explains in 2011. This defence industry collaboration also strengthened the military readiness of CEE states that were, or were soon to be, NATO members. “NATO now has about 400 Russian made helicopters owned by eastern European nations that require upgrades,” Rogozin continues. Contracts were indeed issued to eastern European NATO countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria, who upgraded both helicopters and MiG fighter jets.²⁵ Before Rogozin broadcast that defence industry cooperation was a strategic priority, military-industrial cooperation with NATO was under way. In July 2008, the head of Rosoboronexport, a Russian state-run armaments manufacturer, considered the arms trade “the most promising line of cooperation between Russia and NATO,” including in the post-Soviet space. In fact, Russia’s leading defence industry company in 2006 similarly felt that NATO expansion in CEE states presents “new opportunities” for modernising armaments there.²⁶

Industry cooperation is further evidenced in a 2011 US Army contract with Rosoboronexport. A US Senate Committee

23 W. Burns, *Russia’s NATO Enlargement Redlines*, “Memorandum to Joint Chiefs of Staff,” 1.02.2008, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW265_a.html

24 W. Burns, *Addressing Russian Arms Sales*, “Secret cable,” 26.10.2007, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07Moscow5154_a.html.

25 Dmitry Rogozin: *Russia Wants More Tangible Cooperation with NATO*, “Security Index,” n. 1 (94) v. 17, 7.03.2011, p. 7 DOI: 10.1080/19934270.2011.553117 E. Teslova, *US Allies Continue Buying Weapons from Russia*, 24.11.2019, Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/us-allies-continue-buying-weapons-from-russia/1653985#>. It took until the summer of 2022 for Russia to terminate these contracts, because these NATO countries were aiding the supply chain to Ukraine. *Russia suspends certification of Czech, Bulgarian aircraft plants – Foreign Ministry*, “TASS,” 14.07.2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1479885>. Several NATO countries have longstanding business and military collaboration with Russia. For example, the head of Russia’s state-owned defence conglomerate is a member of the Franco-Russian Chamber of Commerce. *Rosoboronexport signs five agreements with Italian companies*, “SKRIN Market & Corporate News,” 4.09.2013, <https://advance-lexis-com.adelphi.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:598P-CH41-JCMC-POJ1-00000-00&context=1516831>

26 I. Chernyak, *Sellers of Fire; General Director of Rosoboronexport, Anatoly Isaikin, is convinced that Russia will retain the leading positions on the international armament market*. “Defense and Security (Russia),” 11.07.2008 <https://advance-lexis-com.adelphi.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:4T07-R7P0-TX4V-P1BM-00000-00&context=1516831>. *Rosoboronexport hosts 6th meeting of Weapon System Modernization Round Table*, “SKRIN Market & Corporate News,” 14.12.2006, <https://advance-lexis-com.adelphi.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:4MK0-8MC0-TXDS-035Y-00000-00&context=1516831>

on Armed Forces probed this deal that had the potential to reach \$1 billion. It uncovered that the US “directly purchases” military-use Mi-17 helicopters from the Russian arms conglomerate, and its aircraft were in use since 2005 in the Afghanistan War. Russia’s “priority” to enhance arms deals with NATO continued in 2013, with Sputnik news reporting “Pentagon to buy Russian helicopters despite ban.”²⁷ In September 2013, Russia and NATO performed a joint exercise, what a Russian general described as part of a “trusted relationship” with NATO.²⁸ Defence industry contracts appear as the strategic priority, rather than containing NATO outreach.



Russian leaders’ willingness to welcome NATO expansion for unprincipled motives (election favours, loan schemes, armaments profits) suggest security threats were either inflated or sacrificed for personal ambition. In this way, Russian policymakers are responsible for their (poor) security calculations

The pattern of hostility followed by a reset from 1993 to 2013 was disrupted by Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia’s cooperation with NATO should be

evaluated in terms of its costs/benefits to national security. What core interests were served or how was Moscow managing the predictable outcome or even worse case scenarios of abetting NATO’s enlargement?²⁹ The shifting international architecture following the end of the USSR lent itself to some degree of cooperation and exploration of alternative alliances. Moscow’s desire to secure IMF loans, enter the WTO, combat terrorism, and deflect criticism from the Chechnya wars contributed to its cooperation. However, Russian leaders’ willingness to welcome NATO expansion for unprincipled motives (election favours, loan schemes, armaments profits) suggest security threats were either inflated or sacrificed for personal ambition. In this way, Russian policymakers are responsible for their (poor) security calculations. That these leaders, including Putin, accepted NATO expansion for political and economic benefits, sold NATO military equipment, and assisted in NATO wars, cast serious doubts on their claims that NATO encirclement is an existential threat.

The Guns of April or August? The Russian Question and the Origins of War

Defence industry cooperation and joint military manoeuvres continued just five months before Yanukovych’s removal in February 2014. Russian disinformation misrepresents his overthrow as a Western

27 *Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services, US Senate, 112th Session*, February–November 2012 <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg80073/html/CHRG-112shrg80073.htm> . Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Quarterly Report to Congress, 30.04.2011, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA584474.pdf>. *Pentagon to Buy Russian Helicopters Despite Ban*, “Sputnik International,” 4.04.2013, <https://sputniknews.com/20130404/Pentagon-to-Buy-Russian-Helicopters-Despite-Ban-18045138.html> .


28 *NATO and Russia hold joint counter-terror exercise Vigilant Skies*, “NATO Press Release,” 26.09.2013, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_103663.htm.

29 L. Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 9–19.

plot to bait Moscow into war.³⁰ Consider the release of an intercepted January 28, 2014 phone call between US undersecretary of state Victoria Nuland, and the then US Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt. The two discuss how to “midwife” Yatsenyuk into power. At first glance, the exchange appears suspicious, because the Ukrainian politician would become prime minister soon after Yanukovich’s departure. A simple timeline, however, dispels this myth. Yanukovich, on January 25, 2014, proposed to Yatsenyuk that he serve as prime minister before the Nuland call.³¹ And again, he agreed, during February 20, 2014 negotiations in the presence of Russia’s representative, to a power-sharing arrangement with Yatsenyuk.

Russian disinformation deploys the master narratives of NATO encirclement and Western destabilisation to deflect attention from their own interference. The cause of Yanukovich’s flight was largely internal. The massive protests that started in November 2013, known as Maidan or the Revolution of Dignity, railed against Yanukovich and

his PoR corruption, “dictatorship laws,” and militarised police violence.³² By the time Yanukovich sought compromise, the popular uprising had boiled over to the point where hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, could settle for no less than his removal.



Russian disinformation deploys the master narratives of NATO encirclement and Western destabilisation to deflect attention from their own interference

The well-known, but largely understudied Surkov, Glazyev and Frolov leaks, as well as leaked US State Department cables, uncover how Russia destabilised Ukraine before Maidan. Vladislav Surkov was Deputy Prime Minister of Russia from 2011 to 2013, and assistant to the president, who Russia state media described as “in charge of Ukraine and the Donbass.”³³ Sergey Glazyev, a veteran politician, served in the Duma, and

30 For Russia’s “master narrative” of the US coup and NATO encirclement, see *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, “TASS,” 21.02.2022, <https://tass.com/politics/824413>. *Putin weighs in on root cause of Ukrainian conflict*, “RT,” 25.11.2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/567197-putin-ukraine-operation-avoided/>. Earlier versions on the coup include, *US spend up to \$5 billion to overthrow Viktor Yanukovich – Putin*, “TASS,” 28.09.2015, <https://tass.com/politics/824413>. Russia’s representative to the United Nations mentioned before a Security Council inquiry: the “well known Russophobe, godmother of the anti-constitutional coup in Ukraine Ms. Nuland,” *Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia, Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations*, 21.02.2022, https://russiaun.ru/en/news/210223_n.

31 For a day-by-day outline of events that pinpoints Yanukovich’s power sharing offer on 25 January 2014 that followed a 22 January meeting, see M. Wynnycykj, *Ukraine’s Maidan/Russia’s War: A Chronicle and Analysis of the Revolution of Dignity*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2019, pp. 105-107. Zygar reports that Putin pressed Yanukovich to sign the 20 February agreement, M. Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin*, New York: Public Affairs, 2016, pp. 262-264, 267. Nuland states that the call occurred on 27 January 2014. *Interview of Victoria Nuland*, “Frontline,” 14.06.2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/victoria-nuland/>. Russia propaganda also positions former US President Obama’s 2015 statement that the US “helped broker a deal” on Ukraine’s transition as proof of a coup, but Obama’s remarks reflect the well-known 20 February deal that Putin endorsed. *President Obama’s interview with Fareed Zakaria*, “CNN,” 1.02.2015, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/president-obamas-interview-fareed-zakaria-cnn/>.

32 A. Kurkov, *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kyiv*, London: Penguin, 2104, pp. 82, 121, 123-24, 133. M. Shore, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press. Much has been written about ultranationalists at Maidan, and the following documents the left currents, E. Channell-Justice, *Without the State: Self-Organization and Political Activism in Ukraine*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022.

33 *Russia and Ukraine are negotiating with the negotiators*, “Kommersant,” 12.02.2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4251496>

was an advisor to Putin 2012-2019. Kirill Frolov, a lower-level functionary, assisted Glazyev.

There is considerable debate in the scholarly literature concerning the degree of Russian influence on the separatists before the outbreak of war. Moscow's interference is indisputable, and debates centre on whether Russia's involvement was the catalyst for war (interstate conflict), or if internal grievances were the primary cause ("civil war").³⁴ There is sufficient evidence in the aforementioned leaks and eyewitness accounts that Russian intelligence and military personnel incited rebellion. Moscow disinformation and some leading researchers minimise this intervention as by rogue actors³⁵, or that

Moscow had limited control over the separatists.³⁶ The concern here is how Moscow's support incited armed conflict. Russian intervention in Crimea and Donbas was clear from the start, and even before the outbreak of war. Moscow indisputably selected the separatist leadership, provided money and arms, and launched cross-border missiles in June 2014.³⁷ Much of the scholarly literature on the origins of the war take the position that Russian involvement prior to August 2014 lacks evidence and remains unproven. But the installation of several key separatist leaders, leaked emails and phone calls, as well as artillery shells fired from Russia before it openly deployed soldiers in August 2014, indicate that Russia played a significant role in the origins of the armed conflict.

34 The International Criminal Court (ICC) describes it as an "international armed conflict in eastern Ukraine from 14 July 2014," International Criminal Court, Office of the Prosecutor, *Report on Preliminary Activities*, 5.12.2019, p. 68.

35 Two key actors, Surkov and Glazyev, have served as long term advisors. Surkov was chief of staff, deputy prime minister, and presidential advisor who presided over "managed democracy," Ukraine policy and negotiations. Glazyev was also a long-term advisor and Duma member. He received a medal for the liberation of Crimea in 2014. That these two figures acted entirely on their own strains credulity. *Medal for the liberation of Sevastopol and Crimea*, 3.04.2014, "Sevastopol News," <https://sev.news/2014/04/sevastopol/sobytiya/069218099/>. On Russia instigating conflict, N. Mitrokhin, *Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass*, "Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society," v. 13, 2015.

36 Arutunyan provides extensive examples of Moscow's meddling, based on field research, but concludes that technologists like Surkov and Glazyev acted independently of the Kremlin. A. Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers and Moscow's Struggle for Ukraine*, London: Hurst & Company, 2022, pp. 154-55. Arel and Driscoll also document Russia's role in the east in the months before deploying Russian soldiers in August 2014, but insist that "there is no compelling evidence that Russian actors controlled events on the ground until August," and that Girkin was acting at this point as a "freelancer," not a Kremlin-controlled intelligence operative. D. Arel and J. Driscoll, *Ukraine's Unnamed War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 3-4. My goal is not to prove the Kremlin directed all events as if it was a controlled experiment or that there were not domestic sources of rebellion, but that at minimum external forces (Russian citizens tied to Moscow) set in motion armed hostilities. Mateeva, who tells the story from the perspective of pro-Russian separatists likewise states, "without question, Russia exploited these events, but did not define them" and argues that the causes are many, largely emanating from internal, regional politics. A. Mateeva, *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine explained from within*, London: Lexington Books, 2017, pp. 2-3, 297. Kudelia challenges "monocausal" interpretations that attribute the war to a Moscow plot, because it displaces the domestic sources such as the violent overthrow of Yanukovich, and state fragmentation as much as internal political-emotional conditions. S. Kudelia, *Domestic Sources of the Donbas Insurgency*, "PONARS Eurasian Policy Memo no. 351," September 2014.

37 A. Nikolsky, *The Russian Ministry of Defense announced the conduct of exercises on the application of combined missile strikes*, "Vedomosti," 3.06.2014, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/27286071/ukraine-grozyat-raketami> access: 24 February 2023]. S. Case and K. Anders, *Putin's Undeclared War: Summer 2014 – Russian Artillery Strikes against Ukraine*, "Bellingcat," 21.12.2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2016/12/21/russian-artillery-strikes-against-ukraine/>. M. Czuperski, J. Herbst, E. Higgins, A. Polyakova, and D. Wilson, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine*, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2015, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/HPS_English.pdf.

Russia's initial objective was the *Novorossiya* project, or the rebirth of a New Russia in eastern and southern Ukraine as part of the Russian World. That goal failed, and Russia's priority centred on the destabilisation of Ukraine through federalisation.³⁸ Covert operations prior to the cataclysmic events of 2014 were part of a spectrum of activities to destabilise Ukraine. Moscow anticipated that protests would erupt. Russia pressured Yanukovich to join the Eurasian Customs Union (CU) and to avoid signing the European Association Agreement (AA). From July to October 2013, Russia placed customs bans on Ukrainian agricultural and meat products, railway cars and deemed nearly all Ukrainian products "high risk." Russia has long used economic coercion to influence Ukrainian leaders who were attempting to find equilibrium between Western and Russian interests, such as "gas wars" that included a complete shut off in 2006 in one such confrontation.³⁹

The aforementioned Frolov leaks uncovered a summer 2013 Russian policy paper that discusses the "all-round pressure" required to prevent Yanukovich from signing the AA. Yanukovich's "ignorance" regarding the benefits of joining the CU, the document notes, is "provoking a large-scale protest

movement" of pro-Western elements. It will "be extremely difficult for Yanukovich to retain power" as he "is fuelling anti-Russian sentiment because his rule is perceived...as Russian-imposed." As we "wait for the collapse of the current regime," the paper states, the "immediate goals" include the "formation of an influential network of pro-Russian forces," to compel Ukraine to join the CU. This network can force Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia. It will require influence operations in the parliament, business, and media, without revealing "the hand of Moscow." The "personnel basis of this socio-political structure can be the regional leaders of Southern and Eastern Ukraine."⁴⁰

These tactics of fomenting opposition are also evidenced in the Surkov leaks. These email leaks expose how Russia funded local elections, bribed law enforcement and journalists, paid protestors and infiltrated NGOs. Consider also that separatists in Donbas submitted expense sheets to Surkov.⁴¹ Complementary tactics are evident in the Glazyev leaks, where Crimean separatists request payments from the presidential advisor. Glazyev at one point instigates the separatists to take "regional state administration" buildings, and then instructs

38 T. Kuzio, *Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiya failed*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies," 2019, pp. 297-309. A. Shandra and R. Seely, *The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, London: Royal United Services Institute, 2019, p. vii.

39 D. Cenusă, M. Emerson, T. Kovziridse and V. Movchan, *Russia's Punitive Trade Policy Measures towards Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia*, "Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) Working Document," September 2014, [https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/russias-punitive-trade-policy-measures-towards-ukraine-moldova-and-georgia/]

40 *On a set of measures to involve Ukraine in the Eurasian integration process*, "Zerkalo Nedeli" 16-22 August 2013, <http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/o-komplekse-mer-po-vovlecheniyu-ukrainy-v-evraziyskiy-integracionnyy-process-.html> access: 22 February 2023]. On the authenticity of the document, S. Hosaka, *The Kremlin's "Active Measures" Failed in 2013: That's when Russia Remembered its Last Resort: Crimea*, "Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization," 26, Summer 2018, pp. 329-330. The paper also identified the Ukrainian Choice party under Medvedchuk (Putin is godfather to his child) that "can play a leading role in consolidating these forces."

41 A. Shandra and R. Seely, *The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, London: Royal United Services Institute, 2019, pp. viii, 13, 22, 24, 28, 39-40, and 50. Author interview of A. Shandra, 31.05.2022.

them to call for Moscow's help, having stated that he had a direct order.⁴² The Kremlin's method is to provoke separatists to create conflict, and pledge to support them, while directing the rebels to appeal to Russia for help. This tactic allows Russia to maintain "plausible deniability", in that they were merely coming to the aid of local, Russian-speaking activists seeking freedom.



The aforementioned Frolov leaks uncovered a summer 2013 Russian policy paper that discusses the "all-round pressure" required to prevent Yanukovich from signing the AA

Pavel Gubarev, former Donetsk people's governor, is one of the "regional leaders" in eastern Ukraine whose first-hand account intersects with the revelations above. Gubarev explains that Yanukovich was "hated and despised not only in the Western parts of Ukraine, but also the southeast." It was no surprise he "brought everything to an explosion." Many in the east were frustrated with Yanukovich's regime. Consider reports of a spike in protests under Yanukovich's rule, and protestors occupying a town hall in the Luhansk region in June 2013, because PoR politicians failed to stop factory shutdowns in the "oligarch-controlled economy."⁴³

Separatists, of course, found no relief in the new government in Kyiv, who they viewed as Western-installed Nazis and "Russophobes." A complicated set of independent socio-political conditions (economic grievances, inflated fears over oppression, bitterness toward Kyiv, mining trade with Russia, the role of local and regional oligarchs in supporting or suppressing revolt, Donbas identity, aspirations to fill power vacuums) that are beyond the scope of this paper commingled with Moscow's clandestine activities to tilt grievances toward armed rebellion. The point here is that Russia's covert (and later overt) operations are a crucial factor in fomenting and maintaining armed conflict. The classification of Maidan and/or Yanukovich's removal as a Western plot not only minimises Ukrainian agency, it simplifies that agency.

Another piece of evidence that Moscow converted aggrieved, frustrated actors toward greater violence is evidenced in Gubarev's testimony. He reveals that there were "only a handful of fighters" and "people were still afraid to shed blood" or to even pick up guns in early 2014. "We did not understand that it was necessary," Gubarev writes, "to behave as in war." During this moment of uncertainty, Gubarev received a phone call from Glazyev. He told Gubarev that "he supported our actions in the anti-fascist struggle." Glazyev's "simple words breathed new strength into me," Gubarev exclaims.⁴⁴ He was now prepared to behave as in war.

42 H. Conyash, *Glazyev tapes debunk Russia's lies about its annexation of Crimea and undeclared war against Ukraine*, "Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group," 26.02.2019, <https://khpg.org/en/1551054011>. A. Umland, *The Glazyev Tapes: Getting at the root of the conflict in Ukraine*, "European Council on Foreign Relations," 1.11.2016, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_glazyev_tapes_getting_to_the_root_of_the_conflict_in_7165/.

43 *During Yanukovich's rule, the number of protests increased by almost 60%*, "Ukrainska Pravda," 11.07.2013, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2013/07/11/6994098/>. *The Looming Revolt in Lysychansk*, "Ukrainian Week," 22.07.2013, <https://ukraineweek.com/society/85188>

44 P. Gubarev, *Факел Новороссии [Novorossiia Torch]*, Издательство «Питер», 2016, pp. 53, 72, 111-112. Y. Snegirev, *Gubarev: We need budgetary autonomy and our own humanitarian policy*, "Rossiyskaya Gazeta," 11.05.2014, <https://rg.ru/05/12/gubarev.html>; Gubarev was staunchly opposed to Maidan and blamed it on Western influence, and sharply criticised the Ukrainian government for marginalising the Russian language.

Another external source who set off conflict was retired FSB Colonel Igor Girkin, who infamously claims to have “triggered” the war in the east in April 2014. Separatist Alexander Zhuchovsky collected interviews with his comrades that corroborate Girkin’s assertions on inciting a small group of locals to violence. Of special significance is that Girkin also travelled with Kremlin-connected billionaire Konstantin Malofeev to Crimea in January 2014, where they were accompanied by a Russian parliamentarian, Dmitry Sablin and future Duma deputy, Alexander Borodai. Borodai, a Russian citizen who performed public relations work for Malofeev, was appointed prime minister of the DPR. He also advised Sergey Aksyonov, who soon became the PM of Crimea. In June 2014, Borodai acknowledged that Surkov “always provides the Donetsk People’s Republic with serious support” and “is our man in the Kremlin.” Girkin adds that, “Surkov enjoys the trust of Putin.”⁴⁵



Russia’s covert (and later overt) operations are a crucial factor in fomenting and maintaining armed conflict

Taken together, the Surkov and Glayzev leaks illustrate Russia’s active involvement in fomenting “the regional leaders of Southern

and Eastern Ukraine.” These destabilisation efforts were noticed in US State Department memos concerning Crimea as far back as 2006. One cable noted that the “GRU (Russian military intelligence) was active in deliberately fostering interethnic tensions in Crimea,” including providing “money to local groups” for “information campaigns,” such as “anti-NATO protests.”⁴⁶

Conclusion

NATO popularity has increased in Ukraine in recent years because of Russia’s invasion. The Kyiv Security Compact (2022) reasserts its right to self-defence from an aggressor, which entails defence preparation and serious security guarantees, because the 1994 Budapest “assurances” failed to protect Ukraine. Ukraine surrendered its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security commitments in that agreement. Moscow’s fabrication that NATO expansion threatens its existence, and that the West orchestrated a coup next door, aim to delegitimise Ukraine’s right to a viable security arrangement. In the fall of 2021, the US and Ukraine announced a strategic partnership. The Kremlin framed these critical preparations for self-defence as a “provocation.”⁴⁷ In the lead-up to the partnership, Russia mobilised additional forces on the borders of Ukraine, a country that was already under attack and occupation.⁴⁸ Kremlin narratives again reversed the roles of provocateur and reactive party.

45 Borodai: Surkov is our man in the Kremlin, “Actual Comments,” 16.06.2014, https://actualcomment.ru/boroday_surkov_nash_chelovek_v_kremele.html; Former DPR leaders spoke about the role of Surkov in the appointment of Zakharchenko, 11.05.2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/05/2017/59144a319a7947212ee57035> access: 22 February 2023.

46 S. Gwaltney, *Ukraine/Belarus/Russia: GOU Views on Russia Defense Relationship*, “US State Department Confidential Cable,” 16.03.2006, https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06KIEV1062_a.html

47 *US-Ukraine charter aimed at escalating tensions*, “TASS,” 11.11.2021, <https://tass.com/world/1359927>.

48 *Russia deployed two armies and three airborne formations to the Western borders*, “Interfax,” 13.04.2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/760994>; P. Shinkman, *Russia threatens US, NATO against action in Ukraine*, “US News & World Reports,” 2.04.2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-04-02/fairy-tale-russias-new-threats-to-nato-met-with-dismissals>

It is of critical importance that policymakers, journalists and researchers comprehend how Moscow's magnification of the NATO threat serves its war objectives. A primary goal is to prevent Ukraine from forming an enduring security alliance, and aligning with the European Union.

A durable, stable conflict settlement will not occur under the conditions of a divided, federalised state as many propose. This scenario would allow permanent occupation, and a "frozen conflict" that perpetuates hostilities. To avoid future attack and/or sustained destabilisation, peace protocols must proceed from international norms that uphold territorial integrity and protective alliances, to safeguard that fundamental right in the international arena.

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EXPOSING THE ROOTS OF DISINFORMATION ABOUT NATO ENLARGEMENT

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While the use of disinformation as a weapon has always existed, the development of information and communication technologies has greatly simplified it in modern armed conflicts. The topic of NATO enlargement has been significantly overblown with false reports, although it has had its dossier of false information refutation. It is widely perceived as an irritant in NATO-Russia relations. To understand the essence of Russian-Ukrainian relations, the topic of "NATO enlargement" is a false context used as a separate type of disinformation.

While some ponder why Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, President Putin has offered several explanations. In a televised address on the outbreak of war against Ukraine, he said that NATO expansion was a matter of life and death. He accused NATO of supporting anti-Russian governments in a region he considers Russia's "historic lands"¹.

Interpreting the quality of Russian-Ukrainian relations in the context of security threats posed by NATO's eastward enlargement is not a new Russian disinformation technique. But this context may be key in shaping global perceptions of the conflict between Russia

and Ukraine. Since October 2022, the amount of anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO rhetoric on the Internet has increased 75-fold, and replaced COVID-19 as the main topic of disinformation².

Before and during the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda claimed that Russia was in danger of being encircled and therefore needed security guarantees from NATO, including denying Ukraine possible membership of the alliance³. Gradually, a complex of accusations was formed against NATO in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia: "NATO states were conducting a full-scale military development of Ukraine's

1 Обращение Президента РФ 24 февраля 2022 г. (Address by the President of the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022), Kremlin, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67843>

2 The Disinformation War: The falsehoods about the Ukraine invasion and how to stop them spreading, Euronews, 25.02.2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/02/25/the-disinformation-war-the-falsehoods-about-the-ukraine-invasion-and-how-to-stop-them-spre>

3 Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического Договора (проект) (Agreement on Security Measures between the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (draft). [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/]

territory”⁴, “under the cover of the Minsk agreements approved by the UN Security Council, the West was purposefully preparing Ukraine for war against our country”⁵.

Disinformation as a “Dezinformatsiya”: The Features of the Russian Approach

The word “disinformation” is a perfect example of how confusing and ambiguous its use can be. Usually, disinformation is defined as false information that is deliberately and largely covertly disseminated to influence public opinion or conceal the truth⁶. In this sense, it differs significantly from “misinformation”, which is false or inaccurate information that is disseminated unknowingly and without the intention of deceiving the public⁷. There is another version of the origin of the word “disinformation”, which links it to a literal translation of the Russian word “dezinformatsiya”. The word “dezinformatsiya” was used in the name of a special department in the KGB structure in the 1950s, established to spread propaganda. In this paper, we will rely on the integrative concept of disinformation based on the actors, their intentions, and methods⁸.

This concept is crucial for an understanding of the Russian approach to the dissemination of disinformation. In this case, “disinformation” is inextricably linked to propaganda (in the sense of “deceptive propaganda”), uses techniques characteristic of the work of special services, targets a perception of information as a way to deal with security threats, and engages top state figures. The latter point is particularly important, because the engagement of top politicians creates a situation where disinformation becomes the basis for political decision-making. For example, “Semantic Visions”, a company that identifies disinformation using language patterns on the Internet, found that a large number of messages misleadingly depicting the Ukrainian government as corrupt, neo-Nazi, and Russophobe are “straight from Putin’s mouth”⁹. The messages emanating from the Russian president that link anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO rhetoric are broadcast more widely by other actors in Russian politics and state media.

Disinformation is a part of military strategy. The long history of disinformation during war states that when politicians speak, especially about war, you can expect misdirection¹⁰. This is because there is a

4 Грызлов Б. «Упущенный мир» (Gryzlov B. «Missing Peace»), Российская газета, март 2023

5 Выступление Постоянного представителя В.А. Небензи на пленарном заседании - 11й чрезвычайной специальной сессии Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН 22 февраля 2023 г. (Statement by Permanent Representative V.A. Nebenzi to the plenary of the 11th emergency special session of the UN General Assembly, 22 February 2023), https://russiaun.ru/ru/news/220223_n

6 The real story of “Disinformation”, Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/disinformation-meaning-origin>

7 Disinformation and Russia’s war aggression against Ukraine, OECD, 03.11.2022, <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>

8 Michael Hameleers, Disinformation as a context-bound phenomenon: toward a conceptual clarification integrating actors, intentions and techniques of creation and dissemination, *Communication Theory*, Volume 33, Issue 1, February 2023, <https://academic.oup.com/ct/article/33/1/1/6759692>

9 The Disinformation War: The falsehoods about the Ukraine invasion and how to stop them spreading, Euronews, 25.02.2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/02/25/the-disinformation-war-the-falsehoods-about-the-ukraine-invasion-and-how-to-stop-them-spre>

10 Barry Strauss. The long history of disinformation during the war, *Washington Post*, 28.04.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/04/28/long-history-misinformation-during-war/>

huge request for information during war. By consuming more information, people try to ensure their safety, sympathise with human suffering, or observe perpetrators being brought to justice.


Disinformation alone does not determine the outcome of a war, but it can have a significant impact on the understanding of the conflict and therefore the possible ways to resolve it. Focus on the actors disseminating untruthful information can prevent further dissemination of disinformation through other communicators in the chain. Disclosing the intentions of the suppliers of disinformation can provide a starting point for legal and political action directed at the causes of the dissemination of intentionally false information. Understanding the different ways in which disinformation is disseminated can help reduce the damaging effects of false messages on public opinion.

Disinformation About NATO Enlargement as a Context of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

The use of false messages as context constitutes a distinct type of disinformation. Putting the real problem in a false frame allows actors to create a favourable interpretation of the problem, and promote their approaches to its resolution.

Russia has never concealed a negative attitude towards NATO's open-door policy, especially regarding its eastward enlargement. In the 1990s, Russian diplomacy sought to use normalisation in relations with the USA, to influence alliance policy. However, the attempt to negotiate some "red lines" that NATO was not supposed

to cross was rejected. The Russian position in the negotiations reflected a failure to influence NATO's decision on enlargement, exploiting the US interest in strengthening democratic tendencies within Russia. As Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (1998-2004) recalled, "the essence of the Russian position agreed upon at that time was to launch, in parallel with NATO enlargement, which Russia was powerless to stop at that time, a negotiation process to create a new architecture of European security"¹¹.



The messages emanating from the Russian president that link anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO rhetoric are broadcast more widely by other actors in Russian politics and state media

All talk about the new architecture of European security reflected Russia's desire either to obtain a veto over NATO's eastward enlargement, or to fix the geographic limits of this enlargement. Ukraine invariably figured in these discussions. On March 21, 1997, during a meeting with U.S. President Bill Clinton in Helsinki, where relations between the Russian Federation and NATO were discussed, Russian President Boris Yeltsin mentioned Ukraine: "But one thing is very important: enlargement should also not embrace the former Soviet republics. I cannot sign any agreement without such language. Especially Ukraine. If you get them involved, it will create difficulties in our talks with Ukraine on a few issues"¹². (It is noteworthy that the published documents do not make any reference to earlier agreements between

11 Иванов И. Россия – НАТО: к истории нынешнего кризиса (Ivanov I. Russia-NATO: towards a history of the current crisis), Russian Council on Foreign Affairs, 03.02.2022, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiya-nato-k-istorii-nyneshnego-krizisa/>

12 Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Memorandum of conversation (March 21, 1997). p.106, Presidential Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569>

the USSR and NATO on non-enlargement. Moreover, it was Boris Yeltsin who asked Bill Clinton for a “gentleman’s agreement” that the post-Soviet republics would not be admitted to NATO). On April 4, 2008, Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was present at the NATO summit in Bucharest, spoke of Ukraine as a “very complex state”, and made the preservation of its sovereignty dependent on attempts to integrate it into the Euro-Atlantic security space: “And if you also bring in NATO problems, other problems, it can put the statehood itself on the edge of existence”¹³.

The claim that NATO enlargement is a conflict factor between Ukraine and Russia is untrue if the roots of the conflict between the two neighbouring states are considered. The source of the conflict was the uncertainty following the collapse of the USSR over future relations between the newly independent states. The hasty signing of the agreement forming a new association – the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – most probably indicated the intention of the new political leadership of the Russian Federation to find a formula for these relations within the framework of the transformation of the post-Soviet space as a kind of integral geopolitical construct. But the “parade of sovereignty” developed in a different way: the splitting up and fragmentation of the once unified space. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was a consequence of the collapse of the USSR and arose before NATO officially announced its decision to enlarge eastwards. Described by the first Ukrainian President, Leonid Kravchuk, as a “civilised

divorce”, this conflict between the former Soviet republics went beyond the “division of the Soviet inheritance”. The problem was that the parties to the conflict could not agree on a formula for future relations. The term “strategic partnership”, used in official documents, was an aspirational model that had never materialised. Moreover, the term “strategic partnership” concealed many unresolved problems in bilateral relations, making the public in both countries susceptible to Russian propaganda, linking periodic exacerbations of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to destructive actions by external forces, primarily the West. The use of the NATO enlargement thesis was particularly convenient for Russian propaganda, as it allowed for the securitisation of relations with Ukraine. Over time, Ukraine was transformed from a relatively weak neighbour into a “security threat” to Russia, precisely in the context of a possible NATO enlargement. Thus, the ground was laid for the preventive steps that the Russian leadership would see fit to take to reduce this contrived, non-existent threat.

Turning to the roots of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia allows the context of “NATO enlargement” to be questioned. The conflict between the two post-Soviet republics came to the surface when Presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Boris Yeltsin issued similar decrees in the spring of 1992, putting in writing claims to one object – the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. In this situation, it was decided to start negotiations¹⁴. There is ample evidence that negotiations between Russia and Ukraine were difficult, and proceeded in an

13 Выступление Владимира Путина на саммите НАТО (Бухарест, 4 апреля 2008 года) (Vladimir Putin’s Speech at NATO summit (Bucharest, 4 April 2008), Unian, <http://www.unian.net/politics/110868-vyistuplenie-vladimira-putina-na-sammite-nato-buharest-4-aprelya-2008-goda.html>)

14 Обставини втрати Україною управління над ЧФ СРСР, поділ флоту та ознаки розкрадання – звіт ТСК (Circumstances of Ukraine’s loss of control over the USSR Black Sea Fleet, division of the fleet and signs of theft – report of the Temporary Investigation Commission), 11.06.2019, <https://www.ukrmilitary.com/2019/06/tsk-dodatok1.html>

atmosphere of mutual mistrust¹⁵. In July 1993, the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation adopted a resolution, "On the Status of the City of Sevastopol", which defined the city's affiliation with Russia. The Russian State Duma did the same in October 1996¹⁶. Although Boris Yeltsin vetoed this document, the Russian delegation could use these parliamentary acts in negotiations with Ukraine, expecting concessions on the status of the Russian Black Sea Fleet on Ukrainian territory.

Not surprisingly, the solution to the problem of dividing the Soviet Union's Black Sea Fleet took a few years, and the final documents ("The Fleet agreements") included a clause regarding the terms of Russia's naval presence on Ukrainian territory. Despite the signing of the political "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation" in 1997, the conflict between the two neighbouring countries was not resolved. Relations deteriorated in the fall of 2003, when construction of a dam from the coast of the Russian Taman Peninsula in the direction of the Ukrainian island of Tuzla started. The situation could not be quickly clarified through diplomatic channels, and the dispute was moved to the public arena.

On December 24, 2003, in Kerch, after tense negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, an "Agreement on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait" was signed, which defined the status of the Sea of Azov as an internal sea of both states, as well as the creation of the Kerch Strait Joint Operating Consortium¹⁷. The topic "NATO enlargement to the east" was not explicitly articulated. However, the agreement which concluded the Ukrainian-Russian talks contained a clause: "Warships flying the flag of third states could enter the Sea of Azov and pass through the Kerch Strait only at the invitation of Ukraine or Russia, coordinated with the other coastal state"¹⁸.

The documents signed in December 2003, did not delimitate the maritime border, and envisaged further work on the delimitation of the waters of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. As before the "Tuzla incident", the parties to the conflict did not see eye to eye on this issue. For example, in the Russian parliament, the Ukrainian-Russian treaty drew harsh criticism from deputies of the Rodina party and Communists, who left the session hall in protest. However, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on the issue that "only 'NATO's expansion towards our neighbour' displeases the Russian side in its relations with Ukraine"¹⁹.

15 Дубинин Ю.В. Как была заложена правовая основа российско-украинских отношений. (Dubinin Y.V. How the legal basis for Russian-Ukrainian relations was laid), *Международная жизнь*. 2008. № 7. с. 57-76

16 Обставини втрати Україною управління над ЧФ СРСР, поділ флоту та ознаки розкрадання – звіт ТСК (Circumstances of Ukraine's loss of control over the USSR Black Sea Fleet, division of the fleet and signs of theft – report of the Temporary Investigation Commission), 11.06.2019, <https://www.ukrmilitary.com/2019/06/tsk-dodatok1.html>

17 Договір між Україною та Російською Федерацією про співробітництво у використанні Азовського моря і Керченської протоки (Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait), 2003, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_205#Text

18 Договір між Україною та Російською Федерацією про співробітництво у використанні Азовського моря і Керченської протоки (Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait), 2003, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_205#Text

19 Госдума признала за Украиной косу Тузла (Duma recognizes Ukraine's Tuzla spit). Вебсайт «Крымская линия» от 21 апреля 2004 года, <http://politika-crimea.ru/hronology-sobytyi/19-razdely/hronology/82891-protivostoyanie-ukrainy-i-rossii-iz-za-granitsy-v-kerchenskom-prolive-30-sentyabrya-23-oktyabrya-2003-goda>

Years of talks, during which Ukrainian and Russian representatives have made directly contradictory public statements about the delimitation border in the Azov Sea, have made little progress. In July 2012, the parties only managed to sign a joint statement on the future delimitation of the maritime border between Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, the likelihood of a renewed territorial dispute has not gone away. Except that the false context of “NATO enlargement to the east” allowed Russian propaganda to present such a threat as a “geopolitical rivalry between Russia and NATO” and a “justification” for Russian expansion, and seizure of a neighbouring state’s territory.



Linking the problem of relations with Ukraine to NATO's enlargement policy created a favourable interpretation for Russia. It appeared that NATO enlargement had become an escalation factor in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, overshadowing the root causes of the conflict

In the spring of 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, violating Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. Nevertheless, in his “Crimean speech”, Vladimir Putin inappropriately explained: “I just can’t imagine that we would go to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors”²⁰. As if there were no “Kharkiv agreements” at the time, which allowed the Russian Black Sea Fleet to remain in Crimea until 2042.

Linking the problem of relations with Ukraine to NATO’s enlargement policy created a favourable interpretation for Russia. It appeared that NATO enlargement had become an escalation factor in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, overshadowing the root causes of the conflict. Russian propaganda reinforced this view by portraying the alliance’s enlargement policy as a threat to Russian security. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference on February 10, 2007, Vladimir Putin made it clear: “And we have a fair right to ask frankly: against whom is this enlargement?”²¹ But he could also have posed the question differently: “For what?” However, the question was phrased in such a way as to cast doubt on NATO’s “real intentions”. The interpretation of NATO enlargement as a security threat concealed the truth about Russia’s willingness to use its territorial claims on Ukraine to influence Kyiv’s politics.

Gradually, Russian propaganda’s coverage of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia became almost inseparable from the false context of “NATO enlargement”. Misinformation about NATO enlargement is correlated with some stages of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Thus, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 as an act of aggression was accompanied by Russian propaganda attempts to shift responsibility for the violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity onto the alliance: “On the contrary, we were repeatedly deceived, decisions were taken behind our backs, we were put before a fait accompli. This was the case with NATO’s eastward expansion, with the deployment of military infrastructure near our borders...

20 Обращение Президента Российской Федерации (18 марта 2014 г.) (Address by the President of the Russian Federation 18 March 2014), Kremlin, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

21 Выступление и дискуссия на Мюнхенской конференции по вопросам политики безопасности (10 февраля 2007 г.) (Speech and discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (10 February 2007), Kremlin, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034/videos>

And in the case of Ukraine, our Western partners crossed the line, behaving rudely, irresponsibly, and unprofessionally”²². The cause of the concentration of Russian troops and equipment on the border with Ukraine in the summer of 2021 (the next stage of conflict escalation) was explained exclusively in propaganda style as “external control”, “military development of Ukrainian territory, and deployment of NATO infrastructure”²³. The subsequent upsurge in the conflict – the recognition of the self-proclaimed republics LNR and DNR, which had received military, political, and financial support from Russia since 2014 – was interpreted by Russian propaganda in the light of Ukraine’s accession to NATO as a “direct threat to Russian security”²⁴. When announcing the large-scale invasion of Ukraine (the so-called “special military operation”), Vladimir Putin linked his decision to the unacceptability of further expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance’s infrastructure. He pointed out that these were Russia’s “historical territories” that were being “intensively settled by the armed forces of NATO countries and pumped full of state-of-the-art weapons”²⁵.

Actors of Disinformation and Their Intentions

The false context of “NATO enlargement”, in which Russian propaganda frames a full-scale aggression in Ukraine, appears in the information space in the current phase of the armed conflict.



Apart from attempts to shift responsibility to NATO for the war against Ukraine, these intentions include expectations of concessions from the alliance (as a prerequisite for a peaceful settlement) and promotion of the possible options to end the conflict

The main proponents of the dissemination of the untruthful information are the leaders of the Russian state. Apart from attempts to shift responsibility to NATO for the war against Ukraine, these intentions include expectations of concessions from the alliance (as a prerequisite for a peaceful settlement) and promotion of the possible options to end the conflict. In Putin’s scheme of things, “NATO enlargement” is the key to understanding the “background and true causes” of events in Ukraine. The public is offered a stream of accusations against the North Atlantic Alliance for violating the principle of security indivisibility. Following up on this approach, Russian representatives offer Ukraine as a precondition for negotiations, to acknowledge “established geopolitical realities”²⁶, i.e., the illegal annexation of part of its territory. Finally, the plan proposed by the Russian party to end the conflict is “security guarantees” for the Russian Federation. Moscow again proposes a return to discussion of the draft

22 Обращение Президента Российской Федерации (18 марта 2014 г.) (Address by the President of the Russian Federation 18 March 2014), Kremlin, 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>


23 Путин В. Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев (Putin V. On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians), Kremlin, 12.07.2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

24 Путин В. Обращение 21 февраля 2022 (Putin V. Address on 21 February 2022), Kremlin, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>

25 Путин В. Обращение 24 февраля 2022 г. (Putin V. Address on 24 February 2022), Kremlin, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67843>

26 Путин В. Россия и Китай – партнерство, устремленное в будущее (Putin V. Russia and China – Partnership for the Future), Kremlin, 19.03.2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70743>

treaty proposed shortly before the invasion of Ukraine. The essence of the proposals was the return of NATO infrastructure to the 1997 borders, and a moratorium on eastward enlargement²⁷.



The shift in relations with Ukraine in the context of the “NATO eastward expansion” policy relied on long-standing current issues, worldviews, grievances, prejudices, or simply scepticism towards NATO and the West in Russian society

Russian propaganda interprets relations not only with Ukraine but also with other neighbouring states through the lens of “NATO enlargement”. For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov calls Moldova the next “anti-Russian centre” after Ukraine, meaning that its president Maia Sandu is allegedly eager to join NATO²⁸. At the same time, he respects the Georgian government “for its courage” in resisting the pressure of the West²⁹. In this context, Putin’s warnings at the Bucharest summit about Georgian attempts “under NATO’s cover” to restore

the country’s territorial integrity, and the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war come to mind³⁰.

Initiated and supported by Russian politicians at the highest echelons of power, disinformation about NATO relies on a chain of untruthful messages. These include some from foreign politicians (first of all, Chinese and Belarusian), representatives of the self-proclaimed LPR-DPR republics annexed to Russia, and former Ukrainian politicians who fled to Russia. All of them, to varying degrees and in different forms, broadcast messages sent on by the Russian political leadership, and contribute to the global understanding of NATO’s essence and policies. This can range from “direct accusations” against the alliance, to the format of “exposing fake messages” on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website³¹, and even the inclusion of false narratives in the texts of “peace proposals”. The 12 points for a political solution to the “Ukrainian crisis”, published by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on February 24, 2023, do not name NATO explicitly, but the negative attitude towards the Alliance’s open-door policy is unmistakable: “The security of the region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs. The legitimate

27 Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического Договора (проект) (Agreement on Security Measures between the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (draft), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17.12.2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/

28 Лавров намекнул, что после Украины РФ возьмется за Молдову (Lavrov hints that after Ukraine, Russia will take on Moldova), DELO, 02.02.2023, <https://delo.ua/ru/politics/lavrov-nameknul-cto-posle-ukrainy-rf-vozmetsya-za-moldovu-410475/>

29 Compliments to the Georgian authorities from Moscow, Kiev’s concerns, and that same Gavrillov – what is going on?, News Georgia, 20.01.2023, <https://www.newsgeorgia.ge/komplimenty-vlastjam-gruzii-ot-moskvy-obespekennost-kieva-i-tot-samyj-gavrilov-cto-proishodit/>

30 Выступление Владимира Путина на саммите НАТО (Бухарест, 4 апреля 2008 года) (Vladimir Putin’s Speech at NATO summit (Bucharest, 4 April 2008), Unian, <http://www.unian.net/politics/110868-vyistuplenie-vladimira-putina-na-sammite-nato-buharest-4-aprelya-2008-goda.html>

31 Falsehoods spread by the U.S. on the Ukraine issue: a reality check, Embassy of China to the USA, 2.05.2022, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgx/zxxx/202205/t20220503_10681306.htm

interests and security concerns of all countries must be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately³². All this is alongside reports from some ambassadors that directly accuse NATO of escalating the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, for example: “The moves by the US-led #NATO have pushed the #Russia-Ukraine tension to the breaking point”³³. Representatives of Belarus at the UN General Assembly essentially repeat Russian narratives about “NATO enlargement”, calling on delegates to “take into account the root causes of the conflict in and around Ukraine”. Referring to Russia and its “legitimate security concerns”, they suggest “refraining from supplying weapons to the conflict zone”³⁴. Such a scenario would inevitably lead to Ukraine’s defeat in the face of a large-scale Russian invasion. A propaganda movie made about dead and wounded children in Luhansk, in addition to accusations against Ukraine, contains the repeated message that Kyiv does not need people, but territory – to deploy NATO bases³⁵.

The shift in relations with Ukraine in the context of the “NATO eastward expansion” policy relied on long-standing current issues, worldviews, grievances, prejudices, or simply scepticism towards NATO and the West in Russian society. First-hand disinformation simplifies and enhances its impact on citizens’ beliefs. By repeating like a mantra that NATO has not changed since the end of the Cold War, Russian leaders have reinforced their citizens’ suspicions

about the Alliance’s “real intentions”. But, in essence, this may have been a reaction to an inability to influence NATO policy in Europe.

Combining disinformation with propaganda, over time the thesis about “the mistake of NATO enlargement to the east” was transformed into a demand for security guarantees for the Russian Federation. This approach directly contradicts Ukraine’s attempts, as a victim of Russian aggression, to obtain security guarantees as part of the settlement of the conflict. But it is already clear that Ukraine’s attitude towards the alliance cannot be put outside the framework of the settlement process when conditions are favourable for it.

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32 China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China, 24.02.2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html

33 Ambassador Hou Yanqi: “The moves by the US-led #NATO have pushed the #Russia-Ukraine tension to the breaking point”. 10.03.2022, <https://twitter.com/China2ASEAN/status/150173533539855875>

34 Як Генасамблея ООН ухвалювала «українську формулу миру»: головні заяви політиків (How the UN General Assembly adopted the “Ukrainian formula for peace”: the main statements of politicians), Suspilne, 23.02.2023 <https://suspilne.media/395219-genasamblea-oon-rozgladae-ukrainsku-formulu-miru-nazivo/>

35 «Приказано выжечь». В Донбассе документируют преступления украинской власти («Orders to burn out». The Ukrainian government’s crimes are being documented in Donbass), 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBB-RDxsnGs>

NATO RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION

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Because of the changes in the security landscape, proactive communication with members is more critical than ever before for organisations like NATO. Russia's systematic use of deception, propaganda and false news is a significant component of the hybrid warfare it has waged against its neighbours, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the three NATO allies in the Baltics. Following the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in the winter of 2014, and the illegal and unlawful annexation of Crimea, NATO and its allies became targets of Russian propaganda. Numerous studies have been conducted documenting Russia's propagandistic efforts in most of the NATO countries and their allies by lone specialists, civic networks, and non-governmental organisations even beforehand, and since 2014. This article focuses on the attacks and counterattacks directed squarely against NATO and the alliance's response to them.

Background

Several military historians contend that the employment of deception and hybrid threats is nothing new in the annals of war. In the past, the disadvantaged side would utilise deceit to gain strategic and tactical advantages in warfare. Terrorist attacks in the twenty-first century by non-state entities like Hezbollah, the Taliban, and the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria have contributed to the rise of asymmetric, or hybrid, threats.¹ It must be emphasised that the means of conflict have fundamentally

changed. Von Clausewitz's paraphrased statement that war is a chameleon, which will change its aspect at each occurrence, is more relevant today than it has ever been before.²

In 1995, the United States introduced the concept of asymmetry in their Joint Doctrine.³ This idea was initially applied in a narrow and simplistic manner.⁴ Following the realisation and materialisation of "asymmetric" conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan,⁵ the United States Department of Defence finally defined asymmetric warfare

- 1 Frank Hoffman, 'Hybrid Warfare and Challenges', *Joint Force Quarterly* 52, 2009.
- 2 Antulio J Echevarria II, 'War Is More than a Chameleon', *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- 3 Robert Johnson, 'Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, 2017.
- 4 Gergely Tóth, 'Legal Challenges in Hybrid Warfare Theory and Practice: Is There a Place for Legal Norms at All?' in Sergey Sayapin and Evhen Tsybulenko (eds), *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*, Springer, 2018.
- 5 Josef Schroeff and Stuart J Kaufman, 'Hybrid Actors, Tactical Variety: Rethinking Asymmetric and Hybrid War', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, 2014.

as attempts to circumvent or undermine an opponent's strengths while exploiting his weaknesses, using methods that differ significantly from those of the opponents.⁶ The concept of hybrid warfare first emerged back in 2002: William J. Nemeth used his thesis, *Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare*, to popularise the concept of hybrid warfare.⁷ The author described a society where ancient and contemporary elements merged, and this society fought using a combination of both new and old strategies. Hybrid warfare, sometimes synonymous with asymmetric warfare and sometimes denoting a subcategory within it, has recently entered NATO's lexicon. NATO officials are more comfortable with the phrase.⁸

As Russia launched a coordinated sequence of operations in the winter and spring of 2014, and again in 2022 against its neighbour Ukraine, it ushered in a new era of hybrid warfare.⁹ This included the "little green men" (i.e., Russian troops without insignia) illegally annexing Crimea, a phoney referendum on the annexation, and widespread propaganda and disinformation about attacks by Ukrainian nationalists on Russian-speaking citizens in Crimea

and the Donbas, as well as a phoney distortion of modern history and cyber-attacks combined with energy blackmail, because of Ukraine's reliance on Russian gas supplies.¹⁰ Technological progress in society, globalisation, and the interconnectedness of critical supply chains across nations are new features of the current form of hybrid warfare. All these factors have contributed to an overall increase in threat intensity, necessitating a nuanced suite of responses for effective defence and deterrence.

Immediately after the events in Ukraine in early 2014, NATO recognised this need. Allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization met in Wales on September 5, 2014, and outlined areas in which NATO should adopt an appropriate policy in response to hybrid threats.¹¹ Hybrid warfare is defined by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a "*wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures employed in a highly integrated design.*"¹²

In March 2022, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the alliance must be prepared to deal with all aspects of this new reality from wherever it originates. Further he stated, "[and] that means we must look

6 Gergely Tóth, 'Legal Challenges in Hybrid Warfare Theory and Practice: Is There a Place for Legal Norms at All?' in Sergey Sayapin and Evhen Tsybulenko (eds), *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*, Springer, 2018.

7 William J Nemeth, 'Future War and Chechnya : A Case for Hybrid Warfare', Thesis, 2002, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36699567.pdf>; Bastian Giegerich, 'Hybrid Warfare and the Changing Character of Conflict', *Connections* 15, 2016; Bettina Renz, 'Russia and "Hybrid Warfare"', *Contemporary Politics* 22, 2016.

8 Murat Caliskan and Michel Liégeois, 'The Concept of "Hybrid Warfare" Undermines NATO's Strategic Thinking: Insights from Interviews with NATO Officials', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* #1, 2020.


9 Ahan Gadkari and Tushar Rajput, 'A Leopard Never Changes Its Spots – Legal Validity of Russia's Use of Force against Ukraine', *Berkeley Journal of International Law*, 2022, <https://www.berkeleyjournalofinternationalallaw.com/post/a-leopard-never-changes-its-spots-legal-validity-of-russia-s-use-of-force-against-ukraine>; Taras Kuzio, 'Russia-Ukraine Crisis: The Blame Game, Geopolitics and National Identity', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2018.

10 Barbora Maronkova, 'NATO in the New Hybrid Warfare Environment', *Ukraine Analytica*, #11, 2018,

11 North Atlantic Council, 'Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales', March 2003, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede240914walesummit_/sede240914walesummit_en.pdf.

12 *Ibid.*

*closely at how we prepare for; deter; and if necessary defend against hybrid warfare.*¹³ NATO must be able to keep a close eye on the situation, analyse the data, and identify persons responsible for the seemingly random acts of violence. In the same way that hybrid warfare techniques are a complex network of interconnected acts, so must the counterstrategy of defence and deterrence be. Cybersecurity, situational awareness, and the fight against misinformation are just a few of the many pressing issues that need fixing.



NATO made progress in its hybrid warfare policy during its Brussels Summit on July 11, 2018, by establishing counter-hybrid support teams, which will give specialised targeted assistance to partners

At its summit in Warsaw, Poland, in July 2016, NATO formally established a policy and defined specific measures for implementing that strategy, as it relates to fighting hybrid warfare.¹⁴ The country under assault has the main duty to defend itself against hybrid threats and attacks. At any point in a hybrid campaign, NATO is ready to aid a member nation. To defend themselves, members of the North Atlantic Alliance and its partners are ready to counteract hybrid warfare. North Atlantic Council members may choose to use Washington Treaty Article 5 in a crisis (The Warsaw Summit Declaration).¹⁵

NATO made progress in its hybrid warfare policy during its Brussels Summit on July 11, 2018, by establishing counter-hybrid support teams, which will give specialised targeted assistance to partners upon request, following a prior decision to establish such cyber response teams. The specifics of these groups' procedures are currently being discussed and planned. Hybrid warfare is intricate and transnational. That is why NATO takes a big picture approach, teaming up with the EU and partners like Finland, Sweden, Ukraine, and others. The following are the four pillars around which NATO's response to hybrid warfare is built:

1. Defence and Deterrence in order to have high readiness forces in place and credible deterrence on land, air and sea.
2. Cyber defence to protect NATO and individual allies from cyber-attacks.
3. Resilience to enhance national civil preparedness and ensure protection of critical infrastructure.
4. Strategic communications to fight disinformation and propaganda.

Regular exercises and heightened awareness of one's surroundings are the glue that holds these pillars together.¹⁶

Depending on the circumstances, the energy sector, together with the economy and commerce, may be crucial components of a country's overall strategy. Being a political and military alliance, NATO does not have jurisdiction over these issues.¹⁷

13 Jim Garamone, 'Stoltenberg Expects NATO Leaders to Strengthen Alliance Posture', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2975977/stoltenberg-expects-nato-leaders-to-strengthen-alliance-posture/>.

14 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué – Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016', *NATO*, 9.07.2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Maria Mälksoo, 'Countering Hybrid Warfare as Ontological Security Management: The Emerging Practices of the EU and NATO', *European Security* #27, 2018.

17 Alexandra-Maria Bocse, 'NATO, Energy Security and Institutional Change', *European Security* #1, 2020.

A country's willingness to fight back and protect itself is put to the test in hybrid warfare, as reiterated by the NATO secretary general.¹⁸ Hybrid strategies may also be a precursor to a full-scale assault, with conventional troops raising the pressure and waiting to pounce on any weakness. NATO and its allies must show that they can and will respond quickly to crises throughout the globe.¹⁹

How NATO Fights Russian Propaganda and Disinformation

For an organisation like NATO, which values preventative dialogue with its members, the current security situation necessitates new means of communication. Russia's systematic use of deception, propaganda, and false news is a key component of the hybrid warfare it has waged against its neighbours, including Ukraine, Georgia, and the three NATO allies in the Baltics, and Poland. From 2004 until 2014, Russia targeted its neighbours with propaganda assaults. But, with the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in the winter of 2014, and the unlawful annexation of Crimea, NATO and its allies also became targets for Russia.

Most NATO members have been investigating Russia's propagandistic activities with the participation of independent specialists, civic networks, and non-governmental organisations. This article's focus is on the attacks and counterattacks that have been directed squarely against NATO.

Russian state-run, government-affiliated, and citizen-led media often propagate these three tropes about NATO:

1. Strategic stability is being jeopardised by NATO deployments near Russia's borders.
2. When it came to expanding to the east, NATO reneged on agreements.
3. Strategic stability is compromised by missile defence programmes directed against Russia.



Most NATO members have been investigating Russia's propagandistic activities with the participation of independent specialists, civic networks, and non-governmental organisations

Russian propaganda and misinformation also focused on the NATO expansion process. Some of the more illustrative instances are the following narratives:

1. During 2016–2017, when Montenegro's accession to NATO was discussed, the notion that "Montenegro is being dragged into NATO against the will of the people" was often deployed. Russia has spoken out against Montenegro joining NATO, and has promised retaliation against the small Balkan republic. Russian officials made statements before and after the accession talks, the Russian media reported that NATO was forcing Montenegro into membership, Russian spy agencies supported an unsuccessful *coup d'état* attempt against the then Prime Minister of Montenegro in October 2016, and Russia provided financial support to pro-Russian and anti-NATO political parties, NGOs, and the media.²⁰

18 Jens Stoltenberg, 'Keynote Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Opening of the NATO Transformation Seminar', NATO Transformation Seminar, 2015, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_118435.htm?selectedLocale=ru.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Reuf Bajrovik, Vesko Garcevic and Richard Kraemer, 'Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018; David Brunnstorm, 'Russia Threatens Retaliation as Montenegro Becomes 29th NATO Member', *Reuters*, 5.06.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-montenegro-idUSKBN18W2WS>.

2. The 2018 agreement between Skopje and Athens would rename Macedonia as the Republic of Northern Macedonia and make it the 30th member of the Alliance. Nevertheless, a similar argument was made against the pact. The Russian authorities have voiced strong resistance to any further Balkan expansion of NATO. Political figures at home and abroad were concerned that Russia would try to influence the outcome of the referendum in Macedonia over the country's controversial new name. The Russian authorities, as cited by the Russian media, have said that the referendum results were invalid, and that NATO has pulled Skopje into its circle.²¹

During the past four years, the NATO Press Office has seen a 300% rise in interest in NATO among journalists worldwide.²² There has been an uptick in exaggerated claims and misleading headlines in both Russian and Western media outlets.²³ Even the official NATO Twitter account has been subjected to cyber and troll attacks, with as many as 10,000 fake accounts following the account of the organisation's official spokesman.²⁴ Because of this, NATO has shifted its communication priorities, improved its strategic communication infrastructure, and launched new measures to fight Russian misinformation and propaganda. NATO does not respond to propaganda with more propaganda, but rather with facts and knowledge. NATO has a special website dubbed "Setting the record straight" where

they dispel some of Russia's most persistent falsehoods.²⁵ This site provides evidence-based responses to common myths about NATO by way of articles, films, infographics, and maps.

In response to the claim that NATO encircles Russia, the team, using a specially drawn map, illustrated that out of Russia's 14 neighbours with 20,000 km of borders, only five are members of NATO.²⁶ To effectively counter hybrid threats, collaboration with various stakeholders is essential. Because of this, NATO has expanded its efforts in collaborating with other international groups, to increase awareness of its surroundings and share information and best practices.

In addition to the steps resulting from the joint NATO-EU declaration, NATO is also involved in the European Centre of Excellence on Countering Hybrid Warfare in Helsinki, Finland, and the NATO Centre of Excellence on Strategic Communications in Riga, Latvia. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, all of which are in the path of Russian hybrid warfare and misinformation, get aid from NATO, as do Finland and Sweden. All of these countries have expertise in constructing highly resilient societies.²⁷ The Hybrid Warfare Platform developed between NATO and Ukraine is one such platform that allows for the sharing of knowledge and best practices to fight Russian propaganda.

21 Sarantis Michalopoulos, 'US-Russia Tensions Escalate over Greece, Macedonia Name Deal', Euractiv, 13.07.2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/us-russia-tensions-escalate-over-greece-macedonia-name-deal>.

22 'Newsroom', NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_room.htm.

23 Kathrin Wesolowski, 'Fact Check: Fake News Thrives amid Russia-Ukraine War 17.04.2022', DW, 28.04.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-fake-news-thrives-amid-russia-ukraine-war/a-61477502>.

24 Kelvin Chan, 'NATO Researchers: Social Media Failing to Stop Manipulation', AP NEWS, 29.04.2021, <https://apnews.com/article/social-media-technology-business-social-platforms-europe-0637e119414e7131955d4aa428466946>.

25 NATO, 'NATO-Russia: Setting the Record Straight', NATO, <https://nato-intl.com/?p=890>.

26 *Ibid.*

27 NATO, 'NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats', 16.03.2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.

Strategic Communication Refinement

NATO officials recognise the need for coordinated communication in formulating and implementing strategic decisions. NATO has its own very effective, in-house Strategic Communications system that is utilised to promote the Alliance's political and operational aims daily. Although NATO's Strategic Communications is the overarching framework, their allies have also developed their own national systems and procedures to better represent their unique circumstances and interests. Combating propaganda and deception requires strong and effective strategic communication.

Strategic communications are defined by NATO as "the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims".²⁸

Because of the organisation's many elements, one of NATO's top priorities in terms of strategic communication is establishing a reliable system of coordinated communications, based on mutually accepted political choices. The Public Diplomacy Division at NATO HQ in Brussels has taken on innovative methods in its communications, to make the best use of its resources, by linking communications campaigns to specific policy goals. NATO has implemented a programme evaluation system and improved its analysis of the surrounding information technology infrastructure (ITI). The military command structures of NATO, and the larger NATO family, are interconnected in several different

ways, including via official and informal networks, operational level working groups, and strategic policy boards.

For this reason, ITI has developed as a powerful instrument of strategic communications. Several NATO allies and partners, in addition to NATO itself, are now working to improve their capabilities. Indicators and early warnings of hybrid activity, as well as the alliance's own communications strategy, make use of ITI analysis of the information environment.



NATO officials recognise the need for coordinated communication in formulating and implementing strategic decisions

With ITI, we may learn to navigate the increasingly cluttered and ever-changing digital information landscape. Many storylines and voices are vying for the attention of information consumers in today's crowded media landscape. This skill is more valuable than ever before in the age of fake news. It may assist NATO to modify its communication posture, by providing a real-time indication of the information environment in which it functions, via the monitoring, reporting, and analysis of both friendly and adversarial actions and intents.

Setting SMART goals,²⁹ establishing key narratives/themes/messages, selecting its target audiences, and finally monitoring and identifying its major channels of communication are all crucial to ITI's

28 NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence, 'StratCom | NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Riga, Latvia', https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-nato-stratcom-coe/5.

29 SMART objectives – Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Time bound.

approach, which is reminiscent of the traditional framework of a communication campaign.³⁰ From the most popular news outlets to the most obscure blogs, podcasts, and video streaming sites, not to mention the many social media channels and online forums, they may be as varied as an organisation wants or has the capacity to cover.³¹ Key patterns may be uncovered by the systematic accumulation of knowledge and data.

Concerning the 2016 decision at the NATO Warsaw Summit to deploy four multinational battalion-size battlegroups to Poland and the Baltic states as part of NATO's strengthened defence and deterrence posture, one well-researched example provides insights into both friendly and hostile information environments. The United States Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), which focuses on tracking and monitoring disinformation, issued a warning about a massive disinformation campaign on October 15th, 2017, in light of the impending United States deployment to Poland as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. According to RIA Novosti's quoting of a spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Defence: *"Amid the hysteria over Russia's planned military incursion right from the Zapad-2017 drills, the 2nd Armoured Division of the US arrived quietly in Poland and was deployed there [Boleslawiec, Drawsko Pomorskie, Torun, Skwierzyzna, Zagan] with its armoured vehicles... Contrary to the NATO and the US statements about the 'insignificance' of*

the troops being pulled towards the Russian border, there is now a de facto US Armed Forces division, not a brigade."³²

Although a division has at least 10,000 troops, the United States really sent a brigade combat team, which consisted of 1,500 to 3,500 men. Detailed information regarding the impending deployment has been made available in a fact sheet provided by the U.S. Army Europe Command.

As part of the Enhanced Forward Presence, NATO is sending troops to Poland and the Baltic nations. The DFRLab has performed an extensive study into Russian propaganda over this issue.

1. NATO is unwelcome.
2. NATO is providing material assistance to terrorists.
3. The Baltic Nations are outside of NATO's protection.

It was found out that some such stories, although having little overall impact, may have had a harmful effect on the local population. NATO and individual member-states that are either hosting NATO forces or sending their own troops would benefit greatly from this kind of study. They may better plan their own communication efforts, modify storylines and key messages as needed, and keep tabs on the information circulating in their area of influence. More and more studies, reports, and trends are being presented to the political and military

30 Joe Saballa, 'Lithuania Doubling Pace of Ukrainian Soldier Training', *The Defense Post*, 8.12.2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/12/08/lithuania-ukrainian-soldiers-training/>.

31 Akin Ünver and Ahmet Kurnaz, 'Securitization of Disinformation in NATO's Lexicon: A Computational Text Analysis', 11 in *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 2022.

32 DFRLab, 'Disinformation Deployed against "Atlantic Resolve"', *DFRLab*, 16.11.2017 <https://medium.com/dfrlab/disinformation-deployed-against-nato-enhanced-forward-presence-c4223f6d7466>; Also see OECD, 'OECD Policy Responses on the Impacts of the War in Ukraine – Disinformation and Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine Threats and Governance Responses', OECD, 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>.

leadership of NATO and individual member states,³³ and they are feeding into the decision-making process.

Conclusion

The best way to combat misinformation and propaganda is via open and honest dialogue. Better strategic communication and decision-making may result from a deeper understanding of the information landscape in which international organisations and national governments function.

During the last seven decades, NATO has provided much-needed predictability in an otherwise chaotic world. According to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Alliance's first duty is to defend its territory and its

citizens against any assault. NATO maintains the full spectrum of capabilities necessary to deter and defend against any threat to the safety and security of its populations, regardless of the form that threat may take, including hybrid threats, considering the extremely varied, complex, and demanding international security environment in which we all operate.

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33 Akın Ünver and Ahmet Kurnaz, 'Securitization of Disinformation in NATO's Lexicon: A Computational Text Analysis', in *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 2022.

ACCESS TO OFFICIAL INFORMATION FOR COUNTERING DISINFORMATION: KEY FINDINGS AND STEPS FOR UKRAINIAN POLICY MAKERS

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During 2011-2021, Ukraine developed comprehensive legislation on access to official information, and implemented it according to the best international democratic standards. However, during the war, access to official information has been partly limited due to reasons of national security, despite the fact that this democratic instrument is an effective tool to counteract disinformation. It is important now for the government and policymakers to find a well-balanced approach between enhancing national security and ensuring free flow of access to official information, to make sure that accurate and trustworthy official information is not replaced with fake. This article is aimed at defining the role that access to official information can play in counteracting disinformation, and what steps all the stakeholders can take towards a better-informed society.

Disinformation has become a major challenge in the age of the Internet. The rapid spread of false or misleading information through digital media platforms has become an international concern, threatening to undermine democratic institutions and damage reputations. Information manipulations, including disinformation, are a global, complex, and ever-evolving challenge that threatens universal values, democracy, freedoms, and societies. A diverse range of actors, including individuals, researchers, civil society organisations, governments, social media platforms, and online service providers, have emerged to detect, attempt to understand, and respond to this challenge¹.

Governments discuss effective instruments to combat disinformation, especially during times of crisis and wartime.

Obviously, it is difficult to find a single tool that will allow for the combating of disinformation in all its forms, and blocking all means of its dissemination. It is widely recognised that the most sustainable solution is to increase media literacy, even though this takes a long time and requires a lot of resources. This instrument needs a high level of freedom of speech, and access to information and inclusivity, but it allows for building and supporting a society with strong resistance to disinformation and propaganda.

1 1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats, EEAS, February 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/uploads/2023/02/EEAS-ThreatReport-February2023-02.pdf>


Access to official information is an important component of the solution. By providing accurate and reliable information, official sources can counteract false narratives, and provide the public with a factual basis for decision-making. Free access to official documents allows journalists to uncover and report on important information that may otherwise remain hidden and be replaced with disinformation. In the context of protecting national security in times of war, it helps to develop trust between government and citizens², which is not possible without ensuring the transparency of the government and the accountability of its actions.

The Right to Information and Its Limitations

Access to official documents ensures the right of individuals or organisations to request and receive information held by government or public authorities. It is generally considered a fundamental right in many countries, as it promotes transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in democratic processes. However, access to official documents is often subject to limitations, such as protection of personal data, national security, and confidentiality of certain types of information. In such cases, the government or public authorities may refuse to disclose requested information or may redact certain parts of the documents.

During the recent decade, many countries worldwide introduced legislation on access

to official information (or access to official documents or access to public information), as is illustrated by the *Global RTI Rating*³. In addition, the *Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents*⁴ also known as the *Tromsø Convention*, entered into force in 2020 for 10 European countries, and which marked the recognition of the right to information at the level of an international treaty. The high demand for access to official documents as the component of transparency and accountability is illustrated by the number of inquiries processed by the European Ombudsman (approximately 29% of complaints to the European Ombudsman in 2021)⁵.



By providing accurate and reliable information, official sources can counteract false narratives, and provide the public with a factual basis for decision-making

In addition to international treaties, ratified by Ukraine, national regulations and ECHR case law, there are soft law setting standards in balancing access to official information and national security, namely the *Johannesburg Principles on National Security Freedom of Expressions and Access to Information*⁶ and *Global Principles on National Security and the Right to Information (The Tshwane*

2 Building Trust in Public Institutions, Main Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions. Website of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 13.07.2022, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/building-trust-to-reinforce-democracy_b407f99c-en


3 Global RTI Rating <https://www.rti-rating.org/>

4 Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, 1.12.2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=205>

5 European Ombudsman Office, *Annual Report 2021*, <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/publication/en/156017>

6 *Johannesburg Principles on National Security Freedom of Expressions and Access to Information*, <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/joburg-principles.pdf>

Principles)⁷. For the purposes of this paper, we will not cover the entire contents of these documents, but will only note that the *Tshwane Principles* emphasised the importance of a reasonable balance between the right to freedom of information and national security considerations: “striking the appropriate balance between the disclosure and withholding of information is vital to a democratic society and essential for its security, progress, development, and welfare, and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms”.



Access to official documents is fundamental for promoting transparency, accountability, and citizens' participation in democratic processes. Limitations of certain types of information such as protection of national security may still apply

Access to official documents is fundamental for promoting transparency, accountability, and citizens' participation in democratic processes. Limitations of certain types of information such as protection of national security may still apply. However, they should be well balanced and reasonable, to keep the democratic society well-informed, able to perceive information critically, and counteract disinformation.

The Role of the Ukrainian Government in Countering Disinformation During the War

For the period of 2011-2022, Ukraine developed comprehensive legislation on access to official information as well, and implemented this legislation according to the best international democratic standards. However, during wartime, the issue of a reasonable balance between national security and freedom of information became more critical. On the one hand, Strategic goal No. 4, as outlined by the National Security and Defence Council⁸, highlighted the importance of “compliance with the rights of individuals to collect, store, use and disseminate information, freedom of expression of their views and beliefs, protection of private life, access to objective and reliable information”. But on the other hand, state authorities tend to classify more information in wartime than in the period before the full-scale aggression, which is illustrated by the findings of the monitoring of ensuring information rights under martial law in 2022⁹. Recognising the importance of it, in 2023 the Ukrainian Ombudsman is developing a special report on access to official information during the war, which is going to be published soon. The Ombudsman's efforts in producing this report are particularly commendable, given the significant shortage of material and human resources of the Secretariat and the high number of calls on it in wartime. In the report, the Ombudsman will analyse the

7 *Global Principles on National Security and the Right to Information (The Tshwane Principles)*, Open Society, 12.01.2013, <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/bd50b729-d427-4fbb-8da2-1943ef2a3423/global-principles-national-security-10232013.pdf>

8 Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine of October 15, 2021 “On the Information Security Strategy”: Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 685/2021 as of 28.12.2021, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/685/2021?find=1&text=публіч#w1_2

9 Report on the results of monitoring of ensuring information rights under martial law in 2022, UNDP, 24.01.2023, <https://www.undp.org/uk/ukraine/publications/zvit-pro-monitorynh-stanu-zabezpechennya-informatsiynykh-prav-v-umovakh-voyennoho-stanu-2022-roku>

challenges that arose over the protection of citizens' rights to access information during the first year of war, and emphasise the vital need for access to official information during such a difficult time.

To ensure that access to official information is effective in countering disinformation, it is important that public authorities take a proactive approach to making official information available. The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, which is responsible for issues related to countering disinformation and laying out and implementing the policy of information access, has established the Centre for Strategic Communications and Information Security as one of the mechanisms for countering disinformation. The Centre's work is focused on communication of counteraction to external threats, including information attacks from the Russian Federation.

As the research¹⁰ of the Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication illustrates *“the role of the government and government bodies at different levels in the country's information space has considerably changed in wartime. Whereas prior to the full-scale invasion of Russia, the government's communication policy was criticized by experts for many years, the situation changed radically for the better after February 24, 2022. The government managed to establish effective multi-channel communication with society... Communication through out-of-date websites, which was poorly handled by the press offices and information departments of various authorities before the full-scale invasion, has been replaced by fast and accessible communication through messengers and social media.”*

At the same time, the challenges of wartime amplified the number of situations when government institutions tend to restrict access to official information, despite citizens' high interest in it. An important example highlighted a restriction on the publication of open data. On the first day of the full-scale aggression by the Russian Federation, the access to the state's open data portal and the majority of open public registers was limited. The limitation lasted for half a year and many of the public registers were still working in the limited regime. It blocked the work of many open-data based services, which provide society with vital official information, among which was one of the most popular – YouControl.



To ensure that access to official information is effective in countering disinformation, it is important that public authorities take a proactive approach to making official information available

YouControl provides a platform for generated profiles of legal entities, organisations and companies to refer to the state register of legal entities. It helps prevent fraud and falsifications in several ways. Primarily, this is achievable through the verification of information related to companies. The state register of legal entities contains accurate and up-to-date information about registered companies, including their legal names, registration numbers, and other relevant details. By

10 *“Transformation of the field of media literacy in the conditions of a full-scale war in Ukraine”*, Report, Ukrainian Institute of Media and Communication with the support of the Baltic Media Development Center (BCME), 27.07.2022, <https://www.jta.com.ua/news-and-reports/uimk-pidhotuvav-analitychnyy-zvit-pro-transformatsiiu-sfery-mediiahramotnosti>

cross-checking the details of a company with the register, *YouControl* makes it possible to verify that the company exists and is legitimate. In addition, this tool helps to counteract disinformation, due to the identification of beneficial owners, by using the official data from state registers. When it is established that this or that media is controlled or financed by the aggressor, it stimulates a critical attitude in citizens to the information that this media disseminates. Increased transparency and accountability, along with the easy interface of *YouControl* results in preventing fraud and falsifications.



During the last year, Ukrainian civil society and researchers have contributed to the analysis of the influence of war on discourse that the aggressor spreads for justification of the war, as well as on freedom of information standards in the context of national security

It should be noted that the legal regulation of open data and public registries is a part of the Ukrainian legislation on access to public information and official documents. Despite some differences in terminology, both the “Law of Ukraine on Access to Public Information”¹¹ and the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, ratified by Ukraine in 2020, are equally applicable to information in digital formats and open data.

At the time of preparing this material, the discussion on the full disclosure of open data sets and public registers is continuing. As part of the efforts to address this issue, the government is developing a draft of a new edition of the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 835¹², which regulates the procedure for creating and publishing open data sets. Civil society activists insist on opening up as much data as possible, despite the hypothetical risks, as the vast majority of online tools aimed at combating fakes and disinformation rely on data from public registers. Additionally, they highlight the irrationality and imbalance of limiting access to open data and public registers. This is because, according to Ukraine’s Law “On Access to Public Information”, information that was previously lawfully disseminated to the public cannot be restricted.

Investigative Journalism and Fake-Resistance Tools

The challenges of wartime have led to a broad discussion in Ukraine about strategies for restricting access to official information. It became obvious that direct prohibition to distribute some types of information is not effective, and sometimes causes more harm than good. The Ukrainian government and policymakers struggle to find a well-balanced approach between enhancing national security and ensuring free flow of access to official information, to make sure that citizens can make informed decisions about the issues that affect them.

During the last year, Ukrainian civil society and researchers have contributed to the analysis of the influence of war

11 Law of Ukraine “On Access to Public Information”, 2011, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2939-17#Text>

12 Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine #835, 2005, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/835-2015-%D0%BF#Text>

on discourse that the aggressor spreads for justification of the war, as well as on freedom of information standards in the context of national security. For instance, UICPR (a Ukrainian-based NGO) conducted a series of analytical papers on discourse analysis, best international standards, and ECHR case law in access to information and freedom of expression. The analysis¹³ on international standards, and the practice of the European Court of Human Rights and national regulations during wartime draws conclusions on Ukraine's compliance with its obligations to guarantee the right to information under the legal regime of martial law. Based on the decisions and approaches of the European Court of Human Rights, the overview assesses the efforts of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in Ukraine to develop a policy aimed at strengthening democratic values at times of an armed aggression against the country.

Access to information has improved public awareness and its ability to check the information distributed by the media. Many initiatives, namely *StopFake*¹⁴, *DisinfoChronicle*¹⁵ and *Feykogryz*¹⁶ use publicly available official information to debunk fake and misleading messages:

- *StopFake* is a Ukrainian non-governmental organisation that aims to expose and counteract fake news, propaganda and disinformation. It was established in March 2014 at the height of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which was accompanied by a large-scale information war. *StopFake*

was created as a grassroots initiative, and has become a leading resource in Ukraine and internationally for fact-checking and debunking fake news and propaganda.

- *DisinfoChronicle* is an online platform that provides comprehensive coverage of disinformation and propaganda in Ukraine and globally. It is a project of the Detector Media NGO, to promote freedom of speech and media literacy in Ukraine. Using verified information from official sources, *DisinfoChronicle* publishes fact-checks of viral news stories and political claims, and provides a database of disinformation actors and their activities. By providing accurate and timely information on disinformation campaigns, the platform helps to build resilience to the growing challenge to democracy and media freedom.
- *Feykogryz* is a Ukrainian fact-checking project that focuses on debunking disinformation and fake news in Ukraine, run by the independent media outlet, *Texty*¹⁷. The project is staffed by a team of professional journalists and fact-checkers who specialise in verifying news stories, videos, images, and other forms of online content. *Feykogryz* uses a range of methods to verify the accuracy of the contents, including reverse image search, geolocation, and analysis of the original source of the information. Once a piece of content is found to be false or misleading, *Feykogryz* publishes an article debunking the claim and explaining why it is false. The project also provides its readers with tips on how to identify fake news and disinformation.

13 Right to information: international standards, practice of the European Court of Human Rights and national regulation during wartime, Overview of legal approaches. Series: Freedom of speech and national security. – Kyiv: UCIPR, 2022. <http://ucipr.org.ua/ua/publikatsii/vydannia/right-to-information-international-standards-practice-of-the-european-court-of-human-rights-and-national-regulation-during-wartime>

14 *StopFake* <https://www.stopfake.org/uk/golovna/>

15 *DisinfoChronicle* <https://disinfo.detector.media/>

16 *Feykogryz* <https://fgz.texty.org/>

17 *Texty* <https://texty.org.ua/>

The abovementioned Texty is a Ukrainian investigative journalism website that focuses on producing in-depth stories and analyses on social, economic, and political issues in Ukraine. One of the unique features of Texty is its extensive use of open data in their reporting. The website uses a variety of open data sources to provide evidence-based analysis, and to support their investigative reporting. In one of their recent publications¹⁸, Texty used official information about Ukraine's income and expenses to analyse trends, and the state's ability to support its military. Journalists used official open data to create visualisations of the impact of revenues from various types of taxes on the overall budget balance. Such approaches in journalism adhere to the highest media standards, as they provide citizens with objective information, and counteract the spread of fake and unfounded conclusions.



In times of war, governments have a natural tendency to limit access to official information as much as possible. Officials often justify these steps by citing national security concerns as the default reason

Overall, the development of investigative journalism in Ukraine has been closely linked to the improvement of legislation and practices in the sphere of access to official

information. Several non-governmental media organisations have been advocating for access to public information and the development of open data, as part of a media development and disinformation counteracting, as the research illustrates¹⁹. The government's efforts to keep a balanced approach in classification of information and control on the side of Ukrainian Ombudsmen have made a significant contribution.

Key Steps for Policymakers

In times of war, governments have a natural tendency to limit access to official information as much as possible. Officials often justify these steps by citing national security concerns as the default reason. The events that occurred during the Russian invasion of Ukraine have posed the question of the efficiency of such an approach. We observed three main trends:

- While restricting access to official information may harm the right to know, the government's decisions and actions can be effective in ensuring national security, and the benefits of such measures may outweigh the negative impact.
- The restriction imposed by the government has no real effect from the point of view of national security (for instance: shutting down the access to official open data sets and public registers made no sense, as the enemy had already got that information) and the civil society was deprived of the sources of official information unreasonably.

¹⁸ Yevgenia Drozdova, "Everything is for the army, but there is not enough money for salaries. Incomes and expenses of the state in 2022 in the graphs", TEXTY, 21.02.2023, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/108984/vse-dlya-armiyi-ale-hroshej-na-zarplaty-ne-vystachaye-dohody-i-vytraty-derzhavy-v-2022-roci-v-hrafikah/>

¹⁹ Olena Churanova, "Against Russian disinformation: Ukrainian non-governmental organizations on the frontline", UA: Ukraine Analytica, Issue 1, 2018, <https://ukraine-analytica.org/wp-content/uploads/churanova-ukr.pdf>

- Limitation of official information may decrease the ability of civil society to resist disinformation, and thus damage national security. The level of trust in society and in government institutions is decreasing due to excessive secrecy surrounding information, such as the use of budget funds or connections between high-ranking officials and an aggressor state. As a result, disinformation cannot be verified and debunked.

As the experience of the recent year demonstrates, the active resistance of Ukrainian society may effectively withstand the enemy. During the war, civil society and its institutions have made their contribution to counteracting the harmful narratives and propaganda of the aggressor²⁰. Thus, while restricting some civil rights during wartime, especially freedom of information, the government should apply a well-balanced and proportionate approach, as excessive restrictions in access to official information could have no effect or could even be harmful to national security in certain cases.

Therefore, the key steps for policymakers to take should include comprehensive analysis of the restrictions imposed and their outcomes for national security and civil society; as well as developing well-balanced regulations in this sphere. Draft laws and implementation measures in this area must take into account the public's need for official, and therefore true and accurate, information. The controlling body, in Ukraine – the Ombudsman – must have sufficient material and personnel resources to fulfil its function of ensuring citizens' informational rights.

Conclusions

In the recent decade, we are witnessing not only an information war against Ukraine, but also a general distortion of the information space by spreading fake news and disinformation. The propagation of harmful narratives and fake information is primarily facilitated by the aggressor, but their introduction is often a result of a lack of official information and individuals' susceptibility to deception and false beliefs. Fake news can be verified through the mechanisms of access to official information, and in combination with investigative journalism and media literacy improvement, this democratic tool could become a powerful weapon to counteract disinformation.

To ensure that access to official information is effective in countering disinformation, it is important that public authorities take a proactive approach to making information available, and that freedom of information laws are strengthened and effectively enforced. It has become possible, due to the efforts of civil society actors, advocating for openness of information of significant public interest, the government's efforts to keep a balanced approach in the classification of information, and control on the part of the Ukrainian Ombudsman.

Although the practical limitations of wartime often restrict access to official information for the sake of national security, and the enforcement of freedom of information laws is sometimes inadequate, this valuable resource should be enhanced and expanded. Despite the

20 Lily Sabol, *Shielding Democracy: Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine*, NED, 22.02.2023, <https://www.ned.org/shielding-democracy-civil-society-adaptations-kremlin-disinformation-ukraine/>

challenges of martial law, Ukraine has preserved its achievements in ensuring the right to information, which has become one of the components that have ensured the preservation of independence and democratic governance in a harsh information war.

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