

"What are we, shooting at ourselves?": narratives of Russian disinformation regarding the occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

DPR	Donetsk People's Republic (Russia-created entity)
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
KSEP	Kyiv School of Energy Policy
NNEGC Energoatom	National Nuclear Energy Generating Company "Energoatom"
NPP	Nuclear Power Plant
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PNNL	Pacific Northwest National Laboratory
UN	United Nations
ZNPP	Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant

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Introduction

The city of Enerгодar and Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) have been occupied by the Russian army since the early days of the full-scale invasion despite the heroic resistance by local residents. Both the Russian diplomacy and the Russian military have a significant strategic advantage to take the identified dangerous object hostage, since the risks of an accident threaten the nuclear security of the entire region. On March 3, 2022, the Russian army [entered](#) Enerгодar and occupied Zaporizhzhya NPP. The next day, on March 4, the first fire broke out on the territory of the facility - the building of the ZNPP training complex caught fire. After establishing control over the nuclear power plant, the first representatives of the Russian nuclear company Rosatom arrived at ZNPP on March 12, ostensibly to help the staff. The [process](#) of officially subordinating ZNPP to Moscow began in October 2022. A Moscow-based, Russian State-run operating organization was created for the ZNPP, and the Russian Federation announced that it had taken control of the facility and was now making significant operational decisions. The Russian Federation's nuclear regulator, Rostekhnadzor, established a continued presence at the ZNPP as of December.

The power plant staff has been working under constant pressure from the Russian army for more than a year. According to the Minister of Energy of Ukraine, ZNPP staff [were subjected](#) to violence and torture, some were kidnapped and killed - for example, on June 29, 2022, the occupiers [tortured](#) and killed a diver of the ZNPP hydraulic workshop Andrii Honcharuk. The ZNPP Director General was [detained](#) by the Russian authorities on September 30 and the ZNPP Deputy Director General for Personnel was detained on October 11. By January 2023, approximately one third of all ZNPP operational staff had departed since the beginning of the occupation. The Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Mariano Grossi, expressed serious [concerns](#) about the pressure that ZNPP staff are facing. The reduced ZNPP staffing levels combined with psychological stress from the ongoing military conflict is impacting the nuclear safety and security at the plant.

During the occupation, ZNPP suffered its first-ever complete blackout. During the past year, ZNPP blackouts were [recorded](#) six times. On July 21, NNEGC Enerгодatom announced that the Russian military had [deployed](#) at least 14 units of heavy military equipment with ammunition, weapons, and explosives on the territory of ZNPP Unit 1. Since September 2022, a permanent IAEA [monitoring](#) mission has been present at the station. The IAEA [confirmed](#) "continued presence of military personnel and equipment at the site, with unauthorized military vehicles and stores still present in the turbine halls of the Unit 1 and 2 buildings." The IAEA formulated seven indispensable pillars for ensuring nuclear safety and security, and Russia has since [violated](#) all seven pillars at the ZNPP. The IAEA highlighted that the seven pillars are being [compromised](#) at all times by Russian activity.

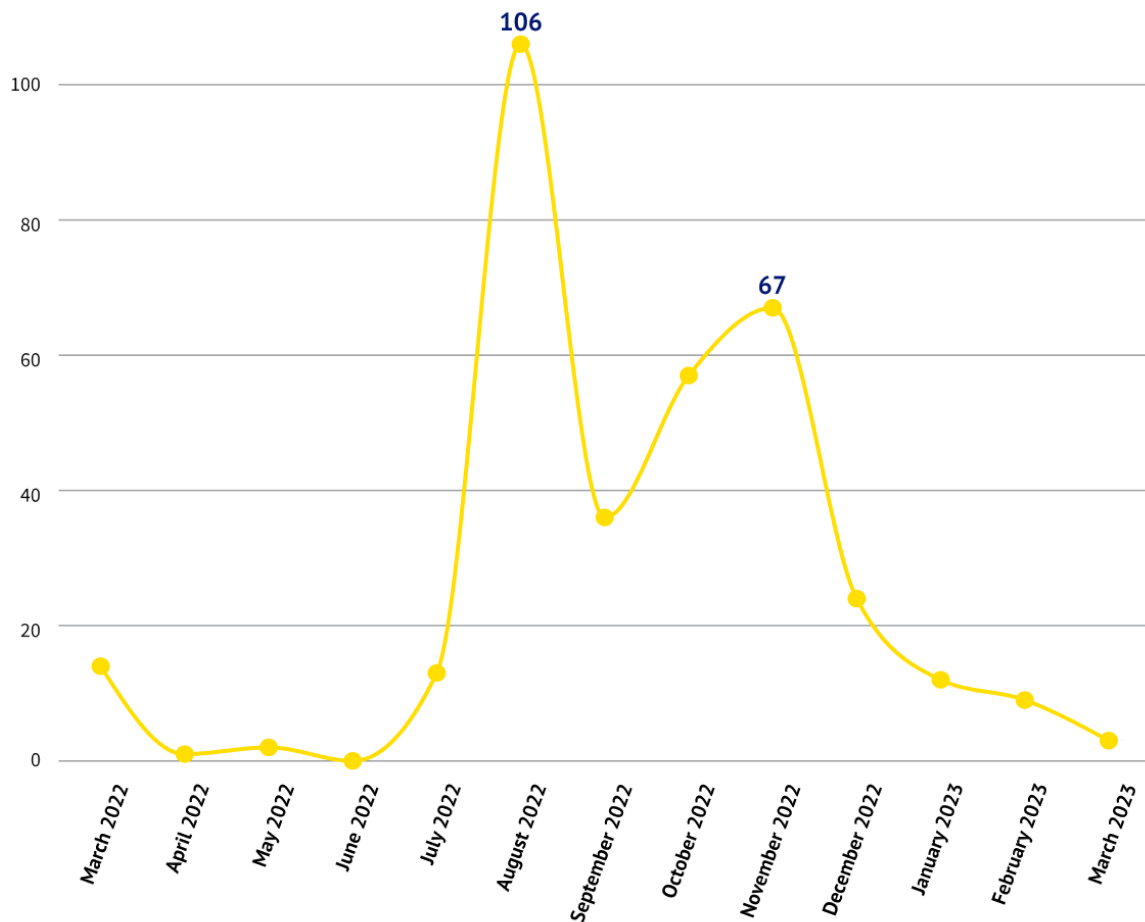
Meanwhile, the Russians are tirelessly painting a picture of a happy and prosperous life of the ZNPP under the Rosatom administration, blaming Ukraine for shelling of Energodar, and keep providing new arguments that explain why they are the only ones capable of protecting the ZNPP from disasters.

As a result, we collected a total of 345 news reports, containing disinformation statements, from which we singled out 6 key narratives of Russian disinformation:

- "Russia only protects the ZNPP, it does not endanger it ",
- "Ukraine resorts to provocations and nuclear blackmail",
- "Ukraine wants to do harm to the ZNPP, its citizens and the whole world"
- "Ukraine's secret nuclear weapons"
- "The ZNPP belongs to Russia"
- "Russia maintains the ZNPP in working order and is ready to cooperate with everyone."

Let's have a closer look at the way each of the narratives was formed and transformed during the year of observation.

Frequency of mentions of ZNPP by media



Source: open data

Disinformation narrative No.1: “Russia only protects the ZNPP, it does not endanger it”

Since the first day of occupation of the ZNPP, the Russian authorities have been presenting this aggressive move as an act of “*taking the power plant under their protection.*” This narrative is directly related to the next topic that we will address – disinformation about provocations and nuclear terrorist attacks committed by Ukraine. In Russian news reports, the process of armed occupation of the ZNPP was laconically [described](#) as “*getting it under control.*” As Ukrainian NNEGC Energoatom reported, on the night of March 4, 2022, when the Russians [launched](#) an initial assault on the ZNPP, one of the buildings on the territory of the power plant caught fire as a result of Russian shelling. In response to the assault Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs immediately [urged](#) Russians to cease fire and to establish security zone around the ZNPP, while State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SES) [reported](#) that Russian military did not allow the SES units to start eliminating the consequences of the fire. This fire accident was one of the first cases of safety violation at the ZNPP, which threatened to cause radiological consequences not only in Ukraine but also in neighboring countries. However, Russian media have avoided giving any details of the armed assault in their public communication. Instead, they [claimed](#) that the fire occurred when “*a mobile patrol of the National Guard of Russia was attacked by a Ukrainian subversive group*” which set fire to the building when retreating. According to Russian media, the Russian military routinely patrolled the territory but did not [shell](#) the last Ukrainian National Guard unit that remained in the occupied city of Energodar to protect the strategic site, while the IAEA director-general Rafael Gross [confirmed](#) that fire was caused by a Russian projectile. Furthermore, Russian state media emphasized that the Russian troops do not interfere with the work of ZNPP personnel in any way and adhered to this storyline throughout the observation period.

Immediately after the occupation of the ZNPP, the representative of Rosgvardia [announced](#) that they had found “a large number of weapons and ammunition” on the territory of the ZNPP and that the Ukrainian military “[organized](#) their firing points in the reactor buildings.” Advisor to the Head of the President’s Office Myhailo Podoliak [denied](#) all the allegations that Ukraine has ever kept any weapons and ammunition on the territory of Ukrainian nuclear energy objects. The IAEA monitoring mission on the ZNPP also [did not find](#) any evidence supporting Russian allegations. Russian state media proceeded to spread false allegations and wrongfully accuses Ukraine of planning to wage a full-scale battle directly at the premises of nuclear reactors and using the threat of a nuclear disaster for both Ukraine and Russia as a deterrent to the Russian army, and at the same time the Permanent Representative to the UN Vasiliy Nebenzia [claimed](#) that they occupied the ZNPP “*to prevent Ukraine from resorting to nuclear terrorism.*” However, Russian state media offer no explanation as to why the Armed Forces of Ukraine, who they say were preparing for the armed defense of the ZNPP, made no use of the stockpiles of weapons and “*firing points in the reactor buildings.*” At the same time, according to [BBC](#) and [The Insider](#) sources, as well as [statements](#) by NNEGC Energoatom, it is the Russians who are accumulating their

military equipment on the territory of the ZNPP. In September 2022, this was [confirmed](#) by the IAEA monitoring mission. The IAEA highlighted that the presence of military equipment on site has [destabilized](#) the designed physical protection system.



Figure 1. Russian military serviceman stands guard near the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, August 4, 2023. (Alexander Ermochenko/Reuters)

Since August 2022, Russian state media reports and articles containing mentions of the ZNPP have usually [concluded](#) with a reference paragraph reminding readers that the ZNPP is not under military occupation but “*is under protection*” by the Russian army. The articles claim that Russian troops provide [protection](#) “*against the leakage of nuclear and radioactive substances.*” At the same time, Russia responded to IAEA statements by [denying](#) the deployment of heavy weapons on the territory of the ZNPP and claiming that the Russian National Guard is present at the nuclear station to “ensure security,” and that all military equipment and anti-aircraft missiles are kept at a safe distance from the ZNPP. However, the IAEA mission, Ukrainian authorities, and BBC journalists [have evidence](#) that refutes Russia’s statement regarding military equipment. [According](#) to the permanent representative of the Russian Federation to the IAEA, “*the call [to demilitarize] the ZNPP is completely unrealistic because there is nothing to demilitarize there.*”

Russian state media did not actively push the narrative about “protecting the ZNPP” in the first months of military occupation of the nuclear station – regular repetition of this mantra (at least once a week) began in August 2022 and continued

throughout the observation period. For example, in mid-August, a member of the Russian State Duma, Leonid Slutsky, [declared](#) that the Russian military presence at the ZNPP is necessary to prevent a “nuclear Bucha,” in reference to Russia’s disinformation narrative about the Bucha massacre¹, which took place during the Russian occupation of Kyiv region. Russia’s UN ambassador Vasily Nebenzya [said](#) that the calls to demilitarize the ZNPP “*can’t be serious*” because “*de facto demilitarization*” of the nuclear plant is contingent on the Russian presence. In December 2022, Renat Karchaa, an adviser to the CEO of Rosenergoatom, [described](#) the calls to withdraw the Russian National Guard from the territory of the ZNPP as “*idiotic and provocative*” in adherence to the established propaganda practice of denying the presence of military equipment on the territory of the nuclear facility. From time to time, the Russian journalists claimed to [imagine](#) “*horrific*” pictures of “*what would happen if [the ZNPP] has been unguarded since March 2022,*” thereby insinuating their own importance in safekeeping the site.

Russian state media goes to great lengths to show dedication and deep concern over the safety of a potentially hazardous nuclear facility, and they refuse to acknowledge that another party or authority may handle this task better. In mid-December 2022, the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [stated](#) that “*the possibility of taking ZNPP out of Russia’s control or transferring the control of ZNPP to a third party is absolutely out of the question*” because Russia is “*capable of ensuring the physical and nuclear security of ZNPP.*” The Russian authorities and their collaborator Vladimir Rogov, representing the occupation government of the Zaporizhzhia region, speak in unison. According to Rogov, the ZNPP is no place for peacekeeping missions, and the proposal to conduct such a mission is just “*meaningless demagoguery.*” The only counterargument the Russians put forward is that they can ensure the safety and security of the nuclear plant on their own. However, Russian state media do not explain why “[they are the only ones](#) who are capable of guaranteeing the security of the ZNPP.”

As a result, all IAEA efforts to create a demilitarized zone around the ZNPP have failed. IAEA Director General Grossi acknowledged that his objective has evolved from an initial proposal to establish a demilitarized zone around the plant to now focus more on what should be avoided to ensure its [protection](#), rather than on territorial aspects.

Disinformation narrative No.2: “Ukraine resorts to provocations and nuclear blackmail”

As shown, Russian media consistently express that Russian forces are “protecting” the ZNPP and that their military presence at the power plant is the only guaranteed way to ensure the security of Ukraine, Russia, and the entire continent against a nuclear disaster. They claim that they are protecting the world from “[cynical](#)” Ukrainians who are ready to endanger the lives and well-being of their compatriots

¹ See an investigation about Russian disinformation about Bucha, conducted by Bellingcat <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/04/04/russias-bucha-facts-versus-the-evidence/>

and the international community for the sake of political and economic dividends. This is the most popular narrative among observed Russian state media.

As mentioned above, the ZNPP was placed under Russia's "protection" [in response](#) to Ukrainian military's "*provocations*." Soon after the fire accident that took place due to Russian shelling and storming of the ZNPP, Vladimir Putin [declared](#) that "*the attempts to shift responsibility for this terrible provocation on the Russian military*" are nothing other than "*elements of a cynical propaganda campaign*."

According to Russian state media, the [motive](#) behind these "*provocations*" is Ukraine's attempt to "*intimidate*" the West by saying that the Russians allegedly "*almost blew up*" the ZNPP and that "*this area is contaminated by radiation*," while the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, "*in the manner of the best tragic dramatists [intimidated](#) the global community with the prospect of 'the second Chernobyl disaster' that almost repeated itself due to the fault of Russia*" and "*intentionally misleads the whole world and the citizens of Ukraine by sending them into panic mode in fear of the possibility of living near a radioactive area*." The Russians claim that the Ukrainian government is guided by "*Russophobia*," which means that for Ukrainians "*there are no prohibited methods, everything is permitted*." In some cases, the state media explain that the accusations of shelling attacks on the ZNPP against Russia are nothing more than "[Russophobic fabrications](#)" made by Western countries. Ukraine's motives that are being invented by the Russian state media will be discussed in detail in the description of disinformation narrative No.3: "Ukraine wants to do harm to the ZNPP, its citizens and the whole world." However, analysts of East StratCom Task Force (organized within the European Union) [stated](#) there is no evidence provided by Russia to support the claim that Ukraine is shelling the ZNPP. Moreover, as stated by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Russian military forces [use](#) the facilities as "a nuclear shield" in attacks on Ukrainian forces.

The intensity with which this narrative has been repeated has been increasingly proportionate to the level of Russian state media attention to ZNPP since July 2022. This development coincides in time with Ukraine's first statements about the [deployment](#) of Russian military equipment on the territory of the ZNPP, which endangers the security of the power plant and the entire region. In response to Ukraine's statements about Russian shelling of the ZNPP, Russian state media began to [point fingers](#) at Ukraine and put the blame on "*neo-Nazis*" for making artillery strikes in the immediate vicinity of the nuclear facility. At the end of July 2022, a member of the occupation government of Zaporizhzhia region, Vladimir Rogov, went so far as to [threaten](#) to file a complaint to the United Nations about "*nuclear terrorist acts*" committed by the Ukrainians, and he [expected](#) the UN to take "*concrete measures*." In turn, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation [complained](#) to the IAEA about the "*Ukrainian drone attack on the ZNPP*." In August 2022, Rogov [responded](#) to the accusations of artillery shelling against Russia by saying that "*the guilty mind is never at ease*," while Russia [announced](#) its intention to convene a meeting of the UN Security Council "*due to Kyiv's attacks on the ZNPP*."

The level of attention to military occupation of the ZNPP is especially high during the periods when the nuclear plant suffers a partial or total loss of the external power supply necessary for safe operation. The Russian state media [insisted](#) that this is due

to the fault of the Ukrainian military whose intention is *“to change tactics if the counteroffensive is unsuccessful.”* From time to time, members of the occupation government of Zaporizhzhia region [demonstrated](#) what they claim to be small fragments of U.S. munitions that are in use by the Armed Forces of Ukraine in confirmation of their legend about Ukraine’s targeted shelling attacks on the ZNPP. They also [named](#) specific units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine that allegedly carried out these attacks. In order to reinforce their argument, Russian state media [cite](#) the testimonies of ZNPP employees, who [operate](#) under constant supervision and pressure by Russian military that they saw with their own eyes *“who carried out the attacks and where the shells came from.”* Russian state media also attempted to legitimize Russian actions through the involvement of residents of Energodar who allegedly [called on](#) the IAEA to *“put an end to Ukrainian provocations.”* According to the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Russian military forces [increase](#) pressure on local inhabitants of Energodar by expanding patrols in the city, impeding the procedure of document inspections on the checkpoints, restricting movement around the city, etc. Meanwhile, the ex-president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, tried to convince everyone that *“neither the UN nor even the stupid Russophobic public”* believe the Ukrainian evidence about Russian shelling attacks on the nuclear plant. His words echoed the statement made by Dmitry Polyanskiy, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. Contrary to the facts presented at the UN meeting, Polyanskiy [claimed](#) that *“no one in the UN supports Kyiv’s account of events.”* The Russians claim that the IAEA representatives actually *“know that the shelling of ZNPP is carried out by the Ukrainians,”* but for some reason they *“can’t afford to say it out loud.”* Putin’s key argument is as follows: *“If the nuclear station is under our military control, then why are we shelling ourselves? It’s just bullshit.”* According to his logic, there would be no reasonable explanations for the Ukrainians to shell themselves. ‘

Disinformation narrative No.3: “Ukraine wants to do harm to the ZNPP, its citizens and the whole world”

This narrative is consistent with the narrative about Ukrainian provocations at the ZNPP. The difference is that in this case, according to the Russian propaganda, Ukraine not only seeks to paint Russia in a negative light but also shows a disposition to cause direct damage to the ZNPP, residents of Energodar, and to the citizens of Ukraine and neighboring states.

In July 2022, Russian state media expressly [said](#) that Ukraine is not just trying to convince the West of Russia’s guilt or *“make things as clear as mud”* to create the impression that the ZNPP is under serious threat, but also *“aims to inflict maximum damage or destroy key infrastructure facilities.”* Furthermore, the Russians accused Ukraine of carrying out a targeted shelling attack on ZNPP employees during a shift handover, which is *“a terrorist act committed by the Kyiv regime with the aim of intimidating its own civilians.”* Later on, representatives of occupational authorities attempted to [persuade](#) the public that the Armed Forces of Ukraine were aiming directly *“at the nuclear reactor or the cooling system,”* and that *“half of Europe will be*

blown sky-high" if they succeed. According to the Russian propaganda, besides the desire to [kill](#) its own citizens with artillery fire, Ukraine also seeks to trigger a radiation leak and [stage](#) a man-made disaster in the region. Russian state media [repeatedly proposed](#) different conspiracy theories about Ukraine's plans to carry out terrorist attacks on ZNPP employees.

In mid-August 2022, the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [put forward](#) a theory about Ukraine's motivation to destroy a strategic nuclear site and endanger the lives of its citizens. In particular, she said that "*Ukraine is attacking the ZNPP to accomplish the task of destroying itself as a community.*" Other representatives of Russia authorities came up with a more reasonable motivation for Ukraine. [According to](#) the representative of the people's council of the self-proclaimed DPR, Ukraine is shelling the ZNPP in an attempt to "*create conditions for the deployment of peacekeeping forces and change the course of the special military operation.*" The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation [is convinced](#) that Ukraine seeks to intimidate local people by subjecting them to artillery attacks because "*the Ukrainian regime has an urgent need of money and weapons,*" and Ukraine becomes more likely to get what it wants simply "*by drawing the attention of the international community with the help of such actions.*" The Russian Ministry of Defense reiterates the above-mentioned opinion that Ukraine [wants](#) to stage a provocation that will "*trigger a radiation leak*" and "*bring the reactors of the nuclear plant into a state of abnormal operation*" in time for the visit of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres to Kyiv at the end of August 2022. Besides that, Ukraine benefits from artillery shelling of its own nuclear facility because by doing so it "[legalizes the delivery of heavy weaponry](#)" from abroad. In October 2022, Russian media [announced](#) that Zelensky gave the order to capture the ZNPP at any cost before the US Senate midterm elections, which took place in early November 2022. In this context, the ZNPP should serve as an element of Zelensky's "*PR campaign.*" Ukraine [denies](#) the shelling of the ZNPP by Ukrainian troops, and in July 2022 analysts at the Institute for War Studies [said](#) that a "false flag" provocation by Russia was likely.

Disinformation narrative No.4: "Ukraine's secret nuclear weapons"

According to this disinformation narrative, the Russian army not only "protects" the ZNPP from "nuclear terrorist attacks" committed by Ukraine but also [prevents](#) the development of Ukraine's secret nuclear weapons. Soon after the storming of the ZNPP by the Russian troops, an unknown source [informed](#) the Russian media that the "*clashes*" between the Russian and Ukrainian military, which caused a fire accident in one of the buildings on the territory of the nuclear facility, happened because those buildings were used to "*store the documents on the advanced development and creation of Ukrainian nuclear weapons.*" The Russian authorities claim that "*after joining the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as a non-nuclear state in 1994, Ukraine began research and development work with the aim of building a technological base for the potential creation of its own nuclear weapons.*"

Later in the summer, the Russian occupation authorities in Zaporizhzhia region [stated](#) that the “*Poroshenko-Zelensky regime gave authorization to carry out the forbidden experiments,*” which is evidenced by the fact that the Russian invaders allegedly found some nuclear materials on the territory of the ZNPP which “*are not necessary for maintaining the ZNPP in working order and couldn’t appear as a result of nuclear reactor operation.*”

The Russian propaganda mentions of Ukraine’s alleged intention to develop and use a “dirty bomb” picked up pace at the end of September 2022 in preparation for Vladimir Putin’s [instruction](#) to transfer ownership of the ZNPP to the Russian Federation. At that time, partial or complete blackouts had been [taking place](#) at the ZNPP on an alarmingly regular basis as a result of the Russian shelling attacks. In late September, the Russian mass media [declared](#) that “*according to the trustworthy sources... the Kyiv regime plans to stage a provocation involving the detonation of a “dirty bomb” or a low-yield nuclear warhead.*” They claim that the Kyiv Institute of Nuclear Research reached the final stage of development of such a weapon. Representatives of the self-proclaimed LPR [believe](#) that “*the nuclear warhead can be delivered or has already been delivered to Ukraine by Western partners.*” The Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman [used](#) the term “dirty bomb” in a metaphorical sense and claimed that “*Ukraine is trying to make a dirty bomb out of the ZNPP by way of shelling it.*” The Russian authorities were infuriated at the fact that Ukraine and a number of Western countries [refuted](#) the aforementioned allegations. They responded by [saying](#) that Ukraine and its partners took an “*unacceptable approach*” to handling “*a seriously dangerous situation that we are talking about. These statements will remain on the conscience of our counterparts on the other end of the line.*” Later on, Maria Zakharova [stated](#) that “*the months-long Ukrainian shelling of the ZNPP*” serves as proof that “*the Kyiv regime intends to use the nuclear threat factor at any cost*” since “*there isn’t much difference between the shelling of the ZNPP and nuclear explosive actuation.*” At the beginning of November, the Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu unequivocally declared that “*Moscow knows about Kyiv’s attempts to create a dirty nuclear bomb.*” Shortly after the publication of Ukraine’s accusations of nuclear weapons production by Russia, IAEA inspectors [denied](#) the presence of any undeclared nuclear weapons and materials at ZNPP.

Disinformation narrative No.5: “The ZNPP belongs to Russia”

The intensity of use of narrative about Russia’s appropriation of the ZNPP has increased gradually. It is noteworthy that at the beginning of military occupation of the nuclear plant, the Russians [said](#) they had no intention of subordinating the ZNPP to Rosatom. In May 2022, the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Marat Khusnullin [stated](#) that “*Zaporizhzhia NPP will work for Russia, but we are ready to deliver electricity to Ukraine if they will pay for imports.*” In July 2022, the occupation government of Zaporizhzhia region published a statement in the Russian media explaining why they are delivering the electricity “*to Kyiv.*” According to this narrative, the residents of Energodar are the ones who launched the initiative to transfer the ZNPP to Rosatom for trust management. At that time, the local collaborators [explained](#) that they cannot

make independent decisions “because the nuclear station is under the control of the IAEA, while Rosatom cannot go in there due to the intricacies of this procedure”, and they cannot violate the procedure “because this is nuclear energy.”. Taking into account vast reporting [of systematic use](#) of repressions against the local inhabitants of Energodar and ZNPP staff, as well as growing number of torture chambers in Energodar, [reported](#) by General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, statements of any version of public opinion under substantial restrictions of freedom of speech cannot be perceived as accurate representation of local population attitudes.



Figure 2. Ukrainian civilians blocking a road in Energodar to protect the city from advancing Russian troops, March 2, 2022. Dmitry Orlov/Telegram

At the end of July 2022, when the pro-Russian occupation media had already been [waging](#) a propaganda campaign in support of Russia’s plans to hold pseudo-referendums in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, the local collaborators in Zaporizhzhia region expressly [said](#) that “*although the ZNPP is under de jure control of NNEGC Energoatom... it is expected that the nuclear plant will be placed under Rosatom administration.*” The local collaborators argued that the next logical step is to hand over the ZNPP to Rosatom since the nuclear station is already under the control of the Russian army that ensures its physical security (this narrative is logically consistent with Disinformation Narrative No.1, described above).

After the pseudo-referendums, the Russian state media stopped the discussions and reconciled the differences of opinion. In early October 2022, the Russian media began to [refer to](#) ZNPP as “*a wholly-owned subsidiary of Russian Concern Rosenergoatom forming part of state-owned corporation Rosatom.*” These statements were accompanied by the [news](#) that “*the residents of Energodar supported the decision to place the ZNPP under Rosatom administration*” because “*everyone understands that their future is linked with the Russian Federation.*”.

When the United States introduced [sanctions](#) against Russia's Joint Stock Company Operating Organization of Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Rogov [said](#) that *"the imposition of sanctions against the nuclear power plant confirms several points at once. First, the West clearly understood that they will not manage to capture the nuclear power plant. Second, they recognize that the ZNPP is an enterprise owned by the Russian Federation. The West understood this, got used to it and gave up."*

The United States and the G7 clearly [stated](#) that Russia must cede full control to its rightful sovereign owner, Ukraine, of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant as well as of all nuclear facilities within Ukraine's internationally recognized borders to ensure their safe and secure operations.

Disinformation narrative No.6: "Russia maintains the ZNPP in working order and is ready to cooperate with everyone"

Disinformation narrative No.6: "Russia maintains the ZNPP in working order and is ready to cooperate with everyone"

Since the beginning of Russian invasion, Russian state media have been actively emphasizing that Russia is using all its resources and capabilities to support the ZNPP personnel and maintain the nuclear plant in working order. The Russian authorities also demonstrated their "interest" in cooperating with the international institutions in all respects and giving the IAEA mission full access to the ZNPP. However, as Ukraine said, "support" for the ZNPP only translates into violence and torture against the station's employees who remain hostages of the occupiers. In July 2022, it became a [fact](#) that one of the ZNPP employees was tortured by the Russians. The G7 countries [condemned](#) the repeated abductions and torture of ZNPP management and employees by the Russian military, and in November 2022, *The Wall Street Journal* published [evidence](#) that the Russians had detained and tortured more than 200 ZNPP employees and had an equipped torture chamber called the Yama. In August 2022, the Russians echoed the Ukrainian government's [appeal](#) to the IAEA to conduct an inspection of Zaporizhzhia NPP and [invited](#) the IAEA inspectors *"to come and see what's going on in the ZNPP and its surroundings."* Furthermore, a member of the occupation government of Zaporizhzhia region threatened to *"provide documentary evidence of Ukrainian army's shelling attacks on the ZNPP."*

The Russian authorities responded to the publication of first IAEA [reports](#) on the Russian occupation of the ZNPP and intensification of discussions about international inspection mission to the ZNPP [by announcing](#) their readiness to provide the IAEA delegation with full access to the ZNPP. In late August 2022, Maria Zakharova declared that Russia *"is fighting to bring the IAEA representatives to the ZNPP."* However, the Russian army [increased](#) the intensity of shelling attacks in the area of IAEA delegation's travel route agreed by the parties during the first visit of IAEA inspectors to the nuclear plant. But according to Maria Zakharova, *"the so-called Western society and the Kyiv regime are doing everything"* to exclude the possibility of inspecting the nuclear plant. In parallel to the complex process of providing the IAEA delegation with

access to the ZNPP, Zaporizhzhia occupational administration [refused](#) to issue special permits for IAEA to pass through the military outposts. At the same time, the Russian media broadcast [statements](#) to the effect that “Russia is ready to render all possible assistance, including logistical support in organizing the IAEA mission to the ZNPP.” Meanwhile, the Russian occupation authorities of Zaporizhzhia region pointed fingers at the Ukrainians by saying that “if the IAEA inspectors come to the ZNPP, the whole world will find out who is shelling the nuclear station, why the Ukrainians carried out forbidden experiments, and that the residents of Zaporizhzhia region want to become part of Russia.” The occupation authorities also [declared](#) that they are “ready to provide complete security [to IAEA representatives] and give them access to the nuclear station so that they can make an assessment of the situation.”



Figure 3. IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi hugs Renat Karchaa, an adviser to the CEO of Rosenergoatom, March 2023

After the inspection of nuclear facility, the Russian state media tried to legitimize false accusations of targeted shelling attacks on the nuclear plant against Ukraine and convened the UN Security Council meeting “following the results of IAEA mission to the ZNPP.” They [continued](#) to insist that “the IAEA delegation had the opportunity to determine that the Ukrainian military is the only threat to the ZNPP.” As time went on, the Russian enthusiasm for cooperation with the IAEA evaporated and gave way to disappointment over the incompetence of IAEA inspectors who did not affirm Russia’s distorted picture of real events. In November 2022, the Russian media [cited](#) the interview with press secretary of the President of Russia Dmitry Peskov who “ironically expressed a belief that no one expected to find a ‘dirty bomb’ waiting for inspectors in the center of the uranium enrichment plant.” Meanwhile, a member of the Russian State Duma, Leonid Slutsky, [expressed](#) his disappointment at the fact that “the [IAEA] resolution was crafted according to the collective West standard. The resolution doesn’t call on the Kyiv regime to stop shelling the ZNPP nor does it condemn Zelensky’s nuclear blackmail attempts.” According to Slutsky, “Ukraine received a plenary indulgence, and it is reported that there are no ‘dirty bombs’ on

Ukrainian territory.” Later on, the Russians declared that they were “*holding a [discussion](#) with IAEA representatives on the issue of establishing a nuclear security protection zone around the ZNPP,*” while the ZNPP employees are [treated as “members of our family.”](#) Throughout the month of November 2022, which was marked by particularly heavy shelling and resulting serious damage to the ZNPP, the Russians repeatedly [announced](#) their initiatives to cooperate with international experts to ensure security of the nuclear plant. At the end of November, Rosatom responded to the [escalation](#) of IAEA’s rhetoric about de-occupation of the ZNPP by [speaking](#) favorably of previous experience of cooperation with the IAEA and describing the consultations with Agency representatives as “*useful and frank.*” However, in February 2023, the Russians evidently had a change of heart and began to criticize the IAEA mission. The member of the occupation government of Zaporizhzhia region, Vladimir Rogov, [complained](#) that the IAEA “*sabotages*” the rotation of mission staff, and that “*the West’s intelligence organizations are behind this act of sabotage.*” Rogov draws a comparison between the missions of IAEA and OSCE, which “*started as peacekeeping missions but ended in a spying scandal.*”

Conclusions: Russia’s cohesive disinformation campaign

In this report, we have provided a detailed description of Russia’s key disinformation narratives about the occupation of the ZNPP. As can be seen from our analysis, none of these narratives is self-sufficient and neither of them can exist independently of one another. In each section, we gave a revealing insight into one of the aspects that was emphasized by the Russians more than others within a certain context or at a certain point in time – either in support of their actions or in reaction to external factors and events to help the Russians achieve their goals. Summarizing the results of our analysis, we would like to focus readers’ attention on the goals that lie behind Russia’s rhetoric. The Russians exert every effort not only to convince the widest audience possible but also to dominate the discourse in the broadest sense of the word.

If we step back from the detailed consideration of Russian state media rhetoric and information support for the occupation of the ZNPP, we will see that the whole matter **boils down to a threefold metanarrative about Russia** that runs like a golden thread through all disinformation narratives. The first component part of Russian metanarrative is **Russia’s responsibility and moral superiority over its geopolitical opponents**. This component is most evident in Russian state media discourse about placing the ZNPP under Russia’s protection and demonization of the Ukrainians, who are shelling the nuclear site and their compatriots on a systematic basis, “create panic” over the nuclear security of the ZNPP and are preparing to use the prohibited secret nuclear weapons against the military and civilians. Russian state media never provide any arguments to back up a claim that only they can guarantee security of the nuclear plant because their regular readers/listeners take it for granted. In order to confirm this statement, we can examine Russian state media disinformation activities in the field of nuclear energetics before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. For example, Russian state media [emphasized](#) that Ukraine was a “*puppet state*” subordinate to the United States, “*a nuclear waste disposal site*” colonized by the

West. According to Russian state media, Western partners use Ukraine as a place to store hazardous materials without caring about the nuclear security and the threats to life and health of Ukraine's population. Russian state media claim that, unlike the Americans, Russia invests in research and development of modern technologies for safe processing and disposal of radioactive waste. Moreover, "*Russia continued to provide nuclear waste storage and disposal services to Ukraine even when Kyiv delayed payments.*" In other words, Russian state media portray Russia as the most responsible and caring partner in the world. Russian state media [said](#) that "*the Americans want to get a second Chernobyl disaster, but we are not willing to take such a risk.*"

The second component of the Russian state media metanarrative is **Russia's technological superiority over its rivals**. In the context of ZNPP, we can trace the development of this idea in Russia's statements about maintenance of the ZNPP in working order and counseling of nuclear plant personnel through the efforts of Russian specialists. In a broader context, the main way for Russia to emphasize its technological excellence was to set itself off against one of the key competitors on the nuclear fuel market: the American company, Westinghouse. The Russians started making [statements](#) regarding the violation of nuclear reactor safety in Ukraine "*due to structural defects caused by the American manufacturer, Westinghouse company*" even before the Russo-Ukrainian war began. [According to Russia](#), the Ukrainians are ready to take the risks associated with the use of U.S. fuel "*just to show their loyalty to Washington yet again,*" while the Americans [are testing](#) their hazardous technologies in Ukraine because only Ukraine can take such a risk due to its dependent position, unlike other countries.

The third component part of Russian metanarrative is **the indispensability of Russia to the world nuclear market**. In the context of Russian occupation of the ZNPP, the Russians emphasized that they would do a great job of managing the nuclear facility thanks to advanced capabilities and continuous professional development of Rosatom employees, and due to the fact that the ZNPP was built with the use of Soviet technologies. The Russians have made frequent [statements](#) about their country's indispensability and leadership in the international market of nuclear energy prior to taking control of Ukrainian nuclear facilities. They claim that the attempts to decrease dependence on Russia in the field of nuclear energy are not based on any reasons other than politically motivated ones, and such attempts yield nothing but losses from replacement of Russian technologies. [According to](#) Vladimir Putin, "*the goal of the collective West is to make life harder for millions of people.*" In the context of nuclear facilities that were built in Ukraine and other countries with the involvement of Russian Federation, the Russians [emphasize](#) that it is impossible to ensure safe operation without using their materials, equipment and services. In the context of Ukraine, the Russians systematically [insisted](#) that the goal of ensuring safe use of Western fuel at the Soviet nuclear sites is unattainable. When the United Kingdom (UK), US, Canada, Japan, and France announced a [plan](#) to displace Russia from the international nuclear energy market, Russian media published a [paper](#) titled "*Dangerous counterfeit: anti-Russian alliance creates a nuclear threat.*"

In summary, Russia's disinformation efforts in the field of nuclear energy boil down to one common denominator: **Russia is the only reliable partner on the nuclear**

energy market. It should come as no surprise that Russia's economic rhetoric is consistent with the political one, considering that Russia has been shedding the blood of Ukrainians on their own territory for nine years in the name of Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood and the one and only "Russian World."

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