

**«THE DAY HAS COME WHEN WE ALL RECOGNIZED THAT
INFORMATION HAS BECOME ANOTHER TYPE OF WEAPON»:
THE ARCHITECTURE OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION**

Authors:

Anastasiia Romaniuk, social network monitoring expert of the *Civil Network OPORA*

Milena Komar, *Kyiv School of Energy Policy*

We express our gratitude to Nazar Kholod for his contribution to the preparation of the material and academic support.

August 2023

Acronyms and Abbreviations

IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
KSEP	Kyiv School of Energy Policy
NPP	Nuclear Power Plant
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UN	United Nations
ZNPP	Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant

Contents

Introduction	3
Actors and mechanisms of the spread of Russian disinformation.....	3
Speakers of Russian disinformation about the occupation of the ZNPP	7
Tactics of Russian disinformation.....	9
Conclusions.....	11

Introduction

Back in 2015, the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, Serhey Shoigu, [stated](#) that "the day has come when we all recognized that the word, camera, photograph, the Internet and, in general, information have become another type of weapon, another type of armed forces. This weapon can be used both in a bad and in a good way. This is a weapon that in different years took part in the events of our country in different ways - both in defeats and in victories."

In 2013, a year before the start of the war in Ukraine, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, Valery Gerasimov, [published](#) a programmatic article, better known as the "Gerasimov doctrine", where he described the concept of hybrid war in the vision of the Russian military leadership. There, Gerasimov, one of the [authors](#) of the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, proclaimed the importance of non-military measures for waging a modern war, one of which is "information confrontation". Thus, for Gerasimov, who is currently the head of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, "information confrontation opens wide asymmetric possibilities for reducing the combat potential of the enemy", and therefore, during the conduct of war, "it is necessary to carry out actions in the information space, including for the protection of one's own facilities." Thus, one of the [results](#) of the transformation of information into a weapon is disinformation and propaganda, and a clear proof is the [increase](#) in the budget of the Russian state forces, shortly before the start of a full-scale invasion, by more than three times.

In this text, we will consider how the architecture of Russian disinformation is arranged and what are the key techniques and principles of disinformation using the already familiar example of disinformation about the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). Thus, we singled out that the key actors in the spread of Russian disinformation are representatives of the state authorities of the Russian Federation, Russian state platforms for global communication, proxy sources, hidden influences in social networks, and hackers. In the context of disinformation regarding the Russian occupation of the ZNPP, we found that the main speakers of disinformation here are local collaborators, representatives of Russian diplomacy, individual representatives of Rosatom, Russian politicians and the military. We singled out that the dominant techniques used by the Russians in the design of disinformation narratives are "discredit" and "disarm" and considered how the Russians used them in the context of ZNPP.

Actors and mechanisms of the spread of Russian disinformation

According to the [report](#) of the US State Department, Russian disinformation has 5 main distribution platforms:

- **representatives of the state authorities of the Russian Federation:** statements of the Kremlin and representatives of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Russian Federation, messages and statements on their official websites and pages in social networks,
- **Russian state platforms for global communication:** Russian state media for domestic and international audiences located both in Russia and abroad,
- **proxy sources:** pro-Russian international media that are not publicly funded from the state budget of the Russian Federation (or they try not to advertise the sources of funding), local media in local languages, unconscious spreaders of Russian narratives, reinforcement of Russian narratives in foreign governments,
- **hidden influences in social networks:** interference in local discourses both in Russia and abroad, information campaigns to reduce trust in international and state institutions of other countries, strengthening of protests and social conflicts,
- **hacker attacks and operations:** cyber operations aimed at hacking personal and state accounts, capturing and cloning websites, stealing data, falsification, discrediting official sources and official media.



Thus, Russia is building a complex and multi-level infrastructure for the dissemination of disinformation, which, according to the [researchers](#) of the Global Engagement Center, allows, firstly, to spread different variations of the same false narrative, tailored to different audiences, and secondly, allows the Kremlin to distance itself and manage their reputation if their proxies spread risky and

dangerous narratives, and thirdly, multiply the reach and resonance of false narratives by repeating them from a multitude of different channels. This triad of informational needs of Russia is vividly illustrated by the [case of the spread](#) of Russian disinformation about the Bucha massacre. Thus, only within 3 days after the publication of evidence of the crime committed by the Russian military during the occupation of the city of Bucha, 509 posts containing various versions of Russian disinformation about the crime spread through the international segment of Facebook. It was distributed by various actors: as members of groups and administrators of various public pages, pages of media and news aggregators, pages of political institutions, public figures and even foreign political parties.

Russian media under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation [do not have the right](#) to talk about the Russian war in Ukraine in a different way than it is covered by the Russian authorities and the armed forces of the Russian Federation - according to the law "On Fakes About the Russian Army" adopted on March 4, 2022, dissent is punishable by up to 3 years of imprisonment. The Russian government communicates with the **domestic audience** of the Russian Federation through an extensive [system](#) of media platforms: 10 publications, 6 TV channels, 5 radio stations and 4 news agencies.

Russian disinformation spreads to the **international audience** both through **state broadcasters** in foreign languages (Russia Today and Sputnik) and through **proxy sources**: *de jure* non-Kremlin media, organizations, etc., which act in the interests of the Russian government. Thus, the researchers of the Global Engagement Center [singled out](#) a definitely not exhaustive, but illustrative list of such proxies. It mostly refers to the mass media aimed at various foreign audiences and pseudo-research centers that spread pro-Russian narratives under the guise of analytical or scientific materials, for example, the Canadian "research" portal [Global Research](#), the multilingual news portal [News Front](#), located in occupied Crimea, or pseudo - analytical portal [South Front](#). Some **"experts"** also [play along](#) with Russian propaganda. Citizens of the USA or European countries [spread](#) Russian disinformation and create the illusion that Russia is supported in the West as well, and also work to worsen the image of Ukraine. These are not only political scientists, journalists or analysts, but also athletes, actors, musicians and other public influencers. In addition, Russia has an extensive network of **cultural diplomacy** that promotes the concept of a "Russian world", creates a positive image of the Russian government and army, and spreads disinformation about the Russian war in Ukraine. Among them is the [Public Diplomacy Support Fund named after O. M. Gorchakova](#), [Russian Cooperation](#) and the ["Russky Mir" Foundation](#), which have dozens of regional offices around the world. The **Russian Orthodox Church** is also an important tool for spreading disinformation. Its parishes are in more than 10 European countries and [work](#) in the interests of the Russian authorities.

Russia also uses **international organizations**, such as the [UN](#) and [OSCE](#), to spread disinformation. Russian diplomats at UN Security Council meetings [repeatedly](#) justified the invasion and accused Ukraine of violating international norms. Thus, for example, Russian Ambassador Vasiliy Nebyendza [used](#) the UN as

a platform to spread Russian disinformation about the alleged development of a "dirty bomb" by Ukraine, and also, as we mentioned in the previous article, convened a meeting of the UN Security Council regarding Ukraine's alleged shelling of the ZNPP.

Also, Russian informational influences are carried out with the help of **local media** that have no ties to the Russian authorities, but spread narratives in the interests of the Kremlin. Thus, for example, in March 2022, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies analytical center [recorded](#) at least 16 Russian information campaigns in the countries of the African continent, carried out by local media and organizations. Another scenario of hidden influences: **hacker attacks and social networks**. Thus, in the period from 2018 to 2021, the company Meta, which owns the Facebook and Instagram social networks, [deleted](#) 79 pages, 1862 groups, 606 accounts and 84 Instagram accounts, which, masquerading as Ukrainian, spread Russian narratives, and in general, during 2017-2020, the company [discovered](#) that Russia used its platforms to covertly interfere in the information fields of more than 50 countries around the world. In the course of such operations, both influence on public discourse and attempts to extract sensitive information from Ukrainian journalists, the military, and government officials were carried out using the accounts of fake persons. Moreover, during the 2022 midterm elections for the US Senate, the head of the "Wagner" PMC and the founder of the "Trolls from Olgino" factory and "Internet Research Agency", the Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin directly [confirmed](#) Russian interference in the American elections through social networks and stated that they "we are interfering and we will continue to interfere. Carefully, accurately, surgically and in our own way, as we know how to do."

In addition to the ability to develop targeted messages for different audiences, such a complex structure allows for the constant spread of Russian disinformation. If in the case of the domestic audience, the authoritarian regime has full control over the information space of its own citizens, then when working on a foreign audience, the Russians need to maneuver against opposition from the target countries. So, for example, with the beginning of the full-scale Russian war on the territory of Ukraine, the broadcasts of the international state Russian mass media Russia Today and Sputnik [were banned](#) at the EU level and fully or partially restricted in other countries of the world. To comply with these sanctions, access to the pages and applications of Russia Today/Sputnik was restricted by the companies Microsoft, Apple and Google. Research by the Civil Network OPORA showed that the sanctions had a significant impact on the activity of the blocked media as well as on other Russian media that were not subject to the sanctions. At the same time, the content in Arabic and Spanish languages was the most actively distributed, because in the countries of speakers of these languages no measures were implemented to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation. Moreover, as of December 2022, the reach of Russia Today's Spanish-language Facebook page is almost [three times higher](#) than that of the publication's main page. As of January 2023, 50 countries of the world have [imposed](#) sanctions against Russian

mass media and media persons, and 215 Russian media persons have been subject to [personal](#) sanctions.

Speakers of Russian disinformation about the occupation of the ZNPP

To illustrate the mechanisms of creation and dissemination of Russian disinformation, we coded an array of news reports from Russian state media about the Zaporizhzhia NPP, collected to study narratives of Russian disinformation about the ZNPP. Thus, we coded an array of 345 news messages according to the following categories:

- 1) "voices" of Russian disinformation: who are referred to by the Russian mass media when covering the events surrounding the ZNPP,
- 2) tactics used in the development of disinformation messages.

Various voices spread Russian misinformation in the case of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, the narratives of which we have read in detail earlier. Thus, the following are involved in the spread of disinformation about the ZNPP:

Speaker	Number of mentions
Local collaborators	148
Russian diplomacy	127
Representatives of Rosatom	51
Russian politicians	59
Russian military	44
Nameless representatives of the government/army	14
Statements of Russian authorities (for example, a statement from the Ministry, etc.)	18
Rosatom as an institution	7
Own anonymous sources	8
"Independent experts"	6
Journalists of the publication	6
Rostekhnadzor	1
Residents of Energodar	1

The main "mouthpieces" of Russian disinformation about the ZNPP are **representatives of the local occupation authorities**, and they most often spread the second most popular narrative in the studied media about "provocations and nuclear blackmail" on the part of Ukraine. Thus, the most public among the local collaborators is Vladimir Rogov, the so-called member of the main council of the occupation administration of the Zaporizhzhia region. Rogov's anti-Ukrainian activities [began](#) around 2008, and during the Revolution of Dignity, the organization headed by Rogov organized "anti-maidans" in Zaporizhzhia. Rogov had ambitions for power in the region back then, in 2014, but then he fled to Russia together with many pro-Russian politicians, returning to Ukraine only after Russia occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region. For the most part, the voice of collaborators who are directly "on the ground" is used as a source of news about the situation in Enerгодar and directly at the ZNPP. This is exactly how they report on Ukraine's alleged shelling of power plant facilities and describe terrifying scenarios of Ukraine's imagined intentions to cause a man-made catastrophe to achieve military and geopolitical goals. Also, representatives of local occupation administrations are the main proponents of the idea of subordinating the ZNPP to the Russian corporation Rosatom, presenting this idea as an "initiative from below" and the own desire of ZNPP employees and energy donors. We can see echoes of these theses in the statements of Russian diplomats and politicians. It is significant that we recorded only 2 cases when this idea was expressed by the representatives of "Rosatom" themselves and not a single statement on this matter from Rosatom as an institution.

The second most frequently mentioned are **representatives of Russian diplomacy**. Most often, we come across the statements of, for example, the spokeswoman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Maria Zakharova, and the ambassador of the Russian Federation to the UN, Vasiliy Nebyendzia. A day before the start of the full-scale invasion, Zakharova [was put](#) on the EU sanctions list along with Russia Today editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, Russian TV presenter Vladimir Solovyov and other propagandists. Nebyendzia has been in his position since 2017 and since then has been systematically [spreading](#) Russian disinformation on one of the key international platforms. Most often, diplomats also accuse Ukraine of "provocations", repeating the thesis of local collaborators. Given their role, diplomats repeat the collaborators' narratives, directing them to an international audience, comment on the statements, actions of foreign governments and international organizations, and the interaction of Russians with them. At the same time, diplomats emphasize the fact that the Russians only protect the ZNPP and do not expose the facility to danger. Diplomats, as well as Russian politicians and the military, are key advocates of the conspiracy theory about the development of secret, illegal nuclear weapons by Ukraine. We observe only isolated statements on this matter from other speakers.

The third are **individual representatives of the Russian state nuclear power corporation Rosatom**. Most often, we hear the voice of Renat Kaarchi - the advisor to the CEO of the corporation, a primatologist by education, who [specialized](#) in breeding monkeys before starting his career in nuclear energy. It is

noteworthy that we observe only rare and isolated comments about the occupation of the ZNPP by Russia from Rosatom as an institution, and only media comments by individual representatives of the corporation. Like other speakers, the loudest narrative from the mouths of Rosatom representatives is the topic of the so-called "provocations of Ukraine", and in second place is the coverage of various types of support for both ZNPP employees and Energodar citizens from both Russia in general and Rosatom in particular, as well as declarations of the intention to fully cooperate both with the IAEA and with other institutions from the international community on the issue of ZNPP (which contradicts the real actions of Russia in this context).

Russian politicians and **the military** are the fourth and fifth most frequently mentioned speakers of disinformation in the studied media. As we have already noted above, it is they who popularize the disinformation narrative about Ukraine's cons of illegal nuclear weapons. In addition, traditionally, they insist that Russia protects the ZNPP from "Ukrainian provocations".

Tactics of Russian disinformation

As researcher Anton Shekhovtsov notes, Russian narratives can be divided into two levels - strategic and tactical. Thus, strategic narratives are more static and reflect the long-term priorities and interests of Russian politics and warfare. They have a clear logical structure and are more consistent. Instead, tactical narratives can be more chaotic and less coherent, as they function as point measures to reinforce strategic narratives. Tactical narratives are often more manipulative and emotional.

Using the example of ZNPP, we saw how 6 disinformation narratives are woven into a three-fold metanarrative: Russia's responsibility and moral superiority over geopolitical opponents, Russia's irreplaceability on the global market, Russia as the only profitable and reliable partner for cooperation in the market.

To reinforce profitable deceptive narratives, Russia [uses](#) the following tactics:

- "discredit"
- "divide"
- "disarm"
- "demoralize".

This methodology was developed by Russia back in the days of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As Vasyl Mitrokhin, the archivist of the First Main Directorate of the KGB, which was responsible for external intelligence, formulated, the main goals of the Soviet influence operations, which were later inherited by Russia, were: 1) "exerting influence on the enemy", 2) "weakening his political, economic, scientific technical and military positions". Thus, since 1959, the Soviet KGB had a separate unit responsible for disseminating disinformation. Practices developed in the last century by the already defunct state still remain the foundation for the development of Russian informational influences. In the context

of Russian disinformation about the ZNPP, Russians mostly use two of these techniques - "discredit" and "disarm".

Discredit. As Ladislav Bittman, the deputy head of the disinformation department of Czechoslovak intelligence in 1964-1966, [described](#) this tactic, "our main task was to notice and prepare all the enemy's weak points, his sensitive or vulnerable places, as well as to analyze his failures and mistakes in order to use them in our goals".

Discrediting has become the dominant tactic of Russian propagandists. In the context of ZNPP, the most popular objects of discredit were the Ukrainian government, the army, and Ukraine's geopolitical partners. As we have already described in the first report on the narratives of Russian disinformation, the main informational priority of the Russians regarding the ZNPP is to depict the criminal intentions of the Ukrainians to use the ZNPP for "nuclear blackmail" and to put Ukrainians and citizens of neighboring countries at risk of man-made catastrophe for material or political dividends. We observe that Russia is systematically mirroring evidence-based accusations by Ukraine and international observers in its direction of systematic shelling of a nuclear energy facility, storage of weapons on its territory, and intentions to use the ZNPP as a tool of pressure. For the most part, the discrediting narratives are supported by **intimidation** that the absence of Russian troops in Energodar and in particular on the territory of the ZNPP will lead to a disaster, **emotionally colored vocabulary** and seasoned with conspiracy theories about the secret development of prohibited weapons by Ukraine on the territory of the power plant and the management of Ukraine by Western governments that (for some reason) are interested in nuclear disaster in Ukraine. Russians often use the technique of "clickbait", that is, the use of emotionally manipulative headlines and sharp accusations of various "enemies of Russia" of immoral and cruel actions and intentions. It is important to remember that in conditions of extensive and oversaturated media platforms and the number of events in the information space, a large part of users consume news content exclusively at the level of headlines.

Disarm. The essence of this tactic is to create the illusion of no threat from your side to the enemy. Using this tactic, the Russians try to portray themselves as a safe and reliable player, trying to relax their enemy and prepare the ground for the surprise effect. In fact, this tactic is the basis of the two narratives outlined by us earlier: "Russia only protects ZNPP" and "Russia supports the operation of ZNPP and cooperates with everyone." Similar to discrediting, the use of this technique is accompanied by **intimidation**, namely by confronting oneself with "immoral" and criminally minded enemies - Ukraine and its geopolitical partners. In this context, the Russians also often use the illusion of an initiative "from below", that is, from the ZNPP employees and Energodar citizens. This is how the Russians broadcast "petitions" and statements of citizens who seem to feel more comfortable and safer under the control of the Russian Federation. It was under the auspices of the "initiative from below" that Russian propaganda framed the transfer of ZNPP to the control of the Russian corporation "Rosatom" - almost nowhere did we find a mention of this topic from the standpoint of the interests of the Russian state.

Conclusions

Thus we saw that the Russian authorities have built an extensive and complex infrastructure to spread disinformation at the global level. We singled out **7 key platforms** for both direct and indirect dissemination and scaling of disinformation: representatives of the Russian state authorities, Russian state platforms for global communication, proxy sources, hidden influences in social networks, hacker attacks and operations, activities of Russians within international institutions and the Russian Church. Such multi-channel allows, firstly, to create more effective targeted messages for different audiences, secondly, to form resistance to countermeasures on the part of countries and target audiences of informational influences, thirdly, to create the effect of an "echo chamber" - to increase persuasiveness their messages by repeating them from many different sources.

Using the example of Russian disinformation about Zaporizhzhia NPP, we found that the key speakers of Russian disinformation were: local collaborators, representatives of Russian diplomacy, representatives of Rosatom, Russian politicians and the military. Thus, the function of local collaborators consists in creating the illusion of an "initiative from below" on the part of the local population and ZNPP employees, as well as producing "reliable news" from the epicenter of events. Also, representatives of local occupation administrations are the main proponents of the idea of subordinating the ZNPP to the Russian corporation Rosatom, presenting this idea as an "initiative from below" and the own desire of ZNPP employees and Energodar citizens. We can see echoes of these theses in the statements of Russian diplomats and politicians. For their part, Russian diplomats adapt the messages of the collaborators to an international audience and regularly comment on international events, strengthen conspiracy theories about the development of prohibited weapons by Ukraine, and especially emphasize the narrative that the Russians are only protecting the ZNPP and do not expose the facility to danger. As an institution, Rosatom itself rarely comments on events surrounding the ZNPP, however, we often observe media statements by individual representatives of the corporation, most often - statements about "provocations" by Ukraine and coverage of various types of support for both ZNPP employees in particular and Energodar citizens in general. Russian politicians and the military duplicate and amplify the statements of the actors listed above.

From the point of view of the design of disinformation narratives, the most popular tactics of the Russians in the context of the ZNPP are discrediting and disarmament. Russia is systematically mirroring evidence-based accusations by Ukraine and international observers in its direction of systematic shelling of a nuclear energy facility, storage of weapons on its territory, and intentions to use the ZNPP as a tool of pressure. The Russians often influence their audience by intimidation that the absence of Russian troops in Energodar and in particular on the territory of the ZNPP will lead to a disaster, emotionally colored vocabulary and filled with conspiracy theories about the secret development of prohibited

weapons by Ukraine on the territory of the power plant and the management of Ukraine by Western governments. Russians often use the technique of "clickbait", that is, the use of emotionally manipulative headlines and sharp accusations of various "enemies of Russia" of immoral and cruel actions and intentions. At the same time, by discrediting Ukraine, Russia presents itself as a reliable and safe partner that protects the ZNPP from man-made disasters and other external threats. In the framework of this work, the description of the speakers and tactics of Russian disinformation regarding the ZNPP is illustrative in nature. As we have shown above, Russian disinformation is an extensive and complex system that has many more actors and platforms than the news reports from the Russian media that we have used. The case of ZNPP is not an exception, so for a deeper understanding, additional research on this topic is necessary.