

UNDERSTANDING DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE

ALLEGATIONS OF UKRAINIAN NUCLEAR REARMAMENT



JANUARY 2025

KEY POINTS

Disinformation narrative: Russia deliberately promotes existing misinformation about Ukraine's potential nuclear rearmament, creating a disinformation narrative that seeks to justify its invasion and deflect attention from its own suspension of non-proliferation initiatives. Ukraine's contradictory statements inadvertently amplify this disinformation.

Implications: This targeted disinformation aims to damage Ukraine's credibility within the international community and erode Western military support.

Recommendations: Ukraine should prioritise consistent and unambiguous messaging around its commitment to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT); Western media and policymakers should ensure quality reporting to prevent the spread of misinformation; and governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international bodies should proactively debunk false narratives to expose Russia's tactics and reaffirm global commitments to non-proliferation.

BACKGROUND

Discussions about Ukraine's nuclear disarmament can be traced back to 1991, when it inherited roughly 4,000 strategic and tactical nuclear weapons that were stationed on its territory.¹ Unlike Kazakhstan and Belarus, which also acquired nuclear weapons during the Soviet Union's collapse but agreed to give them up quickly, Ukraine underwent significant internal debate about whether to retain its stockpile.

Kyiv's eventual decision to relinquish its nuclear weapons was influenced by international political pressure, Moscow's operational control over the weapons and economic and safety issues.² Importantly, the 1994 *Budapest Memorandum* affirmed that Russia, the UK, the US³ would "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine".⁴ In exchange, Kyiv agreed to transfer its nuclear arsenal to Moscow and join the NPT.⁵ Initially praised for preventing nuclear proliferation, the *Memorandum* later became a source of grievance after Russia repeatedly violated Ukraine's sovereignty⁶ (see *timeline*).

RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

Moscow generates disinformation by deliberately amplifying existing misinformation about Ukraine's indigenous technical capabilities and the amount of time needed to develop a viable nuclear deterrent. This fusion of factual elements with falsehoods makes these information operations especially difficult to counter and refute.⁷ Moscow's disinformation campaign highly likely serves several purposes:

- **Justification for military aggression:** Russia rationalises its invasion by undermining Kyiv's reputation as a responsible international actor.^{8 9}
- **Fearmongering:** By conflating the unrelated "dirty bomb" (see [previous report](#)) and nuclear weapons development narratives, Russia amplifies public fears that supporting Ukraine could lead to nuclear escalation.^{10 11}
- **Distraction from own nuclear activity**¹²: The nuclear rearmament narrative diverts attention from Russia's suspension of non-proliferation efforts and its nuclear threats against the West.

TIMELINE

- **1994**
Ukraine signs the *Budapest Memorandum*, giving up its nuclear weapons in exchange for security assurances. It also joins the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state.
- **2014**
Russia annexes Crimea and supports pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas.

Some Ukrainian politicians begin advocating for nuclear rearmament, although this doesn't become state policy.
- **February 2022**
President Zelenskyy warns adherence to the *Budapest Memorandum* is in doubt unless the West assures Ukraine's security.

President Putin cites Ukraine's nuclear rhetoric as a justification for Russia's full-scale invasion.
- **March 2022**
Foreign Minister Lavrov declares Russia will take all necessary measures to prevent Ukraine from regaining nuclear weapons.

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UKRAINIAN INTENT

Despite fuelling Russia's disinformation narratives, Kyiv's contradictory^{13 14} statements about nuclear rearmament (*see timeline*) might aim to achieve any combination of the following objectives:

- **Influence Western support:** Remind allies that withdrawing or reducing military assistance could destabilise nuclear non-proliferation efforts.
- **Undermine disinformation narratives:** Shift the spotlight onto the failures of the *Budapest Memorandum* and highlight Russia's responsibility for destabilising non-proliferation norms.
- **Signal genuine intent:** Prepare the information space for a future official policy shift from NPT adherence to nuclear rearmament.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Calls for a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine are growing.^{15 16} If Kyiv is unable to secure NATO membership or receive bilateral security guarantees from the US as part of a future peace settlement, Ukraine could consider developing nuclear weapons as a deterrent against further Russian aggression.

While Ukraine may explore rearmament, successfully rebuilding its nuclear capabilities is highly unlikely due to significant technical and political challenges. Developing a nuclear deterrent would likely take multiple years and require currently absent indigenous capabilities.¹⁷ Any covert efforts would almost certainly be exposed, undermining diplomatic support from key allies. Disinformation around the threats posed by nuclear rearmament could also be exploited as pretext for renewed military action.

Additionally, aggression against Ukraine has inadvertently highlighted the dangers of nuclear disarmament. Moscow's actions may embolden nations such as Iran and North Korea to further pursue nuclear deterrence while avoiding denuclearisation talks, damaging non-proliferation efforts.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

To counter targeted disinformation narratives:

- **Ukrainian officials:** should prioritise consistent and unambiguous messaging around Kyiv's commitment to the NPT to avoid undermining international confidence in non-proliferation frameworks.
- **Western media and policymakers:** should deepen their understanding of the technical and legal barriers to Ukraine restoring its nuclear weapon status – to prevent inadvertently spreading disinformation.
- **Governments, NGOs and international bodies:** should take a more proactive and responsive role in debunking these narratives.

By exposing disinformation tactics and reinforcing Ukraine's non-nuclear status, the international community can discredit these narratives while reaffirming global norms against nuclear proliferation.

Russia's disinformation shifts focus from nuclear rearmament to the "dirty bomb" narrative.

June 2024
In its annual safeguard report, the IAEA again finds no indication that Ukraine is weaponising its nuclear material for non-peaceful activities.¹⁹

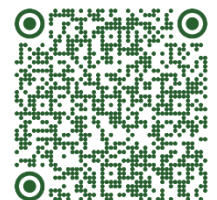
October 2024
President Zelenskyy states that Ukraine will either join NATO or obtain nuclear weapons.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry reaffirms that Kyiv remains committed to the NPT.

November 2024
Changes in US leadership raise concerns about possible reductions in military aid to Ukraine.

Rearmament concerns are amplified by poor analysis and inaccurate mainstream media reporting which misrepresents officials' positions and downplays the complexities of nuclear weapon development.^{20 21}

President Putin amplifies this media reporting, reiterating that Russia will not allow Ukraine to develop nuclear weapons.



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