

UNDERSTANDING DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE

WEAPONISATION OF NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS



August 2025

BACKGROUND

Disinformation targeting nuclear power plants (NPPs) has historically been employed by both state and non-state actors to erode public trust in governments and nuclear energy.¹ Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, physical incidents at NPPs (shelling, power loss and drone attacks) have become frequent (see *timeline*), fuelling these disinformation narratives while obscuring culpability and manipulating public opinion.

Overview of Nuclear Power Plants²

Nuclear Power Plants	Zaporizhzhia (ZNPP)	Chornobyl (ChNPP)	Kursk (KNPP)
Location	Ukraine <i>(occupied by Russia since 4 March 2022)</i>	Ukraine <i>(occupied by Russia from 24 February - 31 March 2022)</i>	Russia
Key Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Europe's largest NPP. Close to the frontline. Often at centre of disinformation narratives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symbolic weight from the 1986 disaster. Narratives used to amplify radiological fears. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety concerns during Kursk offensive. Older, more vulnerable NPP design.

While **ZNPP** has been central to ongoing radiological and nuclear disinformation, **ChNPP** and **KNPP** have also featured in the information operation. References to **ChNPP** often tap into historical radiological anxieties,³ while military activities near **KNPP** are used to depict Ukraine as a threat to Russian nuclear security.⁴ Each site plays a distinct role: **ZNPP** as an occupied and compromised site, **ChNPP** as a symbol of past catastrophe, and **KNPP** as a vehicle for cross-border escalation narratives.

VERIFICATION CHALLENGES

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has recorded multiple safety incidents at **ZNPP**, including drone strikes, off-site power losses, shelling, gunfire and cooling water shortages.⁵ Attribution for many incidents remains disputed with both sides denying responsibility and accusing the other of staging attacks.⁶ These narratives amount to disinformation when they involve deliberately false claims, but broader attempts to deflect blame and influence international perception are often better understood as components of wider information operations.

Rotation of IAEA staff to **ZNPP** has been often delayed due to military activity.⁷ These delays complicate timely verification of nuclear materials and risk safe operations.⁸ Despite ongoing military activities and incidents at **ZNPP** and the connected disinformation narratives, the IAEA has confirmed that there is no immediate risk of a radiological leak, with radiation levels remaining within normal parameters.⁹

TIMELINE

- 24 February 2022**
Russia launches full-scale invasion, occupies **ChNPP**.
- 04 March 2022**
Russia occupies **ZNPP**.
- 31 March 2022**
Russian forces withdraw from **ChNPP**.
- 05 August 2022**
Initial reports of shelling damage to infrastructure at **ZNPP**.
- 25 August 2022**
First loss of off-site power at **ZNPP**. *(Off-site power is lost nine times between Aug 2022 and Jul 2025).*
- 23 November 2022**
Nationwide blackout affects all Ukrainian NPPs.
- 6 June 2023**
Kakhovka Dam collapses, impacting **ZNPP's** cooling water reserves.
- 3 October 2023**
Reports of drone attacks near **KNPP**.
- 11 August 2024**
Fire damages **ZNPP** cooling tower after a drone attack (see page 2 QR code).
- 14 February 2025**
Drone strike hits **ChNPP's** New Safe Confinement dome (see page 2 QR code).



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STRATEGIC AIMS

Disinformation campaigns around NPPs, particularly **ZNPP**, appear to reflect a deliberate effort to exploit nuclear infrastructure for the following military, political, and psychological advantage:

1. **Justifying Military Presence:**¹⁰ By framing control of **ZNPP** as a measure of nuclear risk management, occupation shifts from a violation of sovereignty to a promotion of nuclear safety.
2. **Delegitimising Ukraine's Reputation:**¹¹ Narratives that cast Ukraine as incapable or reckless with nuclear infrastructure erode international confidence in its governance.¹²
3. **Blurring Global Norms:** Undermining of long-standing norms that civilian nuclear facilities should be excluded from military operations, a principle aimed at preserving their safety during conflict.

TACTIC COMPARISON

Despite differences in the narratives surrounding the **ZNPP**, **ChNPP**, and **KNPP**, consistent disinformation tactics are evident across all three cases. The most prominent techniques include:



Unsubstantiated attribution

Attributing harm or negligence to deliberate adversary actions without substantiated evidence, to shape international perception.



Manipulating Content

Using altered imagery, selectively framed data, or misleading video to fabricate or distort evidence in support of false narratives.



Emotional Triggers¹³

Amplifying anxiety through alarmist rhetoric or exaggerated consequences to provoke panic and erode public trust in official information.



Firehose of Falsehoods¹⁴

Disseminating large volumes of misleading or contradictory information across multiple channels to confuse audiences and crowd out accurate reporting.

The presence of these disinformation tactics across three diverse examples suggests they constitute a blueprint likely to be reused in future conflicts involving NPPs. Developing a nuanced understanding of this disinformation toolkit is essential for building resilience and ensuring effective crisis response.

CONCLUSION

Disinformation during conflict can threaten nuclear safety by distorting threats, provoking risky actions, and delaying response. It disrupts the ability of institutions like the IAEA to operate effectively and reveals gaps in global mechanisms meant to protect nuclear sites during conflict. **ZNPP** specifically demonstrates how these dynamics heighten the risk of escalation.

These NPP crises not only challenge Ukraine's legitimacy but expose vulnerabilities in global nuclear governance frameworks.¹⁵ With disinformation increasing confusion and mistrust around nuclear facilities under occupation and within active war zones, institutions must adapt by strengthening safety measures, assessing protocols and implementing crisis communication strategies.

Scan the QR code for references



Scan the QR code for the GP Tactic Spotlight



Scan the QR codes for satellite imagery analysis (from timeline)



ZNPP

ChNPP

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