

The Nuclear Blackmailing Narrative on Twitter and Telegram

| Ukraine, Russia, and beyond



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About this project

This project aims to provide an understanding of public online discourse and perceptions of conflict-related issues in the social media debates in Ukraine. By performing social media monitoring in and around Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this project tracks disinformation, and helps us understand the narratives and perceptions of the war online. This project also raises awareness by advancing the understanding of disinformation and social media's role in the war in Ukraine.

Due to security concerns, we are unable to disclose the names of the experts consulted in this report. They all have broad knowledge in areas such as online discourse, human rights and Ukraine's political environment.

For more information on the project, click [here](#).

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This report was written by Anastasiia Tarasova, with contributions from Michael Meyer-Resende, DRI Executive Director, and with data analysis by Anastasiia Alekseeva.

Forset designed the layout of this publication.

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1 | Executive Summary

In the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government has resorted to “nuclear signaling”, both subtle and less subtle. The issue has been much discussed by governments and the expert community, as well as in the media,¹ with some drawing parallels with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.²

This report assesses how this discussion has reverberated in Twitter and Telegram in Ukraine, Russia, and beyond, through an analysis of 505,430 Twitter posts during the period from 24 February to 31 October 2022.

These are the report’s findings:

1. From the first day of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s flexing of its nuclear muscles has shaped the narrative on Twitter and Telegram. In particular, the focus has been on two major dimensions of “nuclear”: a) the capture of **nuclear plants** as the generators of energy and heating, as well as a kind of intimidation and blackmail upon their occupation; and b) the use of **nuclear weapons**. The topic “nuclear war” has generated speculation mainly in relation to the interaction between the US and NATO and Russia.
2. The nuclear narrative on Twitter carried mainly negative connotations, while Telegram posts often used satire or parody,³ e.g., mocking posts about a “**dirty bomb**”. There has been a noticeable difference in the discourse in the two countries: On Ukrainian channels, sarcasm and humour have been common as part of the nuclear discussion,⁴ while discourse on Russian Telegram channels has been gloomy and conspiratorial in tone – or just propagandistic.
3. Nuclear threats are employed by Russia as a means of pressure and intimidation, aimed at nudging Kyiv to the negotiating table on the terms and conditions dictated by the Kremlin. Russia constantly claims its readiness for negotiations, perhaps as a sort of reminiscence of Cold War diplomacy.
4. Analysis of “nuclear” discourse on Twitter has revealed that “nuclear war” is predominantly mentioned with regards to the US-NATO-Russia interaction, meanwhile Ukraine-Russia war context is flooded with the topic of “tactical nuclear weapons” or so called small-scale “nukes”

1. Marina Baranovskaya, “[How High is the Risk of Putin Using a Nuclear Weapon?](#)”, *Deutsche Welle*, 12 October 2022.

2. Graham Allison, “[The Cuban Missile Crisis at 60: Six Timeless Lessons for Arms Control](#)”, Arms Control Association, Washington D.C., October 2022.

3. Sofiya Maksymiv, “[How Humor Helps Ukrainians Withstand War Atrocities](#)”, *Ukraine World*, 21 July 2022.

4. Charles Shaw, “[Ukraine’s Caustic Wartime Humor Has Surprising Soviet Roots](#)”, *Slate*, 03 May 2022.

2 | Methodology

This report is based on the analysis 505,430 Twitter posts related to the war in Ukraine containing the term “nuclear”. The observation period was from 24 February to 31 October 2022. The tweets selected were written in three languages: Ukrainian, Russian, and English. In addition, Telegram messages and emoji reactions were included from 4 groups of popular news channels: 1) 20 pro-Ukrainian channels in Ukraine; 2) 11 pro-Russian channels in Ukraine; 3) 4 pro-war channels in Russia; and 4) 4 independent channels in Russia.

The report is based on thematic analysis and sentiment assessments, and identifies the most discussed topics on Twitter and Telegram to reveal the dynamics of discussions and narratives over the indicated period, as well as what changes and developments shaped the nuclear discourse on Telegram and Twitter in both Russia and Ukraine.

3 | Analysis

From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Kremlin used nuclear signaling. In his speech of 24 February, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned other countries not to intervene in his war, stating that Russia's response would be "immediate and lead you to consequences that you have never faced in your history."⁵ At the end of February, he ordered his military to put Russia's nuclear deterrence forces on high alert.⁶

It is important to understand that the situation here is very different from the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, often cited in the current context. Russia has engaged in nuclear brinkmanship in an asymmetrical context, where, as one of the nine nuclear superpowers and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it is threatening a non-nuclear country – Ukraine – which gave up its nuclear arsenal in return for security assurances, including of the inviolability of its borders, under the Budapest memorandum.⁷

The Kremlin has used nuclear signaling in different ways: by implying that it may use its full nuclear arsenal ("Armageddon"); in discussions about the use of a small tactical nuclear weapon on the battlefield; in talk about "dirty bombs"; and in the occupation of and threats related to nuclear facilities, particularly in Chernobyl and Zaporizhia. It appears that these statements have been made with a psychological purpose, particularly to intimidate Ukraine's allies.

| The 'nuclear' narrative on Twitter

This section provides insight into who have been in the majority in the tweets and posts examined – those who believe that the war in Ukraine will end up in nuclear conflict, or those more skeptical about this prospect? This was done by constructing a network of retweets and identifying two camps, based on the content, hashtags, and structure of the networks (Fig. 2).

Observed trends:

a. The nuclear narrative appeared in the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion (Fig. 1), and became more prominent in March, in relation to the dangerous situation

5. Al Jazeera, "'No Other Option': Excerpts of Putin's Speech Declaring War", 24 February 2022.

6. Andrew Roth, Shaun Walker, Jennifer Rankin & Julian Borger, "Putin Signals Escalation as He Puts Russia's Nuclear Force on High Alert", *The Guardian*, 28 February 2022.

7. Aldo Zammit Broda, "Ukraine War: What Was the Budapest Memorandum and Why Has Russia's Invasion Torn It Up?", *The Conversation*, 2 March 2022; Ukraine, Russian Federation, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and United States of America, [Memorandum No. 52241 on security assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#), 5 December 1994.

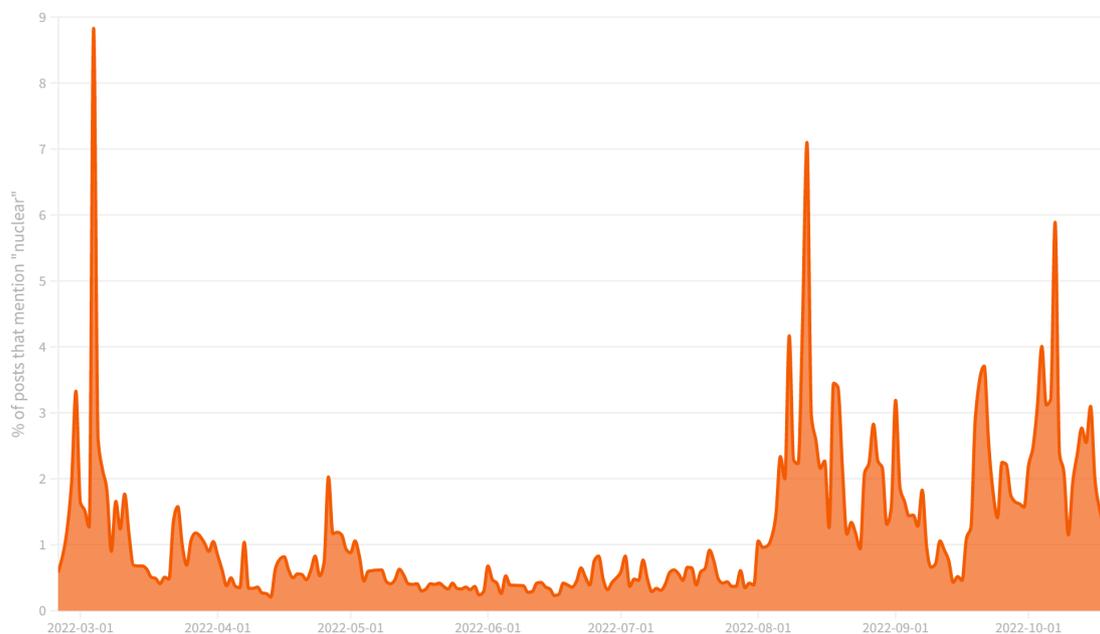
around the capture of nuclear facilities, when Russian troops first occupied the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone,⁸ and then the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, in the southeastern region of Ukraine, in Zaporizhia.⁹

Another peak of the nuclear narrative on Twitter appeared in August, in relation to the situation and shelling near the Zaporizhia Nuclear Station. The situation became so tense that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) deployed a verification mission to spotlight the danger.

Meanwhile, the autumn of 2022 has brought a new peak in the discussion of the nuclear topic, just as many experts and United States President Joe Biden have drawn parallels with the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, when the Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union reached their apogee, putting the whole world on the brink of mutually assured destruction.

Dynamics of the percentage of tweets that mention "nuclear"

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Data: DRI • Chart: DRI

Figure 1. The number of posts on Twitter mentioning the "nuclear" topic

8. Faustine Vincent, "Chernobyl: The Story of 35 Days of Russian Occupation", *Le Monde*, 16 June 2022; Ben Tobias, "Ukraine War: Chernobyl Workers' 12-Day Ordeal Under Russian Guard", *BBC News*, 7 March 2022.

9. Matt Farmer, "Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant: A Timeline of Events Since Russia's Invasion", *Power Technology*, 21 October 2022.

b. In terms of the nuclear narrative (Fig. 2), references to “nuclear war” have mainly been related to the idea of the United States versus Russia – the two countries with the world’s largest stockpiles of nuclear warheads,¹⁰ or referencing NATO more broadly. Meanwhile, within the more specific framework of the Russia-Ukraine war, the narrative has mainly been about tactical nuclear weapon strikes – about so called “small nukes”.¹¹

Figure 2 represents the network on Twitter during the observation period, from 7 to 16 October 2022. All tweets that mentioned nuclear war+Russia+Ukraine were included in the analysis, identifying the authors of the tweets that are the nodes in the network. The connections between accounts are retweets. The network shows two camps, mostly in the United States’ Twitter audience, both arguing about whether or not to send more weapons to Ukraine. There was also criticism of Biden and the Democrats for supporting Ukraine. As part of this dispute, the narrative arose that further substantial United States support for Ukraine in the war against Russia might lead to nuclear war, arguing that, instead, Washington should push for a peace deal. One of the recent tweets is posted by Donald Trump Junior, urging for a halt to supplying weapons to Ukraine, after an anti-aircraft missile fell and killed two people in Poland.¹² Meanwhile, opponents of pushing for a peace deal underlined that the potential use of nuclear weapons would not bring peace but, instead, would lead to full-scale war and the end of Russia.

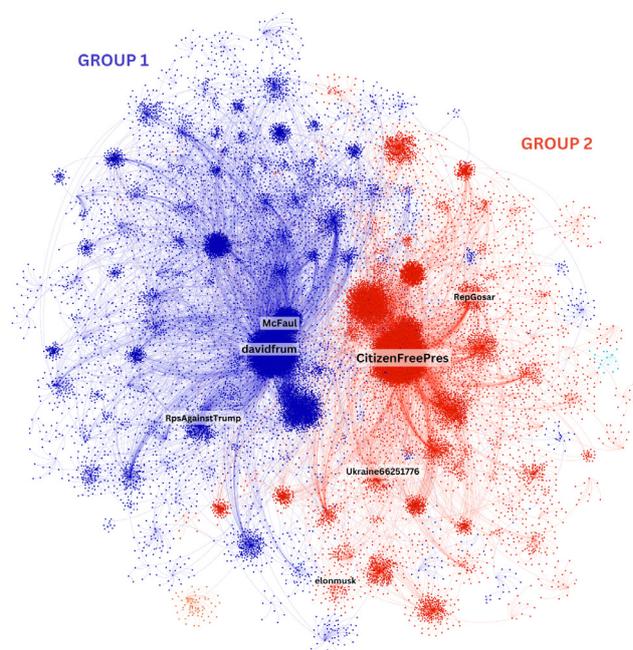


Figure 2. The network of reposts on Twitter with the hashtags # nuclear war+Russia+Ukraine

10. BBC News, “[Putin Threats: How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have?](#)”, 7 October 2022

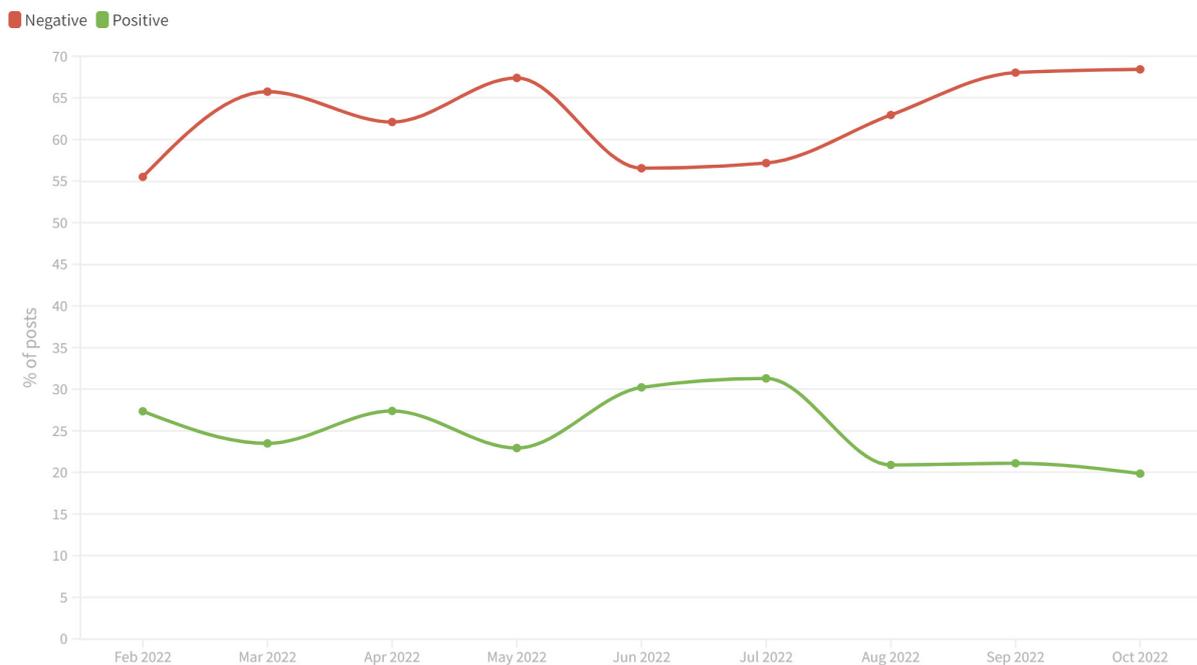
11. Eleanor Watson, “[What Are Tactical Nuclear Weapons and How Might Putin Use Them?](#)” CBS News, 12 October 2022.

12. NEXTA (@nexta_tv), “[Donald Trump Jr. Urged to Stop Supplying Weapons to Ukraine](#)”, Twitter, 16 November 2022.

c. **Most of the tweets on the nuclear topic are intimidating in nature, and evoke negative connotations.** This tendency has been particularly persistent since August 2022 (Fig. 3), and is linked to the situation at and shelling of the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant.¹³ The percentage of posts expressing negative sentiments has been twice that of positively coloured posts. The tendency in the summer had been towards an increase in positive sentiment, but the shelling of Zaporizhia power plant turned the dynamic in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, optimistic tweets began to appear from the Ukrainian authorities aimed at downplaying the danger and urging people not to be afraid of Russian nuclear weapons,¹⁴ as well as a sarcastic skirmish¹⁵ with Elon Musk following his comments calling for a peace deal in view of the potential threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

The majority of tweets that mention "nuclear" have a negative sentiment

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Data: DRI • Chart: DRI

Figure 3. The dynamics of sentiment around the "nuclear" topic on Twitter

13. European Union et al., "Joint Statement Dated 12 August 2022 on the Situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant", 12 August 2022

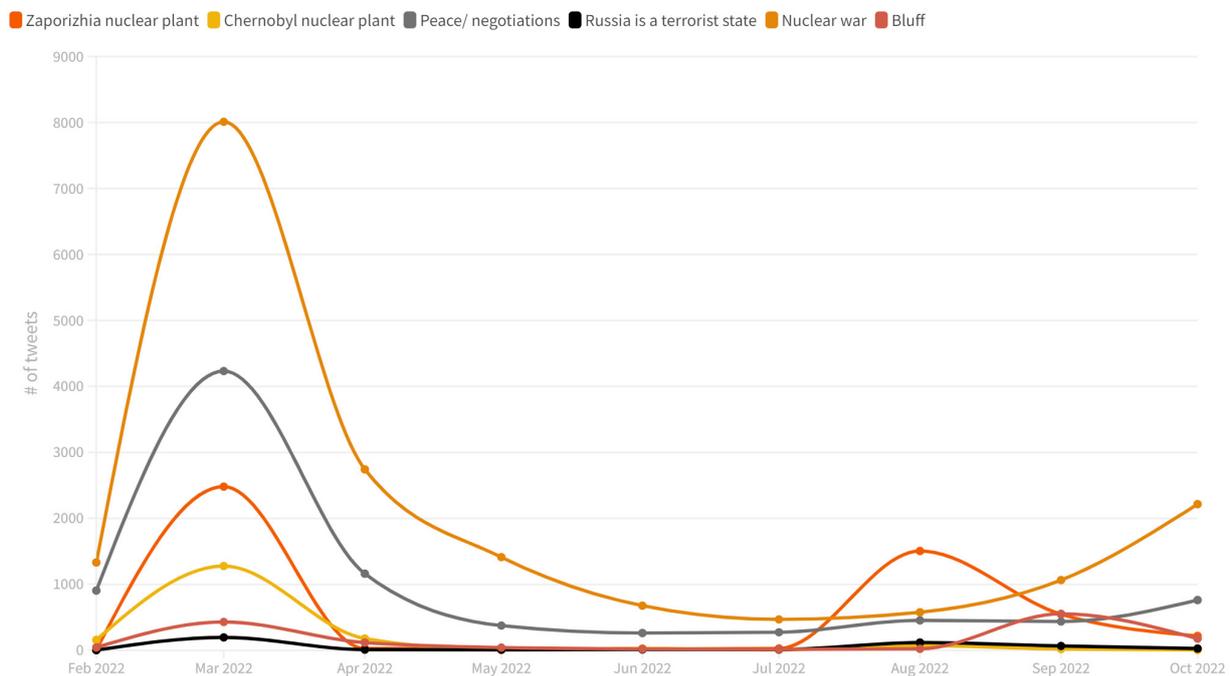
14. Defense of Ukraine (@DefenceU), "After Mariupol and Bucha and Missile Attacks, We Will Not Be Intimidated...", Twitter, 6 October 2022.

15. Михайло Подоляк (@Podolyak_M), https://twitter.com/podolyak_m/status/1582015498404786180, Twitter, 17 October 2022.

d. The situation around Russia's capture of the nuclear facilities in Ukraine was one of the most frequently discussed topics on Twitter (Fig. 4). Especially intimidating was the fact of the shelling in the vicinity of the nuclear facilities, which led to a heated debate about whether Russia should be recognized as a "state sponsor of terrorism".¹⁶

The dynamics of topics related to nuclear power on Twitter

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Data: DRI • Chart: DRI

Figure 4. Most frequent topics shaping 'nuclear' narrative

Along with the situation in relation to the nuclear power facilities, the topic of "nuclear war" generated greater debate, becoming especially heated in March, then lapsing somewhat, before the number of tweets began to grow again in the autumn.

The subject of a peace deal followed a similar dynamic, being very popular in March, then steadily decreasing from April, before increasing again in October. The shelling of the nuclear power plants was also considered as illogical and inconceivable, given the catastrophic consequences that could come as a result. Most of the discourse considered it to be irrational, or a kind of "bluffing" by the Russian side, just to bargain for certain terms or conditions.

¹⁶ Visit Ukraine. Today, "PACE Adopted a Resolution Recognizing Russia as a Terrorist Regime. What Are the Consequences for Ukraine?", 14 October 2022.

What is the level of anxiety or fear of nuclear war in the societies – Ukraine vs Russia?

This section will examine the dynamics of the moods related to the nuclear topic in Russian and Ukrainian Telegram and Twitter discourse.

The Telegram channel “Pravda Ukraine” (“Truth Ukraine”) has stated that the majority of Ukrainians do not believe that Russia will employ nuclear weapons. According to the results of a survey conducted by the [Rating](#) public opinion group, on 8 and 9 October 2022, 84 per cent of respondents said they did not believe that Russia would use nuclear weapons against NATO member states.¹⁷

In an interview with Czech TV, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said “It is not worth being afraid of the “nuclear war”,¹⁸ while, in an interview with BBC News, he said that, to a certain extent, Ukrainian Society is preparing itself for the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁹ Posts appeared on some Telegram channels with instructions about what to do in the event of Russian nuclear weapon strikes against Ukraine. And a petition even appeared on the Ukrainian presidential web page with the suggestion to allow all non-mobilised males between the ages of 18 and 60 to leave the country, in view of the threat of the nuclear bomb.²⁰ In another interview, with the Australia’s Lowy Institute Lowy, Zelenskyy also suggested that NATO conduct a preventative strike in the event that the threat of Russia using nuclear weapons became viable.²¹

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that Russia is fully dedicated to a doctrine of the impossibility of starting nuclear war.²² The United States, for its part, has closely monitored the relocation of nuclear weapons by Russia, and reported that the risk of such a strike is low.²³

Observed trends:

a. **The toxicity of tweets has been consistently high**, with the exception of March 2022, the month with the one of the lowest percentage of such tweets, **and the**

17. Sociological Group “Rating” (Rating Group), “[Eighteenth National Survey: Attitude of Ukrainians towards Foreign Countries \(October 8-9, 2022\)](#)”, 24 October 2022.

18. Angelina Arshenova, “[Zelensky Estimated the Threat of Russia’s Use of Nuclear Weapons](#)”, *Fakty ICTV*, 02 November 2022; Michal Kubal, “[Zelenskyj pro ČT: Spokojíme se jen s vítězstvím, ale Rusové musejí ustoupit](#)”, *Česká televize*, 01 November 2022.

19. Hugo Bachega & John Simpson, “[Ukraine War: World Must Act Now to Stop Russia Nuclear Threat – Zelensky](#)”, *BBC News*, 07 October 2022.

20. Ткач Сергій Володимирович, “[№22/165590-еп ДОЗВОЛИТИ ВИЇЗД немобілізованим ЧОЛОВІКАМ 18-60 РОКІВ через ЗАГРОЗУ ЯДЕРНОГО ВИБУХУ!](#)”, ЕЛЕКТРОННІ ПЕТИЦІЇ Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України, 04 October 2022.

21. Meduza, “[Zelensky Calls on NATO to Launch a Preemptive Strike to Prevent Russia from Using Nuclear Weapons](#)”, 06 October 2022.

22. РИА Новости, “[МИД заявил о приверженности заявлению о недопустимости ядерной войны](#)”, 04 October 2022.

23. Reuters, “[Pentagon Says Can’t Corroborate Reports of Russian Nuclear Arms Movement](#)”, 04 October 2022.

percentage of toxic tweets is increasing (Fig. 5).

Though he did not mention the first use of nuclear weapons explicitly, in his speech at the outset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Putin spoke of employing of all necessary means and of decisions they would consider to be viable in the event a third party made an attempt to interfere²⁴ in the situation between Russia and Ukraine or posed a threat to the “country or people” of Russia. And, from the first day of the full-scale invasion, Russia’s nuclear deterrence forces have been on high alert. Meanwhile, a high percentage of the posts related to the nuclear theme are related to United States President Biden²⁵ or Elon Musk,²⁶ whose tweets periodically explode Twitter. Various videos were also spotted on Twitter about the consequences of the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons, which may be also considered as an element of applying pressure against Ukraine or the spreading of Russian propaganda.²⁷

The dynamics of the percentage of toxic tweets that mention "nuclear"

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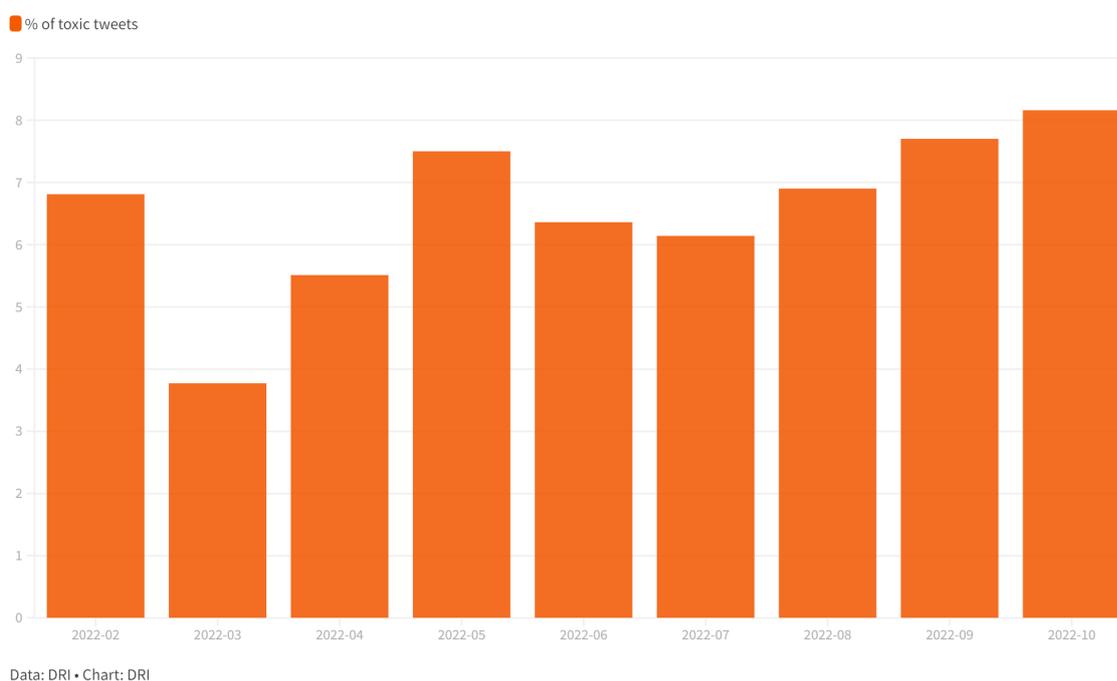


Figure 5. Dynamics of the toxicity of the tweets mentioning “nuclear”

24. Al Jazeera, “‘No Other Option’: Excerpts of Putin’s Speech Declaring War”.

25. Natasha Bertrand (@NatashaBertrand), “Per Pool, Biden Tonight at a Fundraiser in New York...”, Twitter, 07 October 2022.

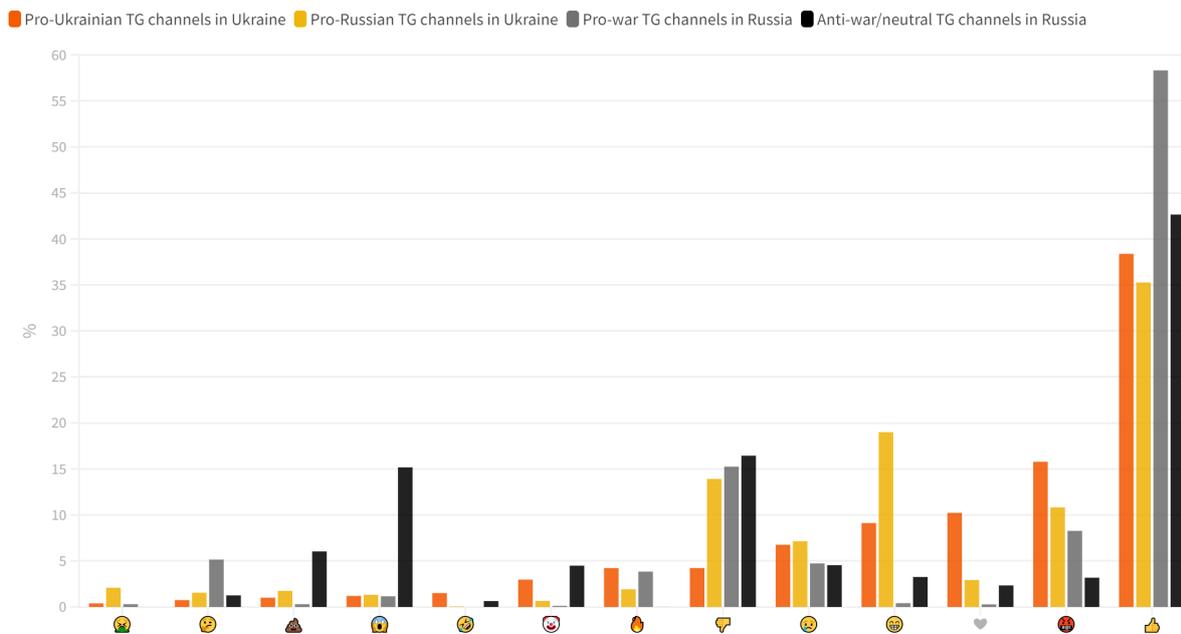
26. Elon Musk (@elonmusk), “If Russia is Faced with the Choice of Losing Crimea or Using Battlefield Nukes, They Will Choose the Latter.” Twitter, 17 October 2022.

27. Dr. Rolf Fredheim & Martha Stolze, “Virtual Manipulation Brief: Russia’s Struggle to Circumvent Sanctions and Communicate its War against Ukraine”, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2022.

b. **The reaction of the audience on Ukrainian and Russian Telegram (Fig. 6) in relation to the nuclear topic has been interesting.** It has, indeed, been a popular theme and, while being discussed quite toxically on Twitter, if we look at the reactions on Telegram, at first sight, the number of “likes” under Ukrainian posts makes no sense. One explanation that has been offered is that the toxic tweets are mainly targeting western audiences, while Telegram is more popular among the Ukrainian audience and, accordingly, it is pointless to try to scare Ukrainians with the subject of the potential use of a nuclear strike.²⁸

Subscribers' reactions to the posts that mention "nuclear" on selected groups of Telegram channels in Ukraine and Russia

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Data: DRI • Chart: DRI

Figure 6. Reactions to the posts on Telegram that mention “nuclear”: Ukrainian vs. pro-Russian channels in Ukraine; Russian neutral channels vs. Russian pro-war/propaganda channels

As displayed in Fig. 7, the number of posts mentioning “nuclear” on Telegram channels began increasing significantly in July, in connection with the situation around the nuclear plant in Zaporizhia, but frequency of mentions of “nuclear” on Pro-Ukrainian and Pro-war Telegram channels in Russia has declined since October. Meanwhile, the mention of the term “nuclear” on Pro-Russian and anti-war Telegram channels has continued to grow.

28. Institute for the Study of War (@The Study of War), “#Russian nuclear propaganda is meant to ‘scare the West,’ says @TheStudyofWar’s @KatStepanenko”, *Twitter*, 04 November 2022.

The dynamics of the number of posts that mention "nuclear" on Telegram channels in Ukraine and Russia

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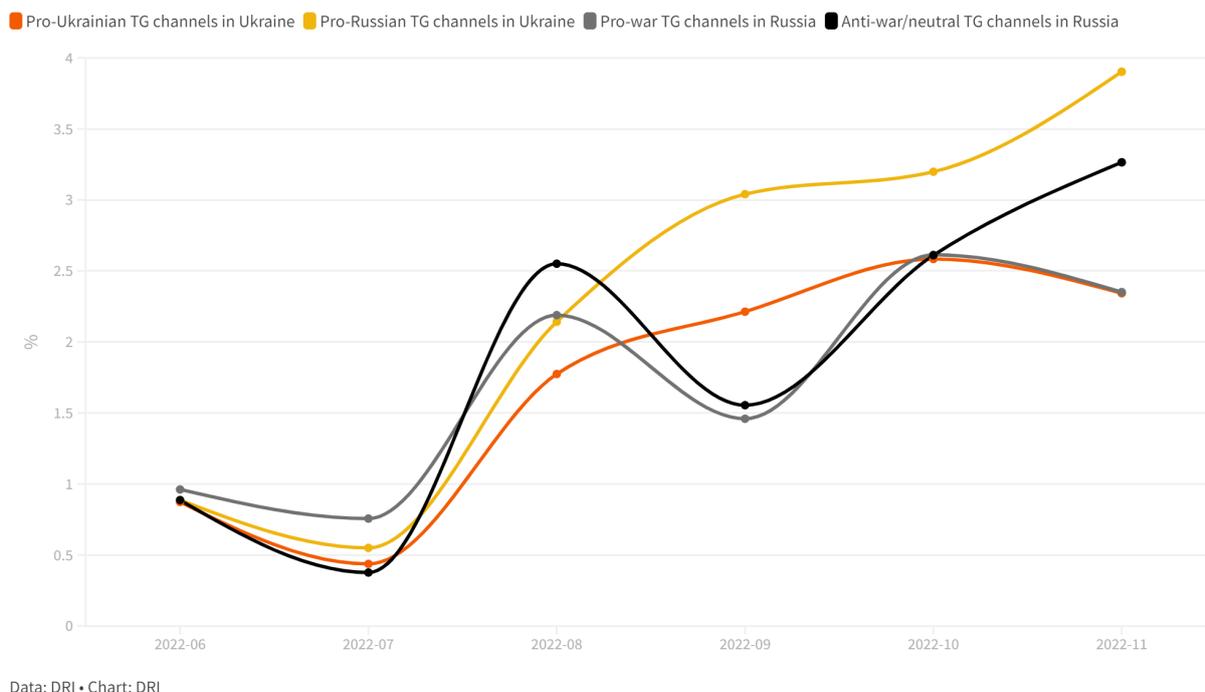
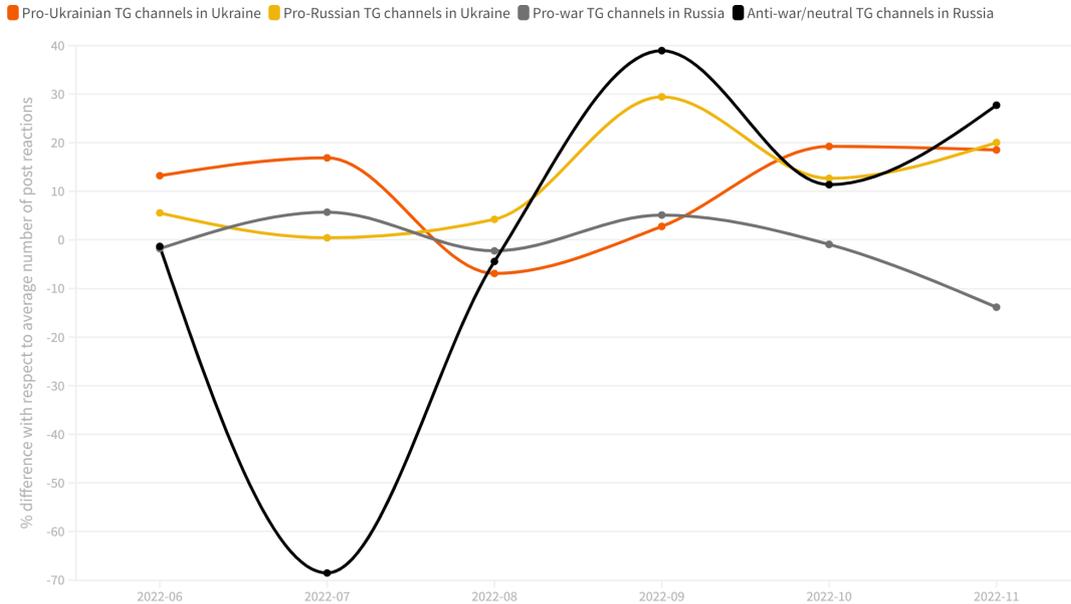


Figure 7. The dynamics of "nuclear" posts on Telegram channels in Ukraine and Russia

The dynamics of the number of posts on pro-war Telegram channels in Russia are interesting (Fig. 8). Of late, as underlined by many commentators on Telegram, the presence of the "nuclear" narrative has decreased on pro-war Telegram channels. Meanwhile anti-war and neutral Telegram channels have started mentioning this topic more often. Among Ukrainian Telegram channels, these numbers have fluctuated as drastically as in the Russian Telegram content. Nonetheless, pro-Russian channels mentioned "nuclear" quite frequently – especially in August, in relation to the shelling of the Zaporizhia nuclear power facility.

On average, posts that mention "nuclear" generate more reactions

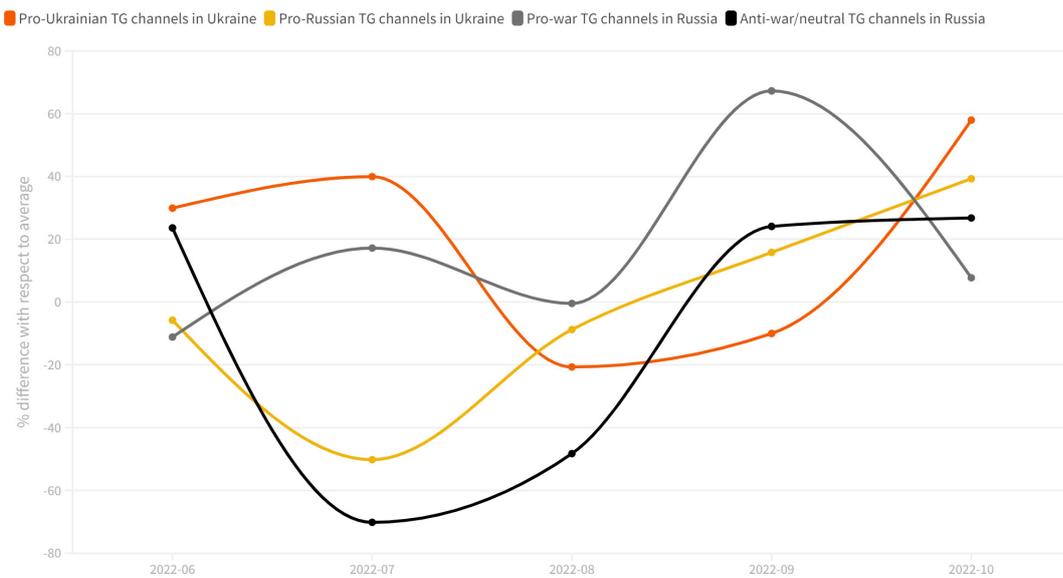


Data: DRI • Chart: DRI

Figure 8. The dynamics of the reactions to "nuclear" posts

There has also been a tendency for posts mentioning the term "nuclear" to generate more sarcastic reactions (Fig. 9), particularly on Ukrainian Telegram channels.

The posts mentioning the term "nuclear" have begun to generate more sarcastic reactions (🙄, 🤪, 🤨)



Data: DRI • Chart: DRI

Figure 9. The dynamics of the reactions to the "nuclear" posts on Telegram channels in Russia and Ukraine

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Meanwhile, if we look at the character and the format of the posts on the nuclear topic in general, it is clear that the topic has generated a large number of memes and funny or sarcastic posts (Fig. 10). One of the characteristics of Ukrainian Telegram is that serious topics are often addressed in a mocking manner.



Figure 10. A cartoon from *Twitter*, “Nobody in the world has such a weapon”.

Here, we have to emphasize one of the specificities of the war-related Telegram content in Ukraine – the wide use of memes, sarcasm, jokes, and mockery to present the dire and serious situation in a humorous manner.

This is partially connected with the personality of the President of Ukraine – a former comic actor – and also reflects the spirit of Ukrainians and their disarming sense of humour in the face of a deadly threat. Some regional governors, and especially Vitaliy Kym in the heavily bombed Mykolaiv Oblast,²⁹ have become Telegram celebrities with

29. Lorenzo Tondo, “‘Jokes Are Strategic’: How Mykolaiv’s Leader Uses Humour to Resist Putin”, *The Observer*, 09 July 2022.

their optimistic posts and videos. Humour has turned into a form of resistance and resilience against the brutal Russian invasion, invoking George Orwell's maxim that "Every joke is a tiny revolution". Memes with "babushkas",³⁰ tractors facing off against tanks,³¹ or symbolic pictures³² (Fig. 11) transmit the message that belligerence can be overcome by wit. In particular, one of the most discussed on the media appeared the works by the British street artist who produced the paintings in Kyiv, Irpin, and Borodianka. This way the artist expressed the solidarity with Ukraine. The anonymous artist depicts people of Ukraine during their routine tasks. And uses Ukraine as canvas. The recent [video](#) with his works in Ukraine on Instagram collected millions of views.



Figure 11. A mural by the street artist Banksy, symbolising the victory of a small boy over Putin as a Judoist

Ukrainian Telegram content is witty and creative in comparison to its Russian and pro-Russian counterparts, which tend mainly towards analytical, philosophical or, as on Russian antiwar or neutral Telegram channels, deeply self-reflective content. To a certain extent, it is possible to draw a parallel with Umberto Eco's story "The Name of the Rose", in which monks tried to hide Aristotle's Poetics, a book on comedy, from the people, denying them this knowledge and keeping them in a gloomy and obedient position.

30. Rui Alves, "[Babushkas Battalion: The Unsung Ukrainian Kalashnikov Grandmas](#)", *Medium (Lessons from History)*, 4 March 2022; [Боже, яке кончене!](#), *Telegram*

31. Ashish Dangwal, "[Tank vs Tractor — Russian Army Gets the 'Ultimate Revenge' On Ukrainian Tractors After They Drove Away With Their Tank](#)", *The Eurasian Times*, 03 May 2022.

32. Sophie Tanno, "[Banksy Unveils Mural in Ukrainian Town Liberated from Russians](#)", *CNN Style*, 12 November 2022.

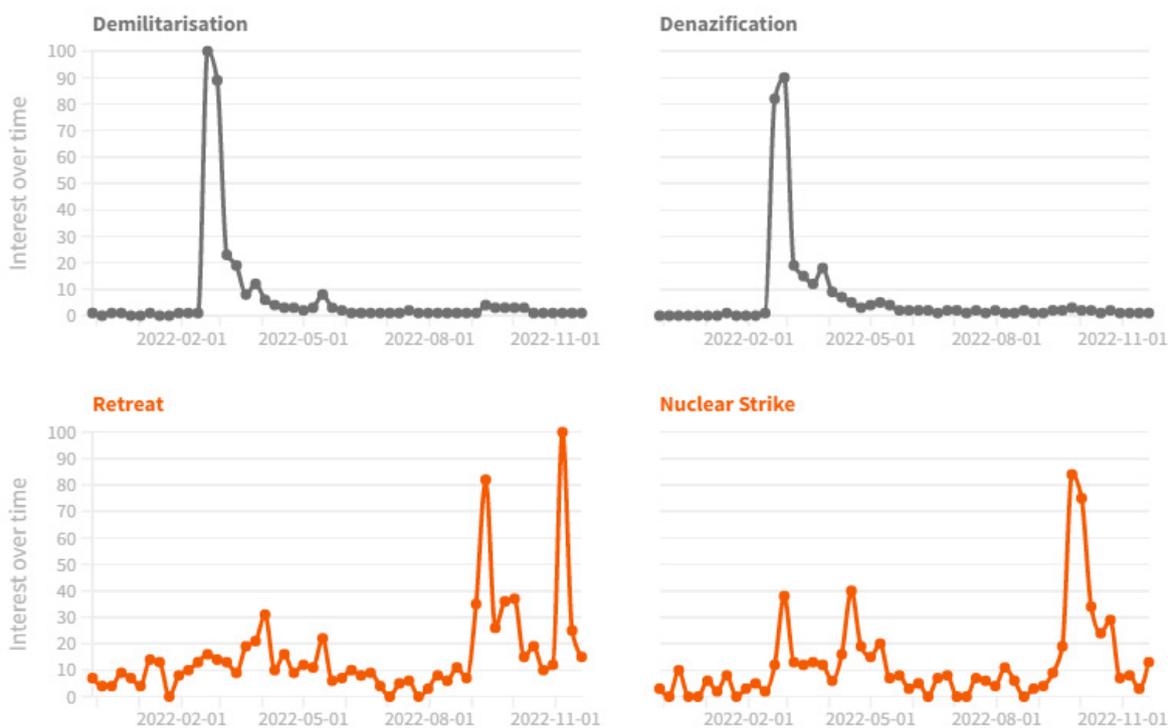
| How is the term 'nuclear threat' is discussed in Russia and in Ukraine?

This section looks at the dynamics of the discussions about the “nuclear” topic, and particularly the most recent phenomenon of the “dirty bomb”, in social media discourse in Ukraine and Russia.

Observed trends:

a. The narrative of the “special military operation” has changed from “denazification” or “demilitarization” into “retreat” and “nuclear strike” (Fig. 12).

Google Trends



Data on Google Trends: Demilitarisation and Denazification, Retreat and Nuclear strike • Chart: DRI

Figure 12. Source – the Telegram channel 'Verstka'.

A 2 November statement by the Russian Ministry of External Affairs on the prevention of nuclear war admits that the employment of nuclear weapons is hypothetically possible “as a response to aggression, when the very existence of the state is under threat”.³³

33. МИД России, “Заявление Российской Федерации о предотвращении ядерной войны”, 02 November 2022.

Meanwhile, many experts consider the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine possible in the event of further successful Ukrainian offensives or an attempt to liberate Crimea.³⁴ It remains unclear whether this might be a signal demonstrating the disappointment of Russian generals with the status quo and failures in Ukraine, especially in view of the recent retreat by Russian forces in the Kherson oblast, including from the city of Kherson itself.

The nuclear narrative is constantly retransmitted by high-level officials such as former Russian prime minister and president Dmitry Medvedev,³⁵ currently the deputy head of the Security Council, with his “nuclear apocalypse” warnings, Dmitry Rogozin, the former head of RosCosmos, Russia’s space agency, speculating about the potential use of “promising weapons and military complexes”,³⁶ or propagandists marching in Moscow demanding to nuke the “centres of decision-making”,³⁷ as posted on Alexey Pivovarov,³⁸ Telegram channel.³⁹ Pivovarov is an independent and renowned journalist in Russia, author of the YouTube Channel “Redaksia” – literally meaning “Editorial Office”⁴⁰ – with over one million subscribers and who has been deemed a “foreign agent” by the Russian authorities.

In their turn, the Centre for the Counteraction of Disinformation, within the Council of National Security and Defense of Ukraine, has labeled reports and commentary on Russia’s alleged preparation for a nuclear strike against Ukraine (e.g., a report by the Italian newspaper La Repubblica⁴¹ about a Russian submarine with a nuclear warhead, or by the Times that Putin was sending a nuclear military train to Ukraine,⁴² or recent posts with information on the potential use of a nuclear strike to provoke an electromagnetic impulse⁴³) as info terrorism,⁴⁴ carried out by Russia to pressure Ukraine to start negotiations and to accept a peace deal based on the Kremlin’s terms.

b. In October, social media discourse exploded with information on the “dirty bomb” (Fig. 13), which, in fact, is not a “weapon of mass destruction” but a “weapon of mass disruption,” where contamination and anxiety are the combined major objectives.⁴⁵

34. Helene Cooper, Julian E. Barnes, Eric Schmitt, “Russian Military Leaders Discussed Use of Nuclear Weapons, US”, *The New York Times*, 02 November 2022.

35. Guy Faulconbridge & Caleb Davis, “Medvedev Raises Spectre of Russian Nuclear Strike on Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 27 September 2022.

36. Mikhail Zuev Rogozin threatening to use “experimental weapons” at the front. *Wide News*. 12.11.2022
<https://wide-news.com/rogozin-threatening-to-use-experimental-weapons-at-the-front/>

37. Telegram Channel Pivovarov Redaksia In Moscow occurred march 'To / Against Washington' 12 Nov, 13:57
https://tgstat.ru/en/channel/@redaksiya_channel/13443

38. 100 Most creative Russians Alexey Pivovarov <https://www.100mcr.com/en/participant/alexey-pivovarov/>

39. Telegram channel Pivovarov (Redaksia) https://tigrm.ru/channels/@redaksiya_channel

40. Redaksia YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1eFXmJNkjITxPFWTy6RsWg>

41. Floriana Bulfon, “Si muove il sottomarino Belgorod. Nato in allarme: ‘Test per il supersiluro Poseidon’”, *La Repubblica*, 02 October 2022.

42. Larisa Brown & George Grylls, “Putin ‘Orders Nuclear Military Train to Ukraine’”, *The Times*, 03 October 2022.

43. Tom Ball, “How Russia could use electromagnetic pulse weapon to cripple Ukraine”, *The Times*, 11 November 2022.

44. РОМАН ПЕТРЕНКО, “СНБО об активизации ‘ядерных’ новостей: Информационный терроризм от России”, *Украинская правда*, 04 October 2022.

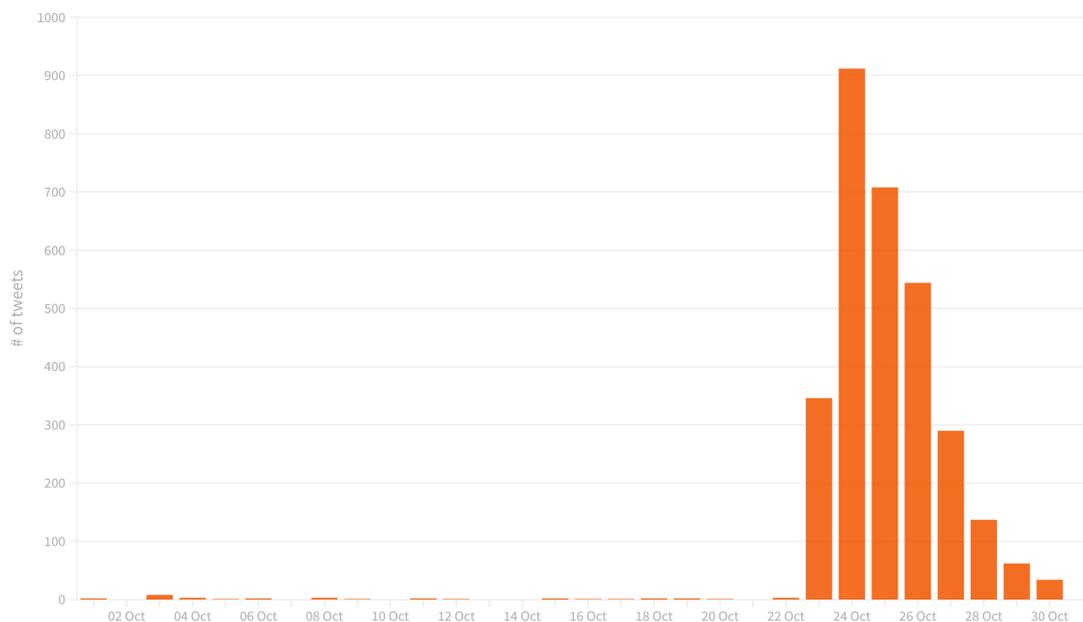
45. The United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Office of Public Affairs, “Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC): Fact Sheet on Dirty Bombs”.

The psychological effect of talking about a “dirty bomb” may be the same – or even worse – than talking about a tactical or other type of nuclear arms.

The Russian Minister of Defence personally called his colleagues in Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States to inform them about the alleged threat of a “dirty bomb” developed by the Ukrainian side.⁴⁶ There was even a UN Security Council session convened to discuss these claims,⁴⁷ while the IAEA was conducting inspections of two nuclear facilities in Ukraine.⁴⁸ Upon inspection, there were no indications of undeclared nuclear materials or activities at the Ukrainian facilities, and the investigation showed that Russia's dirty bomb allegations had “zero basis in fact”.⁴⁹ In response to the narrative of a “dirty bomb”, United States President Biden, in his turn, commented on the prospect of Russia’s using nuclear weapons by stating that it would be an “incredibly serious mistake”.⁵⁰

Number of tweets that mention “dirty bomb”

Click to interact!



Data: DRI • Chart: DRI

Figure 13. The number of mentions of the term “dirty bomb” over time on Twitter or Telegram

46. Grzegorz Kuczyński, “Russia’s Shoigu Warns of “Dirty Bomb” Provocation”, Warsaw Institute, Poland, 26 October 2022.

47. Michelle Nichols, “Russia Raises Accusation at U.N. of Ukraine ‘Dirty Bomb’ Plans”, *Reuters*, 25 October 2022.

48. International Atomic Energy Agency, “Safeguards Inspectors to Visit Two Nuclear Locations in Ukraine, IAEA’s Grossi Says After Receiving Request from Ukraine”, Vienna, 24 October 2022.

49. French Embassy in the United Kingdom, “Ukraine – IAEA Confirms the Absence of Undeclared Nuclear Materials and Activities – Statement by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs Deputy Spokesperson”, Paris, 03 November 2022.

50. Servet Gunerigok, “‘Incredibly Serious ‘Mistake.’ Biden Says if Russia Uses Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine”, *Anadolu Agency*, 25 October 2022.

If we look at the reactions to the topic of the dirty bomb, again, we can see that it was popular and collected a significant number of “likes”, and that this was particularly popular on the pro-war Telegram channels in Russia (Fig. 14).

Subscribers' reactions to the posts that mention "dirty bomb" on Telegram channels in Ukraine and Russia

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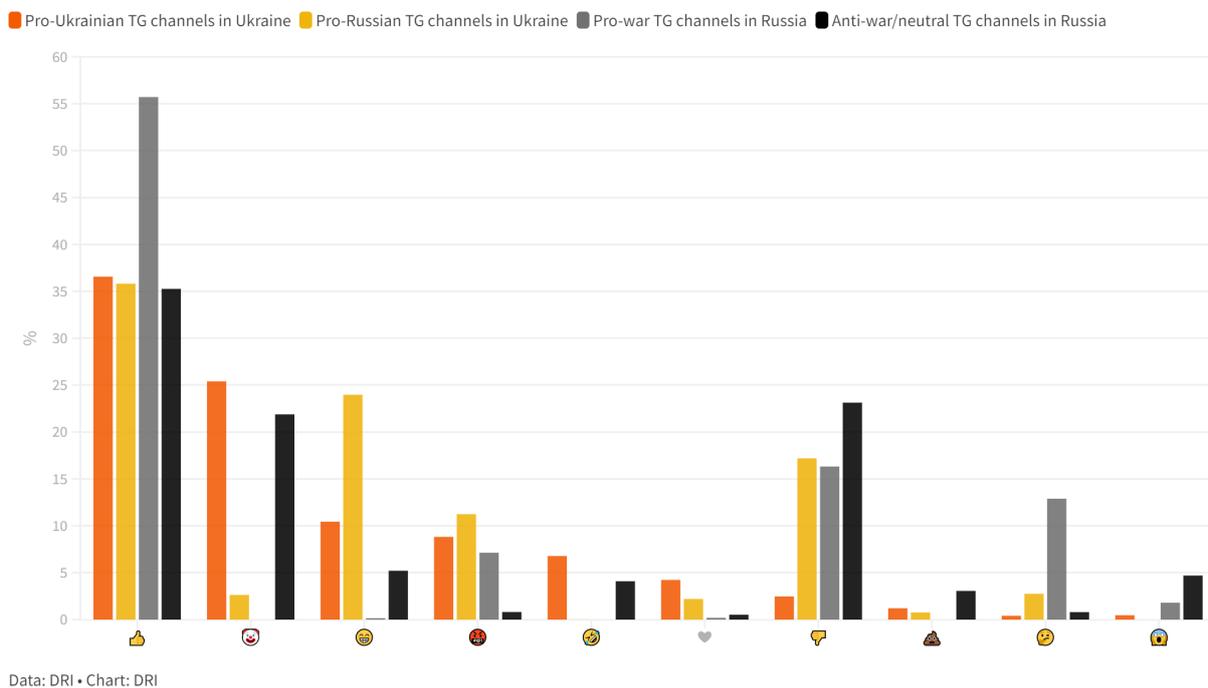


Figure 14. The reactions of subscribers on the Telegram channel in Russia and Ukraine to posts on the subject of “dirty bomb”

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, the content of the posts devoted to the “dirty bomb” were largely memes and sarcastic posts (Fig. 15, 16). Even the Chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, Kyrylo Budanov,⁵¹ underlined that “information” on the “dirty bomb” had turned into a joke, much the same as the allegations about laboratories for biological weapons – killer mosquitos or pigeon assassins – made earlier by the Russian permanent representative to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya.

51. Wikipedia, Kyrylo Budanov https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrylo_Budanov



Figure 15. Meme: "If in Ukraine there were, indeed, a 'dirty' bomb"

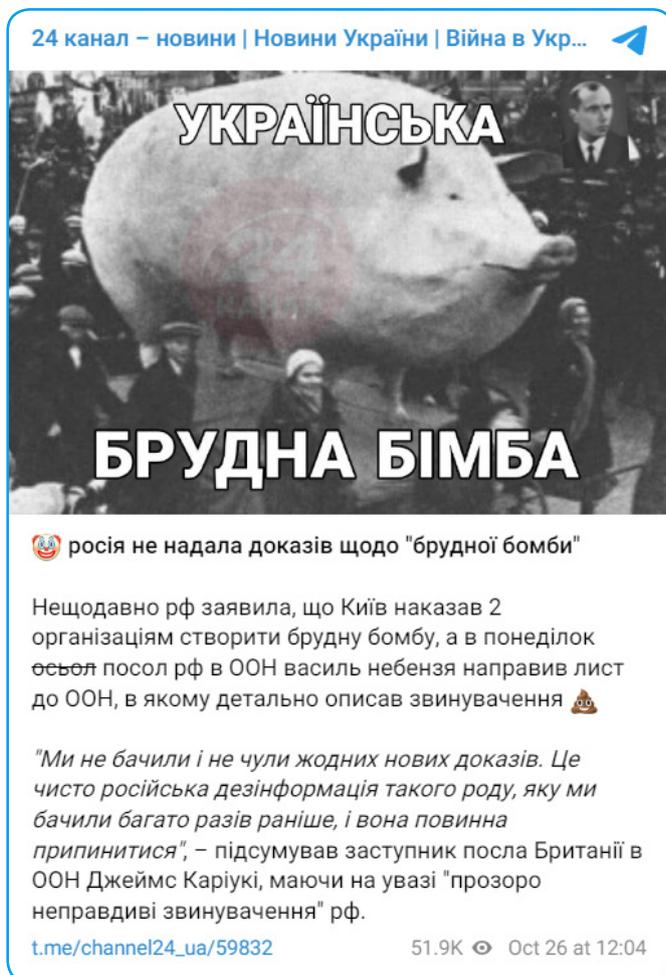


Figure 16. Meme: "Ukrainian dirty bomb"

Symbolically, the photo at the top right of the meme in [Fig.16](#) is of the Ukrainian nationalist fighter Stepan Bandara, a highly controversial personality in history due to his links with Naziism, which related back to Russian President Putin's claims at beginning of the "special military operation" that one of its goals was the denazification of Ukraine.

| The situation around the nuclear power stations

This section will look into how the situation around the Zaporizhia nuclear power facility⁵² has been covered in Ukrainian and Russian social media discourse.

The head of the IAEA has announced the agreement on creating a safe zone around the power plant, but the situation remains volatile. From the very first days of the full-scale Russian invasion, the nuclear facilities at Chernobyl and Zaporizhia became the subject matter of nuclear blackmailing.

The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone was captured on the first day of the full-scale invasion, 24 February, by Russian forces striking south across the Belarus border. On 31 March, Russian troops then abandoned the area, upon withdrawing from their advance on Kyiv.

The story around the Zaporizhia is ongoing. The nuclear power facility was captured by Russian forces on 4 March and, as of 12 March, it was reported that the plant was to be transferred from Ukraine's state-owned nuclear company, Energoatom, to the control of its Russian counterpart, Rosatom. In August, the situation grew very tense, as constant shelling in the vicinity of the plant led to the deployment of the AIEA inspection team. The number of posts on Twitter at this time rose steeply ([Fig. 17](#)), especially among the anti-war and neutral Telegram channels in Russia. The situation remains volatile, and the IAEA continues to monitor the situation in a tense environment.

Percentage of posts that mention the Zaporozhia nuclear plant by Telegram channels

Click to interact!

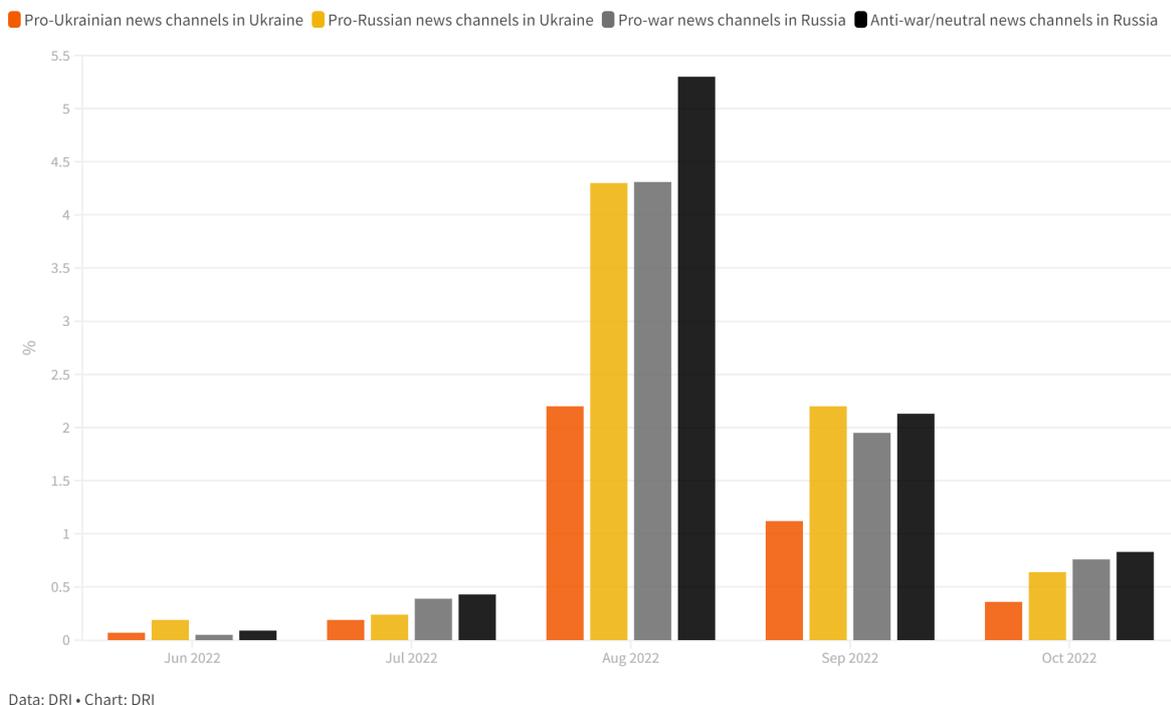


Figure 17. Dynamics of Telegram posts that mention the Zaporizhia plant

What remains unclear is the question of whether it was necessary for the Russians to occupy the nuclear facilities, and then to raise the stakes by reportedly mining and shelling them. On the one hand, the capture of the Zaporizhia facility – the largest nuclear power plant in Europe and among the 10 largest in the world⁵³ – serves the strategic goal of providing energy and heating to the Russian-held areas. Meanwhile, it remains unclear why the Chernobyl exclusion zone came under attack⁵⁴. Some analysts deemed it to be a warning to NATO forces not to interfere.⁵⁵

53. Andrian Prokip, “[Why the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant Matters...for the Whole World](#)”, Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 19 September 2022.

54. Faustine Vincent, “[Chernobyl: The Story of 35 Days of Russian Occupation](#)”

55. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, “[Russian Forces Capture Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, Says Ukrainian PM](#)”, 24 February 2022.

