

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In recent weeks, the Kremlin appears to have been deploying a campaign of ‘strategic disinformation’ in relation to the purported CBRN threat from Ukraine.
- In the past, this has seen Moscow making public assertions about what it fears before then going on to stage false flag operations that ‘realise’ those fears, thereby legitimising its intended (and previously concealed) policies and agenda.
- While US intelligence sources have been reporting that Russia plans to deploy CBRN weapons (or a CBRN-related false flag operation) in Ukraine, new ExTrac data shows that Moscow’s communications around the potential for this to happen have been establishing a more permissive attitude towards CBRN usage among pro-Kremlin communities online.

OVERVIEW

New analysis from ExTrac indicates that recent pronouncements from Moscow about the Kremlin’s ‘concerns’ around the use of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons systems in Ukraine are having a direct and sustained impact on the pro-Russia information landscape.

Since late 2021, ExTrac has been collecting historic and real-time data from pro-Kremlin feeds on Telegram with a view to tracking perceptions of the war among Putin-aligned communities on- and offline. In February, we detected a protracted surge of inauthentic behaviour across these feeds that directly precipitated, by exactly one week, the invasion of Ukraine. While, overall, levels of activity in the pro-Russia ecosystem on Telegram have been declining in recent weeks, we have seen a similar, albeit more nuanced, dynamic emerge in the context of Ukraine’s alleged CBRN ‘threat.’

BACKGROUND

Since late February—after it became clear that the invasion of Ukraine was not going to be as straightforward as the Kremlin had predicted—senior officials in the Russian government have been repeatedly making references to CBRN in Ukraine. On 27 February, Putin put Russia’s nuclear deterrence forces on high alert and, a few days later on 2 March, the head of the Russian SVR, Sergei Naryshkin, accused Ukraine of illicitly developing nuclear weapons. At the same time, Russian officials began speaking of their concerns about Ukraine’s alleged nascent chemical and biological capabilities. These collective capabilities, which are now being touted as a justification for Russia’s continuation of the invasion, are being framed as an imminent danger to global security.

The Kremlin’s pronouncements have not just been about contesting the international consensus that its invasion of Ukraine is illegal. Rather, and potentially more importantly, they have also been a way for it to deliberately and directly curate the nature of the discourse on the war among its proponents.

While Ukraine’s allies may dismiss the claims around CBRN as ‘laughable,’ when considered in the context of communities that are explicitly supportive of Russia’s invasion, they are both impactful and effective as strategic communications. By introducing this new CBRN dimension to its war, the Kremlin has in a matter of days created a more permissive information environment to enable the potential deployment of false flag CBRN-related operations. By raising the spectre of their use by Ukraine, it has developed conditions under which it can deny responsibility for, or even justify, its future deployment of CBRN capabilities, whether covert or otherwise.

DATA

ExTrac analytics demonstrate precisely how this strategic disinformation campaign has been panning out. To track it, we have visualised the frequency with which CBRN-related terms have been referenced by pro-Kremlin voices over the course of the last year. To do this, we ran targeted keyword searches against the more-than-three million posts ExTrac has ingested from pro-Kremlin feeds on Telegram since Q4 2021.

Figures 1 to 3 show that, after they were first mentioned by Russian officials in the context of Ukraine at the end of February and beginning of March, references to the words ‘nuclear,’ ‘biolaboratory,’ and ‘chemical’ across pro-Kremlin Telegram feeds immediately surged.

Posts including the word ‘биолоборатория’ (‘biolaboratory’), for example, increased by a factor of more than four hundred after the Kremlin’s claim that it was targeting bioweapons facilities at the end of February.

Similarly, the term ‘ядерный’ (‘nuclear’), which in the year up to 24 February had been posted around three times a day on average on pro-Kremlin feeds, was used between five and ten times more regularly after Putin raised the spectre of nuclear war days after the invasion started.

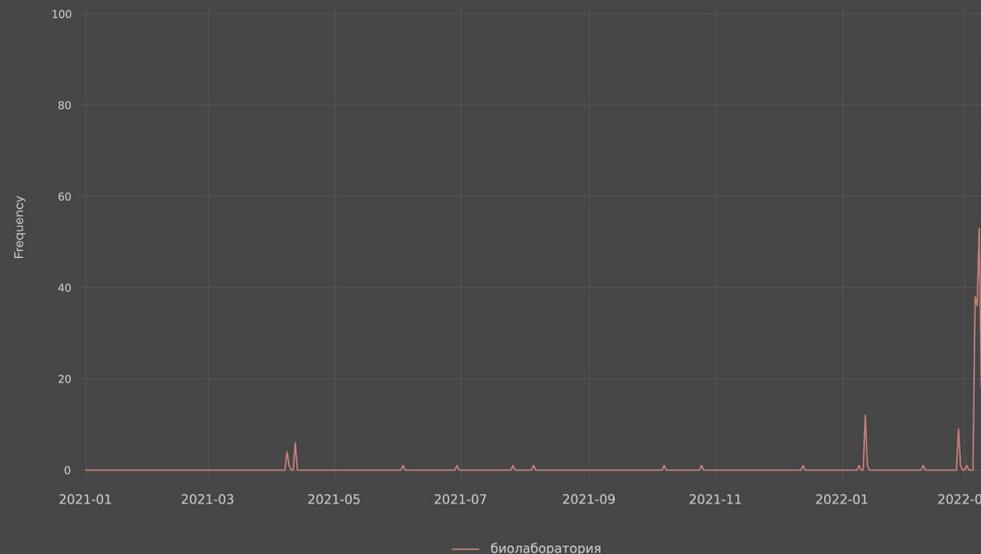


Figure 1. References to ‘биолоборатория’ (‘biolaboratory’) since January 2021.

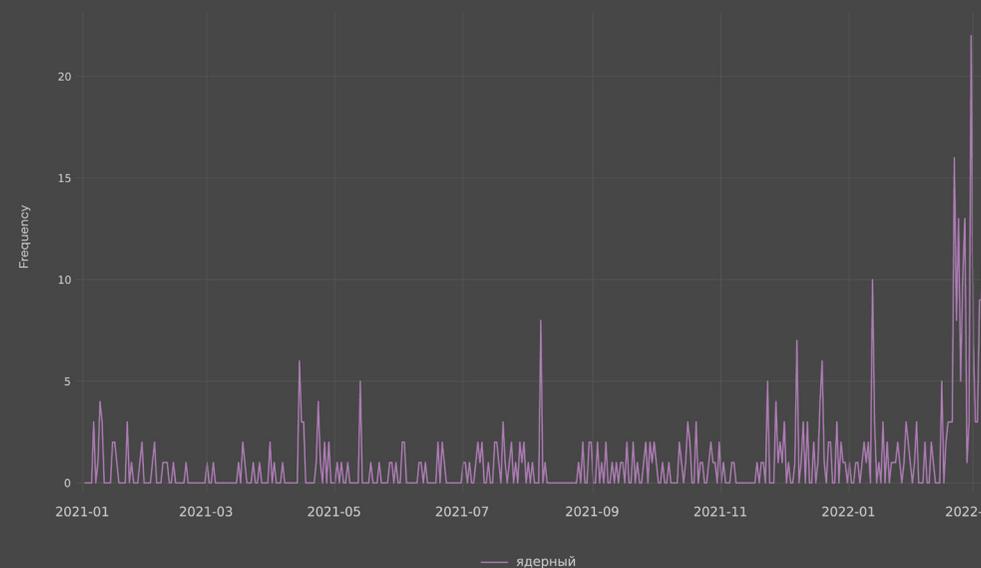


Figure 2. References to ‘ядерный’ (‘nuclear’) since January 2021.

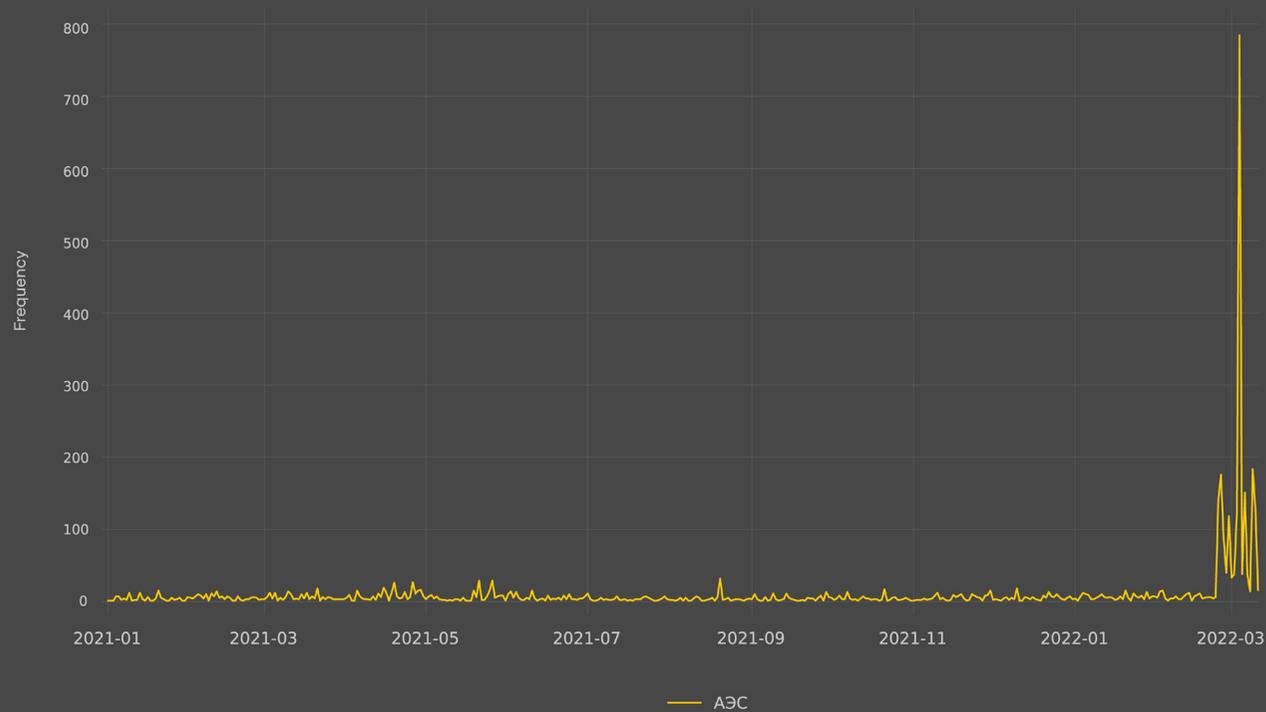


Figure 3. References to 'АЭС' ('nuclear plant') since January 2021.

As for the term 'АЭС' ('nuclear plant'), references to it increased fifty-fold in the week that followed Russia's incursion into Ukraine. Given last week's reports from the Ukrainian government that Russian was planning a false flag at Chernobyl, this surge is particular cause for concern.

Critically, in the days that followed their initial introduction into the pro-Russia comms landscape, these same keywords—which, prior to the Kremlin's calculated use of them, were posted rarely or not at all—continued to be in frequent use, indicating that they had become part of the pro-Kremlin narrative around the invasion of Ukraine.

UKR

Telegram

Крымская Z прачка

12 Mar 2022

09:45 UTC

📌 США планировали открыть в Симферополе свою биологическую лабораторию, ещё когда он был в составе Украины. Об этом заявил вице-премьер крымского правительства Георгий Мурадов.

"Биологическое оружие годами разрабатывалось в секретных лабораториях Пентагона на территории Украины. Крымчанам эта тема известна, и только воссоединение Крыма с РФ помешало реализации замыслов по созданию патогенов в Крыму", - сказал Мурадов.

ایالات متحده قصد داشت آزمایشگاه بیولوژیکی خود را در سیمفروپول باز کند. حتی زمانی که بخشی از اوکراین بود. این را کلورگی مرادوف معاون نخست وزیر دولت کریمه اعلام کرد.

مرادوف گفت: "سالهاست که سلاح های بیولوژیکی در آزمایشگاه های مخفی پنتاگون در خاک اوکراین ساخته شده است. کریمه ها از این موضوع آگاه هستند و تنها اتحاد کریمه با فدراسیون روسیه مانع از اجرای طرح های ایجاد عوامل بیماری زا در کریمه شد."

« The United States planned to open its biological laboratory in Simferopol, even when it was part of Ukraine. This was stated by Deputy Prime Minister of the Crimean government Georgy Muradov. "Biological weapons have been developed for years in secret laboratories of the Pentagon on the territory of Ukraine. Crimeans are aware of this topic, and only the reunification of Crimea with the Russian Federation prevented the implementation of plans to create pathogens in Crimea," Muradov said. - ایالات متحده قصد داشت آزمایشگاه بیولوژیکی خود را در سیمفروپول باز کند. حتی زمانی که بخشی از اوکراین بود. مرادوف معاون نخست وزیر دولت کریمه اعلام کرد. "سالهاست که سلاح های بیولوژیکی در آزمایشگاه های مخفی پنتاگون در خاک اوکراین ساخته شده است. کریمه ها از این موضوع آگاه هستند و تنها اتحاد کریمه با فدراسیون روسیه مانع از اجرای طرح های ایجاد عوامل بیماری زا در کریمه شد."

Go to Post ▶



Figure 4. Pro-Kremlin feed posts about purported bioweapons experimentation in Ukraine.

UKR

Telegram

Shorty ДНР Chat

12 Mar 2022

04:53 UTC

ВАЖНО

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- о терроризме и смежных с ним деяниях (содействии, призывах к террору и др.);
- о захвате заложников или подготовке к захвату;
- о незаконном вооруженном формировании;
- об угоне воздушного, водного судна или ж/д транспорта или подготовке к угону;
- о незаконных действиях с ядерными и радиоактивными материалами;
- о подготовке к посягательству или посягательстве на жизнь государственного или общественного деятеля;
- о насильственном захвате власти или подготовке к таковому;
- о подготовке к военному мятежу;
- о подготовке к нападению на дипломатические представительства;
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+7 (495) 224-22-22
8 (800) 224-22-22

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Анонимность и конфиденциальность гарантируется во всех случаях обращений.

Figure 5. Appeal for information about possible nuclear terrorist attack plots against Russia.

UKR	<p>Telegram</p> <p>ИнформБюро-ЮФО</p> <p>12 Mar 2022</p> <p>09:46 UTC</p>	<p>⚡ Пока ещё И.о. главы "Энергоатома" Пётр Котин заявил, будто нам на Запорожской АЭС сказали, что АЭС находится в "собственности" Росатома. Фейк, рассчитанный на необразованных вуюк. В связи с действиями "Энергоатома", ГИЯРУ и Минэнерго украины, управляемыми из США и направленными на саботаж работы АЭС; а также в связи с самоустранением "Энергоатома" от выполнения своих функций - в сложившейся ситуации, "Росатом" оказывает необходимую помощь ЗАЭС и ЧАЭС в организации безаварийной, безопасной эксплуатации. Кроме того, имели место попытки украинской стороны совершить теракт на ЗАЭС, также украинские террористы совершили теракт в системе электроснабжения ЧАЭС. Украина представляет угрозу всему цивилизованному миру, поэтому силы объединённого контингента осуществляют охрану ЗАЭС и ЧАЭС от украинских террористов.</p> <p>⚡ Still Acting The head of Energoatom, Pyotr Kotin, said that we were told at the Zaporizhzhya NPP that the NPP was "owned" by Rosatom. Fake, designed for uneducated wooks. In connection with the actions of Energoatom, SINR and the Ministry of Energy of Ukraine, controlled from the USA and aimed at sabotaging the operation of nuclear power plants; and also in connection with the self-elimination of Energoatom from performing its functions - in the current situation, Rosatom provides the necessary assistance to ZNPP and Chernobyl in organizing trouble-free, safe operation. In addition, there were attempts by the Ukrainian side to commit a terrorist attack at the ZNPP, and Ukrainian terrorists also committed a terrorist attack in the Chernobyl power supply system. Ukraine poses a threat to the entire civilized world, therefore the forces of the united contingent protect the ZNPP and the Chernobyl nuclear power plant from Ukrainian terrorists.</p>
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Figure 6. Pro-Kremlin influencer alleging that Ukraine and its allies have been attempting to sabotage nuclear power plants now controlled by Russia.

SIGNIFICANCE

To date, Russian strategic communications activities in the context of Ukraine have generally been framed as lacking or at best lacklustre.

While that may be true of its efforts to sway critics, the same cannot be said of its activities among audiences that are supportive of the invasion. The Kremlin's recent utterances around CBRN are a microcosm for its broader reliance on the doctrine of 'strategic disinformation,' which has seen it repeatedly making public assertions about what it fears before then going on to stage false flag operations that 'realise' those fears, thereby legitimising its intended (and previously concealed) policies and agenda.

On that basis, the Kremlin's systematic and sustained effort to artificially inject the CBRN problem-set into the discourse around Ukraine in recent weeks is major cause for concern.

