



By: *Sergei Stepancev, TA Moscow*

# Russian blackmail strategy - after gas and food, nuclear disaster is next



The recently reported explosion at a Russian mine near the Russian-controlled Ukrainian Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant appears to be a typical Russian “intelligence by combat” manoeuvre.

The Kremlin has been exploring alternatives to prevent the Ukrainian offensive operation, or at least trying to make it less humiliating for Moscow.

Things have been becoming tense in Russia. The young population is getting annoyed, and frightened by the possibility of being sent to the front line.

They have reason to be so, as a law was passed in parliament this week to allow the sending of electronic calls for the recruitment of the able-bodied, to avoid the previously large-scale evasion of military service.

Oligarchs and elites have been feeling strangled and in captivity because of their inability to visit Western countries as freely as they used to.

Ultra-patriots are confused by the poor performance of the Russian army in Ukraine. Losing to Ukraine is humiliating because, in Russian nationalist and patriotic reality, Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are inferior to Russia. They are like sub-Russians.

Earlier, the Kremlin skilfully used corruption to subvert the Western political class and to promote the needed agenda for the Kremlin.

After sanctions were introduced, the only available bargaining leverage was alleged Russian extraordinary military might, but even that appeared to be a false and overestimated assessment.

Since the war started, the Russian army has revealed itself in Ukraine as incompetent and outdated, just like the Russian Lada vehicle, which fell behind Western auto producers in terms of technological breakthroughs by least two generations.

## Blackmail - the only remaining lever of influence

Blackmail is now the only feasible alternative the Kremlin has to save itself and convince the West to stop assisting Ukraine.

Nuclear blackmail is the only type of blackmail that the Kremlin believes can impact the West.

According to the Kremlin, nuclear explosions and radiation hazards impacting European cities can form much-needed anti-Ukrainian and anti-war sentiment among European voters and Western politicians.

Hunger blackmail did not work to any degree, because Turkey objected to it, a country led by a person having a similar mind-set to Putin.

Russia calculated that it has nothing in case Erdogan decided to send Turkish peacekeepers to Ukrainian ports to oversee the release of vessels with grain and other food commodities.

Blackmail with gas supplies, which Moscow also resorted to in the early stages of its aggression against Ukraine, also failed.

It did the opposite - the huge European market, which relies on imports from Russia by 40-50%, is almost completely separated and permanently closed to Russia.

Putin understands that European leaders are not prepared or willing to send armed forces to isolate the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant from ongoing military operations, even though it has been using Zaporizhzhia as a bridgehead to strike Ukrainian forces.

Threats relating to the prospect of a nuclear explosion are, perhaps, the only remaining instrument of influence that can save Putin and correct the poor performance of the Russian army in Ukraine.

## Pressure on Western politicians

Russia has been trying to bend and flip the truth. Since the start of the Russian aggression, Russia has been trying to present it as if the Ukrainian armed forces have been responsible for nuclear provocations.

Russia wants to put more pressure on Western politicians and convince them that the only way to guarantee nuclear safety is to stop military operations immediately, without any conditions and begin negotiations.

Some European leaders may like it because the next time Russia violates peace talks, they will no longer be in office, and therefore it will be handled by the next administrations of Western countries.

However, Russia will never stop blackmailing, causing problems and increasing the level of pressure.

Moscow does not even spare China in its manipulations regarding the nuclear arsenal. Moscow relies on China as its only major ally, and the way out of a catastrophic economic situation.

Just a few days after meeting the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Moscow, when Putin committed to refraining from the proliferation of the nuclear arsenal, he decided to deploy a part of it in neighbouring Belarus.

## The danger of new blackmail

If the West pays too much attention to Russian nuclear blackmail, Russia will be convinced that blackmail is working and will continue to do so.

If the West makes a mistake and agrees to appease Russia under the threats of nuclear blackmail, the West can be certain that Russia will continue with nuclear blackmail.

Today, Russia wants the West to abandon Ukraine. Tomorrow, Russia will want to object to NATO expansion.

The day after tomorrow, Russia will use the

Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant to object to some initiative by American or European governments. Russia will not stop nuclear blackmail if it succeeds now with Zaporizhzhia.

Someone like Erdogan or Xi would probably have dispatched Special Forces units to demilitarise Zaporizhzhia. European leaders cannot do that, so they need to be wise enough not to fall for Putin's nuclear threats.

The Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant is probably the only remaining guarantee that Putin has, and the only leverage over the West and over ultra-patriots in Russia.