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A PRIMER ON RUSSIAN COGNITIVE WARFARE



COGNITIVE WARFARE

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Executive Summary

Understanding cognitive warfare is a national security requirement for the United States.[1] *Cognitive warfare* is a form of warfare that focuses on influencing the opponent's reasoning, decisions, and ultimately, actions to secure strategic objectives without fighting or with less military effort than would otherwise be required. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea increasingly use cognitive warfare against the United States in order to shape US decision-making. Cognitive warfare can be defeated. The United States and its allies can neutralize adversaries' cognitive warfare through systematic awareness and by exploiting the weaknesses that drive US adversaries to rely on cognitive warfare in the first place. Cognitive warfare is much more than misinformation or disinformation. It uses an array of tools, including the use of selective and partial truth in messaging, often integrated with economic, diplomatic, and military action up to major combat operations. Cognitive warfare is distinguished by its focus on achieving its aims by influencing the opponent's perceptions of the world and decision-making rather than by the direct use of force.

Russia is a key player in the cognitive warfare space and a model for China, Iran, and North Korea. Russia has effectively used cognitive warfare to facilitate its war in Ukraine, shape Western decision-making, obfuscate Russian objectives, preserve Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime, and mask Russia's weaknesses.

Cognitive warfare is Russia's way of war, governance, and occupation. The goals, means, and effects of Russian cognitive warfare are far greater than disinformation at the tactical level. Russian cognitive warfare is:

- The way of war: The Russian way of war is centered on the notion that wars can be won and lost in the opponent's mind. The Kremlin's main effort is shaping its opponents' decisions to achieve aims unattainable through Russia's physical capabilities alone. The Russian strategy that matters most is not its warfighting strategy, but rather the Kremlin's strategy to cause us to see the world as Moscow wishes us to see it and make decisions in that Kremlin-generated perception of reality.[2]
- The way of governance: The Kremlin has been waging an information war inside Russia and on territories that Russia illegally occupies in order to maintain the regime's control and stability. Russia's internal and external information operations, while distinct from one another, interact and cannot be understood in siloes. The Kremlin's domestic information control helps it generate resources for Russia's military efforts abroad.

- Born out of need: Russia is not weak, but it is weak relative to its goals. The Kremlin uses cognitive warfare to close gaps between its goals and its means. The main purpose of Russia's cognitive warfare is to generate a perception of reality that allows Russia to win more in the real world than it could through the force it can actually generate and at a lower cost.
- Targets reasoning: The primary objective of Russian cognitive warfare is to shape its adversaries' decision-making and erode our will to act. The Kremlin aims to decrease US and allied will and capability to resist Russia to lower the barrier to achieving its aims. Russia needs its opponents to do less so that Moscow can achieve more of its goals. The Kremlin uses cognitive warfare to create a world that would simply accept, and not fight, Russian premises and actions.
- Beyond media: Russia uses all platforms that transmit narratives - media, conferences, international frameworks, diplomatic channels, individuals — as tools of its cognitive warfare.
- Beyond information means: Russian cognitive warfare is supported by physical activities. These physical tools include military exercises; sabotage; cyber-attacks; combat operations, and exaggerations of Russia's military capabilities and battlefield progress.
- Cross-theater and multigenerational: Russian information operations span decades and geographies. The effects of Russian cognitive warfare may occur years after Russia launches information operations. Russia selectively activates and deactivates a set of narratives over decades to adapt them to the Kremlin's evolving requirements.
- Effective, but only to a point: Cognitive warfare allowed Russia to make some gains that would have been impossible with conventional forces alone. Russian cognitive warfare is not always effective, however, as Russian information operations regularly succeed only partially, fail, and even backfire.
- A constant pursuit: Russia is always fighting for the initiative in the information space. The initiative is not permanent and can be contested.
- A vulnerability: The Kremlin is overly dependent on cognitive warfare. The Kremlin's ability to achieve its objectives abroad critically depends on the West's acceptance of Russia's assertions about reality. Putin's presidency also depends in part on his ability to maintain a perception that an alternative to his rule is either worse or too costly to fight for.
- Predictable, hence targetable: Russian cognitive warfare supports the Kremlin's strategic aims, which have not changed in years. This fact presents opportunities for defense and offense. The Kremlin also relies on a set of predetermined

messages, making it hard for the Kremlin to rapidly pivot to new information operations.

The United States should not counter Russian cognitive warfare symmetrically. The key to defending against Russian cognitive warfare is doing so at the level of strategic reasoning while resisting the urge to chase Russia's tactical disinformation efforts. Debunking individual false narratives only grapples with the tactical level of Russian cognitive warfare and is insufficient for countering Russian cognitive warfare. The United States and its allies should understand what premises the Kremlin wants us to believe at any given time and over generations, which decisions of ours it is trying to shape, and in support of which aims. The United States and its allies can then defend against Russian cognitive warfare by rejecting the very premises the Kremlin is trying to establish in its effort to have us reason from those premises to conclusions that benefit Russia.

Section 1: Historical Context

Russia's cognitive warfare long predates Putin's rule, but Putin has extensively relied on this capability both to govern and to wage wars.

Governance. Putin has sought information control in Russia since the first days of his presidency. Russian security services raided a major independent TV station in Russia days after Putin's inauguration in 2000.[3] Putin established state control over Russian media by 2003.[4] The Kremlin has introduced new forms of information control every year since 2000.[5] Present-day Russia punishes any expression that appears to conflict with the Kremlin's agenda, and Putin has been expanding censorship since launching his full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[6] The Russian state sentenced a Russian teenager for using 19th-century Ukrainian poetry to protest Russia's war against Ukraine in 2025, for example.[7] The Kremlin's efforts to create a national instant messaging platform are among its latest attempts to expand monitoring of domestic communications.[8]

Warfare. Russia's cognitive warfare is rooted in the Soviet concepts of "reflexive control." [9] Soviet mathematician Vladimir Lefebvre defined "reflexive control" in 1967 as a process of transferring the bases for decision-making from one opponent to another.[10] In other words, the Kremlin is trying to get its opponents to accept Russian premises and then to reason from those premises to decisions that favor Russia. For example, Putin took the false assertion that discussions of Ukraine's NATO accession posed an imminent danger to Russia in 2021 — an assertion that ISW and others have debunked[11] — and built it into a false conclusion that Russia was justified in launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin continues to use this false assertion in an effort to absolve Russia of any responsibility for its war against Ukraine and to try to secure concessions from the United States and Ukraine in the context of the peace negotiations.[12]

Russia is recycling Soviet messaging strategies and implements. Russia flaunting its conventional power, such as nuclear weapons, its fleet, and its missile systems, is a tactic that the Soviets frequently used in their strategic messaging against the West.[13] The Kremlin invested in expanding the reach and capabilities of the state news agency *TASS* (an acronym for the *Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union*) in 2013 and 2014. *TASS* was the source of Soviet domestic and foreign propaganda and was present in 116 countries during the Soviet Union's rule.[14] Russia has been using its diplomatic channels to influence Western leaders. The Soviet Union similarly used so-called "active measures" — diplomatic networks and espionage — to advance its interests.[15]

Russia's cognitive warfare capabilities did not degrade after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, in contrast to its conventional military capabilities, which declined in the 1990s. Russian military discourse about reflexive control and information operations continued throughout the 1990s, and the Russian intelligence services sustained their information operations abroad.[16] The Kremlin used various cognitive means in its failed effort to deter the Baltics from integrating with the West in the 1990s, demonstrating that the Soviet Union's collapse did not change Russia's goals of controlling former Soviet states or its willingness to use cognitive warfare to advance its goals.[17]

The Russian way of war increasingly reflected the notion that wars can be won and lost in an opponent's mind during Putin's rule.[18] Putin has long prioritized developing the Kremlin's ability to shape perceptions globally and in Russia. Putin adopted an Information Security Doctrine in 2000, which emphasized defending against other states' psychological influence on Russia.[19] The Kremlin intensified its cognitive warfare efforts after a series of peaceful protests against corrupt regimes in former Soviet states, including Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution and Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution. Russia's neighbors' striving toward transparent Western-style governance threatened Russia's goal to control those states, and Putin perceived this development as a threat to his regime. Putin stressed over the years that the Kremlin "should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia." [20] The Kremlin launched a series of information operations to stop and reverse the loss of Russian influence in Ukraine and other former Soviet states. The Kremlin invested in narratives about separatism in Ukraine as early as 2004 and used them a decade later as a foundation of its hybrid operation aimed at seizing Ukraine's eastern and southern regions in 2014, and later of its full-scale invasion in 2022.[21]

Russia's national security paradigm further prioritized cognitive warfare and integration of information warfare capabilities into its doctrine and concepts of operation after Russia's 2014 and 2015 military campaigns in Ukraine and Syria, respectively.[22] Russian military scholars wrote in the Russian military science journal *Military Thought* that information capabilities play an increasingly important role in a country's ability to

influence global events: capabilities to exploit the intellectual potential of other countries; to disseminate and insert its own spiritual ideological values, culture, language; to stall spiritual and cultural expansion of other countries; to transform and even undermine their spiritual and moral foundations.[23] Some Russian military writers even argued that all activities, including kinetic operations, must be aimed at achieving informational effects.[24] Russia's 2016 Information Security Doctrine called for an independent Russian information policy, the segmented management of the Russian internet, and the elimination of Russian dependency on foreign information technologies.[25] Russia established the Military-Political Directorate in 2018 to instill the Kremlin's ideology within the Russian Armed Forces, as the Kremlin sought to expand its information control over the Russian military.[26] The Soviet Union similarly integrated political officers into its military to ensure the Soviet military's alignment with the Communist Party's ideology and objectives.

The Kremlin has prioritized the expansion of its media conglomerate globally. The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept named "strengthening Russian media's positions in the global information space" among its priorities.[27] Kremlin-controlled media organizations *RT*, *TASS*, and *Sputnik* launched a concerted effort to form partnerships with foreign media.[28] *TASS* resumed multi-language programming and reopened numerous branches in foreign countries in 2013 and 2014.[29] The Kremlin has been investing in a generation of Russia-favorable journalists through training programs.[30]

Section 2: Intent

The Kremlin focuses on the battle for the mind out of both necessity and opportunity. Russia is not weak per se, given its sizable military capabilities and potential. But Russia is weak relative to its strategic goals. The Kremlin uses cognitive warfare to close gaps between its goals and means.

The Kremlin's strategic aims have remained largely the same throughout Putin's rule. These aims include preserving Putin's regime; reestablishing Russia as a great power, which presupposes subjugating Ukraine and Belarus; regaining control over the former Soviet states; and establishing a world order in which US influence is diminished, NATO's unity is broken, and Russia has decisive influence.

Putin has lacked the means to achieve his goals.[31] Russia's military failures during the 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the 2022 full-scale invasion exposed the limits of Russia's hard power. Russia is often neither strong enough to impose its will on others, nor is it appealing enough to be a partner of choice. Russia's sphere of influence is largely an invented one — it is the sphere of influence Putin desires to have, but by and large does not. Russia's neighbors are not willing to choose Russia as an exclusive partner if at all.[32] Russia also lacks the military power to control its perceived sphere of influence by force. It would take Russia over 100 years to capture

the remaining 80 percent of Ukraine at the current rate of advance, assuming Russia can sustain massive personnel losses indefinitely.[33] Russia's victory in Ukraine is far from inevitable. Russia has been struggling to fully seize four Ukrainian territories that the Kremlin illegally declared as annexed in September 2022 ever since that announcement. It would take Russia over 4.5 years to capture these areas fully, assuming Russian forces advance at the same tempo they have been since July 2024. Other former Soviet states, such as Moldova, resist the Kremlin's attempts at domination.[34] The closest that the Kremlin has come to controlling a country since the fall of the USSR is Belarus. The Kremlin regained dominant influence over Belarus in 2020 – 2021 after a multi-year campaign of coercion and manipulation.[35] The Kremlin also failed to support its allies, the Bashar al Assad regime, in Syria in December 2024 and Armenia during the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh war, because Russian forces and military equipment were tied down in Ukraine.

The purpose of the Kremlin's cognitive warfare is to generate an alternative reality that allows Russia to win in the real world. Most of the Kremlin's cognitive efforts aim to decrease the will and capability of those resisting Russia and to lower the barrier for Russia to achieve its aims.

1. **The Kremlin's chief cognitive effort is making the world accept Russia's premises.** For example, the Kremlin asserts that Russia's victory in Ukraine is inevitable; that Russia is entitled to areas of Ukraine it does not militarily control; and that Russia deserves its desired sphere of influence — despite the abovementioned realities.

Intent: The Kremlin will have a better chance of imposing its will on others if the world ceases to support countries that resist Russian control. The Kremlin will have a better chance of accomplishing this aim by making the international community accept the premise that Russia is entitled to its desired sphere of influence. Russia will have a better chance of subjugating Ukraine if the Kremlin is successful in having the international community accept the premise that Russian victory is inevitable and that continued Western aid to Ukraine is futile. Russia will achieve a goal that exceeds its military capability if the world accepts the premise that Russia deserves occupied and unoccupied Ukrainian territories and pressures Kyiv to cede land as a part of a deal with Russia.

1. **The Kremlin has been trying to portray Russia as righteous.** The Kremlin invests enormous energy in dismissing and concealing Russia's atrocities, indicating the importance of this effort. The Kremlin repeatedly denied the Russian military's involvement in the Bucha Massacre in March 2022 during Russia's invasion of Kyiv Oblast. Russian forces committed major and well documented atrocities against civilians in Bucha in 2022.[36] The Kremlin even claimed that Ukraine had "staged" the massacre to gain Western support.[37] The Kremlin accused Ukrainian forces of destroying the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023.

The dam was under Russian occupation and was likely destroyed by Russia to hinder Ukraine's Summer 2023 counteroffensive.[38] The Kremlin conceals its religious persecutions in occupied Ukraine and Russia — namely against Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and Baptists.[39] The Kremlin attempts to hide or reframe Russia's kidnapping of Ukrainian children. Russia has been conducting mass deportations of Ukrainian children and depopulating Ukrainian territory.[40] Russia is denying its systemic executions of Ukraine's prisoners of war despite considerable evidence of those executions.[41]

Intent. The Kremlin aims to conceal and normalize Russia's atrocities to limit international resistance to Russian actions. Widespread knowledge of Russian atrocities periodically, but not always, mobilizes Western resources and societies to resist Russia, making it harder for Russia to achieve its goals. Russia failed to conceal its responsibility for the Bucha massacre in 2022, resulting in vast condemnation and seemingly increased Western military aid for Ukraine.[42]

1. **The Kremlin has been trying to conceal Russia's and Putin's weaknesses while discrediting Russia's targets.** The Kremlin has been seeking to portray Putin as an effective war leader.[43] Putin has, in fact, been an ineffective war leader, failing to achieve nearly all of his stated military objectives well over three years into Russia's war, despite an estimated one million Russians killed and wounded.[44] The Kremlin has been downplaying Russian failures and Ukraine's successes. The Kremlin downplayed Ukraine's liberation of occupied territories in 2022, Ukraine forcing Russia's Black Sea Fleet out of the western Black Sea and the occupied ports in Crimea, and Russia's failure to protect its international borders against the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast, among others.[45] The Kremlin has been persistently working to discredit Russia's targets — from Estonia to Ukraine — and portray them as unworthy of international support since the 1990s, well before Putin came to power and increasingly during his rule.[46]

Intent: If the world believes the narrative of Russia's strength, invincibility or inevitability of Russia's victory or that Russia's targets are unworthy of support, then the world may be less inclined to resist or help others resist the Kremlin's actions. Concealing Putin's weakness in a system built on the premise of strength is also key to his regime's stability.

The Kremlin is using cognitive warfare, in sum, to create a world order that would simply accept, and never fight, Russian premises and actions, and to allow Russia to achieve objectives that are otherwise beyond its means.

The Kremlin uses cognitive warfare for governance and occupation. The ability to control the narrative has become an increasingly existential requirement for Putin's regime's stability in Russia. Putin's presidency depends

on his ability to maintain the perception that any alternative to his rule is either worse or too costly to fight for.[47] Putin's dominance over the Russian information space allows Putin to absorb setbacks that would have threatened the power of other leaders — like failing to achieve most of the objectives in a war against Ukraine that has resulted in over one million Russians wounded and killed.

Russia uses cognitive warfare in its occupation playbook as well.[48] Russia aims to establish information control immediately after the physical occupation of any given area. Russian forces seized the local TV tower and began airing Russian propaganda right after Russia occupied Kherson City in 2022.[49] Russian occupation officials connected occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts to 20 Russian federal channels and 10 Russian occupation channels in 2023.[50] The Kremlin also launched an elaborate information campaign aiming to frame Russian presidential elections in occupied Ukraine in March 2024 as legitimate in an effort to secure acceptance of the Kremlin's occupation of parts of Ukraine.[51] The degree and effectiveness of Russia's information control on the territories Russia illegally occupies vary. Russia, nevertheless, requires both terror and information control to govern the territories it illegally occupies in the face of local resistance.[52]

Russian global and domestic cognitive warfare are deeply connected and cannot be understood in isolation from one another. The Kremlin's cognitive warfare inside Russia is not just about regime stability. The Kremlin uses cognitive warfare inside Russia to generate resources for its external military efforts. The Kremlin is offering high financial rewards to attract Russian volunteers; using military-patriotic propaganda and education to indoctrinate children into eventual military service; sponsoring numerous military bloggers to advertise military service and crowdfunding events; and conditioning Russian society to accept greater sacrifices.[53] Many Russians who chose to take part in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and kill Ukrainians admitted to doing so because they believed Russian propaganda about Nazism in Ukraine, as evidenced by interviews of Russian POWs and of Russian locals reciting the Kremlin's narratives as justification for their choices.[54] Russia's widespread support for Putin's maximalist aims in Ukraine is also in part a result of Russia's information campaigns to condition Russians to a long war against Ukraine and the West.[55]

The Kremlin's investment in cognitive warfare stems not only from necessity but also from its perception of opportunity. Cognitive warfare can be waged often by inexpensive means such as social media. The failure of an information operation is less costly and noticeable than a military failure. Modern technology, a fast-paced news cycle, and the transnational nature of the global information space have made it easier for Russia to influence different audiences and countries at once — sometimes under the guise of plausible deniability. Russia can launch, pause, stop, or intensify various information operations more readily than military operations. The information

environment is confusing and overwhelming — fertile conditions for cognitive warfare, which aims to confuse and convince. Cognitive warfare is abstract, unregulated, and under-investigated. Free societies have not developed a comprehensive way to protect decision-makers and populations from adversarial cognitive warfare. Russian cognitive warfare also benefits from the fact that its primary objective is to cause inaction in response to its actions.

The Kremlin succeeds if it persuades its adversaries that it is too hard to know the real truth, too hard to resist Russia, too hard to be sure which side is right, and which is wrong. Moscow does not have to persuade opponents that its views and aims are correct — just that resisting Russia is unnecessary, unjustified, or unwise. This requirement presents a much lower threshold for success than persuading opponents to agree with Moscow, particularly in a global information environment already conditioning people to say, "Well, who really knows?"

Section 3: Scope

Tactical, Operational, and Strategic Information Operations

Russian information operations are elements of Russian cognitive warfare. Russian information operations function at all levels of war: tactical, operational, and strategic, ultimately supporting the Kremlin's strategic aims.

Tactical-Level Information Operations

Russia's tactical information operations are largely focused on individual events or narratives. Examples of a tactical level information operation include Romanian TikTok influencers publishing a video in support of a pro-Russian Romanian presidential candidate, or a Russian propagandist's claim that a Ukrainian government official is under the influence of drugs.[56]

Russian information operations at the tactical level aim to confuse, inject new narratives, test the information space, or uphold an existing narrative, among other efforts. They are numerous and spread across different means and in different languages, making them hard to track and easy to discard or disavow.

Each individual tactical information operation may appear to be isolated, but the Kremlin orchestrates them into campaigns at the operational level of war in support of the Kremlin's strategic aims. A video published by a Romanian TikTok influencer was a part of the Kremlin's 2024 campaign in Romania, meant to advance a pro-Kremlin presidential candidate in Romanian elections.[57] This campaign supported the Kremlin's strategic objective of breaking NATO's unity, undermining Western support for Ukraine, and weakening European resolve against the Russian threat.[58] Kremlin officials and propagandists routinely push multiple doctored videos and false claims that Ukrainian officials are drug addicts.[59] Each video and claim

appears to be a distinct and isolated event, but together they form part of a campaign at the operational level to discredit the Ukrainian government in the eyes of Western and Ukrainian audiences in support of the Kremlin's strategic aim of eroding Western support for Ukraine.

Russian information operations at the tactical level do not always follow an exact formula to accomplish operational and strategic objectives; many do not work, while some are accidentally created or inadvertently spread. These factors complicate the task of identifying the campaigns they are meant to be part of.

Operational-Level Information Operations

Much of Russia's cognitive warfighting is done at the operational level. Russia's operational level information campaigns are aimed against a set of targets over a protracted period. For example, the Kremlin is advancing several information operations targeting the Baltic states as of summer 2025, namely: redrawing maritime borders in the Baltic Sea; issuing pensions and Russian citizenships to Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians; and accusing local governments of Nazism and repressing Russian speakers and claimed ethnic Russians.[60] This Kremlin campaign targeting the Baltic states has the operational objective of setting long-term information conditions that the Kremlin can use to justify potential future military action against the Baltics, paralleling the campaigns it conducted in Ukraine prior to its invasions of that state.[61] This is one of many Russian operational campaigns in northeastern Europe that seek to accomplish the Kremlin's strategic aim of establishing Russia's desired sphere of influence.

Strategic-Level Information Operations

The strategic level of Russian cognitive warfare is the hardest to grasp but the most critical to understand. Russian strategic narratives target the opponent's will and reasoning. Unlike tactical narratives that focus on specific events or operational campaigns that seek to shape broader perceptions around an issue, Russian strategic information operations are focused on establishing premises that make their target reason from those premises to conclusions that suit Russia and then to act based on these conclusions in ways that advance Russia's aims. In other words, Russian strategic information operations target the very basis of our reasoning with the goal of making us act in Russia's favor while believing that we are advancing our own interests. As ISW assessed in 2024, "the Kremlin is not arguing with us. It is trying to enforce assertions about Russia's manufactured portrayal of reality as the basis for our own discussions and then allow us to reason to conclusions that benefit the Kremlin." [62]

Creating new or changing existing premises is a long game. It requires the gradual erosion of accepted facts or the substitution of facts with a new, Kremlin-favorable set of facts. It requires changing perceptions about enough elements of reality to create a picture of

reality that, taken in its totality, is new (and false). Such efforts are most effective when the target is not even aware they are occurring. For example, Russia's strategic information effort to isolate Ukraine from Western support encompasses hundreds of tactical narratives, supporting multiple decades-long operational information campaigns aimed at shaping the Western perception of the costs, benefits, and risks of supporting Ukraine, and alignment with Western values and priorities.[63]

The ultimate target of the Kremlin's strategic information operations is the opponent's will to act. Russia seeks to undermine its opponents' belief in the value of action as such. **To achieve more, the Kremlin needs others to do less.** The Kremlin has established inaction as a default response by Russian citizens to external and internal stimuli. The Kremlin's strategic information operations seek to condition the West to choose inaction when it comes to Russia. The West, the US in particular, has been an obstacle to the Kremlin's subjugation of its neighbors. US support has been critical to Ukraine's ability to resist Russia's invasion, for example. Russia may very well lose if the West leans in to support Ukraine. The combined economies of NATO countries, non-NATO European Union (EU) states, and US Asian allies dwarf Russia's, among other things. The Russian goal has therefore been to have the United States freely reason to the conclusion that Russia's prevailing in Ukraine or in any other country Russia wants to control is inevitable (or in accord with US interests) and that the United States should stay on the sidelines.

Russia is using cognitive warfare to diminish not only America's will but also America's ability to act. Even when preoccupied in Ukraine, Russia is investing in anti-US narratives from Africa to South America to erode US access, presence, and influence globally.

The Kremlin's strategic information operations also aim to influence opponents into choosing specific actions and to secure Russia's objectives on Russia's behalf. Putin has long sought to break NATO's unity, but Russia is unable to do so by force. The Kremlin is instead creating cognitive conditions in which NATO would undermine its own unity — a core principle of collective defense — from within. Putin has tried to prevent states, even non-former Soviet states such as Montenegro, from joining NATO. The Kremlin has long worked to undermine the relationships among NATO states.[64] The Kremlin has invested in political influence in Hungary and has used Hungary to block or disrupt NATO and EU decisions concerning Ukraine and Russia.[65] The Kremlin has used energy policy to generate friction within the alliance. The Kremlin's multi-year influence efforts succeeded in convincing a NATO member, Germany, to build the now-dormant NordStream 2 pipeline, despite the project's clear national security risks to European interests and limited practical benefits.[66] The Kremlin has long tried to create conditions in which NATO would voluntarily grant Russia a veto over which countries are able to join NATO by attacking or threatening to attack aspiring members, by trying to establish the false premise that Russia is entitled to control a sphere of influence, and by

explicitly demanding that NATO rule out enlargement and limit the deployment of forces and weapon systems.[67]

Multi-Generational and Cross-Theater Information Operations

Russian cognitive warfare efforts span generations and theaters. Russia selectively activates and deactivates sets of narratives over decades. The repetition and persistence of these narratives allow the Kremlin to desensitize its opponents to the intended messages delivered by its information operations, making it more likely for an opponent to lose awareness of the Russian information operations and their intent. The effectiveness of Russia's cognitive warfare in part lies in Russia's ability to invoke the commonly accepted fallacy that redundancy is a sign of information's credibility. Many of the Kremlin's narratives lie dormant for years until an opportune moment arises.

An enduring challenge for the West is the tendency to ignore Russia's tactical activities that appear trivial until they become strategic gains for the Kremlin.[68] Russian multi-generational information operations reinforce this tendency, dispersing already limited Western attention to Russian actions across time and hiding Russian cognitive warfare in plain sight through sheer persistence.

Ukraine. The Kremlin started to proliferate separatist narratives and set up “separatist” structures in Eastern Ukraine as early as 2004—a process that went largely unnoticed in the West.[69] A decade of cognitive warfare enabled the Kremlin's hybrid operation in Ukraine in 2014.

The Baltics. The Kremlin has been setting information conditions for hybrid operations against the Baltic States as early as the 1990s in the name of Russian-Baltic “historic unity” and protecting Russian “compatriots abroad,” including against alleged religious-based persecution.[70] Kremlin officials began threatening Russian military action against the Baltic States as early as 1993 — two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vitaly Churkin threatened that Russia was preparing to use serious diplomatic, political, and perhaps “not only political” measures against Estonia to deter Estonia from adopting the 1993 Aliens Act.[71] The Act regulated the basis for entry of foreigners to Estonia, which the Kremlin likely viewed as limiting its access to Estonia and a threat to the Kremlin's objective of controlling former Soviet states.[1][72] The Kremlin has been routinely questioning the legality of the Baltic States' independence from the Soviet Union since the mid-1990s, likely to establish a justification for potential future military action.[73] Russian officials falsely claimed in the mid-1990s that the Baltic States voluntarily joined the Soviet Union to conceal the extremely forceful Soviet occupation and annexation of the Baltics. The Kremlin continues to push narratives aimed at undermining Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian integration into Western institutions.[74]

The Kremlin is using Russian control of Kaliningrad to set justifications for potential further Russian territorial conquests. Putin stated in September 2024 that Russia must ensure that there are “no barriers” to the movement of Russian citizens between mainland Russia and Kaliningrad Oblast, possibly setting justifications for future Russian aggression against the Baltic States or Poland under the guise of defending Kaliningrad Oblast.[75] The Kremlin uses past territorial conquests and the claimed responsibility of protecting Russian speakers to fabricate a *casus belli*. The Kremlin used this strategy to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and its illegal occupation of Crimea and parts of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in 2014.

Finland. Russian officials are increasingly evoking narratives about Finland’s historic ties to Russia.[76] Prior to Finnish accession in NATO, Russian information operations targeting Finland concerned the following topics: child custody battles between Russian and Finnish parents, Finnish history as a Nazi ally during the Second World War, Finnish intent to regain lost territories, and claims of a strong Finnish-Russian friendship.[77] The Kremlin accused the West of deliberately undermining the Finnish-Russian relationship and preparing to use Finland to threaten northwestern Russia. The Russians are injecting narratives that the Finnish government’s decision to distance itself from Russia is not reflective of the Finnish population’s desires, that Finland was once part of the Russian Empire, and that Finland was “indiscriminately exterminating” the Slavic population in Karelia — a region split between northwestern Russia and Finland.[78]

Another example of a multi-generational and cross-theater information campaign is Russia’s effort to falsely accuse the United States of using secret biological laboratories to produce biological weapons in former Soviet countries and using biochemical and radiological weapons in those states. ISW and others have thoroughly debunked this information operation.[79] The Soviet Union used a variant of the bio labs narrative in the 1980s when it falsely accused the United States of creating HIV/AIDS as a biological weapon.[80] Post-Soviet Russia used the informational campaign focused on US bio labs in the context of Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia. Russian media at the time claimed that Russian forces discovered biological and chemical facilities in occupied South Ossetia.[81] Over the past two decades, the Kremlin has repeatedly invoked the US biolab narrative in numerous former Soviet states, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Armenia — all timed to support various Kremlin operational objectives in those countries.[82] The biolab information operation supports the Kremlin’s strategic objective of regaining control over the former Soviet states by creating a negative perception of the United States in those countries. But it is not only about the Kremlin’s sphere of influence. The Kremlin also deployed the biolab information operation across the Americas, Africa, and Asia.[83] The Kremlin seeks to discredit the United States through anti-US narratives in order to undermine the US global influence. These narratives also aim to discredit the image of the United States in Russia and reinforce the

Kremlin's narrative of Russia being "encircled by the enemies" as a justification for the Kremlin's confrontation with the West.

Beyond Informational Means

The Kremlin's means of creating perceptions go beyond information. The Kremlin uses physical tools to reinforce its narratives and generate fear with the intent of paralyzing its opponents' decision-making. These physical tools include but are not limited to military exercises; false flag operations and sabotage; hacking and cyber-attacks; artificially made migrant crises; combat operations, and exaggerations of military capabilities and battlefield progress.

Russia flaunts its nuclear capabilities to impede Western efforts to supply Russian targets, mostly Ukraine, with weapons. The Kremlin evoked nuclear blackmail several times during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including during Ukraine's successful counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast in Fall 2022 and ahead of Ukraine's summer counteroffensive in May 2023. These information operations aimed to scare the United States and Ukraine's other allies from supplying Ukrainian forces with necessary military equipment and prevent Ukrainian forces from imposing additional defeats on Russian forces.

The Kremlin launched numerous tactical informational operations about a possible Russian assault on Western Ukraine from Belarus in Winter 2023. The Kremlin conducted small-scale exercises with Belarusian forces near the Ukraine-Belarus international border, resulting in the Ukrainian military having to dispute these rumors about an imminent Belarusian attack.[84] Russia likely launched this information operation in an effort to fix Ukrainian forces in northern Ukraine and impede Ukraine's preparations for the Summer 2023 counteroffensive.

The Kremlin further tried to deter Ukraine's preparations for the Summer 2023 counteroffensives by announcing the deployment of tactical Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus in March 2023.[85] The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons is also part of the Kremlin's long-term campaign to annex Belarus.[86] The Kremlin likely deliberately staged the timing of this announcement to follow the United Kingdom's decision to provide Ukraine with munitions containing depleted uranium[2] as part of Western efforts to support Ukraine's preparations for the counteroffensive.[87] The Kremlin was indirectly messaging to Western leaders that it would use tactical nuclear weapons or resort to nuclear escalation against NATO from Belarus if they provided weapons to Ukraine to exploit Western fears of nuclear escalation.[88] This whole episode was intended to shape Western perceptions rather than to change Russia's nuclear capabilities. The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus fundamentally does not change the assessed Russian risk of nuclear escalation, given that Russia has long

fielded nuclear-capable weapons able to strike any target that tactical nuclear weapons based in Belarus could hit.[89]

Physical means, including military operations, transmit information inherently in addition to any immediate physical effects they generate — a dynamic that the Kremlin leverages to shape perceptions via information means. Physical means can trigger emotional responses such as fear, which in turn can influence decision-making. Military operations often serve as the physical confirmation of an established narrative, reinforcing Russia's messaging. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 reinforced Russia's image as aggressive, unpredictable, and capable of tolerating high risk. Russia is using this image and its physical tools to blackmail decision-makers into ceding the Kremlin's demands and advancing Russia's war efforts. The Kremlin, however, in reality is highly calculating and risk adverse because of the limitations of Russia's actual military capabilities.[90]

Russia launched an unsuccessful cognitive warfare effort using missile and drone strikes against Ukraine's port infrastructure to achieve the effects of a blockade in the Black Sea in the Summer and Fall 2023 without actually conducting one.[91] Russia announced its withdrawal from the United Nations-brokered Black Sea Grain Deal in July 2023, which ensured the safe transit of Ukrainian grain to African and Middle Eastern countries.[92] The Kremlin attempted to frame legitimate Ukrainian strikes on the Russian fleet and ground lines of communication as a violation of the Black Sea Grain Deal.[93] The Kremlin also launched a deliberate missile and drone campaign against Ukrainian port infrastructure to discourage international vessels from transporting Ukrainian grain due to high insurance costs. This cognitive warfare effort aimed to accomplish several objectives, including creating the false perception that Ukraine's resistance against Russia's aggression was spoiling global food security and allowing the Kremlin to demand Russia's reintegration into SWIFT and sanctions relief.[94] This cognitive warfare effort also aimed at discouraging international support to Ukraine from African and Middle Eastern countries. The Kremlin's military and informational efforts ultimately failed as Ukraine's successful drone and missile strikes against Russian Black Sea Fleet vessels prevented Russia from imposing a physical naval blockade or achieving the effects of a blockade through informational means.

Beyond Traditional Information Means

The Kremlin's informational means are much broader than media manipulation and troll farms. Russia uses all platforms that can transmit narratives as tools of its cognitive warfare. The Kremlin circulates its narratives through its entire network of alliances, international organizations, media, and individuals.

Russia's cognitive warfare relies on access to global media and the infiltration of Russian narratives across the world. The Kremlin state media continues to invest in a deliberate effort to sign cooperation and content-sharing agreements with foreign media outlets in an effort to distribute its narratives through apparently independent third parties.[95] The latest examples include Gazprom Media Holding, a Russian state media company that owns the Russian video streaming website RUTUBE and TV channels NTV and TNT, and the official Chinese "Xinhua" information agency signing a cooperation agreement with Russia on mutually fighting against "disinformation" in May 2025.[96] Various Kremlin outlets and news agencies signed new media cooperation agreements with Bulgarian, Cuban, Bahraini, Malaysian, and Iranian media companies in 2025.[97]

Russia continues its long-standing effort to cultivate a global cadre of Russia-friendly journalists and politicians. Czech, Belgian, and Polish intelligence exposed a covert Russian operation that has paid European politicians and journalists to advance Russian narratives in the European Union since late 2023.[98] Russian oligarchs covertly paid a German journalist who was producing a documentary on Putin in 2011 and 2012.[99] Russia created fake personas of foreign experts and journalists to advance Russian information operations in African countries.[100] Argentina uncovered a Russian espionage network in 2025 that engaged in disinformation efforts and attempted to influence internal processes in Argentina.[101]

Russia uses international platforms as cognitive warfare tools. Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya, often uses the UN to deflect from Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Nebenzya uses the UN to introduce irrelevant or false narratives to distract from international accusations against Russia's conduct and to undermine Ukraine's diplomatic efforts.[102] Russia uses Russia-Africa summits to advance its vision of Russia as a leader of an anti-Western bloc by advocating for a multipolar world order, disseminating anti-Western narratives, and portraying itself as not internationally isolated.[103]

Russia has a lineup of "cognitive warfighters," or individuals with messaging capabilities and constituencies that the Kremlin deploys to accomplish specific objectives. Cognitive warfighters are not just propagandists, as they perform targeted information operations on the Kremlin's behalf. Kremlin-affiliated Russian oligarch, Orthodox nationalist, and founder of the ultranationalist *Tsargrad* outlet Konstantin Malofeev serves an informational role of conditioning the Russian nationalist community to support the Kremlin's war effort. Malofeev uses his Orthodox nationalist ideology to facilitate military recruitment and crowdfunding efforts. Malofeev employs his appeal to Russian nationalists to convince them that Russia has no other choice but to fight against Ukraine and NATO.[104] CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) Kirill Dmitriev is another example of a Kremlin "cognitive warfighter." Dmitriev studied economics at Stanford and Harvard universities in the 1990s and spent his early career working as a

consultant at McKinsey & Company and Goldman Sachs, and later ran the Ukrainian investment fund Icon Private Equity from 2007 to 2010.[105] The Kremlin uses Dmitriev's Western education and business experience to advocate on behalf of Russia's interests. Dmitriev notably gave several interviews with American news outlets in April 2025 during which he attempted to paint Russia as an attractive market for American investment, tried to undermine trust in the US-Ukrainian mineral deal, and falsely claimed that Russia is not seeking sanctions relief.[106]

The Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) has been a long-standing tool for the Kremlin's hybrid operations, particularly in occupied Ukraine and in former Soviet states. ROC MP spreads Russian narratives aimed at justifying Russia's war in Ukraine to congregants in Russia, Ukraine, and worldwide. The ROC MP, for example, reportedly directed all its clergy to change their liturgy to include pro-war prayers in support of Russia's war of conquest in Ukraine.[107] The Kremlin uses the ROC MP to frame Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltics to portray these countries as religiously intolerant and inherently undemocratic.[108] The Kremlin, however, is conducting systematic religious repression in occupied Ukraine and in Russia - disproportionately targeting Protestant sects and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).[109]

Russia uses the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Compatriots Living Abroad, and the International Humanitarian Cooperation organization (Rossotrudnichestvo) to advance the Kremlin's strategic aims through shaping perceptions abroad.[110] Rossotrudnichestvo is a Russian federal government agency that is responsible for administering aid to foreign countries and for Russia's cultural efforts globally. Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (who now plays a key propaganda role as Deputy Chairman of Russian Security Council) established Rossotrudnichestvo in September 2008 as part of Russia's efforts to expand Russia's global influence.[111] Rossotrudnichestvo also became the Kremlin's key tool for orchestrating pro-Russian rallies across the globe.[112] The Kremlin has appeared to be establishing Rossotrudnichestvo as the base for a new system that would legalize the status of Russia's so-called "compatriots abroad" initiative, which the Kremlin may use to set information conditions to justify further hybrid operations abroad under the guise of "protecting Russian compatriots.[113]

Russian state-owned enterprises are cognitive warfare actors. Rosatom — the Russian state atomic corporation — has been using various information tactics to advance the Kremlin's objectives, such as efforts to legitimize Russia's occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) via the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) framework.[114] The Kremlin has also been using Rosatom as a way to expand Russia's influence in Africa. Rosatom has been establishing nuclear science centers to promote Russian-backed nuclear energy programs in Africa and using these centers and Rosatom's overall presence in Africa to spread Russia's narratives.[115] Rosatom signed memoranda

of understanding to build positive public opinion about Russia's nuclear energy in several African countries.[116]

Section 4: Effects and Vulnerabilities

Cognitive warfare allowed Russia to achieve gains beyond the limits of its conventional forces. The information backdrop of the Kremlin-induced fears has shaped Western decisions, resulting in lost opportunities for Ukraine and battlefield advantages for Russia. Russia's information operations centered on nuclear escalation in the Fall of 2022 aimed to delay Western provision of tanks and other key capabilities to Ukraine. US failure to proactively resource Ukraine's initiative after two successful, successive counteroffensive operations in the Fall of 2022 afforded Russia a reprieve and ability to build its defenses in depth and conduct a partial mobilization. Russian information operations centered on nuclear escalation in Spring 2023 were ultimately successful in dragging Western decisionmakers into the long discussion about what type of weapons they could provide to Ukraine without triggering escalation.[117]

Russian cognitive warfare is nonetheless prone to failure. Information operations can fail for a variety of reasons, including human error; misunderstanding of local culture, history, or informational landscape; or timely countermeasures and public awareness. The Kremlin cannot always control the outcome of certain information operations; some may generate unintended blowback. Russia's failures do not offer permanent relief from cognitive warfare, however, as Russia constantly adapts its information operations.

Russia tried and failed to use fear to dissuade Sweden from joining NATO. Russian ambassador to Sweden Viktor Tatarintsev attempted to threaten Sweden in June 2015, claiming that Russia would take "military countermeasures" if Sweden joined NATO.[118] Tatarintsev's comment was counterproductive to the Kremlin's efforts to discourage Sweden from joining NATO, as it resulted in an increase in Swedish support for NATO integration.[119] The information operation took place shortly after Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, which sparked a defensive anti-Russian sentiment in Sweden and across Europe. Although the Kremlin's effort to dissuade Sweden from joining NATO ultimately failed, the Kremlin's information operations factored in Sweden's deliberations and decision-making process. Swedish parliamentarians debated the possibility of Russia's retaliation in the event of Swedish accession into NATO all the way until Sweden's ratification of cooperation with NATO and eventual accession in 2023.[120]

The Kremlin's overreliance on cognitive warfare is a vulnerability. The Kremlin is overly dependent on its cognitive warfare to achieve its strategic goals. The Kremlin depends on the West's acceptance of Russia's fabricated assertions about reality. Russia's strategy in Ukraine hinges on its cognitive warfare effort to convince the West

that this war is unwinnable. Russia will lose its advantage if the West rejects this premise and surges its support to Ukraine.

The Kremlin is vulnerable to realities that undermine the narrative of a powerful Russia and a powerful Putin – one of Russia’s major unexploited weaknesses.[121] Putin has been proselytizing the idea of a great Russia domestically for 25 years. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that Russians care about Russia being perceived as powerful.[122] Russians have been the most vocal and upset not about staggering Russian manpower losses but about Russian battlefield setbacks.[123] Russian nationalists, whom Putin relies on to wage the war against Ukraine and support his regime, care about the idea of great Russia in particular. The Putin regime’s stability and Russia’s position in the world depend on maintaining the facade of Russia’s power. Putin has, in reality, repeatedly demonstrated that he is a risk-averse leader who refrains from making necessary decisions in time. Russia also has weaknesses that the West has not been exploiting.[124] Russia’s failure to militarily support its allies in Armenia, Syria, and Iran at times of need are recent demonstration of the limitations of Russia’s power.[125] The Russian economy is weakened and constrained by Western sanctions, despite the Kremlin’s declarations to the contrary. The Kremlin overcompensates for these weaknesses by intensifying narratives to exaggerate Russian strength.[126] Putin is thus vulnerable to a Western strategy that would consistently unmask and highlight Russia’s weaknesses. The fastest way to do so is to help Ukraine make Russia fail on the battlefield faster and to counter Russia globally through physical and information means.

The Kremlin’s domestic information control is not ironclad. Putin has given up some control over the Russian information space to the expanding Russian nationalist community, whom Putin relies on to sustain his war and his regime. The Russian milblogger and veteran community has gained prominence after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and continues to regularly call out the shortcomings of the Russian military leadership and its conduct of the war.

Russian cognitive warfare is a source of intelligence about Russia’s intent and capabilities. The Kremlin’s information operations provide indicators about Russian intent, efforts, insecurities, and critical capabilities. Russia’s use of information operations to set conditions for its kinetic actions and as a core way to advance its objectives reveals valuable information about the very objectives the Kremlin aims to achieve and weaknesses it is trying to conceal.

Russian cognitive warfare often comes at a cost to Russia’s physical capabilities and creates an echo chamber of assertions. The Kremlin’s erroneous assessment that it could conquer Ukraine in a matter of days in 2022 stemmed likely in part from the Kremlin’s believing its own propaganda that Ukraine is not a real nation, has no agency or will, and the capability to act. The Kremlin made a similar intelligence

mistake in 2014. Russia expected a welcoming reception among the local population in Ukraine's east and southern regions that Russia tried to seize. The Kremlin instead faced resistance that thwarted Russian efforts to control of intended areas in Ukraine and forced the Kremlin to accept an outcome less than its aims at the time.[127] The Kremlin has also likely believed some of its own propaganda about Russian military capabilities, leading to the Russian military leadership overestimating what it could accomplish on the battlefield in Ukraine.[128]

Conclusion

The US should not try to defend against Russian cognitive warfare symmetrically. The first step to negating Russia's cognitive warfare is not to play by Russia's rules, given that the Kremlin's strategy of 'reflexive control' depends on Russia's ability to trigger a reflex or a reaction in their opponent. The key to neutralizing Russia's cognitive warfare is to recognize when the Kremlin is attempting to implant premises to shape our reasoning and reject those premises. For example, the United States and its allies have an opportunity to reject a Russian premise by dismantling the notion that Russia is entitled to its claimed sphere of influence or that Russia will inevitably win militarily in Ukraine.

Russian cognitive warfare efforts can be forecasted and targeted because of their predictability. Most Russian cognitive efforts support the Kremlin's long-standing strategic aims. Specific Russian narratives and vignettes change based on the timing, place, and distribution method of the message, but the larger premises Russia is trying to establish through these narratives do not. The Kremlin's overall strategic goals that its narratives support also do not change. This fact provides an opportunity to create a comprehensive situational awareness system to monitor, forecast, and neutralize Russian cognitive warfare.

Actions in reality, e.g. physical means, are often the most effective ways to neutralize cognitive warfare. It was Ukraine's successful drone and missile strikes against the Russian Black Sea Fleet that defeated Russia's effort to create a false perception that Ukraine's resistance against Russia's aggression was spoiling global food security. Ukraine's military action denied Russia the ability to impose a de facto blockade and, as a result, enabled grain trade through the Black Sea. Ukraine's incursion into Kursk Oblast in August 2024 dispelled the Kremlin's assertion that bringing conventional war and Western equipment into Russian territory would trigger Russian nuclear retaliation.

The United States should not try to mimic Russian cognitive warfare. Russian overreliance on this capability has degraded Russia's physical capabilities and brought destructive effects on Russian society, damage that will take Russia generations to recover from, if recovery is at all possible. The US and its allies have real power commensurate with their objectives and do not need to rely on cognitive warfare to achieve their

defensive aims. The West is best served by neutralizing Russian (and Iranian, North Korean, and Chinese) cognitive warfare efforts through highlighting them, working to reject the false premises they seek to create, and focusing on the real world situation rather than falling into the trap of operating intellectually within the artificial world cognitive warfare efforts seek to create.

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