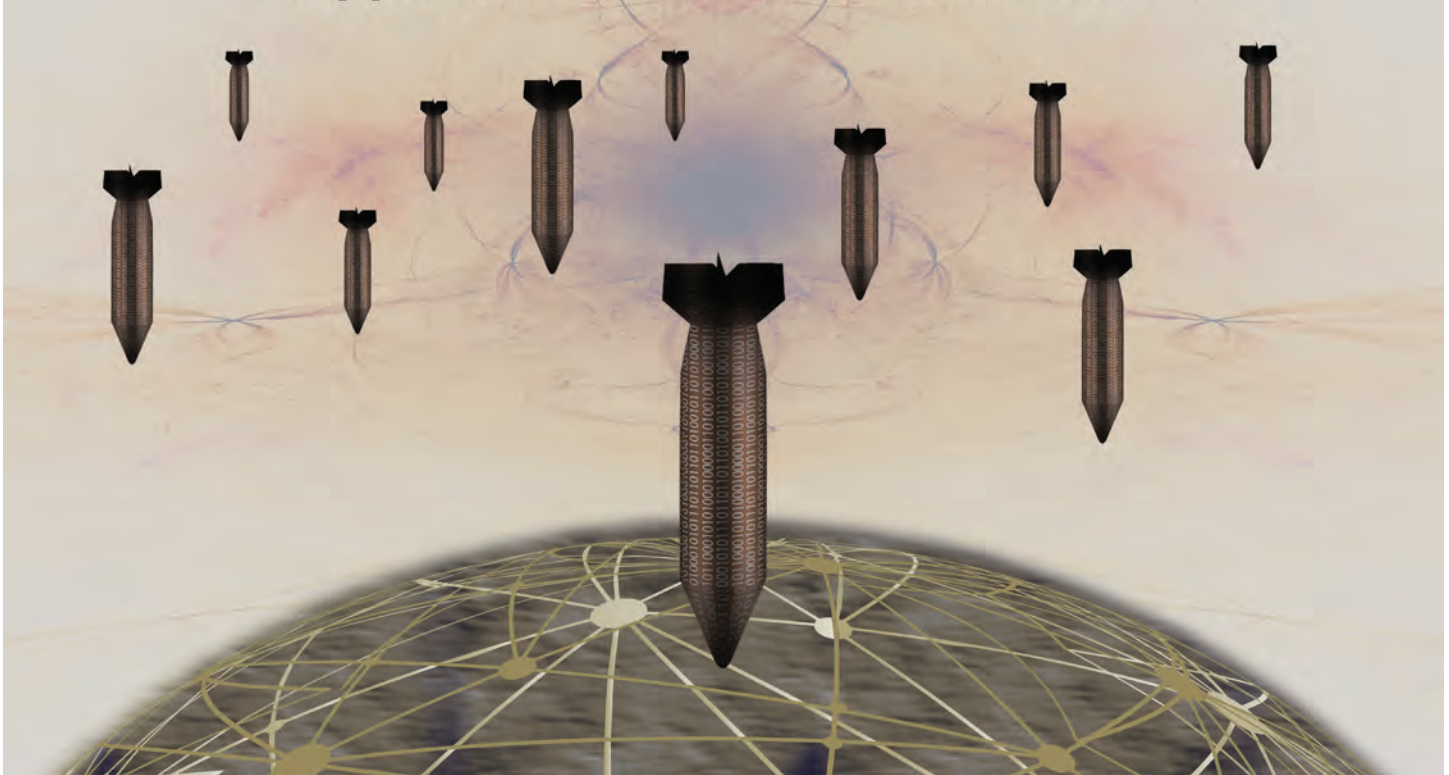


# Spinning Victory: The Russian Approach to Information Warfare



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## Introduction

The modern interconnected information environment and the nuclear-restrained competition between global actors have changed the position of armed conflict within the realm of international relations. This evolution of war has given rise to new conflict formats, leading to the emergence of military-political objectives, in which a successful resolution of a conflict no longer solely depends on a decisive military victory but relies on perceived optics and the impact on the political narratives in regional and global arenas. As information is a primary tool of politics, its effect on conflict resolution has become increasingly more direct. This new dynamic was demonstrated in Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, and Syria, where the underlying conflict actors cannot be decisively affected by military action but instead fight through the informational and political outcomes of regional conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

According to general military thought in the Russian Federation, nations are never at peace, but rather transition between preparing for and waging war.<sup>2</sup> This approach

to international policy adds an adversarial character to the use of any instrument of national power. In effect, it weaponizes information, and through recent technological advancements, it gives an actor the ability to focus information effects to support tactical operations directly during armed conflict. Instead of full-scale military conflicts reminiscent of World Wars I and II, armed confrontation has become part of a larger campaign that integrates political, diplomatic, and economic campaigns, which allow governments to achieve their global political objectives.<sup>3</sup> This focused and deliberate use of weaponized information results in the emergence of a “hidden war” that is continuously waged in the background of the global cognitive space.<sup>4</sup> As a result, this perpetual informational conflict has created a new battleground of ideas and narratives in an ill-defined, largely uncharted global cognitive domain that has a reciprocal relationship with the other domains. This increasing political component of warfare also creates an increasing demand for decision makers and warfighters to accurately understand the operational environment, develop and

employ effective strategies, and accurately assess the impact of military activities in the information space.

### Theoretical Approach

The weaponization of information and the military-political dynamic of warfare have become a universal issue for all global actors, prompting a race to understand emerging conflict dynamics and develop working models relevant to each actor's strengths.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the global academic learning campaign, the Russian Federation has adopted new strategic and tactical conceptual frameworks for this type of warfare under various names, including "hybrid warfare," "network-focused warfare," and "swarm warfare," among others.<sup>6</sup> Despite the different trajectories each theoretical approach takes, the common trend is the overwhelming use of information to effectively shape the operational environment in the pre-conflict and crisis stages of a conflict.

**Information Warfare Systems and Activities.** Embedded in the Russian theoretical understanding, information warfare encompasses all systems and activities that are involved with the information domain, including electronic warfare, psycho-informational activities, and cyber operations. Russian capabilities like cyber, electronic warfare, laser, and others have been combined into a techno-informational branch, while functions that use information to affect the cognitive state of the public are combined into the psycho-informational branch of Russian Information Warfare.<sup>7</sup> Decisive information warfare effects can be achieved by both branches but are selected based on the needs of a commander or the state of the operational environment.

The objective of Russian psycho-informational activities is to gain a commanding level of influence of all nation-state domestic and international decision making through a systematic degradation or destruction of a nation's cognitive sovereignty—the ability to self-determine domestic and foreign socio-political directions.<sup>8</sup> If this cognitive maneuver is successful, it not only transfers national decision-making control to the aggressor state, but it can also achieve an aggressor's global end state without a transition into an armed conflict.<sup>9</sup>

The nascent stage of a conflict can be understood as a clash of narratives;<sup>10</sup> informational activities like propaganda and other messaging become part of a deliberate set of preparatory actions that shape the environment for a potential follow-on military operation. The success of psycho-informational campaigns will ultimately determine if military action is possible, but in both cases, cognitive and informational campaigns are used for physical, tactical, and operational advantages. On the tactical and operational levels, an actor's global narrative for a military confrontation

develops a tactical advantage for friendly forces and extends partial control over the decision making of the enemy.

Since a large percentage of the global population is dependent on the global information network for trade and entertainment, nation-states become vulnerable to psycho-informational and info-technical influence activities. Unless a nation completely severs its connection to the global network, it is impossible to completely prevent foreign campaigns against national cognitive sovereignty. In Russia's case, the dominant actors in Russia's cognitive space have declared the permeation of the Western message through social media networks and other media a threat. To regain control over their domestic cognitive space, the Russian Federation has implemented a series of measures that attempt to filter content and isolate its domestic political and social discourse.<sup>11</sup>

**Units of Action.** According to Russian scholarly understanding, maneuver through information in the cognitive and information domains exists at all three levels of war but varies depending on the conflict format and the stage of a conflict. A key characteristic of the current cognitive units of action is that they are all bound in the physical domain but adopt a dual property, being able to act and be acted upon in the physical, informational, and cognitive domains. This means that the cognitive conflict is still understood through its relationship to the physical domain and not solely as operations in the cognitive and informational domains.

The classification of an informational [cognitive] "unit of action" separates into nine groups:

- ◆ Military organizations with psychological operations capabilities, known as PSYOPS.
- ◆ Official governmental organizations (like a ministry of foreign affairs).
- ◆ Intelligence agencies.
- ◆ Military-focused media activities that focus on the production of information materials.
- ◆ International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including government-owned NGOs.
- ◆ Think tanks.
- ◆ International religious organizations.
- ◆ Mass media.
- ◆ Private activists with capabilities to operate info-technical systems or produce psycho-informational materials.<sup>12</sup>

The private activist unit of action is unique on this list because its actions create plausible deniability for an aggressor state. Additionally, private activists must initially

be developed and maintained by a separate set of psycho-informational activities that align their objectives with that of the aggressor. This is achieved through information campaigns like philosophical movements, religious campaigns, etc., that reach a broad audience but are designed to resonate with marginalized groups and create private activists.

The general scheme of maneuver for Russian cognitive maneuver is to identify an entry point into the information space of a target nation and then find a way to insert weaponized narratives into the general discourse, developing tactical access for follow-on physical maneuver, and move those narratives into the cognitive center, creating political opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

Entry into a cognitive space is achieved by identifying elements in a country's informational network using compatible Russian narratives. For example, the Eurasian Youth Union, Russkiy Mir Foundation, and fourth political theory offer conservative, right-wing political ideals while socialism, communism, and the political movement Essence of Time are left-leaning. To the overall plan, ideology is irrelevant and is used only to create perceived compatibility of objectives between the aggressor state and a target group. After a narrative is inserted, it is pushed into general discourse through informational and physical measures, like rallies, internet trolls, or other amplification methods by an aggressor state's informational unit of action. Once a narrative moves closer to the center of discourse, it creates cognitive effects and windows of opportunity for other levers of influence, including an operational force.

An operational force's role during the pre-crisis and crisis phases is reframed to suit a military-political campaign in which information created from an operation is just as critical to overall success as a tactical victory. An operational unit has three main roles:

- ◆ Act as a security provider for the development of a new socio-political reality.
- ◆ Execute operations in a way that supports the established narrative of a conflict.
- ◆ Fabricate the "reality" of the narrative worldview.

A critical component of military-political warfare is having a pipeline of information from the engagement spaces into the global arena. Psycho-informational messages and activities are irrelevant unless they can be pushed into the global cognitive space to achieve necessary strategic effects. To this effect, mass media has been re-conceptualized as the "heavy artillery" of cognitive maneuver, able to amplify and convert physical action into political off-ramps.<sup>14</sup>

**Emerging Conflict Methodologies.** Hybrid, network-focused, and swarm conflicts are emerging Russian Federation methodologies that are a result of the military and the government adapting to the new technological and political realities of the modern operational environment.

Within the hybrid format, psycho-informational activities are used in tandem with other capabilities to create a socio-political movement through domestic political and social movements. If an attempt to steer a nation in the desired direction is not feasible through psycho-informational activities, a military confrontation in tandem with these activities may be required.<sup>15</sup>

The network-focused strategy is an adaptation of "network-centric warfare" developed in the United States. This approach uses technical and psycho-informational activities to control the behavior of all allies, enemies, and neutral participants in global positional warfare. This format uses technological and psycho-informational methods to gain informational superiority in pre-crisis and crisis periods and develop a common operational picture between all friendly participants of the nonmilitary and proxy elements while denying the enemy access to decision-making data.<sup>16</sup>

Swarm warfare shifts operations to a decentralized condition. Informational units of action build loose networks through joint ventures, remaining largely independent, but can quickly organize to achieve a directed effect. This approach eliminates a targetable center of gravity and creates a socio-political and military network that is co-created by all of its members and whose activity is synchronized by the overall objective.<sup>17</sup>

## Practical Applications

The invasion of Crimea by the Russian Federation and its pre-conflict activities exemplifies the power of psycho-informational campaigns and their use in hybrid, network-focused, and swarm operations. Evidenced by the Russian Federation's campaign for the seizure of Crimea, shaping operations in the cognitive domain through information operations was a key factor in the success of the invasion. Though seemingly benign, during the emerging phase of the conflict, informational, cognitive, and physical tools were able to create a narrative of a marginalized Russian ethnic minority, create a *casus belli* for a Russian Federation intervention under the mantle of a peacekeeper, and simulate the self-determination of the Crimean Peninsula.

Before the first "little green man" stepped onto Ukrainian soil, the Crimean Peninsula was inundated with Russian Federation-backed cultural and humanitarian projects, based on representing the Russian ethnic population in

Crimea.<sup>18</sup> During the initial stage of the crisis, groups like the Eurasia Movement, Essence of Time, and other Russian unification groups established entry points into the Ukrainian cognitive space concentrating on Crimea, Donetsk, Lugansk, Kharkiv, and Odessa regions.<sup>19</sup> Elements of the Eurasia Movement and Essence of Time established local media and organizational proxies in the regions. These major groups and their affiliates acted independently from the main pro-Russian Unification movement, but all shared the same objective—to construct a situation in which the unification of Crimea and the Russian Federation would be feasible.

Konstantin Knyrik and other private activists were instrumental in developing the situation in Crimea and other regions that fabricated a *casus belli* for Russian Federation intervention. Knyrik was indoctrinated into political activism by Aleksandr Dugin, the current front-man of the Eurasia ideological movement and the creator of the fourth political theory. Knyrik's organization represented a fraction of the unification effort with entry points in the right of the political spectrum. Groups from the left conducted similar activities, but all shared a common narrative of reunification with the Russian Federation.

Knyrik became an active participant in the local politics and established a media-center called "South-Eastern Front." His chapter of the Eurasian Youth Union was specifically valued as having "nonstandard capabilities," being able to create diversionary ideological actions during peacetime. The Eurasian Youth Union and its surrogates like Russian Veche in Crimea conducted rallies and other events, during which they used criminalistic actions to create a narrative of a marginalized minority, which was later echoed through a Russian Federation-controlled media network and government-owned NGOs like the Russkiy Mir Foundation. According to Knyrik's estimates, by 2014, his movement consisted of approximately 5,000 activists out of about 2 million total inhabitants of the Crimean Peninsula.

As tensions increased during the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Knyrik became one of the main organizers on the peninsula and established a tactical informational effort to delegitimize non-Russian narratives. To cognitively isolate the engagement space, Knyrik and a group of militants seized the main informational coordination center of Crimea—the Crimean Center for Investigative Reporting, the region's



Armed men without insignia (so-called "little green men") at Simferopol Airport, 28 February 2014.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Arrott, Voice of America

leading independent news source<sup>20</sup>—functionally gaining control of the information space. Russian state-owned media outlets amplified and pushed messaging originating from Crimea into the global conversation space, loaded with political implications.<sup>21</sup>

Decisive control of the information space in Crimea allowed pro-Russian groups to influence the global conversation on the crisis in Crimea, creating uncertainty and a lack of definitive narrative evidence that would politically justify Western intervention or reaction. During the escalation phase of the conflict, Igor Girkin with other operatives, funded by a non-state Russian entity, arrived in Crimea and began to recruit individuals in the administrative and security apparatus in Crimea.<sup>22</sup> Concurrently with the Crimean unrest, Aleksandr Dugin was influencing other pro-Russian activists in Ukraine, moving the narrative forward. Concurrent with the protest activity, other semi-synchronized activities were happening on the peninsula and other parts of Ukraine, being synchronized by the overall military-political objective: a case for Russian Federation intervention.<sup>23</sup>

Once the fabricated socio-political crisis achieved a breaking point with the collapse of the Ukrainian government in Kyiv, the leader of the Russian Unity party formally requested Russian Federation intervention under the mantle of "peacekeeper."<sup>24</sup>

When Russian Federation forces assaulted Crimea, their posture echoed a "homecoming" even though Ukrainian

forces were still on the peninsula and under the control of the Ukrainian General Staff. Even though there was a significant tactical risk to the force and the mission, keeping to the established narrative mitigated these risks because the populace accepted the positioning of “peacekeeping” forces. Russian troops adopted a non-hostile posture with the Crimean public and were very measured in their interaction with the Ukrainian military, constantly focusing on the optics of Russian actions. This Russian operational posture developed an environment in which the Crimean Defense Force was incapacitated because any logical military action against the Russians would be exploited in the informational and cognitive domains, allowing the Russian Federation to escalate military action.<sup>25</sup>

Tactical risk mitigation by the Russian forces was further achieved through Crimean activists’ tactical psycho-informational supporting operations that were used to amplify and confirm the pro-Russian narrative. Through tactical information exploitation, these pro-Russian “swarms” were able to produce strategic effects for the Russian Federation by adding counter-narratives into the global discourse, creating uncertainty and inaction from Ukraine and the international community.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

- ◆ Information warfare is part of a larger global strategy that is perpetual and deliberate and has real effects for maneuver and physical engagement. Propaganda is more than a charged narrative that resides in the cognitive and informational spheres. It has the potential to create impactful effects in the physical domains.
- ◆ New types of conflicts are fought in the open, in many cases telegraphing their objectives because disruptive actors depend on moving large numbers of people. This means that significant actors in the pre-conflict and early conflict stages are in public view and seek exposure and amplification.
- ◆ Any operational force will be exploited for information and cognitive gains whether that force chooses to participate in a narrative engagement or not. In many cases, the message will be framed because the tactical informational teams are not bound by any standard other than victory.

Commanders and staffs should develop a deliberate analytical approach to how they interact with propaganda and information warfare at the tactical and operational levels. Since information warfare uses information weapons like messaging and propaganda, these individual messages can be analyzed similarly to any other munition that has a sender, a receiver, and an effect—an information domain

crater analysis. Lasswell’s communication model (who said what, in what channel, to whom, and with what effect) offers a perfect framework for this type of analysis.<sup>26</sup> By identifying the factors behind a propaganda message, it may be possible to gauge the effects of this information munitions on the mission and the operational environment. Individual message analysis will lead to trends, which could provide an opportunity to develop a more accurate “What the Russians want is...” estimate for a decision maker and planners.

Operational units must understand their unique role in the narrative fight and be able to produce evidence of a conflicting narrative to a hostile actor’s propaganda campaign. This can be as simple as creating special teams in platoons and above to carry video-capture devices that record uncertain situations that can be used as counter-narratives if a unit is exploited. Enemy tactical information teams are currently more capable than ever at inserting narratives into the global and regional cognitive domains. The ability to produce, format, and post information from a cell phone places operational forces in a disadvantageous position because a skilled operative can exploit anything they do.

Russia views the West as a threat to its national security through the perceived manipulation of Russian domestic affairs. Propaganda, disinformation, and other methods of weaponized information are the methods the Russian Federation uses to assert its military-political advantage. The warfighter must develop a greater understanding of modern information warfare along with the political components and objectives influencing its activities. ✨

TERMS	DESCRIPTION
ESSENCE OF TIME	A movement founded and led by Sergei Kurginyan. A mixture of communism with Russian patriotic elements. <sup>27</sup>
EURASIA MOVEMENT	Founded by Aleksandr Dugin. A mix of Russian nationalism, orthodox faith, anti-modernism, and some Bolshevist ideas. <sup>28</sup>
EURASIAN YOUTH UNION	A Russian traditionalist anti-European political organization, the youth wing of the Eurasia Party, headed by Aleksandr Dugin. <sup>29</sup>
FOURTH POLITICAL THEORY	A book by Aleksandr Dugin. Integrates and supersedes liberal democracy, Marxism, and fascism. Cited as an inspiration for events such as the war in Donbass. <sup>30</sup>
RUSSKIY MIR	The core culture of Russia. Includes the diverse cultures of traditions, history, and the Russian language. <sup>31</sup>
RUSSKIY MIR FOUNDATION	Created by Vladimir Putin as a government-sponsored organization that promotes the Russian language worldwide, “forming the Russian World as a global project.” <sup>32</sup>

Figure by Jonathan S. Dingler

## PEOPLE

## DESCRIPTION

ALEKSANDR DUGIN	Known for his fascist views, was the main organizer of the National Bolshevik Party, National Bolshevik Front, and Eurasia Party. Author of <i>The Fourth Political Theory</i> . <sup>33</sup>
IGOR GIRKIN	Played a key role in the Russian Federation's Annexation of Crimea, and later in the war in Donbass as an organizer of the Donetsk People's Republic's militant groups. <sup>34</sup>
KONSTANTIN KNYRIK	Editor of the propaganda news agency News-Front. A pro-Russia activist in Crimea. Thinks of himself as an information warrior for the digital age. <sup>35</sup>

Figure by Jonathan S. Dinger

*Проблемы Национальной Стратегии*, 2018, 122–143.

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The Army Intelligence Museum acts as custodian and repository for artifacts significant to the history of intelligence organizations, operations, and individuals and provides military history education. The museum highlights the role of Military Intelligence within the U.S. Army from 1775 to the present day and honors the achievements of Soldiers acting in intelligence roles. Museum exhibits include a World War II German Enigma cipher machine, a large fragment of the Berlin Wall, a vehicle operated by the U.S. Army Military Liaison Mission during the Cold War, and signals intelligence gear used by the Army Security Agency. The museum also has displays of manned and unmanned intelligence aircraft at the outdoor Air Park on Hatfield Street.

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[https://history.army.mil/museums/TRADOC/fortHuachuca\\_MI](https://history.army.mil/museums/TRADOC/fortHuachuca_MI)