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Future scenarios for the war in Ukraine explore how the use of information could affect the cohesion of Russia and of the West in the medium term. The four possible variations of Russian/Western cohesion – high/high, low/high, high/low, low/low – indicate how each side would define the outcome of the conflict. These possible outcomes, in turn, generate lessons about how a liberal West might use information to tip the scales on an autocratic Russia.

– **Western states are pluralistic, making their cohesion a problem in a crisis. Various constituents debate different solutions when decisive action is required. But certain forms of action are possible on which a resolute information campaign can be based.**

– **Germany and a coalition of like-minded states should start detailing a recovery plan – "Ukrainian Dawn" – to show both Ukraine and Russia's elite that they are willing to support Ukrainian state-building not only militarily but also economically for the long haul.**

– **Western governments need to signal to their citizens that they will cover the increased costs of energy and living that have arisen during Russia's war and the pandemic. This requires an action-oriented information campaign.**

– **More than 100 countries voted in the UN General Assembly to condemn the Russian invasion. They should be encouraged to launch short video statements to explain why they did so to their citizens and the international community.**

Information matters in Russian President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine – a fact perhaps most dramatically illustrated by the conflicting narratives around Russia's atrocities in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha. There, citizen-journalists and independent media proved that atrocities had been perpetrated by Russian forces, and the international community duly condemned Russia's actions. And yet, the Kremlin brazenly denied any involvement, deflecting attention by propagating images of Russian soldiers handing out bread elsewhere in Ukraine. Moreover, the images from Bucha that drew outrage from the West were barely featured in media in many parts of the world.

Bucha, however, is just one example of how information campaigns have defined the conduct of the war so far. Terms such as "denazification," "special operation," and "Moskva" have become shorthand for the pattern of narrative and counter-narrative.[1] Indeed, information campaigns gave Russia a false pretext to invade and are now being used to degrade Ukraine. At the same time, they have fueled pressure in the West for military support and ever harsher sanctions against Russia. But how exactly does information matter and how is it used?

USING INFORMATION TO AFFECT COHESION TO INFLUENCE WAR

Cohesion is a factor that will have a decisive impact on the duration and scale of this conflict, but it has proved to be an unpredictable quality. Analysts throughout Europe were initially surprised by the strength of cohesion in Ukraine and even in their home countries.[2] Then, as Putin's "short war" dragged on and his plans floundered, analysts expressed surprise at Russia's continued cohesion as reflected in the loyalty of the Russian elites to the Kremlin and high public opinion approval ratings for the invasion of Ukraine. Thus, anything that the West/Ukraine can do to influence cohesion and make it more predictable deserves attention. Information campaigns have emerged as a prime candidate for achieving this goal.

Evidently, national leaders can influence domestic cohesion by explaining the goals and costs of a war to their population and closing off (false) counter-narratives from abroad. Pluralistic systems like those in the West could foster a common understanding at home – among government, parliament, industry, and civil society – as to how to manage Russian aggression. Since partners need to share roughly common conceptions to exert effective foreign policy, such narratives could also influence levels of cohesion among potential and actual allies. And they could use information to sow division in their adversary. Here, we test the assumption that information operations can influence each country's relative cohesion.

SCENARIOS

Looking to the medium term, we used scenarios to first ask how levels of cohesion might define outcomes. We then asked how Western states might use information campaigns to affect relative levels of cohesion thereby influencing these outcomes. The following four scenarios lay out possible developments.

Scenario 1 "Truman Show": Information Is More Important than Reality

- **Key role of information:** Both Putin and the West successfully create separate information spaces.
- **Cohesion**: Russia (high), West (high)
- **Impact on the conflict:** Long conflict but decisive outcome

Throughout this first scenario, the Kremlin successfully maintains its control of the online movement of ideas and information. Yet a challenge arises thanks to the physical movement of information as Russian soldiers are gradually rotated home with first-hand accounts of the realities of the war. In the first year of fighting, this is not a problem: soldiers are generally rotated within Ukraine itself, and bereaved parents and relatives are among the most vociferous supporters of the conflict as they look for meaning in the sacrifice of their kin. As it drags on, however, maimed soldiers start bringing home dismal stories. Russia's need to maintain control of the information space begins to define its conduct in the war. The Kremlin is loath to repeat the mistakes of the 1980s, which saw the USSR lose control of the domestic narrative about its war in Afghanistan. The tail now wags the dog, and Russia alters real world behavior to maintain control of an imagined narrative, withdrawing from large

1 Alena Epifanova, "Russia's Technological Isolation," DGAP Online Commentary, German Council on Foreign Relations, April 6, 2022: https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-technological-isolation (accessed April 26, 2022).

2 Tyson Barker and Heli Tiirmaa-Klaar, "Deciphering Russia's Wartime Cyber Campaign," DGAP Online Commentary, German Council on Foreign Relations, March 17, 2022: https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/deciphering-russias-wartime-cyber-campaign (accessed April 26, 2022).

MATRIX OF SCENARIOS AND THEIR DESIRABILITY FOR THE WEST

Each of the scenarios shows how important it is to actively shape the information environment to reach both a desirable level of cohesion and outcome of conflict.

parts of Ukraine and deploying troops to other theaters rather than bringing them home.

For its part, the West successfully nourishes the narrative of Russian aggression, and both major political parties in the United States feel obliged by strong public pressure to maintain sanctions – not to mention keep up efforts to combat Russian evasion of those sanctions and secondary sanctions targeting the Chinese. Yet Western governments struggle to compel Russia to agree to a settlement concomitant to its defeats on the battlefield. Russia declares that it has met its aim of "liberating" the Donbas region in easternmost Ukraine. Although Western governments have poured money into both Ukraine's military and its economic reconstruction, they have neglected to devote funds to target advertising and information campaigns in Russia itself.

Scenario 2 "Stab in the Back": Securocrats Remove a Self-Deluding Putin

- **Key role of information:** Russia's sovereign internet was effective in quelling dissent, but elite opinion changed. Russian security elites seek a way out.
- **Cohesion:** Russia (low), West (high)
- **Impact on the conflict:** Short conflict and decisive outcome

Throughout this second scenario, the Kremlin successfully promotes the idea of Ukrainian/Western weakness to a domestic audience. Meanwhile, Russia's security elites, so-called securocrats, enjoy unfettered access to information from outside Russia. Consequently, they see regular evidence of the West's resolve to support Ukraine – not only militarily but also in terms of economic reconstruc-

tion. Fearing negative consequences, they neither bring this disparity to Putin's attention nor coordinate among themselves. As the information divide between Putin and his securocrats widens, the pinnacle of Russian power becomes less cohesive. Putin punishes individual officials for what he sees as intelligence failures, weakening the security apparatus at home and abroad. His government is forced to divert more of its budget away from waging the war in Ukraine to step up domestic propaganda, and Putin obliges elites to support these efforts. The securocrats grow frustrated, and a sudden absence of Putin – for a trip to Beijing or hospitalization – gives them an opportunity to meet and confer. They force him to agree to a transition of his powers to a triumvirate of senior security officials.

The transatlantic community was initially bogged down by indecision over whether the EU should offer Ukraine membership to signal long-term support. But it moved on to devise a plan to spend the USD 300 billion in frozen assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, as well as assets seized from Russian elites, to rebuild key Ukrainian industries including its agriculture and extraction of raw materials. Ordinary Ukrainians are empowered to oversee this spending and prevent corruption: Procurement and expenditure are published online as part of an open information strategy.

Yet high Western cohesion and low Russian cohesion do not end in a positive outcome for the West/Ukraine. Following the transition of power in Moscow, a stab-in-the back myth grows inside Russia, and the triumvirate is pressured to act more in line with warmongering nationalism.

Scenario 3 "The Paralyzing Force of Propaganda": Russia Expands to Fill the Post-Soviet Space

- **Key role of information:** Negative public opinion in the West over sanctions allows the Kremlin to divide and conquer.
- **Cohesion:** Russia (high), West (low)
- **Impact on the conflict:** Long conflict and indecisive outcome

In the early days of the war, transatlantic sanctions hit not only elites but Russian society itself, making it easier for Putin to spin his narrative and garner domestic support. Western governments have neither explained the purpose of sanctions to ordinary Russians nor spelled out the conditions for their reversibility. Moreover, they have not countered the narrative that the West is "once again" embarking on regime change. In the absence of a counter-narrative, Putin readily taps into a historical view that sees territorial conquest and an autarkic economy – one that includes Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other post-Soviet countries – as necessary for Russia to withstand outside pressures. Assessing that the EU would not ramp up sanctions because Europeans are already complaining about the high cost of living, Putin sustains and escalates his action in Ukraine. The gamble pays off, and he dexterously exploits the political polarization in Europe through information campaigns.

In Europe, long-pent up frustration at the restrictions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic is still festering and radical groups have continued to form. Groups now regularly take to the streets to protest the high price of fuel and food and to call for an end to energy sanctions and the destabilization of global commodities markets. European countries such as Italy, France, and the United Kingdom turn inward, caring less about Russian action in "its sphere of influence." China implements light sanctions against Russia, sufficient to evade potential US sanctioning of Chinese companies that provide products to Russia. China also buys Russian natural resources, offsetting a large chunk of what Russia lost in inflows of Western revenue from oil and gas. The government in Kazakhstan turns to China for support against a neo-imperial Russia.

Scenario 4 "Kaliningrad Missile Crisis": Neither Side Can Gauge the Other's Actions

- **Key role of information:** Both Russian and Western elites are incoherent in how they signal their foreign policy actions which leaves space for escalation.
- **Cohesion:** Russia (low), West (low)
- **Impact on the conflict:** Developments become unpredictable and spiral out of control

In Russia, CCTV footage of policemen demanding bribes from an unyielding street vendor takes domestic social media by storm. Censors, tasked with taking down the content, delay for as long as they can credibly blame it on technical complexities. After all, they too suffer from day-to-day corruption that has worsened since Russian forces have been deployed to Ukraine. This deviant behavior on the part of the censors reflects broader splits inside Russia's security apparatus. A surprisingly large number of securocrats believe that the Kremlin should acknowledge the matter and appease protesters, espe-

cially as their own contact details are leaked online. A core group of hardliners take the opposite view, believing their own propaganda that the footage stems from a Western disinformation campaign; they argue for deploying the military at home and a lockdown to quell dissent. Such splits within the security apparatus mean that the Kremlin can no longer ensure full control of Russian actions at home or abroad, nor can it trust in intelligence. As a result, Russia gives out contradictory signals. The Kremlin tries to display cohesion, even as policy undergoes U-turns.

Tensions within NATO have also grown. Reelected as president of the United States, Donald Trump uses the Russian narratives that suit him, repeating the notion that the West has been destabilizing Eastern Europe. Turning his back on NATO structures, Trump pursues a set of "hub and spoke" alliances between the United States and individual European states, offering nuclear weapons to a variety of Eastern European countries. Although these moves are primarily made to use the European theater to display US might and deter Chinese action in the Indo-Pacific, they confuse Russia. In this tense situation, a nuclear missile is fired from Kaliningrad and detonates off the coast of France. A hastily made phone call from the French president to Putin remains unanswered, increasing the possibility of further escalation.

LESSONS LEARNED: ACTION-ORIENTED INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS ARE NEEDED

We can draw five general lessons from our scenario exercise:

1. The control of information does seem to affect cohesion. Each of the four scenarios began under the same conditions, yet when one of the two sides successfully controlled information it decisively raised or dented cohesion.

2. High cohesion does not automatically lead to a positive outcome for the West. A Western information campaign that merely dents Russia's cohesion is not sufficient to create the conditions for a sustainable postwar settlement.

3. The West needs to tailor its information campaigns to the "day after," meaning that the West must be clear about the purpose and reversibility of sanctions, as well as the nature of any compromises with Russia.

4. It is the West's credibility that matters most – its information campaigns need to be backed up by action. Russia has become expert at exploiting the gap between rhetoric and action in the West, including the rhetorical commitment of the United States to NATO enlargement.

5. Western democracies like Germany will struggle to match autocracies like Russia for decisiveness of action. But the fact that autocracies need to maintain control of the domestic narrative also creates weakness as Russia's invasion of Afghanistan during the 1980s has shown.

How precisely can the pluralistic West maintain its cohesion while weakening that of an autocratic and hierarchical Russia? We found that Western success boiled down to a simple distinction. All four scenarios demonstrate that the West's information campaigns should ideally be based on "action-oriented information," meaning that governments should address the grievances of their populations by communicating real-world actions that send direct signals to those populations. Russia's information campaigns, by contrast, were relatively disconnected from real-world action. Yet as soon as Russia's information sphere was too distant from real-world events, it was forced into "information-oriented action," meaning it had to change its behavior and propaganda to bring it more in line with reality.

Russia scored points when it undermined Western credibility, pushing the West into promises that it could not keep. Germany is particularly susceptible to this treatment given the polarization of foreign affairs at home and its tendency to focus on totemic issues such as EU enlargement, Nord Stream 1 and 2, and SWIFT sanctions. The West scored points when it forced Russia to alter its real-world behavior to maintain control of its propaganda message. In one of our scenarios, if managed well, this even pushed Russia toward troop withdrawal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To strengthen Western cohesion, Europe should signal demonstrable action on inflation to domestic populations and on defense to the United States.

Domestic concerns relating to the costs of war were the main factor undermining Western cohesion in the scenarios. This lack of cohesion – expressed through popular unease over price hikes in consumer goods and energy costs – made the war longer and less decisive. Addressing this weakness requires information campaigns based on "action-oriented information" as defined above.

In the scenarios, EU member states that found the economic sanctions a strain but did not directly neighbor Russia, such as Austria, took a more dovish stance on Russia. Some, such as France, are already pushing to increase the EU's own debt levels to finance the mitigation of price hikes. If Germany, a fiscally conservative country, finds such an increase unacceptable, it at least needs to coordinate with other member states to jointly achieve cheap energy deals abroad. In other words, the EU cannot ignore the domestic grievances of its members if it is to maintain cohesion of action abroad.

Europe should communicate a similar action-based approach to the United States. There, deeply rooted ideological schisms exacerbated by the fighting in Eastern Europe could lead to a resurgence of Trumpist ideology around the 2022 midterm elections. This implies that Donald Trump could be reelected to the US presidency in 2024. To prevent renewed souring of transatlantic relations Europe must signal that it is seriously working toward meeting US expectations when it comes to defense spending and self-reliance.

With respect to Ukraine, Germany and, more broadly, Europe should avoid focusing on larger dogmatic and symbolic debates that will have to be discussed in the medium term, such as EU accession. Instead, they should signal concrete and pragmatic action to Ukraine. Germany could, for instance, take the lead in laying out a transatlantic economic recovery plan – "Ukrainian Dawn" – for the war-ravaged country. Such a plan needs to focus on strategic industries that will stimulate the Ukrainian economy. Germany should also ramp up its military supplies to Ukraine, which ought to be used, at least in part, to help Ukraine defend important economic areas from Russian attacks. Tying economic recovery measures to military supplies might also have the benefit of extending sizeable military assistance to Ukraine beyond the short term, meaning that those supplies will go hand in hand with rebuilding the country economically.

2. To weaken Russian cohesion, the West needs to tailor its messages to Russia's security apparatus and population.

Russia will likewise be rocked by the economic ramifications of the conflict. But what will matter most for Russian cohesion – unlike in the West where real world events are paramount – is the hierarchical control of information and narrative. If the Kremlin is able to control the flow of information, whether by choking communications networks or by threatening activists, it will prolong and might even expand the conflict. However, by the same logic, information can be used to create divisions between Russian elites and the broader public. Therefore, Western governments need to not only continue but also increase their efforts to reach the Russian people by supporting independent media in their cat-and-mouse game with Russian censorship authorities.

When addressing Russia, Western leaders should have separate messages for the security apparatus and the broader population. The message to the security apparatus should be expressed calmly but coupled with tough measures that deplete their military resources. Here too, the West needs to signal that it aims to prop-up Ukraine militarily in the medium and long term so it can defend itself over a more prolonged period. To demonstrate its seriousness, the EU would also have to devise a post-war plan for Ukraine that would necessarily include economic support for the country and could draw from the frozen assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation.

When it comes to the general population, much of the focus should be on preparing the information sphere for after the end of the conflict. One narrative that Putin's propaganda could create is the predictable stab-in-the-back myth, which would perpetuate the idea that Russia did not lose the war on the battlefield but through subversive elements at home that protested on the streets and showed disapproval. This narrative needs to be combatted proactively. At the same time, any notion that the West is targeting regime change needs to be avoided. Both the stab-in-the-back myth and the notion of regime change need to be "pre-bunked," debunked even before the issue arises.

To this end it will be important for Europeans to build a broad international coalition of third parties – including individual players such as the UN ambassadors of Kenya and Singapore – that highlight Russian casualties, war crimes, and defeats on the frontline. The more that do so, the harder it will be for Russian censors to control information or build an anti-Western alliance. Although 141 countries voted in the UN General Assembly to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine in March of this year, their deed is largely invisible to the average Russian citizen. For many of the governments concerned, it may have even been a matter of mere expedience. Therefore, the countries that voted in favor of this resolution – including Jamaica, Libya, Indonesia, Somalia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates – should be encouraged to record short videos in which they explain why they voted the way they did.

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