

# Strategic Narratives and Information Warfare: Russian FIMI Campaigns against Ukraine's Armed Forces in the Context of War and Societal Impact

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**Abstract:** Russian information operations against Ukraine's Armed Forces (AFU) represent a striking case of modern warfare's cognitive war. The article analyses the case study of Russian Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) targeting the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) to examine how the Kremlin's campaigns sought to shape perceptions and behavior in and beyond Ukraine. Using the DISARM framework as an analytical tool, the research delineates the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPS) and phased approach of the FIMI "kill chain," from planning and content preparation to execution and adaptation. The case analysis reveals how Russian strategic narratives on this topic frame Ukraine's government and military command as "neo-Nazi" or illegitimate authority and deploy psychological pressure tactics such as disinformation about mass surrender or threats to soldiers' families to erode troop morale and influence foreign and domestic audiences. The article also analyses the socio-political effects of FIMI efforts targeting Ukrainian society, particularly civil-military relations.

**Keywords:** FIMI; Russian aggression; information warfare; DISARM Framework; soft power; strategic narrative.

## Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, not only with tanks and missiles but also with a barrage of propaganda, deception, and psychological operations. From the first days of the war, it became clear that both sides treated the "information battlefield" as a real front line. The Kremlin's longstanding practice of disinformation and propaganda honed over years of conflict in Ukraine since 2014 escalated into a concerted campaign targeting Ukraine's defenders and the population's will to resist. In parallel, Ukrainian officials and civil society mobilized an energetic counter-disinformation effort to debunk falsehoods and maintain morale amid chaos.

These malignant information interferences manifest in different campaigns targeting Ukrainian society from various angles and aspects. One of these primary targets since the military intervention and especially the full-scale aggression stage started remains Ukrainian military forces. This article examines the Russian foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) operations directed against the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and the broader informational environment during the ongoing war. This article's core questions are: a) What did Russian information campaigns against the Ukrainian army seek to gain?; b) What strategic narratives, messages, and methods to convey them underpinned these efforts?; c) How did these FIMI campaigns impact society and civil-military relations?

Addressing these questions, the article explores the theoretical interconnections between conflict, war, and society in the informational domain to provide fundamental context for further case analysis, using the case of the targeting of the Ukrainian army by Russian state informational and media units. This case illustrates how modern wars are fought not only on the ground but also in the minds of soldiers and citizens through the information they receive.

### How to cite

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The article is structured as follows. The theoretical framework outlined at the beginning provides context for the strategic narrative and soft power concepts discussed, offering a foundation for the messages disseminated within the FIMI campaign efforts. At the same time, propaganda theory and psychological warfare shed light on the methods used to influence audiences. Next, we describe our methodology, utilizing the DISARM framework and a case study approach.

After that, a detailed case analysis of the Russian FIMI campaigns against the AFU is presented. This part is organized along the campaign's objectives, phases, and key tactics. It highlights specific incidents—from mass text messages urging Ukrainian troops to surrender to forged atrocities and deepfake videos—illustrating the campaign in action.

The socio-political impact on Ukraine (e.g., public trust and civil-military unity) is considered in the discussion section.

### **Theoretical framework**

The EU defines Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) as a typically coordinated and intentional pattern of behavior by state or proxy actors to deceive and influence a target's values, policies, or processes without overt illegality (European External Action Service, 2023). In the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, FIMI became a strategic weapon — a form of hybrid warfare that complements kinetic military operations. The European External Action Service assisted in its reports that Russia uses FIMI as a tool of aggression, employing false narratives and manipulations to justify the crime of aggression (European Council, 2022).

Analyzing these information campaigns requires an interdisciplinary approach. This article draws on international relations and political communication theories to frame Russian operations in terms of strategic narratives (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013), “soft power” (Nye, 2004) and “sharp power” (Walker & Ludwig, 2017), psychological operations – psyops (U.S. Department of the Army, 2005), and propaganda techniques (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). To analyze the flows of information in a campaign targeting Ukrainian militants and the civil perceptions of the Army, the DISARM Framework was applied.

The DISARM framework (DISARM Foundation, n.d.; European External Action Service, 2023) has implemented campaign analysis, a methodology for systematically detecting tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPS) used in FIMI campaigns. The framework provides a structured composition that helps break down the FIMI campaign and information operations into phases (planning, preparation, execution, and assessment), enabling a detailed examination of how various incidents fit together (Bârgăoanu & Pană, 2024). The detailed analysis of TTPs within this methodology allows for a deeper understanding of the campaign's complexity, its stages, and the instruments employed. This, in turn, enables the prediction of FIMI development and the elaboration of countermeasures.

Understanding Russia's information offensive against Ukraine's Armed Forces requires engagement with several strands of theory in international relations (IR) and communication. We focus on four key concepts: strategic narrative, soft power (and its subversion by authoritarian regimes), psychological operations, and propaganda theory. These theoretical foundations offer a multidisciplinary lens for interpreting the goals and methods of Russian information campaigns.

### ***Strategic narratives and “soft power” in the context of international conflict***

In contemporary conflicts, actors compete through force and narratives – overarching stories that frame the causes of war, the identities of heroes and villains, and the justifications for action. In this context, strategic narrative is a storyline crafted by political actors to shape perceptions of events in line with their strategic interests.

As defined by communication scholars, strategic narratives involve constructing a shared understanding of the past, present, and future in international affairs to influence the behavior of domestic and global audiences (Blas, 2023). They combine events into a coherent interpretation that favors one side's objectives. Strategic narrative theory, developed by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), posits that narrative is a form of power intertwined with traditional material power, as it influences how stakeholders perceive and, consequently, respond to a conflict.

Russia's use of strategic narratives in the Ukraine war has been prominent. Well before the 2022 invasion, the Kremlin propagated narratives painting Ukraine as the aggressor and Russia as a reluctant protector forced to act. For instance, a study by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) found that in the prelude to the invasion, pro-Kremlin media flooded the information space with claims that “Ukraine is aggressive” and committing atrocities while simultaneously asserting “Russia is seeking peace” and has a moral obligation to defend the region (Aleksejeva, Carvin, & Buziashvili, 2023).

These storylines, repeated across state media and diplomatic statements, sought to justify Russia's military buildup as a defensive necessity. Other elements of the Russian strategic narrative included labeling the 2014 change of government in Kyiv as a “coup” and the post-2014 leadership as a “neo-Nazi regime,” as well as framing the conflict as a “civil war” inside the country rather than confrontation with Russian-backed forces (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). By weaving these claims together, Moscow attempted to create a resonant narrative to legitimize its aggression in the coming years and undermine Ukraine's moral standing.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, also relevant here, refers to an actor's ability to influence others to want what they want through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). When seen as legitimate or appealing, it typically flows from a country's culture, political values, and policies. Russia's strategic narratives can be seen as an attempt to wield influence by shaping international perceptions—in theory, a soft power technique—but in practice, the Kremlin's approach deviates significantly from Nye's benign formulation. Rather than genuine attraction, Moscow's info-war efforts often rely on manipulation, fear, and falsehood, which some analysts term “sharp power.”

“Sharp power” refers to the information influence tactics employed by authoritarian regimes that penetrate, distort, or undermine the information environments of target societies, in contrast to the co-optive nature of “soft power” (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). According to Walker and Ludwig, who coined the term authoritarian sharp power, “it is not about ‘winning hearts and minds’ (as soft power is) but about engineering distraction and division,” often by weaponizing the openness of democratic systems (Walker, 2018).

In the case of Ukraine, Russia's narratives – for example, portraying itself as a liberator fighting Western-backed Nazis – were aimed at specific foreign audiences as much as domestic ones. They attempted to tap into historical memory (World War II's fight against Nazism) and to exploit ideological cleavages in Western societies (such as far-right sympathy for Putin's traditionalist posturing or far-left anti-imperialist skepticism of NATO). In this sense, the Kremlin hoped to exercise “soft power” by attracting or swaying opinion segments abroad to its viewpoint. However, because these narratives

were built on distortion (Ukraine is not in reality governed by Nazis, nor was it committing genocide in Donbas), they squarely fit the paradigm of propaganda and disinformation rather than genuine persuasive attraction.

The strategic narrative was used as a weapon: a means to legitimize Russia's war (to both domestic and international audiences) and delegitimize Ukraine's resistance, thereby sapping Ukraine's soft power – its image as a victim defending its sovereignty – and bolstering Russia's claims.

### ***Psychological operations and propaganda theory***

Alongside broad narratives, the Russian campaign employed targeted psychological operations (psyops) and classic propaganda techniques to influence specific groups, notably Ukrainian soldiers in the trenches, their families, and Ukrainian civilians under bombardment or occupation.

In military doctrine, psychological operations refer to planned efforts to convey selected information to target audiences, influencing their emotions, reasoning, and behavior (Narula, 2004). At their core, psyops aim to weaken an adversary's will to fight and sow confusion, ideally causing enemy troops to surrender or populations to lose faith in their leaders. The U.S. Department of Defence defines psyops as activities that induce or reinforce behaviors favorable to the objectives, often undermining the opponent's morale and decision-making stance. The NATO doctrine similarly sees psychological activities in war as targeting enemy and friendly audiences to influence attitudes and conduct that support military objectives (Narula, 2004).

Russia's information campaign against the AFU exhibits hallmarks of psychological warfare. During the war's opening phase, for example, U.S. intelligence warned that Russian operatives were preparing to spread false reports of widespread Ukrainian troop surrenders to break the will of Ukraine's army (Bertrand & Hansler, 2022; Reuters, 2022). Indeed, as Russian forces advanced, Ukrainian soldiers and citizens started receiving SMS text messages urging capitulation (Coleman, 2022). These psychological attack vectors – some masquerading as if sent by comrades or commanders – sought to terrorize and confuse their targets. This tactic was not new: a similar campaign of anonymous texts had targeted Ukrainian troops in 2014 (Alliance for Securing Democracy, n.d.). The goal of impersonating insiders and spreading distrust was to induce Ukrainian service members to surrender or desert, a clear psychological operations (psyop) strategy to degrade the adversary from within.

Such efforts align with what Russian military theorists term “reflexive control,” a concept rooted in Soviet doctrine, whereby one conveys specially prepared information to an opponent to manipulate them into making a decision that is favorable to oneself (Kowalewski, 2017). Practically, it means shaping the adversary's perceptions so effectively that they reflexively respond as the actor intends, even though they believe they are acting on their free will.

These methods include spreading carefully timed falsehoods, leaking real information in misleading contexts, or projecting a false posture of strength or weakness (Kowalewski, 2017). The cascade of disinformation Russia unleashed – from fake battlefield reports to deepfake videos (discussed later) – can also be seen as an attempt at reflexive control, aiming to “get into the enemy's head.”

### ***Strategic narratives and psyops are the machinery of propaganda***

Propaganda, in the scholarly sense, is distinguished by its deliberate and one-sided nature. A classic definition by Jowett and O'Donnell (1992) describes propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the intent of the propagandist.” The key

here is manipulation, with the intent to elicit a specific action or attitude, often through the use of biased or false information. Harold Lasswell's foundational work on propaganda, in turn, emphasized the control of public opinion through the manipulation of symbols (Lasswell, 1927).

The Russian information campaign employed a full spectrum of propaganda techniques documented in both historical and contemporary contexts. We can identify tactics from the well-known "5 D's" model of Russian disinformation, which stands for the following aims: Dismiss, Distort, Distract, Dismay, and Divide (Hénin, 2023).

**Dismiss:** Stands for rejecting factual evidence and attacking the source. For example, the Kremlin immediately dismissed allegations of Russian war crimes (like the Bucha massacre) as fake, calling as a hoax produced by the "Kyiv regime" for Western media and accused Ukraine of staging the atrocity (Atlantic Council, 2022). Russia attempted to dismiss the allegation and shift blame by denigrating the reporting as a provocation. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and others pushed this line, despite overwhelming evidence of Russian culpability, to negate the impact of the truth (Atlantic Council, 2022).

**Distort:** Have its aim of twisting facts or creating alternative explanations. A notorious distortion was the Kremlin's bioweapons conspiracy: Russian officials amplified a baseless claim that the U.S. and Ukraine ran "secret biolabs" developing biological weapons as a way to frame the invasion as preventing a dire threat (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). This conspiracy theory distorted legitimate public health cooperation into something sinister, feeding a narrative to justify war as pre-emptive self-defense. Another distortion was the claim that Ukraine was preparing a "dirty bomb." All such falsehoods served to reframe who the real aggressor or danger was.

**Distract:** Aiming to shift attention to a different issue or creating "whataboutism." When faced with international outrage, Russian propaganda often introduced multiple conflicting narratives to create confusion. After the Bucha mass killings were revealed, Russian outlets simultaneously floated various explanations – that the bodies were fake, that Ukrainian shelling killed those people after Russians left, or that it was a British orchestration (Atlantic Council, 2022). This flood of contradictory stories was meant to distract the audience: if nothing is true, then all is possible, and doubt reigns. The strategy of sowing doubt and fatigue through information overload is a hallmark of modern disinformation.

**Dismay:** Instrumentalise threats or fear to intimidate. The psychological texts to soldiers mentioned above exemplify dismay, aiming to frighten opponents into submission. Also, Russian officials' rhetoric, widely used by politicians, experts, and participants of the talk shows, about "unspeakable consequences" if Ukraine continued to resist (a veiled nuclear threat or threats of annihilation) was meant to dishearten Ukrainians and their allies. The Kremlin's proxy media at times warned of Ukraine being "erased" or "purged of Nazis," an intimidation tactic to break the spirit.

**Divide:** Aims to exploit existing societal divisions or create new ones to weaken the opponent's unity. Russian information efforts tried to divide Ukrainians internally – for example, by stoking tensions between civilians and authorities (spreading rumors that the government was going to abandon Kyiv or that certain regions were sacrificed) or by playing up ethnic and linguistic divides (though this had limited success in a Ukraine largely unified by the invasion).

For example, in the international context, it was seen as the intention of Russian state propaganda to reach divisions within NATO and EU populations: one narrative in 2023 aimed to pit German farmers against support for Ukraine by falsely linking rising fertilizer prices or subsidy cuts to Berlin's aid to Kyiv (Wright & Kumar, 2025). In the U.S., Russian outlets echoed any partisan talking points that could reduce support for

Ukraine from both left and right – e.g., emphasizing the cost to taxpayers or painting Ukraine as corrupt and undeserving. Moscow aimed to erode the robust coalition supporting Ukraine by dividing foreign public opinion.

These approaches are bolstered by modern media channels, including state-run TV (for domestic and some foreign audiences), a network of websites and “alternative news” outlets, and especially social media platforms. The Kremlin and its affiliated actors have made extensive use of coordinated inauthentic behavior online, deploying troll farms, fake personas, and bots to amplify messages and give a false impression of grassroots support or consensus. All these fall under the category of techniques catalogued in frameworks like DISARM (which, as we will see, enumerates tactics such as creating false online personas, leveraging fake news sites, and flooding social networks with specific hashtags).

The theoretical backdrop to the Russian FIMI campaign is one where narrative power meets psychological coercion. The Kremlin’s strategy fused strategic narratives at the macro level (to set the stage and justify the war) with propaganda and psychological operations (PSYOP) tactics at the micro level (to break the enemy’s will and confuse observers). It is an approach that leverages what Joseph Nye (2004) would consider instruments of soft power (media, communication), or “sharp power” as it was reconsidered further but uses them in a coercive, deceitful manner, thus blurring the line between soft and hard power – a signature of hybrid warfare.

## Methodology

This article employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the Russian FIMI operations against the Ukrainian Armed Forces as a critical case within the broader phenomenon of information warfare in contemporary conflict. The primary basis for analysis is a compilation of incidents and tactics identified in a provided case study of Russian FIMI campaigns targeting the UAF (conducted as part of an ATHENA project) based on open-source information, including media reports, official statements, and investigative research.

The DISARM framework (Disinformation Analysis & Risk Management) is a central tool that guides the case analysis. DISARM is an open-source, community-driven framework developed in 2019 to categorize and share intelligence on disinformation tactics, techniques, and procedures – TTPS (Bârgăoanu & Pană, 2024). The best practices in cybersecurity (notably the MITRE ATT&CK framework for cyber threats) inspired it and aim to create a “kill chain” model for influence operations (Bârgăoanu & Pană, 2024). DISARM frameworks enable the breakdown of an influence campaign into distinct stages and components, facilitating systematic comparison and the development of countermeasures. The framework categorizes disinformation campaigns into four broad phases of an attack (Hénin, 2023): planning, preparation, execution, and assessment (adaptation).

**Plan:** In this stage, the adversary sets objectives, decides on segments and themes, and targets them. Tactics in this phase include selecting methods to degrade the adversary or discredit credible sources, as well as segmenting audiences geographically or demographically for tailored messaging (Hénin, 2023). In practice, it means identifying how Russian strategists framed their goals vis-à-vis the UAF (undermine morale, erode trust in commanders, etc.) and what big-picture narratives they decided to impose.

**Prepare:** Content creation, channel creation, and staging are at the core of this stage. This stage involves developing and curating messaging tools, such as producing fake images or videos, setting up inauthentic news sites or personas, rehearsing talking points, and priming narratives. The DISARM framework lists many techniques here, from “develop image-based content” or “cheap fake” editing of images to creating whole fake websites and leveraging existing conspiracy theories (Hénin, 2023).

**Execute:** This represents the stage of active deployment of disinformation into the information environment. This is when messages are launched and amplified across platforms. Techniques include posting across multiple platforms, flooding the information space, orchestrating “news” events, amplifying content via inauthentic social media accounts, or even direct interference, such as hacking.

**Assess (and adapt):** In a complete framework, after execution comes evaluation of impact and adjustment of tactics. The DISARM model explicitly includes an “assess” (Hénin, 2023), reflecting sophisticated influence operations that monitor audience reaction, measure the spread of their narratives (via engagement metrics or intelligence), and then refine their approach. While much of this happens covertly, we can assume it is due to changes in Russian messaging over time. For instance, when the initial blitz of disinformation failed to prompt Ukraine's collapse, the propagandists shifted to new themes (moving from “Ukraine will quickly collapse” to “Ukraine is corrupt and suffering – maybe it should negotiate”). These tactics are the adaptive measures in response to battlefield and audience realities.

By mapping out the Russian FIMI activities into these phases, the analysis aims to provide a coherent picture of what is otherwise a multifaceted campaign. Our case analysis section is structured in sub-sections corresponding to the Plan, Prepare, Execute, and Assess phases, describing key TTPs. However, measuring the effectiveness of information operations is still challenging, as it involves assessing changes in attitudes or actions and attributing causality to information exposure. While our focus is not on quantitatively evaluating impact, we discuss observable outcomes (for example, whether a disinformation narrative gained traction abroad or any signs of Ukrainian morale cracking or holding firm). We treat propaganda content and engagement as evidence of an attempt to deploy FIMI.

Finally, this research relies on publicly available information and does not involve direct interaction with human subjects. We remain mindful of the distinction between reporting on false content and amplifying it; therefore, whenever we describe a disinformation message, we label it as 'false' or 'unverified,' as appropriate. All translations from Russian or Ukrainian are ours unless otherwise noted.

## **Case Analysis**

### **Russian FIMI operations against the Armed Forces of Ukraine**

In this section, we detail the Russian information manipulation and interference campaigns directed against Ukraine's Armed Forces (and, by extension, the Ukrainian state and society) during the ongoing war. The analysis is organized along the campaign's chronological and logical progression, aligned with the DISARM framework's phases.

We begin with the planning stage, where we identify Russia's strategic goals and narrative themes (Plan). We then examine how Russia prepared the information environment and the assets for its influence operation in the lead-up to and early days of the full-scale invasion (Prepare). Next, we describe the campaign's execution, highlighting key incidents and tactics, from the “information blitzkrieg” at the war's outset to more protracted disinformation efforts as the conflict continued (Execute). Finally, we consider how the campaign evolved over time and how its effectiveness was countered or mitigated (Assess), noting Russian adjustments and Ukrainian and international countermeasures. Specific examples illustrate each tactic, referencing the theoretical concepts discussed earlier.

### ***Objectives and strategic planning (Plan phase)***

Any influence campaign begins with objectives – what the originator hopes to achieve – and an understanding of the target. In Russia's case, the broad strategic objectives against the UAF and Ukraine were apparent from Putin's speeches and Russian state media rhetoric: to undermine the legitimacy of Ukraine's government and military, to break the will of Ukraine's defenders, and to shape international perception such that Russian aggression would seem justified or at least inevitable. These goals mirrored the political aims of the war itself (regime change in Kyiv, subjugation of Ukraine's sovereignty, the fracturing of Western support). Under the DISARM Plan phase, several key adversary goals and narrative choices made by the Kremlin were identified.

(a) Delegitimise the Ukrainian Armed Forces and leadership. From the beginning, Russian official narratives portrayed Ukrainian authorities as extremists, fascists, or a junta. Putin's justification speech for the invasion in February 2022 (Putin, 2022) reiterated this false claim that Ukraine was run by neo-Nazis who presumably committed genocide in Donbas, therefore necessitating Russian intervention (Geopolitical advantage, [T0074.001] Ideological advantage [T0074.004]).

This framing served to delegitimize not only the government but also the AFU, implying that Ukraine's soldiers were either complicit in "Nazi" behavior (Cause har (T0140, Defame [To140.001]) or, at best, tools of an unlawful regime. By dismissing Ukraine's leadership (Dismiss [T0078]) as a "junta" or "Kyiv regime" and demonizing them as Nazis, Russia laid the groundwork to claim that any Ukrainian military action was illegitimate (Discredit [T0075.001]). This also prepared a narrative for Russian troops: their foe was morally evil (hence lowering any remorse in fighting them). The strategic narrative of "Denazification" (Ideological advantage [T0074.004]) became a centerpiece of Russia's plan; however, it disconnected from reality (Debunk.org, 2023; Iashchenko, 2023).

(b) Degrade adversary (Degrade [T0066]) morale and cohesion. A clear objective was to sap the fighting spirit of Ukrainian forces and sow mistrust within their ranks and between soldiers and the command or government (Dismay [T0078], Undermine [T0135], Polarise [T0135.004]). In planning terms, this meant developing themes or avenues to exploit potential "weak links." Russian planners, likely drawing on prior intelligence, might have identified possible fissures – for instance, anxieties among soldiers about being overwhelmed, concern for families' safety, or historical regional divides in loyalty (Devide [T0079], Identify Social and Technical Vulnerabilities [T0081], Identify existing fissures [T0081.004], Identify Existing Prejudices [T0084.003], Segment Audience [T0072], Geographic Segmentation [T0072.001], Politic segmentation [T0072.005], Psychographic Segmentation [T0072.004], etc.).

The intention was to create messages that could exacerbate these worries (e.g., telling a soldier from eastern Ukraine that western Ukrainian nationalists in Kyiv do not care about him or vice versa) (Kowalewski, 2017). In 2014-2015, Russian propaganda targeted Ukrainian units by name (such as volunteer battalions) to accuse them of war crimes or incompetence, hoping to diminish public support for them. In 2022, continued narratives that Ukrainian generals are corrupt or incapable or that the President is about to flee would all degrade morale if believed.

(c) Facilitate own propaganda and suppress counter-narratives. Another "Plan" objective was to ensure Russia's version of events dominates certain domestic and international media spheres. This meant strategies to discredit credible sources from the other (Hénin, 2023). For instance, even before major atrocities occurred, Russia anticipated allegations against its forces and pre-emptively primed audiences to disbelieve Western media or Ukrainian reports. The Kremlin's ecosystem repeatedly told audiences that Western media are biased or "information weapons" themselves. An example is how

quickly Russian channels declared the Bucha evidence a fabrication; it was almost reflexive, suggesting an a priori plan to dismiss any allegation by blaming Ukraine (Atlantic Council, 2022).

Part of the planning also involved selecting which audiences to focus on – e.g., the Russian domestic public (to maintain support for the war), Ukrainian Russian-speaking populations (to confuse and weaken their loyalty), and international audiences in countries that might waver in their support. Thus, geographic (Geographic Segmentation [T0072.001]) was considered (Hénin, 2023): Russian speakers in Ukraine and abroad would get messaging via Russian-language channels (TV, VKontakte, Telegram), while Western audiences might be reached through English-language propaganda outlets (RT, Sputnik, or social media narratives co-opted by fringe influencers).

(d) Psychological intimidation and coercive narrative. In line with “dismay” tactics (Dismay [T0078]), Russian planners incorporated intimidation into their narrative framework. The objective was to instill fear not only of Russian military might (e.g., showcasing the destructive power of their arsenal or hinting at nuclear escalation) but also of fear created by uncertainty in information. Phrases such as “surrender or face annihilation” were not always explicitly stated in official channels.

However, the subtext was planted through various means (for example, via anonymous text threats to troops or dark rhetoric on Russian state TV about Ukraine's fate). The plan recognized that terror can be spread by information as much as by bombs. Notably, reports emerged that Russian security services had compiled databases of Ukrainian phone numbers and contacts for precisely targeted messaging at the war's start, indicating a premeditated plan to directly reach out to Ukrainian service members and civil servants with coercive messages.

The planning phase set the stage for Russia's information operators to decide on the strategic narratives (“Ukraine is an illegitimate, Nazi-run state”; “Russia is liberating and cannot be blamed”) and the psyops objectives (crack the AFU's will, panic the populace, divide Ukraine from its allies) further. They primed their state media and diplomatic corps to consistently hammer these themes. They also laid plans for more covert channels of influence (like hacking and fake personas) to be deployed in the execution phase.

A key aspect of this stage was the seamless integration of these narratives with military planning – the expectation of a quick victory (“take Kyiv in 3 days”) was mirrored in the information space by confident predictions of Ukraine's swift collapse (Balaban & Zhukov, 2025). According to the DISARM structure, this FIMI campaign aimed to pursue geopolitical and ideological advantage, and it has been implemented with tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) such as degrading the adversary, causing harm, and dissuading the acting division, as illustrated in Figure 1.

TA01 Plan Strategy 2 techniques		TA02 Plan Objectives 13 techniques		TA13 Target Audience Analysis 3 techniques		TA14 Develop Narratives 7 techniques	
T0074 Determine Strategic Ends (2/4)	T0074.002 Domestic Political Advantage	T0140 Cause Harm (1/3)	T0140.001 Disparage	T0081.001 Find Echo Chambers	T0040 Demand Insurmountable Proof		
	T0074.003 Economic Advantage		T0140.002 Intimidate	T0081.002 Identify Data Voids		T0004 Develop Competing Narratives	
	T0074.001 Geopolitical Advantage		T0140.003 Spread Hate	T0081.005 Identify Existing Conspiracy Narratives/Suspicions		T0082 Develop New Narratives	
	T0074.004 Ideological Advantage		T0136.004 Boost Reputation	T0081.004 Identify Existing Fissures		T0083 Integrate Target Audience Vulnerabilities into Narrative	
T0073 Determine Target Audiences			T0136.006 Cultivate Support for Ally	T0081.003 Identify Existing Prejudices			
			T0136.005 Cultivate Support for Initiative	T0081.008 Identify Media System Vulnerabilities			
		T0136 Cultivate Support (1/8)	T0136.001 Defend Reputatn	T0081.007 Identify Target Audience Adversaries			
			T0136.003 Energise Supporters	T0081.006 Identify Wedge Issues		T0022 Leverage Conspiracy Theory Narratives (1/2)	T0022.001 Amplify Existing Conspiracy Theory Narratives
			T0136.008 Increase Prestige	T0080.005 Assess Degree/Type of Media Access			T0022.002 Develop Original Conspiracy Theory Narratives
			T0136.002 Justify Action	T0080.004 Conduct Web Traffic Analysis		T0003 Leverage Existing Narratives	
			T0136.007 Recruit Members	T0080.002 Evaluate Media Surveys			
		T0066 Degrade Adversary		T0080.003 Identify Trending Topics/Hashtags			
		T0078 Dismay		T0080.001 Monitor Social Media Analytics			T0068 Respond to Breaking News Event or Active Crisis
		T0075 Dismiss (1/1)		T0072.002 Demographic Segmentation			
		T0075.001 Discredit Credible Sources	T0072.003 Economic Segmentation				
		T0139.003 Deter	T0072.001 Geographic Segmentation				
	T0139 Dissuade from Acting (1/3)		T0072.005 Political Segmentation				
		T0139.001 Discourage	T0072.004 Psychographic Segmentation				
		T0139.002 Silence					
	T0076 Distort						
	T0077 Distract						
	T0079 Divide						
	T0002 Facilitate State Propaganda						
			T0137.005 Extort				
			T0137.001 Generate Ad Revenue				
			T0137.006 Manipulate Stocks				
	T0137 Make Money (0/6)		T0137.003 Raise Funds				
			T0137.002 Scam				
			T0137.004 Sell Items under False Pretences				
			T0138.003 Compel				
			T0138.001 Encourage				
	T0138 Motivate to Act (0/3)		T0138.002 Provoke				
			T0135.004 Polarise				
			T0135.001 Smear				
	T0135 Undermine (1/4)		T0135.003 Smear				

Figure 1. Mapping campaign on DISARM Framework Layout, Preparation stage

(e) Psychological sowing of panic. Another preparatory move was planting societal panic as the war began. On the night of 23-24 Feb 2022, Ukrainian government websites and media faced waves of cyber-attacks (defacements and DDoS). Shortly after, SMS messages were sent across Ukraine, falsely warning that ATMs were out of cash and the banking system was collapsing (Seed Distortion [T0044], Control Information Environment through Offensive Cyberspace Operations [T0123], as shown in Figure 1).

Ukraine's cyber police had to debunk this as fake. However, the fact that these messages were sent almost simultaneously with the invasion suggests a planned trigger – an attempt to cause civilian chaos just as missiles started flying (Control information environment through offensive cyberspace operations [T0123]). It is an example of “flooding the information space” with harmful rumors at a key moment (Flood Information Space [T0049], Suppress Opposition [T0124], Goad People into Harmful Action (Stop Hitting Yourself [T0124.002]), as illustrated in Figure 1). Preparing such a coordinated campaign would have been done in the weeks prior, highlighting how tightly integrated the information war was with kinetic actions.

### ***Second phase. Information campaign execution (Executing phase)***

With the invasion underway, Russia unleashed its FIMI campaign in full force. The execution phase involved translating plans and prepared assets into concrete actions within the information space. We can identify two sub-phases in execution: an initial high-intensity disinformation blitz (late February to March 2022) and a longer-term, adaptive campaign (mid-2022 through 2023), an information war of attrition. We will chronicle the key features of how Russian tactics unfolded.

#### **Information blitzkrieg (Feb–Mar 2022)**

Russia attempted to overwhelm Ukraine with a rapid series of psychological blows and narrative coups, expecting Ukraine's government to collapse in a few days.

(a) In the first days, Russian outlets and social media channels repeatedly claimed that major Ukrainian cities had fallen and that the Ukrainian military was laying down arms en masse, applying false announcements of surrender or collapse. For example, on 26 February 2022, posts appeared on Telegram asserting that “Kyiv has agreed to capitulate” – a claim that was obviously false at the time. But the most audacious effort was creating a deepfake video of President Zelensky calling on Ukrainians to surrender.

On 16 March 2022, hackers breached the live broadcast of “Ukraine 24” (a TV channel) to air a fake “urgent” message from Zelensky on the ticker, which said he had fled and was urging surrender (Control information environment through offensive cyberspace operations [T0123], as it is indicated on Figure 2). Simultaneously, a deepfake video (with a crudely animated Zelensky face but a recognizable voice) was planted on hacked Ukrainian news websites and circulated via a pro-Russian Telegram channel. In the clip, the faux-Zelensky said: “My advice to you is to lay down arms and return to your families... it is not worth dying for this war” (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2022). This was an apparent attempt at decapitation propaganda and to give the impression that Ukraine's President had given up, thereby removing the chief rallying figure for resistance. The execution was technically poor, and Ukrainian authorities immediately blasted out warnings that any such surrender messages were fake (the “Ukraine 24” Facebook page posted an image with “FAKE” in red across the false message). Nevertheless, the incident showed how far Russia was willing to go in crossing new frontiers of disinformation technology (deepfakes) to achieve a quick

psychological victory (Harass [T0048], Suppress Opposition [T0124], as indicated in Figure 2).

(b) Mass text and radio broadcast psychological operations – psyops (Digital Content Delivery Assets [T0153]). In the Sumy and Mariupol regions, individuals reported hearing radio announcements (likely from portable transmitters or hijacked signals) that Ukrainian forces had officially surrendered. Soldiers sometimes received voice messages or voicemails from unknown numbers, urging them to give up as well.

Ukrainian military intelligence noted that the Russian side had deployed mobile broadcasting units that could mimic Ukrainian emergency frequencies and broadcast fake evacuation orders or false reports of chemical hazards, aiming to confuse military units and civilians (e.g., false alerts about “saboteurs dressed as medics” to cause paranoia) (Balaban & Zhukov, 2025). This flooding of the zone with scare rumors was orchestrated to “disorient and overwhelm” Ukraine’s defense forces and emergency responders (Control information environment through offensive cyberspace operations [T0123], Flood Information Space [T0049], Suppress Opposition [T0124], Goad People into Harmful Action (Stop Hitting Yourself [T0124.002], as it is indicated on Figure 2). The volume of different lies created a chaotic environment where distinguishing truth required extra effort. Each new fake claim, like about false evacuations and many others, was a small tactical strike in the campaign.

(c) Coordinated social media propaganda. Telegram emerged as the central platform for propaganda in the war’s early phase (Balaban & Zhukov, 2025). Unlike Twitter or Facebook, Telegram is less moderated and is widely used by Ukrainians, making it a fertile ground for inauthentic accounts. Dozens of Telegram channels with names like “Чернігів News” (Chernihiv News) emerged, disseminating both genuine local updates and subtle disinformation (Digital Community Hosting Asset [T0151]).

One tactic observed was the impersonation of local authorities, already mentioned above. For instance, a fake channel posing as the Kharkiv mayor told residents to stay calm because negotiations for surrender were underway, which was untrue. Russian official Telegram channels posted false claims about so-called Ukrainian biolabs or fabricated battlefield successes, which then got reposted into Ukrainian group chats automatically involving different assets (bots, trolls, etc.).

This cross-posting (Post Content [T0115], Cross-Posting [T0119]) effectively inserted Kremlin narratives into Ukrainian online communities (a DISARM technique: “inauthentic sites amplify news and narratives”) (Hénin, 2023). In addition, VKontakte (VK), Russia’s Facebook equivalent, saw a surge of posts parroting the line that Zelensky had fled and that brave Russian troops were mainly fighting “Nazi battalions” and not Ukrainian people (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2022).

These messages aimed to convince readers (perhaps those in Russian-occupied zones or Russians themselves) that the Ukrainian regular army was largely not resisting – only fanatic “Nazis” were, and they would be dealt with. This was centrally amplified by Russian state channels, creating a feedback loop between official propaganda and social media virality.

(d) Traditional propaganda channels. While new media were crucial, Russia did not neglect traditional channels (Traditional media [T0111]). Russia state TV rolled 24/7 wartime propaganda, ensuring the domestic population was saturated with the Kremlin’s framing of events. This included talk shows showing maps of Ukraine with Russian flags, anchors claiming that Ukrainian soldiers were greeting liberators, etc. Notably, Russia also engaged in diplomatic propaganda; its envoys and media outlets internationally continued to deny or distort events (Formal Diplomatic Channels [T0111]).

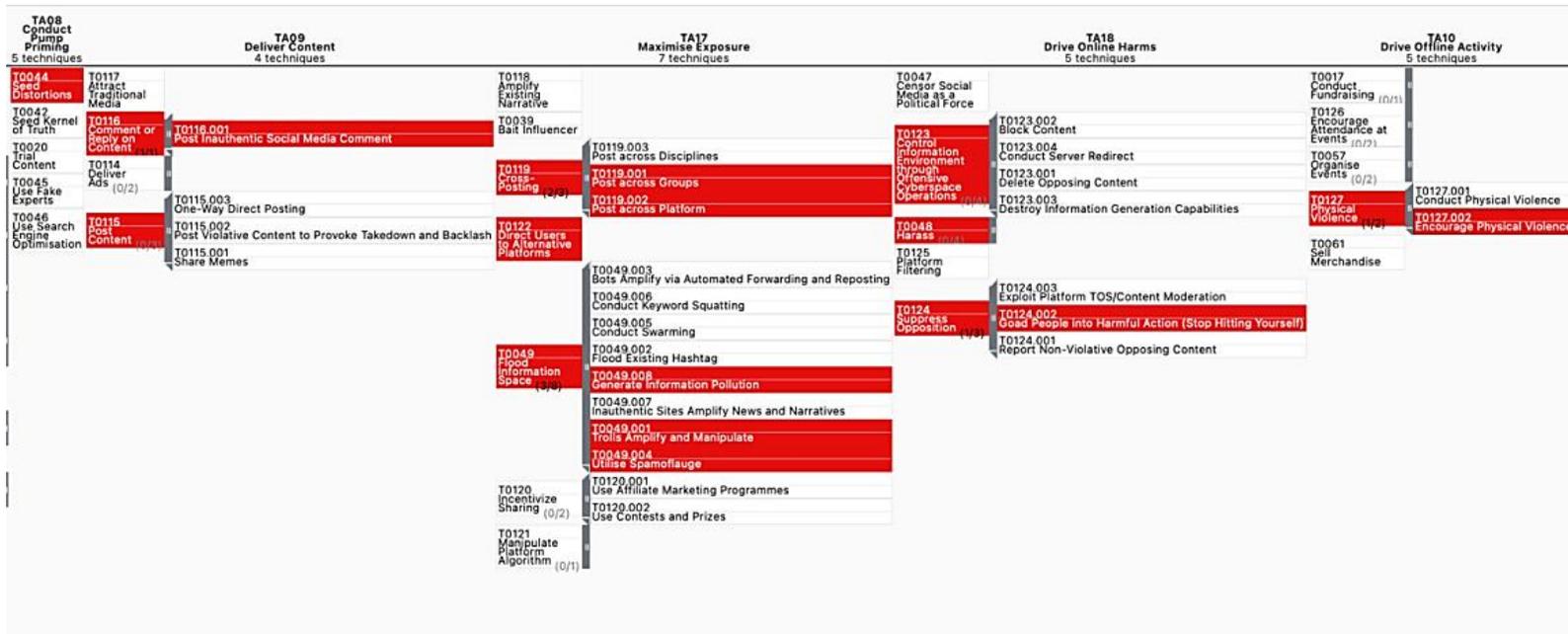


Figure 2. Mapping campaign on DISARM Framework Layout, Preparation stage, flowing into the execution stage

When the Mariupol Drama Theatre was bombed (March 16, 2022), Russian officials and Russian media and digital channels immediately claimed Ukraine's Azov battalion in this attack (Goad People into Harmful Action (Stop Hitting Yourself) [T0124.002]), undermining in this way, AFU's moral standing (Facta.news, 2022).

Despite this, the “information blitzkrieg” had mixed results. This phase forced Ukrainian authorities to put significant effort into debunking almost in real-time. For example, Zelensky's team was highly active on social media, with the President posting selfie videos from central Kyiv, disseminating the message that “we are here, we are not laying down any arms” to disprove rumors of his flight. Moreover, the transparency of Western intelligence (which had pre-bunked many Russian lies by warning of them in advance) also blunted the edge of this stage and the nature of the Russian campaign. When the deepfake emerged, they warned about it in advance, so it failed to confuse people for long. As Ukrainian society and its authority did not collapse, the Russian information campaign entered a new phase, focusing on adjusting its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

### ***Third phase "Information trench war" and adaptation (mid-2022 onward)***

This phase was characterized by an increased effort to exploit wartime hardships and target foreign audiences to undermine support for Ukraine (Measure Effectiveness [T0133], Behavioral changes [T0133.001]).

(a) Shifting narratives to undermine solidarity with Ukraine. Since portraying Ukraine as an immediately collapsing and failed state did not work, Kremlin propaganda and communications shifted to undermining Ukraine's war effort through other angles. Russian channels began focusing on Ukraine's difficulties (Measure Effectiveness [T0133], Content [T0133.002]). For instance, when Russia started using missile strikes to knock out Ukraine's power grid in late 2022, the propaganda angle was “Ukrainian authorities cannot provide basic services; life is getting unbearable under Zelensky's regime.”

And if there were protests or disappointments over a lack of heating, Russian media would exaggerate them as signs of impending societal breakdown (Suppress Opposition [T0124], Physical Violence [T0127], Encourage Physical Violence [T0127.002]). They also revived corruption narratives strongly, painting Western aid as disappearing into a black hole of corruption. This narrative lowered Ukrainians' trust in their officials (civil-military relations strain) and, at the same time, sowed doubt in Western minds about supporting Ukraine (especially on the eve of the super-election year 2024). The EUvsDisinfo analysis noted that, in late 2022, Russia refocused on “undermining public trust in Ukraine's state institutions by exploiting issues such as power outages, military mobilization, and corruption” (Balaban & Zhukov, 2025).

This is a classic influence tactic of taking real issues, such as war causing hardship and corruption, and manipulating them to erode confidence and sow internal division. Here, we see a repetition of the implementation of “divide” (Divide [T0079]) tactics and attempts to segment (re-segment) Ukrainian society in a new way (Segment Audience [T0072], Political Segmentation [T0072.05]). Russian propaganda, for instance, would highlight any example of a Ukrainian official or oligarch's issues during the war and generalize it in a way that the Ukrainian government does not care about ordinary people or soldiers.

(b) As the conflict evolved into a protracted struggle, the Russian information strategy employed a tactic known as “information exhaustion.” This involves a gradual release

of disinformation to erode the audience's emotional resilience over time (Balaban & Zhukov, 2025). For example, repeated heavy emphasis on Ukrainian casualties, wildly inflated by Russian sources, was intended to demoralize Ukrainians by creating a perception that losses are untenable. Images (some real from battlefields, some fake or unrelated wars) were circulated by different pro-Russian channels with messages like “See what happens when you resist, so many of your sons are dead.” The intent was to impose grief and hopelessness.

Another tactic was to push narratives of betrayal. Such rumors would be that “certain brigades of the AFU have been encircled and abandoned by their commanders” or that “regional authorities are secretly negotiating with Russia.” This content aimed to undermine mutual trust. Over months, even if each instance is debunked, the sheer volume can have a cumulative effect of cynicism – people might start to feel themselves overwhelmed by uncertainty.

(c) Internationally, Russia tailored its adapted messages to various audiences. In Europe, as war fatigue grew, Russia amplified calls for peace at any cost, portraying Ukraine as obstinate in not surrendering territory. Russia also linked domestic troubles in Ukraine to the war. For example, Russian outlets in Germany played up how energy prices spiked due to sanctions, implying blame Ukraine/West’s support to Ukraine for social hardship.”

In one case, when Germany debated an €8 billion aid package to Ukraine, Russian narratives argued that this money was causing cuts to domestic programs, trying to pose German citizens' welfare against Ukraine (Wright & Kumar, 2025). In the U.S., Russian amplification joined polarised debates, echoing either the far-right narrative that Biden was risking WWII for Ukraine or the far-left narrative that this was a proxy war benefiting arms manufacturers.

(d) Use of atrocity denial and inversion. With more Russian atrocities coming to light (Bucha, Mariupol, Iziium, etc.), the information war became one of the narrative defenses for Moscow. It executed a strategy of denying and reversing blame (Distort Facts [T0023], Create Fake Research [T0085.007], Develop Opinion Article [T0085.006]). For every incident, Russian officials swiftly offered an alternate story: Bucha was a staged provocation, the Kramatorsk train station attack (that killed fleeing civilians) was a Ukrainian false-flag, the Olenivka prison explosion (killing Ukrainian POWs) was caused by Ukraine itself to deter surrender, etc. These specific counter-narratives were pushed via official channels and amplified by bots and friendly commentators (Develop competing Narratives [T0004]). The aim was not necessarily to convince everyone of the Russian version but to muddy the waters enough that some people would hesitate to trust Ukraine's or Western accounts. This kind of execution falls under “distract” and “distort” (Distort [T0076]) in the propaganda tactics, as discussed. It also has an international norms dimension we will discuss later (as it attempts to subvert accountability for war crimes through information means).

One illustrative event in the attrition phase was Russia's response to Ukraine's successful counteroffensives in 2022. When Ukraine liberated parts of the Kharkiv region in September 2022, exposing mass graves and torture chambers left by occupying forces, Russian propaganda had to handle a narrative defeat (Develop competing Narratives [T0004]). They pivoted by hardly acknowledging Ukrainian victories (Russian TV remained silent or vague). However, online, they started promoting more doomsday rhetoric – for instance, raising the specter of nuclear escalation (to instill fear in the Western public as well).

**Adaptation, countermeasures, and ongoing information battle (Assess phase)**

The final component of the analysis examines how the Russian campaign against the AFU has evolved over time and how Ukrainian and international actors have responded in the information domain. In the “kill-chain” terms, the attacker would assess which tactics worked or failed and then refine their strategy (while the defender would shore up the attacker's weaknesses and build on its resilience). From Russia's side, as analyzed below, there was a straightforward adaptation after the initial assumptions of a quick win proved false.

(a) Reframing the war narrative for the long haul, Russian propaganda shifted from calling the operation a quick “special operation” to portraying it as a larger existential conflict against the West. By the summer of 2022, state media heavily emphasized that Russia was “fighting NATO in Ukraine,” thus preemptively explaining away the failure to defeat Ukraine quickly (since they claimed to be up against a much bigger foe) and preparing the Russian public for a protracted war. This narrative shift also elevates the stakes to justify why Russians must endure sacrifices (such as sanctions' impact and high casualties).

In effect, the Kremlin moved the goalposts in its information strategy. Instead of demoralizing Ukrainians to make them surrender (which had limited success), they focused on motivating Russians to stay the course and discouraging the Western public by fear of escalation. This is a clear example of strategic pivoting: if one target audience (Ukrainians) proves resilient, focus more on other audiences (Russians and Westerners).

(b) Greater reliance on volume over veracity (the firehose approach). Realizing that individual fakes were being rapidly debunked, the Russian operation embraced the continuous flooding of the information space (a strategy often called the “firehose of falsehood”). The enormous volume of it can create an ambient effect even if each claim is disproven.

(c) Use of new technologies (AI-generated content) and emotional content (memes). By late 2023, reports indicated Russia began deploying more sophisticated fake content, including AI-generated “news anchors” in videos that read Kremlin-scripted news or deepfake audios of Ukrainian officials “leaking” sensitive statements. Adopting emerging tech is part of adaptation – still staying ahead of fact-checkers. The EUvsDisinfo mentions the increased use of AI-generated content and bots as part of the “information exhaustion” strategy (Balaban & Zhukov, 2025).

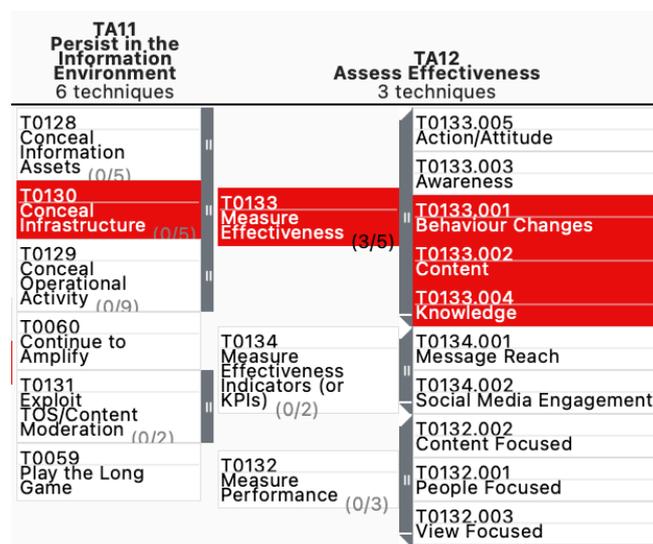


Figure 3. Mapping campaign on DISARM Framework Layout, assessing stage

## Discussion section

Proactive strategic communications by Ukrainian leadership, for example, from President Zelensky's nightly video addresses to the transparent military briefings and frequent social media updates, enabled Ukrainian officials to occupy the information space with credible content, which was a prompt response from the Ukrainian side to the massive flow of FIMI interference. When Russian media claimed the Ukrainian president had fled, he posted from central Kyiv. This rapid response strategy, essentially calling out fakes as they occur, robbed disinformation of its staying power. It also helped maintain high public morale in Ukraine, as citizens saw their leaders present and communicative, reinforcing a trusted channel of communication between the authorities and the population. Another measure implemented by the Ukrainian authorities was the so-called information marathon "United News"—a TV format in which the six largest television channels joined efforts to provide official information and rapid operational updates. It was launched shortly after February 24, 2022. Despite its initial positive and mobilizing effect, "United News" began to face increasing criticism within Ukrainian society, as it excluded several smaller TV channels from airtime and came to be seen as a potential threat to freedom of expression.

Another example of an effective response was calling for transparency in digital platform regulation and sanctioning the dissemination of propaganda content. Ukraine and allied countries lobbied successfully for major tech platforms to limit Russian state media. By March 2022, the EU had banned RT and Sputnik from its airwaves and internet; YouTube and Facebook began down-ranking or labeling content from these outlets. These measures did not eliminate all propaganda content, but they did reduce its reach in specific channels. However, reorienting Russian media assets towards the Global South proved to be an effective adaptation strategy from Moscow's side. As a result, Russian propaganda found more receptive ground in parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where anti-Western sentiment or skepticism of Western narratives is prevalent.

By 2022, a significant segment of the Ukrainian public was relatively media-savvy about disinformation. Grassroots initiatives and NGOs have been promoting media literacy and source verification since 2014. The result was a populace that, when confronted with bizarre claims (such as "biolabs" or "dirty bombs"), often responded with skepticism and humor rather than panic; however, it has sometimes been presented affectively within the societies of allied countries (Brooking, 2022). Overall, this social immunity made it harder for Russian disinformation to achieve reflexive control goals. Nevertheless, Ukraine had, unfortunately, been a testing ground for the Russian information war for years, which appeared with new power after 2022 in the large-scale war context and even scaled in other countries within another political context (as well as in Romania and the Republic of Moldova).

Ukraine's struggle spurred broader initiatives among allies to counter FIMI. NATO and the EU set up or enhanced strategic communications teams. For example, in real-time, NATO's Riga StratCom Centre and the EU's EEAS Stratcom division actively monitored and exposed Russian disinformation narratives (European External Action Service, 2025), the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Centre routinely published fact-checks of Russian claims (e.g., a detailed refutation of the Bucha massacre denial, laying out Russian inconsistencies), etc. By calling out Russian lies on the international stage (even at the UN, where Russian claims were directly challenged), the international community signaled that these FIMI/propaganda tactics would not be allowed to proceed unchallenged. This collective pressure likely deterred some types of disinformation.

The Russian FIMI campaign against the AFU was unprecedented in scale and variety. It employed all from century-old propaganda tropes to cutting-edge deepfake technology. The DISARM framework clarifies how a complex operation can be systematically broken down into phases and tactics and then adapted when initial plans falter. This allows for an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a FIMI campaign and, as a result, enables the design of an effective response aligned with the “kill chain” logic—namely, targeting the entire campaign at its weakest point. The campaign highlights the deeply interwoven nature of kinetic and information warfare today, demonstrating that volume alone does not guarantee information superiority.

## Conclusions

Russia's campaign underscores the concept of war as a battle of narratives and perceptions as much as a physical contest of arms. The Kremlin crafted and propagated strategic narratives, sought to pre-justify aggression, demoralized the opponent, and influenced international response. In doing so, Russia demonstrated the relevance of soft power's dark mirror—“sharp power”—where coercion through manipulation replaces attraction. In this case, FIMI, propaganda, and psyops are reminiscent of Cold War “active measures” but amplified by digital media reach. This reaffirms that information and ideas are a domain of power, rivaling the traditional domains. Strategic narrative theory proved a helpful lens, which helped explain Russia's persistent (if factually baseless) emphasis on themes like WWII redux (fighting “Nazism”) as deliberate efforts to resonate with historical memory and legitimize its actions.

By applying the DISARM framework, we can systematically dissect these tactics, revealing a quasi-kill chain of influence operations that spans from planning deceptive themes through preparing digital assets and channels to multi-platform execution and on-the-fly adaptation. By applying the DISARM methodology, we can predict the development of FIMI campaign directions, identify points for further adaptation and re-adaptation, and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the applied TTPs to elaborate an adequate response. Even though, in this case study, the Ukrainian response was essentially chaotic, it proved effective—particularly in maintaining societal trust in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). In this regard, the DISARM Framework can potentially explain the “kill chain” logic, where targeting public attitudes and perceptions revealed the FIMI campaign's weakest point.

Russia's FIMI campaign intended to assault Ukrainian society's cohesion and cause morale collapse from within. Despite this, one of the notable outcomes is strongly civil-military relations as well as societal trust in the AFU (as also represented by the various sociological data).

The Ukrainian Army, which indeed had issues with public trust in some surveys before the war, is now the country's most respected institution and is seen as the nation's protector and a guarantor of security. Russian attempts to portray the AFU as villains or incompetents found little purchase among Ukrainians, who witnessed these same forces bravely defend their homes. If anything, Russian propaganda accusing the AFU of atrocities (like shelling cities or abusing civilians) backfired domestically – Ukrainians knew who was shelling them (the Russians).

On the other hand, the war created a narrative of national resistance in Ukraine that trumped any ethnic, linguistic, or regional divides that Russia tried to inflame. For instance, Russian media kept labeling Ukrainian forces, especially units like the Azov Regiment, as “Nazis” oppressing Russian speakers. However, many Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the east fought in or alongside those very units against Russia. The shared struggle forged a civic identity that undercut Russia's dividing and microtargeting strategies.

Indeed, it had some impact, and there were isolated incidents of suspicion or scapegoating (occasional witch-hunts for "saboteurs" in communities). However, state communications managed these arising issues by quickly dispelling rumors and urging unity, which most communities heeded.

However, we should acknowledge that while unity remains, constant information attacks are still psychologically taxing. Especially in the war's early confusion, many Ukrainians experienced fear from false alarms. Even knowing something is propaganda does not entirely remove its emotional effect because receiving, for example, a text saying "We will kill your family" is disturbing, even if you are sure it is fake. Over time, this could contribute to collective stress and war fatigue and will likely have long-term political and societal effects.

Still, Russian information operations may have had more impact in occupied areas or where access to Ukrainian media was cut off. In some cities, such as Kherson (before liberation) or Mariupol (still under occupation), Russia forced the populace to consume its propaganda exclusively (jamming Ukrainian signals, distributing Russian SIM cards, etc.). However, the experience in places like Kherson after liberation showed that even months of occupation propaganda did not break the local population's loyalty to Ukraine in general – spontaneous celebrations greeting Ukrainian soldiers indicated Russia failed to win hearts and minds in any significant way. However, there can be other landscapes in places where population change has taken place (East of Ukraine, Mariupol, Crimea).

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