

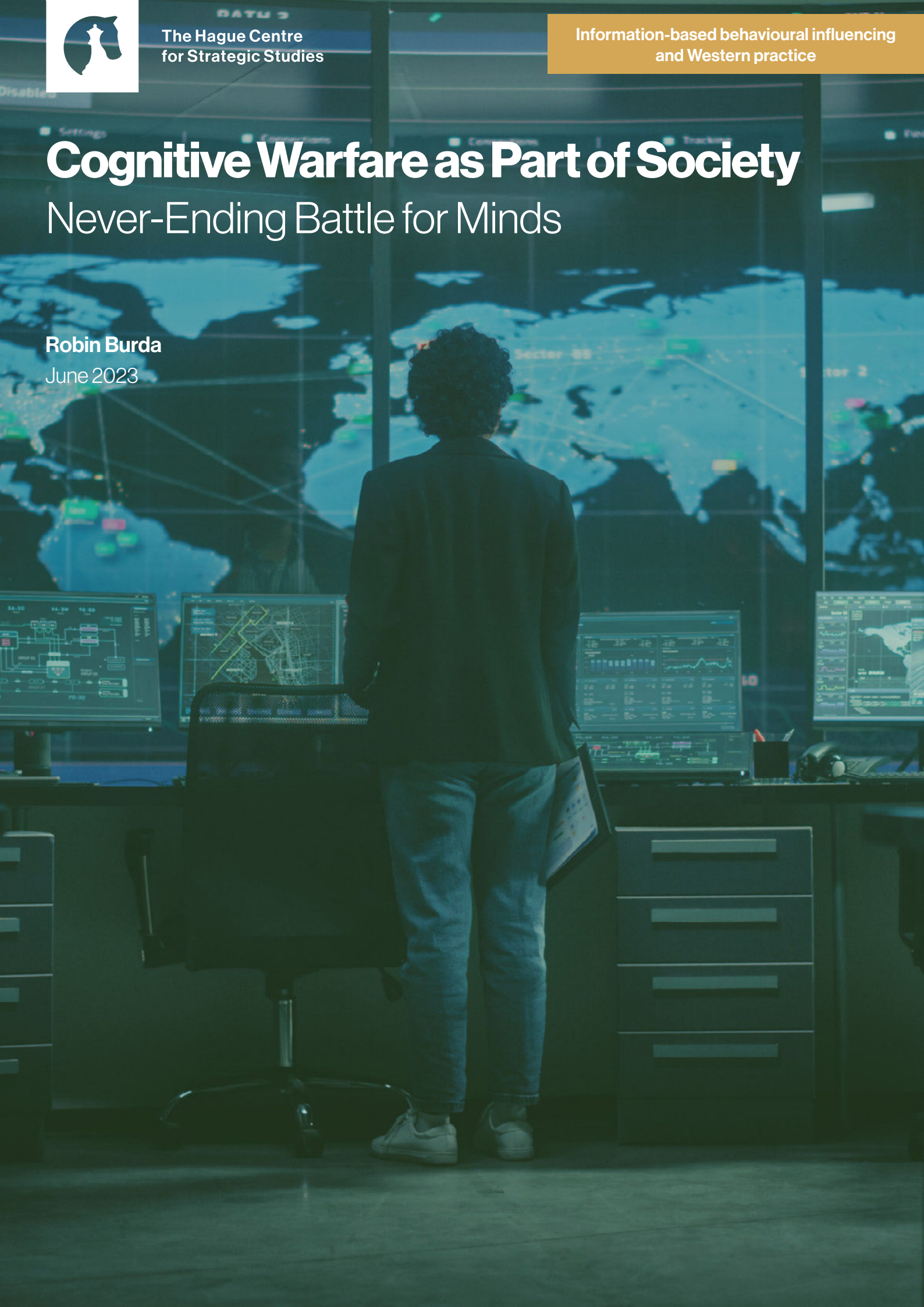


Cognitive Warfare as Part of Society

Never-Ending Battle for Minds

Robin Burda

June 2023





Paper 4

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This paper is part of the *Information-based behavioural influencing and Western practice* paper series.

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This paper is published as part of the project Platform Influencing Human Behaviour, commissioned by the Royal Netherlands Army. The aim of this platform is to build and share knowledge on information-based behavioural influencing in the military context. We bring together international experts and practitioners from both military and academic backgrounds to explore the military-strategic, ethical, legal, and societal issues and boundaries involved. Responsibility for the content rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should it be construed as, an endorsement by the Royal Netherlands Army.

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Paper series: Information-based behavioural influencing and Western practice

The military application of information has a long history in influencing the outcome of war and conflict on the battlefield. Be it by deceiving the opponent, maintaining troop confidence, or shaping public opinion. These tactics are placed under the banner of influencing human behaviour. Behavioural influencing is the act of meaningfully trying to affect the behaviour of an individual by targeting people's knowledge, beliefs and emotions. Within the Dutch armed forces these tactics fall under title of Information Manoeuvre. With the ever-larger and more evasive employment of information-based capabilities to target human cognition, the boundaries of the physical and cognitive battlefield have begun to fade.

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Introduction

The West has been a target of Russian influence campaigns for over a decade. It is easy to get a false impression that the extensive use of propaganda and psychological warfare is an exception to the rule. However, that would be a fallacy, as information has been a key warfare component throughout history.¹ It is vital to realize that “the long peace”² after Second World War was not, in fact, peace, let alone a new norm in international relations. Various tools of information warfare, including psychological operations and propaganda, have never stopped being used. Jacques Ellul argued that propaganda is a social phenomenon that grows within society and is intrinsically intertwined with it.³ His notion that any technological society will always have to coexist with propaganda is alarming. In recent years, a new concept has emerged and is even described as the sixth operational domain – Cognitive Warfare (CW).⁴ Advancements in technology and sciences, such as neuroscience and psychology, lead to new possibilities for influencing the human brain.⁵ Ellul’s thesis of propaganda being an inseparable part of any technological society⁶ paints a bleak future when combined with the new tools utilized by CW unless it is acknowledged and treated as such.

Even if the main threats to Western-style democracies from Russia, China, and Iran vanish in the future, the threat of CW will likely persist. With social media and future platforms leveraging concepts of metaverse and augmented reality, influencing human minds will be even more accessible and cheaper than nowadays.⁷ Even today, a single post on social media can reach millions of people in a matter of hours, snowballing by making a small initial target audience share it further.⁸ Wanless and Berk call this “participatory propaganda.”⁹ The snowballing effect can be exploited within CW, while new technologies like deep fakes can increase the credibility of shared information. Credibility is one of the key determinants of success in influencing peoples’ minds,¹⁰ which makes CW all the more dangerous.

Accepting the premise that any modern society will always be under the malign influence of propaganda or CW is the first step necessary to defend institutions, citizens, and liberal democracy as such. Furthermore, dealing with the threat of CW requires a whole-of-society approach, as discussed by numerous scholars.¹¹ Similar to the experience with COVID-19

1 Lotje Boswinkel et al., *Weapons of mass influence*, technical report (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022), <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Weapons-of-Mass-Influence-Information-Warfare-HCSS-2022-V2.pdf>.

2 See John Lewis Gaddis. “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System.” *International Security* 10, no. 4 (1986): 99–142.

3 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The formation of men’s attitudes* (Vintage, 1973).

4 Francois du Cluzel, “Cognitive warfare,” *Innovation Hub, NATO ACT, June–November, 2020*, https://www.innovationhub-act.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/20210113_CW%20Final%20v2%20.pdf.

5 Alicia Wanless and Michael Berk, “The changing nature of propaganda: Coming to terms with influence in conflict,” in *The World Information War*, ed. Clack Timothy and Johnson Robert (Routledge, 2021), 63–80.

6 Ellul, *Propaganda: The formation of men’s attitudes*.

7 Wanless and Berk, “The changing nature of propaganda: Coming to terms with influence in conflict.”

8 Alicia Wanless and Michael Berk, “The audience is the amplifier: Participatory propaganda,” in *The Sage handbook of propaganda*, ed. Paul Baines, Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (Sage, 2019), 85–104; Alicia Wanless and Michael Berk, “Participatory Propaganda: The Engagement of Audiences in the Spread of Persuasive Communications,” in *Social Media & Social Order, Culture Conflict 2.0* (2017).

9 Wanless and Berk, “The audience is the amplifier: Participatory propaganda.”

10 Daniel Lerner. Sykewar: Psychological Warfare Against Germany, D-Day to VE-Day. GW Stewart, 1949.; For an interesting discussion on the impact of credibility on the acceptance of misinformation, see Ullrich KH Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, John Cook, Philipp Schmid, Lisa K. Fazio, Nadia Brashier, Panayiota Kendeou, Emily K. Vraga, and Michelle A. Amazeen. “The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction.” *Nature Reviews Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2022): 13–29.

11 See for instance See Cristina Ivan, Irena Chiru, and Rubén Arcos. “A Whole of Society Intelligence Approach: Critical Reassessment of the Tools and Means Used to Counter Information Warfare in the Digital Age.” *Intelligence and National Security* 36, no. 4 (2021): 495–511.; Lincoln Flake. “Russia and Information Warfare: A Whole-of-Society Approach.” *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 18, no. 1 (2020).

Various tools of information warfare, including psychological operations and propaganda, have never stopped being used

pandemics, the initial reaction is also crucial, but similar to most illnesses - and CW may be treated as such - it cannot be eradicated, and people may need to learn to live with them. Unfortunately, democracies have their proverbial hands tied concerning influencing their own societies in comparison to authoritarian regimes, as it does not fall within the norms and laws.¹² This greatly hinders any attempts to defend against CW. The paper aims to draw from the historical experience of Czechia and Ukraine after 2014, which was a wake-up call for the West. However, despite the severity of the situation, not all countries responded with the same effort. This is specifically apparent in the case of Czechia, whose government was opportunistic and populist.¹³ On top of that, the president was openly pro-Russian, attacked journalists on many occasions,¹⁴ and hindered the work of intelligence services.¹⁵ The experience and reaction of Ukraine have naturally been much different, as the country has been in an open conflict with Russia since 2014.

This paper aims to analyse the concrete steps implemented to combat Russian CW - at the time primarily framed as 'hybrid warfare' - in Czechia and Ukraine. As CW targets the human domain,¹⁶ I approach the analysis on three distinct levels - the government, the media, and the general society. Atlantic Council's analytical report utilized a similar approach "Democratic defence against disinformation 2.0."¹⁷ While political decisions are important, independent media play a key role in democratic societies. The power of civil society groups should not be underestimated as well. An example of a civil society initiative that greatly helps combat CW is *The Elves*, a volunteer force that formed in 2014 in Lithuania and since then started operating in multiple countries.¹⁸

What is Cognitive Warfare?

Cognitive Warfare is a term used since the 1990s, labelling various things in time. Dahl described CW as a strategy that impacts the Observation-Oriented-Decision-Action (OODA) loop in terms of "decreasing its speed, decreasing its accuracy, or both."¹⁹ However, the contemporary understanding of the concept is focused more on letting the enemy "destroy himself from within" by influencing the general population by attacking the human brain.²⁰ NATO Allied Command Transformation's (ACT) Innovation Hub launched a special initiative to deal with CW.

12 Boswinkel et al., *Weapons of mass influence*.

13 Lenka Buštková and Petra Guasti, "The state as a firm: Understanding the autocratic roots of technocratic populism," *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 2 (2019): 302–330; Pavel Maškarinec, Lukas Novotny, et al., "Von links nach rechts: Wandel der regionalen Unterstützung für die technokratisch-populistische Bewegung ANO 2011 bei den tschechischen Parlamentswahlen 2013 und 2017," *Osterreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 49, no. 4 (2020): 1–14.

14 He even commented to Vladimir Putin that journalists should be "liquidated." See Hana de Goeij, "Czech Leader's Call to 'Liquidate' Journalists Was a Joke, His Office Says," *The Washington Post*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/05/15/world/europe/milos-zeman-journalists.html>.

15 Ladislav Cabada. «Russian Aggression against Ukraine as the Accelerator in the Systemic Struggle against Disinformation in Czechia.» *Applied Cybersecurity & Internet Governance* 1 (2022).

16 Cluzel, "Cognitive warfare."

17 Alina Polyakova and Daniel Fried, *Democratic defense against disinformation 2.0*, technical report (Atlantic Council, 2019), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/APO-242041>, <https://apo.org.au/node/242041>.

18 See <https://www.debunkeu.org/about-elves>.

19 Arden B Dahl, *Command dysfunction: Minding the cognitive war*, technical report (AU's School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 1996).

20 Alonso Bernal et al., *Cognitive warfare: An attack on truth and thought*, technical report (NATO and Johns Hopkins University: Baltimore MD, USA, 2020), <https://www.innovationhub-act.org/sites/default/files/202103/Cognitive%20Warfare.pdf>.

It is undeniable that CW has a profound impact on contemporary security and NATO and the EU must address it as one of the most significant threats to both military and civilian organizations and individuals

Backes et al. used the concept of CW to describe the Russian strategy of interfering in elections in Baltic states.²¹ Their CW definition is useful to grasp the basis of the concept: “Cognitive Warfare is a strategy that focuses on altering how a target population thinks – and through that how it acts.”²² Bernal et al. offer a more elaborate definition: “cognitive warfare is the weaponization of public opinion by an external entity, for the purpose of influencing public and/or governmental policy or for the purpose of destabilizing governmental actions and/or institutions.”²³

Currently, CW can be considered a conceptual descendant of psychological and information warfare, which have been influenced by advancements in the cyberspace domain. However, there are several notable differences between CW and the aforementioned concepts. CW primarily focuses on influencing whole societies, not specifically military targets, and utilizes primarily “grey products” of propaganda.²⁴ This move towards influencing the civilian population is a particularly large threat to liberal democracies, where the people hold significant power and can change the direction of politics in elections. The emerging concept of CW bears striking resemblance to the Russian definition of Information War from the year 2000, which includes “a massive psychological manipulation of the population to destabilize the state and society, as well as coercion of the state to take decisions for the benefit of the opposing force.”²⁵

Cognitive Warfare (CW) is an emerging concept, but there have already been instances of its use in the past decade and more. Among those are activities of Russia, China, and Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic,²⁶ but even smaller-scale attempts by pro-Palestinian groups against Israel are examples of attempts to attack human brains using multitude of tools. Israel was the target of the first “hybrid warfare” by Hezbollah in 2006,²⁷ but Siboni also wrote an essay titled “The First Cognitive War,” arguing that “ Hamas, for example, makes focused efforts aimed solely at generating cognitive-related victories while also incorporating physical means.”²⁸ It is undeniable that CW has a profound impact on contemporary security and NATO and the EU must address it as one of the most significant threats to both military and civilian organizations and individuals.

21 Oliver Backes and Andrew Swab, “Cognitive Warfare: The Russian Threat to Election Integrity in the Baltic States” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2019).

22 Ibid.

23 Bernal et al., *Cognitive warfare: An attack on truth and thought*.

24 Ibid.

25 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Russian Federation Armed Forces’ Information Space Activities Concept. (Moscow: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2000).; see also Blagovest Tashev, Michael Purcell, and Brian McLaughlin. *Russia’s Information Warfare: Exploring the Cognitive Dimension*. Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning Quantico United States, 2019.

26 Ibid.

27 Frank G Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars* (Potomac Institute for Policy Studies Arlington, 2007).

28 Gabi Siboni, “The First Cognitive War,” in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2016–2017*, ed. Anat Kurzand Shlomo Brom (The Institute for National Security Studies, 2016), 215–23.

Czech experience

The government

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was - similar to most countries in the West - a wake-up call for Czechia. With no direct impact of the war on Donbas but established attempts to shape public opinions by Russia, the country had all the reasons to focus on dealing with Russian influence. However, despite the magnitude of the situation and annual reports of intelligence services emphasizing the threat of Russian influence, the political representation did not react accordingly. Former president Miloš Zeman contributed to Russian narratives surrounding the annexation of Crimea, and his statements were often used by Russian propagandist channels like Russia Today (RT). He even downplayed information from foreign intelligence services regarding the Russian preparations for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which RT gratefully posted.²⁹

The Ministry of Interior published Czech Defence Audit in 2016, where Russian influence and disinformation threats were minor topics. However, a SWOT analysis of foreign influence showed a plethora of weaknesses and threats, including *underestimation* of malign influence compared to other types of threats.³⁰ Populists led the governments between 2013 and 2021, and many incidents connected to more or less overt support of Russian policies and narratives took place at the time. Three Czech politicians even took part in Russia's sham elections in Crimea as observers in 2014 despite the position of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Based on a European Values Center for Security Policy initiative called *Atlas of influence*,³¹ 25 members of Parliament helped spread Russian influence, several of them systematically.

Media

The Czech media landscape has been deteriorating in the recent decade, with media concentration in the hands of oligarchs, including the former prime minister Andrej Babiš. Disinformation webs, including Russian Sputnik News and other more or less anti-systemic websites, have been attracting significant audiences. Almost 30% of Czech citizens know that the media spreads disinformation, and the World Press Freedom Index in Czechia had been steadily in decline up until 2021.³² The trust in traditional media, in general, is very low at 33%,³³ which has been helping Russia spread its anti-Western narratives. With the declining trust and "pressure from illiberal parts of society", the traditional media fell into the trap of attempting to give enough room to diverse opinions, which unfortunately often meant giving screen time to individuals known to spread disinformation.³⁴

29 TASS, "Czech president lambasts US intelligence, CIA over failed 'Russian invasion' hype," TASS, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1404865>.

30 Czech Government, *Audit národní bezpečnosti* (Prague: Czech Government, 2016).

31 See <https://www.atlasvlivu.cz/>.

32 Václav Štětka, Jaromír Mazák, and Lenka Vochocová, "“Nobody Tells us what to Write about”: The Disinformation ~ Media Ecosystem and its Consumers in the Czech Republic," *Javnost-The Public* 28, no. 1 (2021): 90–109; for World Press Freedom Index see <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

33 Nic Newman et al., "Reuters Institute digital news report 2021," *Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism*, 2021, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf.

34 Ondrej Filipec, "Towards a disinformation resilient society?: The experience of the Czech republic," *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2019): 1–26.

Almost 30% of Czech citizens know that the media spreads disinformation

It is essential to realise that the primary goal of Russian CW is not to push specific narratives but rather to change how the citizens view media, the government, and how they *think* in general

It is essential to realise that the primary goal of Russian CW is not to push specific narratives but rather to change how the citizens view media, the government, and how they *think* in general. The goal of the disinformation campaigns is to influence people to distrust traditional media and political representation,³⁵ leading, in turn, to an increase in consumption of “alternative media” content, starting a dangerous spiral that ultimately led to a significant position of pro-Russian, anti-democratic parties in the Czech context. The Czech media failed to react fast enough with their own initiatives to deal with malign foreign interference and often created new problems by giving room to disinformators.³⁶ The discussion on the Czech News Agency becoming a member of International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) is still just in the phase of the debate.³⁷ The exception to the rule is a project of the Czech Radio called *Ověřovna*³⁸ where anyone can send information for fact-checking.

Civil society

The CW aims to degrade society from within, a complex goal requiring an accordingly complex defence. Politicians and media profoundly impact the citizens, but cyberspace opens many hard-to-counter opportunities to influence broad audiences. The percentage of people that consume news online and from social media like Facebook and Twitter is almost 90% and 50%, respectively.³⁹ With this high consumption of news content in cyberspace, CW can easily thrive with or without foreign interests present. As August Cole-Hervé Le Guyader puts it: “The characteristics of cyberspace (lack of regulation, difficulties and associated risks of attribution of attacks in particular) mean that new actors, either state or non-state, are to be expected.”⁴⁰ In addition to the aforementioned problems with political representation and the media landscape, more than 30% of people tend to share the news they consume online, effectively becoming sources of information for further audiences.⁴¹ While the shared information is harmless in many cases, disinformation and propaganda are often spread as well, effectively fulfilling the definition of participatory propaganda.⁴²

Despite the apparent problems at all three analysed levels, the Czech civil society, including big companies, also came with various projects and initiatives to combat what we now label *Cognitive Warfare*. Masaryk University created *FakeScape* project,⁴³ which teaches media literacy interactively to help people identify fake news. Association *NELEŽ*,⁴⁴ supported by the telecommunication company T-Mobile Czech Republic, identifies disinformation websites and “asks advertisers not to fund misinformation and manipulative websites whose content divides society.” There is a plethora of other projects that attempt to limit the spread of disinformation, educate people, and help deal with CW. However, with the political representation and often indifferent media, the Czech civil society is nonetheless divided and dissatisfied, and

35 Miloš Gregor and Petra Mlejnková, “Facing Disinformation: Narratives and Manipulative Techniques Deployed in the Czech Republic,” *Politics in Central Europe* 17, no. 3 (2021): 541–564.

36 Filipec, “Towards a disinformation resilient society?: The experience of the Czech republic.”

37 Vojtěch Berger, “Vyvracení dezinformací jako veřejná služba. Pro část radních ČTK je to ale problém,” *hlidacipes.org*, 2022, <https://hlidacipes.org/vyvraceni-dezinformaci-jako-verejna-sluzba-pro-cast-radnich-ctk-problemve-svete-bezna-praxe/>.

38 Roughly translated as “The fact-checking platform.” See <https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-tag/overovna>.

39 Newman et al., “Reuters Institute digital news report 2021.”

40 Cluzel, “Cognitive warfare.”

41 Newman et al., “Reuters Institute digital news report 2021.”

42 Wanless and Berk, “The audience is the amplifier: Participatory propaganda.”

43 See <https://www.fakescape.cz/en>.

44 See <https://www.nelez.cz/en/>.

there is a significant pro-Russia segment of society. This stands true even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Based on a STEM Agency poll from January 2023, 14% of citizens are either strongly pro-Russian or tend to believe Russian narratives on the war.⁴⁵

Ukrainian experience

The government

After the events of 2013-14 Euromaidan, followed by the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, the political situation changed rapidly. The most significant ones happened in the electorate, which changed both in its approach towards politics and its size, as it was truncated due to the Russian occupation.⁴⁶ This inherently led to a much different political representation in the period after Euromaidan and progressively improving indicators of democracy.⁴⁷ However, up until the ban of Russian state-sponsored media after the 2022 invasion, pro-Russian elements were still present in the Ukrainian Parliament.⁴⁸ The political situation in Ukraine has been undeniably more complicated than in Czechia, and, despite the 2013-14 events, segments of society still voted in the 2014 and 2019 elections for parties that could have been considered threats to national security.⁴⁹ In the 2019 presidential elections, pro-Russian candidates amassed a total of around 15% of votes in the first round.⁵⁰

The Ukrainian government has implemented numerous concrete steps to combat Russian CW. The Ministry of Information Policy was established in 2014 and later merged into the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine. The Ministry's declared priorities are: "develop strategies for information policy of Ukraine, coordinate government agencies in matters of communication, counteraction to informational aggression by Russia."⁵¹ In essence, the Ministry helps with strategic communication, which is crucial to a successful defence against CW, and NATO also stresses its importance.⁵² Another body created by the Ukrainian government is the Centre on Countering Disinformation, which deals with fact-checking and preventing attempts to manipulate public opinion.⁵³ The government policies also improved the situation of independent media, and the launch of the Public Broadcasting Company of Ukraine UA: PBC (Suspilne since 2019) brought the country closer to EU standards.⁵⁴

45 STEM, "Česko je díky Evropě ve větším bezpečí. Podle nových dat to vnímá i tuzemská veřejnost," *STEM*, 2023, <https://www.stem.cz/cesko-je-diky-evrope-ve-vetsim-bezpeci-podle-novych-dat-to-vnima-i-tuzemska-verejnost/>.

46 Paul D'anieri, "Ukraine's 2019 Elections: Pro-Russian Parties and The Impact of Occupation," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 10 (2022): 1915–1936.

47 Fernandez Gibaja and A. Hudson, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Struggle to Defend Democracy in Europe and Beyond: Rising Stakes in the Struggle for Democracy*, technical report (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2022), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2022.14>, <https://doi.org/10.31752/%0Aidea.2022.14>.

48 Aleksandra Klitina, "Ukrainian parliament bans pro-Russian parties," *Kyiv Post*, May 2022, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/6877>.

49 Mykhaylo Shtekel, "Why war-torn east Ukraine votes for pro-Russian parties," *Atlantic Council*, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-war-torn-east-ukraine-votes-for-pro-russian-parties/>.

50 D'anieri, "Ukraine's 2019 Elections: Pro-Russian Parties and The Impact of Occupation."

51 Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, *About Ministry*, <https://mkip.gov.ua/en/content/proministerstvo.html>.

52 Julio Miranda Calha, *Hybrid Warfare: NATO's New Strategic Challenge? 051 DSC 15 E*. (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2015), as cited in; Vendula Divišová, "Strategic Communications: From a Reactive Fight Against Disinformation Towards Comprehensive Use in Support of National Security and Defence," *Vojenské rozhledy* 31, no. 2 (2022): 34–53.

53 Yevgeny Matyushenko, "Zelensky approves regulation on Center for Countering Disinformation," *unian.info*, 2021, <https://www.unian.info/politics/center-for-countering-disinformation-zelensky-approves-regulation-11413858.html>.

54 OECD, "Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine," *OECD*, 2022, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/paper/37186bde-en>.

Media

The media landscape in Ukraine improved significantly after 2014, as the World Press Freedom Index of the country jumped from 127th to 97th position between 2014 and 2021.⁵⁵ The role of media was already significant for Euromaidan when journalists sided with the protesters against the pro-Russian government.⁵⁶ While it is undeniable that some of the government initiatives were met with concern - namely the mentioned establishment of the Ministry of Information Policy - several important steps were taken to improve the situation surrounding media in Ukraine, such as privatisation and increased ownership transparency.⁵⁷ The importance of media in the fight against CW cannot be understated, as reporting on various forms of dis- or misinformation, fake news, and propaganda has a positive impact, strengthening “norms of factual accountability, that is, norms that truth matters, that those who peddle untruths should be held accountable, and that deviations from truth should have negative repercussions.”⁵⁸

To combat Russian disinformation campaigns at the time, Kyiv Mohyla Journalism School launched the *StopFake* project, which attracted Ukrainian journalists and quickly rose to international prominence.⁵⁹ The media played a crucial role in countering Russian CW in Ukraine and did so in cooperation with various civil activists.⁶⁰ In the years after Euromaidan, the cooperation between media and policymakers proved equally as important, as it enabled effective defence against CW.⁶¹ However, the media landscape has also been regulated significantly more than in Czechia, to the point that Ukrainian journalists and international organisations have raised concerns about the level of regulation.⁶² In 2021, three television stations affiliated with pro-Russian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk were banned by Zelensky’s administration. Nevertheless, the reactions from the society were mixed, with some believing this is necessary to battle Russian disinformation and others considering it a violation of citizens’ rights.⁶³ After a steep drop in 2018, the trust in media by Ukrainian citizens has been slightly improving,⁶⁴ which might be a result of the ban.

55 See <https://rsf.org/en/index>. In 2022, Ukraine fell to 106th place because of the factors tied to the Russian invasion, including the information warfare.

56 Dariya Orlova, “Ukrainian media after the EuroMaidan: in search of independence and professional identity,” *Publizistik* 61, no. 4 (2016): 441–461.

57 Ibid.

58 Lucas Graves et al., “From information availability to factual accountability,” *Journalism and truth in an age of social media*, 2019, as cited in; Yariv Tsfaty et al., “Causes and consequences of mainstream media dissemination of fake news: literature review and synthesis,” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44, no. 2 (2020): 157–173.

59 Maria Haigh, Thomas Haigh, and Tetiana Matychak, “Information literacy vs. fake news: the case of Ukraine,” *Open Information Science* 3, no. 1 (2019): 154–165.

60 Andrew Wilson, “Ukrainian politics since independence,” *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, 2015, 101–108; Orlova, “Ukrainian media after the EuroMaidan: in search of independence and professional identity.”

61 Nitin Agarwal et al., “Developing Approaches to Detect and Mitigate COVID-19 Misinfodemic in Social Networks for Proactive Policymaking,” in *COVID-19 Disinformation: A Multi-National, Whole of Society Perspective* (Springer, 2022), 47–79.

62 Olga Kyrlyuk, “Ukraine Want to Fight Disinformation by Introducing De-Facto Censorship,” *Open Internet for Democracy*, 2020, <https://openinternet.global/news/ukraine-wants-fight-disinformation-introducing-defactocensorship>.

63 Nina Jankowicz, “Media Bans, Free Speech, and Disinformation in Ukraine,” *Wilson Center*, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/media-bans-free-speech-and-disinformation-ukraine>.

64 USAID-Internews, *USAID-Internews 2021 Media Consumption Survey*, technical report (USAID-Internews, 2021), <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAIDInternews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021-ENG.pdf>.

The importance of media in the fight against CW cannot be understated, as reporting on various forms of dis- or misinformation, fake news, and propaganda has a positive impact, strengthening “norms of factual accountability, that is, norms that truth matters, that those who peddle untruths should be held accountable, and that deviations from truth should have negative repercussions”

Civil society

Ukraine has a “vibrant society”⁶⁵ that has been quite united even before the Russian invasion in 2022. Furthermore, democratic activists managed to counter any attempts from the government to reverse some of the reforms introduced after Euromaidan.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, society is vulnerable to CW to a similar extent as in Czechia thanks to the wide use of the internet and social media, which were the main source of information for most Ukrainians in 2021, with the percentage rising significantly in 2022.⁶⁷ However, the Ukrainian government seems to realize this threat and take it as an opportunity, as the officials and institutions use social media as a dissemination tool.⁶⁸ The civil society battles Russia CW in cyberspace on its own - for example, the Ukrainian Memes Forces Twitter account amassed more than 350 000 followers as of March 2023 and helps to undermine Russian narratives with jokes.⁶⁹

The number of civil society initiatives to battle CW seems lower than in Czechia, but this might be skewed somehow due to the high-level of journalist activism listed above. However, the level of activism in Ukrainian society and independent journalists can be considered a double-edged sword. According to Golovchenko et al., “citizens are not only the most central profiles when it comes to spreading disinformation; they play an equally important role when it comes to countering disinformation.”⁷⁰ Despite the possible threat of (intentional or unintentional) disinformation spreading by civilians and journalists, the reaction of the Ukrainian public to the Russian invasion in 2022 points either towards a failure of Russian CW or a successful building of resilience against such attempts among the citizens.

Findings

The role of the government and its policies has a profound impact on the CW in society. The former Czech governments⁷¹, in the crucial years of the war in Ukraine, are defined by political scientists as “technocratic populist.”⁷² The Czech Communist Party was present in Parliament until the 2021 elections. Ukraine has a semi-presidential system, and both its presidents after 2014 - Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky - have been pro-Western and improved the political situation in the country by bringing Ukraine closer to EU and NATO, as well as strengthening the resilience against Russian CW. Political parties in Parliament have been - similar to Czechia - relatively populist in nature.⁷³ However, parties’ geopolitical

65 Mikhail Minakov and Matthew Rojansky, “Democracy in Ukraine: are we there yet?,” *Keenan Kable* 30 (2018), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/democracy-ukraine-are-we-there-yet>.

66 Ibid.

67 USAID-Internews, *USAID-Internews 2021 Media Consumption Survey*; OECD, “Disinformation and Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.”

68 OECD, “Disinformation and Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.”

69 Colin Freeman, “Laughing in Putin’s face is one of Ukraine’s greatest weapons,” *The Telegraph*, December 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/12/28/ukraines-memes-secret-weapon-against-russia/>.

70 Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann, and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, “State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018): 975–994.

71 In 2013–2017 and 2017–2021.

72 Buštková and Guasti, “The state as a firm: Understanding the autocratic roots of technocratic populism”; Maškarinec, Novotny, et al., “Von links nach rechts: Wandel der regionalen Unterstützung für die technokratischpopulistische Bewegung ANO 2011 bei den tschechischen Parlamentswahlen 2013 und 2017.”

73 Kostyantyn Fedorenko, Olena Rybiy, and Andreas Umland, “The Ukrainian party system before and after the 2013–2014 Euromaidan,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 4 (2016): 609–630.

However, the level of activism in Ukrainian society and independent journalists can be considered a double-edged sword

and language orientations are much more important than left-right division in the Ukrainian context.⁷⁴ The key difference between Czechia and Ukraine that impacts the extent to which CW can influence societies is the presence of pro-Russian parties or lack thereof.

Paradoxically, the media landscape in Czechia, which is more free and more liberal than in Ukraine, did not help battle the present Russian and Chinese CW, which improved to a certain degree only after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Unfortunately, political parties like the populist ANO 2011 and SPD⁷⁵ regularly attack independent media and blame them for being biased.⁷⁶ Trust in media had been steadily declining until 2021's slight improvement.⁷⁷ Trust in media in Ukraine has been unstable, with a steep drop in 2019.⁷⁸ President Zelensky ordered the creation of a new media regulating law in the same year,⁷⁹ which might have caused the decreased trust in media. Society seems to value independent journalism, but in the context of an open conflict with Russia, the media regulation seems to have had a generally more positive impact regarding the defence against CW.

Both Czech and Ukrainian societies made significant progress towards becoming genuine civil societies after the fall of the USSR.⁸⁰ However, Ukraine leaped forward in response to the Russian aggression in 2014, while Czechia has been moving towards deconsolidation of democracy.⁸¹ The civil society initiatives to battle CW are present in both countries, but significant differences in media and political landscapes make the battle an uphill one. This is paradoxically truer for Czechia - a pro-Western, liberal democratic country that is a member of both the EU and NATO. However, the Ukrainian experience is much different due to the direct conflict with Russia, which must be considered. The same behaviour cannot be expected in Czech society, as citizens' priorities are very different in a country outside an open, conventional conflict. The Czech far-right and far-left-leaning citizens protested on several occasions against supporting Ukraine and against the pro-Western government due to rising prices in the country, but Russian CW influence was apparent as well, with the "Z" symbols seen with the protesters as well.⁸²

The analysis of Czech and Ukrainian experiences shows a difference in results when faced with CW based on the level of cooperation between the three groups - i.e., the government, media, and civil society. The three levels are intertwined and affect each other significantly. The increasingly more interlinked nature of the contemporary world, thanks to the growing

74 The Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF), "Vyznachalnym dlya vybortsiv e heopolitychnyi vybir partii ta movne pytannya," *The Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF)*, 2012, <https://dif.org.ua/article/vyznachalnim-dlya-vybortsiv-e-geopolitichniy-vibir-partiy-ta-movne-pitannya>; Fedorenko, Rybiy, and Umland, "The Ukrainian party system before and after the 2013–2014 Euromaidan."

75 Action of Dissatisfied Citizens and Freedom and Direct Democracy Party.

76 Euractiv with AFP, "Czechs alarmed as populist leaders take aim at public media," *Euractiv.com*, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/czechs-alarmed-as-populist-leaders-take-aim-at-public-media/>.

77 Newman et al., "Reuters Institute digital news report 2021."

78 USAID-Internews, *USAID-Internews 2021 Media Consumption Survey*.

79 Denis Krasnikov, "Zelensky orders creation of law regulating media," *Kyiv Post*, 2019, <https://archive.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/president-zelensky-orders-creation-of-law-regulating-media.html>.

80 Nina Averianova and Tetiana Voropaieva, "Transformation of the Collective Identity of Ukrainian Citizens After the Revolution of Dignity (2014–2019)," *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal*, no. 7 (2020): 45–71.

81 OECD, "Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine"; Petra Guasti, "Swerving towards deconsolidation? Democratic consolidation and civil society in the Czech Republic," *Das Politische System Tschechiens*, 2018, 39–62.

82 Deutsche Welle, "Tens of thousands protest government in Prague," *Deutsche Welle*, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/czech-republic-thousands-take-part-in-prague-anti-government-demonstration/a-63012178>; Associated Press, "An anti-government protest in Czech capital draws thousands," *The Washington Post*, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/03/11/czech-ukraine-russia-government-protest/> e6931704-c024-11ed-93507c5fccd598ad story.html.

The key difference between Czechia and Ukraine that impacts the extent to which CW can influence societies is the presence of pro-Russian parties or lack thereof

number of people with access to the internet, plays into the hands of actors *on the offensive*. Cyberspace provides them with an easy and cost-effective way to wage war in the cognitive domain. As demonstrated in both Czech and Ukrainian cases, the number of people mainly getting information online is also increasing.⁸³ In combination with the complex nature of CW, any successful defence needs to encompass—and be coordinated by—all actors ranging from the civil society to the government, and include social media corporations. Any CW effects can quickly spiral and degrade the nation from within. To deal with this threat, politicians, media, and civil societies must closely cooperate, otherwise they cannot be successful.

Conclusion: How Should EU and NATO React?

Both EU and NATO members are diverse countries that share - to a varying extent - values of liberal democracy. The implications of the shared values are mostly positive, but liberal democracies have their “hands tied” when faced with the threats like CW, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage.⁸⁴ That is a threat not only to the countries themselves but also to the EU and NATO, which can be eroded from within by sending the member nations into turmoil and sowing division between them. Cooperation and support of proven policies that help against CW are key if the EU and NATO want to remain internally strong to face internal and external security challenges. Individual nations are best suited to deal with CW in their own societies because of “the importance of having in-depth knowledge or data on the cultural, political and social context of the target information environment.”⁸⁵ However, the EU and NATO need to convince and force their members to take the necessary steps to defend against CW, even proactively if necessary.

Some of the differences between the respective experiences of Czechia and Ukraine point out that a balance must be struck between improving democracy while also regulating malign influences in media and society. It is necessary to involve actors across all groups of society in the endeavour to keep the negative influence of CW on society as low as possible.⁸⁶ The issue of the battle against CW is that the threat is aimed at all groups in society. This includes the military, which is further indirectly impacted through the government and civil society stances. There is a realistic possibility of the decreased capability of NATO forces. However, the military cannot wage overt influence operations against its own populations in liberal democracies. The USA realized that right after Second World War and implemented the Smith-Mundt Act that forbids propaganda against US citizens.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, NATO must not resign on soft power tools and needs to focus on its strategic communication, where many improvements are necessary.⁸⁸ Without clear communication, NATO will not have the member nations’ support and will be unable to fulfill its core goal of strategic deterrence.

83 USAID-Internews, *USAID-Internews 2021 Media Consumption Survey*, See; OECD, “Disinformation and Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine”; Newman et al., “Reuters Institute digital news report 2021.”

84 Boswinkel et al., *Weapons of mass influence*.

85 Ibid.

86 See Ivan et al., “A Whole of Society Intelligence Approach.”; Flake, “Russia and Information Warfare.”

87 Laura A Belmonte, *Selling the American way: US propaganda and the Cold War* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

88 Daniel Gage, “The continuing evolution of Strategic Communication within NATO,” *The Three Swords Magazine* 27 (2014): 53–55.

Individual nations are best suited to deal with CW in their own societies because of “the importance of having in-depth knowledge or data on the cultural, political and social context of the target information environment”

Cognitive Warfare will not vanish even in the best-case scenario of Russia losing the war in Ukraine and other actors halting their information warfare toward the West. With newly emerged tools in cyberspace and new knowledge of the human brain, even much smaller, non-state actors will wage their own propaganda wars, leading to the reality of CW being an indivisible part of society, similar to Ellul's vision.⁸⁹ Without continuous promotion of the values of liberal democracy and battling the anti-democratic elements in societies, the West will slowly but steadily lose its own identity. This is where the EU needs to leverage its influence on the law and policies of its member states. Best practices from countries like Finland - which is the "least susceptible to fake news"⁹⁰ - should be broadly implemented if not country-specific. To guide the concrete steps to take, we can make an analogy to diseases and healthcare in general, which is not a novel approach. Slupska's paper maps metaphorical frameworks in cybersecurity⁹¹ and the health metaphor can be used well for CW, as the concepts are intertwined and the implications similar. For cybersecurity, practising cyber hygiene and cleaning up the ecosystem can bring positive results, while for CW, cognitive/mental hygiene can be essential.

This paper aimed to analyse and compare the experiences of Czechia and Ukraine with CW to draw inferences on *how EU and NATO should react*. Neither Czechia nor Ukraine did a perfect job combating CW, but both cases showed that cooperation among the government, media, and civil society is necessary. However, albeit criticised by international organizations and journalists,⁹² the more active approach of Ukraine, with bans of pro-Russian parties and media, seems to have worked better than Czech passive defence. While this suggestion might be very controversial, a transparent framework for censorship of content in media and on the internet should be created by the EU to help balance the active defence and freedom of speech essential to liberal democracies.

With newly emerged tools in cyberspace and new knowledge of the human brain, even much smaller, non-state actors will wage their own propaganda wars, leading to the reality of CW being an indivisible part of society

89 Ellul, *Propaganda: The formation of men's attitudes*.

90 Madeline Fitzgerald, "Finland Most Resistant to 'Fake News,' Report Finds," *U.S. News*, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2023-01-27/finland-most-resistant-to-fake-news-report-finds>.

91 Julia Slupska, "War, Health and Ecosystem: Generative Metaphors in Cybersecurity Governance," *Philosophy & Technology* 34 (2021): 1–20.

92 Kyryliuk, "Ukraine Want to Fight Disinformation by Introducing De-Facto Censorship"; OECD, "Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine."

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