



**UKRAINE'S COGNITIVE WARFARE OPERATIONS AGAINST RUSSIA: REPRESENTATION,  
STORY AND MICRO-MYTHOLOGY**

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**ABSTRACT**

In recent years, geopolitical rivalries within the international system have been gradually increasing. It's evident that nations that are under attack, fragmented, and militarily weak in geopolitical rivalry have no other choice than going to a war both traditionally and cognitively to survive. Military operational victories do not mean victory in cognitive warfare, and the conquest of target audiences' mental functions is essential to win the war. With cognitive warfare planning, the mind map of the target audiences is drawn, and a suitable environment is prepared for the public to support the struggle, apart from focusing on traditional security measures. The battleground for cognitive warfare is the mindset of society, and properly planned cognitive warfare operations help overcome chaos and uncertainty. In this sense, the attack launched by Russia on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, is the scene of operations that constitute a wide range of cognitive warfare, and affects the whole world, although the outcome is still uncertain. The narratives, stories, representations and micro-mythology created in various dimensions and reflections of Ukraine's cognitive warfare operations are closely followed by mass media all over the world. In this war, in which the non-military aspects of the Russia-Ukraine War are also important, Ukraine desires to manage the perception of the international community on a large scale and tries to create behaviors that determine their identities. This article addresses the narrative strategies of Russia and Ukraine during the war that started in 2022 and continues until today; and it evaluates Ukraine's cognitive warfare operations from various perspectives and examples.

**Key Words:** Cognitive Warfare, Micro-Mythology, Representation, Russia, Story, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelenskyy

**UKRAYNA'NIN RUSYA'YA KARŞI BİLİŞSEL SAVAŞ OPERASYONLARI: TEMSİL, HİKÂYE  
VE MİKRO-MİTOLOJİ**

**ÖZ**

Son yıllarda uluslararası sistem içerisinde jeopolitik rekabetler kademeli biçimde artmaktadır. Jeopolitik rekabette saldırı altında yer alan, parçalanmış şekilde bulunan ve askeri yönden güçsüz ulusların hayatta kalmak için hem geleneksel hem de bilişsel olarak savaşmaktan başka seçeneklerinin olmadığı anlaşılmaktadır. Askeri operasyon zaferleri, bilişsel savaşta galip gelmek değildir ve hedef kitlelerin zihinsel işlevlerinin fethi savaşı kazanmak için önemlidir. Bilişsel savaş planlaması ile hedef kitlelerin zihin haritası çizilir, geleneksel güvenlik önlemlerine odaklanmanın dışında kamuoyunun yürütülen mücadeleye destek vermesine yönelik uygun ortam hazırlanır. Bilişsel savaş için muharebe alanı toplumun zihniyetidir ve doğru planlanmış bilişsel savaş operasyonları kaos ve belirsizliğin üstesinden gelmeye yardımcı olur. Bu anlamda 24 Şubat 2022'de Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya yönelik başlattığı saldırı, geniş bir yelpazede bilişsel savaşı oluşturan operasyonlara sahne olmakta ve sonucu hâlâ belirsiz biçimde tüm dünyayı etkilemektedir. Ukrayna'nın bilişsel savaş operasyonlarının çeşitli boyutları ve yansımalarında oluşturulan anlatılar, hikâyeler, temsiller ve mikro mitoloji tüm dünyaca kitle iletişim araçlarıyla yakından takip edilmektedir. Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'nın askeri olmayan yönlerinin de mühim olduğu bu savaşta Ukrayna, uluslararası toplumun algısını geniş çapta

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yönetmeyi arzulamakta ve kimliklerini belirleyen davranışlar yaratmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu makale, 2022'de başlayan ve günümüze kadar devam eden savaş sürecinde Rusya ve Ukrayna'nın anlatı stratejilerini ele almakta ve Ukrayna'nın bilişsel savaş operasyonlarını çeşitli açılardan ve örnekler üzerinden değerlendirmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bilişsel Savaş, Mikro-Mitoloji, Temsil, Rusya, Hikâye, Ukrayna, Vladimir Putin, Volodimir Zelenskiy

### **Introduction**

Today, with the intensification of fast and connected networks, relations are becoming more complex and intense globalization varies according to territory, region, and subject. The processes that are more complex, more uncertain, that can be reacted in a short time, that involve large groups and individuals, and the process of decreasing distances are experienced irregularly (Nye 2003: 109). The occasional war and peace, ongoing geopolitical conflicts, and power relations, with the escalation of backgrounds specific to each region, become more complex in a period of disorder.

The balance of power and security is not static and is like clockwork. In this respect, there is an ongoing debate on the post-Cold War balance of power and security. The developments between Russia and Ukraine have an important place in this debate. The events that took place between Russia and Ukraine in the global security order have long played an important role in strategic competition and the increasing competition shows that the existence of conventional interstate conflict continues. The war that started in this way in Ukraine with the invasion of Russia, which is a revisionist state, is a search for a power field in order to change the strategic orientation of Kiev and expand Moscow's hegemony. Moscow is carrying out the invasion of Ukraine with the approach of controlling power by force as a catalyst in a multipolar world. The war between Russia, which wants to establish permanent control over Ukraine, and Ukraine, which has to defend itself, is not only physical but also cognitive.

### **Cognitive Warfare**

The mind creates and controls cognitive capacities such as attention, memory and perception and creates designs that enable us to perform our functions in the world (Goldstein 2013: 58). Cognitive warfare in designs is the area where all elements of systematic and complexity-based information warfare, including operational aspects of psychology and neuroscience, are combined with military action. In cognitive warfare involving psychological operations and soft power, there is an attack on the way of thinking of the target society (Claverie and Cluzel 2022: 3) by changing the representation of reality. Cognitive warfare is a strategy that focuses on changing the way the target population thinks and acts (Aydemir 2020: 130-131).

Cognitive warfare is a domain in modern warfare. The digital connection of humanity as a whole, as well as the maritime, air, space, and the cyberspace that connects them all, emerges a new warfare domain on a global stage. In this warfare domain, cognitive warfare is waged to alter or mislead the thoughts of people and cognitive aggression is carried out in an unrestricted manner. Cognitive warfare is the art of using technology to alter human cognition about countering, minimizing, or

managing its consequences (Claverie and Cluzel 2022: 1). Cognitive warfare strategy is to counter the collection and dissemination of false or real information about propaganda or politics, and to respond to propaganda and related efforts distributed by mass media (Aydemir 2020: 130-132). Cognitive warfare changes people's perceptions of just actions and influences them to act in a certain way in designing international society and the security environment. Cognitive warfare plays an important role in the dynamics of the international security environment. For example, if the soldiers do not believe that the war and the cause are justified, a classical war will not take place and the soldiers will be reluctant to fight (Leucea 2022: 83).

Cognitive warfare is used by a range of state and non-state players (Claverie and Cluzel 2022: 2), and the battlefield is the mentality of society. Improperly planned cognitive operations create uncertainty and chaos. If operations involve disinformation and propaganda to undermine integrity, public debates ensue; tensions flare up (Aydemir, 2020: 132-13); mental prejudices are used and thought distortions are provoked (Claverie and Cluzel 2022: 1). Humans can often be described as a security vulnerability, and a new field of competition emerges with the organization of information in the mind. The widespread use of mass media in the field of competition and their planned use leads to an advantage in wars. In cognitive warfare, information is presented in a way that creates a predetermined perception of human nature, and the competition is analyzed in a human-oriented strategic plan, and the weak points of competitors are sought to be successful. A carefully compiled action plan is developed with strategic cognitive attacks on weak points.

The action plan not only makes an effort to manipulate the perception of the target audience, but also integrates all elements of information and psychology on how to attack, how to surround the enemies, how to defend themselves, how to conduct intelligence so that moves are not predicted. It is very important to get the expected response. In the cognitive battlefield, every human becomes a weapon, and under the concept carried out in war, the combination of weapons generates impetus and the influence operations on humans create the situation of winning without fighting. Developing strategies to win conflict in high-intensity conventional warfare and complex and targeted disinformation operations require the capacity to reproduce the narrative. Although some states are successful in their military culture, if they are not skilled in the cognitive battlefield, their strategic culture will be deeply damaged and their cognitive blind spots and masses will be influenced by their rivals.

### **Background of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, nationalism flared up in Ukraine and on August 24, 1991, Ukraine officially declared its independence. After its independence, Ukraine struggled with political, social and economic problems. While the country was experiencing a reality characterized by systematic corruption and economic deterioration, hopes for improving the economy and building European democracy rose (Galeotti 2019: 4-5). From independence to the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukraine dealt with centuries-old problems in terms of language, religion, cultural management, historical memories and ideological differences. With the hostility of Vladimir Putin's Russia and the support offered by the international community to

Ukraine (Smith 2022: 16), the Orange Revolution took place in Ukraine, which vacillated between Russia and the West, and pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko won the presidential election. After Yushchenko took office as President and Yulia Tymoshenko as Prime Minister, Kiev's efforts to be included in NATO gained momentum. After being elected President on February 7, 2010, Viktor Yanukovich underlined that Ukraine should be a neutral state that cooperates with Russia and Western alliances such as NATO, and a new phase has begun. Despite all the problems, democracy has been tried to be maintained and more and more Europeanization has been experienced.

A different situation emerged in Russia, which fell into anarchy and widespread misery after the Soviet Union. Putin, who came to power in 2000 with the mission of rebuilding, modernizing and stabilizing Russia, tried to develop good political and economic relations with Europe. While Russia provided a one-third or more of the energy needs of several European Union countries, thousands of Europeans, from farmers to producers, found large new markets in Russia (Cohen 2019). Over time, relations between Europe and Russia began to change because of Ukraine. There was unrest in the streets of Kyiv for months, and serious clashes took place between the security forces and the protesters. Dozens of people lost their lives in the protests that took place in February 2014. The unstable government and street protests in Ukraine prepared Putin for action, and on March 21, 2014, Putin signed a law that completed the process of annexation of Crimea to Russia. NATO's stance on Ukraine's membership was an issue that triggered Russian occupation of Crimea.

At the beginning of April 2014, Russian-backed uprisings took place in Donbass, Ukraine's heavily Russian-speaking, heavy-industrial region, the base of former President Yanukovich, and a war that risked bringing Ukraine to its knees began (Colborne 2022: 32). A phase of change began with the Ukraine crisis in 2014. With Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support of the Donbass rebels, the Western narrative of democracy was once again on the agenda (Cohen 2019) and a new era began. Russia's annexation of Crimea caused a breakthrough after the Second World War and the lands of a European state were seized by another state (The Financial Times 2014).

Representatives from France, Ukraine, Russia and Germany convened in Belarus to end the violence in Donbas and the Minsk Agreement was signed. However, the ceasefire was broken and the clashes continued. The Minsk Group convened in Belarus to end the war in eastern Ukraine, and the violence still could not be ended. The annexation of Crimea and the violence in the east affected public opinion and public support for joining NATO and the European Union began to increase in Ukraine, which has been experiencing problems between the effects of the West and Russia since its separation from the Soviet Union. Finally, on April 21, 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected as President and a new process was started. In February 2022, clashes took place between Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces in the eastern region of Donetsk and Luhansk, and the Russian forces, which carried out the largest operation in Europe since the end of the Second World War, launched an attack on the territory of Ukraine on February 24.

### **Narrative Strategies of Russia and Ukraine**

The war between Russia and Ukraine is not just a conflict between two neighboring countries. It is also a conflict between a system of values, a security issue between Russia and the Western Bloc, and a cognitive warfare involving narrative strategies. In the war between Russia and Ukraine, narratives are reconstructed every day, and Ukraine in particular tells a story using words and emotional images. The narratives used by both sides cause speculations and the chronological flow varies on both sides.

The point of view of Russia and Ukraine is based on disseminating the information they prefer the world public opinion to know. In the Western narrative, accusations are made that Putin wants to destabilize Western democracies from America to Europe and Putin is characterized by following anti-Western policies (Cohen 2019). Putin pursues a policy based on the idea that the Ukrainian identity is artificial and fragile, and desires to establish political, military and wider dominance over Ukraine from a historical perspective. Russia promotes ultranationalist rhetoric and populism in its narrative. In its main themes, Russia tries to persuade the target audience with a Moscow-centered narrative for military purposes and underlines NATO's possible stance. Putin claims that the Ukrainian government is run by Neo-Nazis and makes statements that Ukraine is operating biological laboratories with malicious intent.

While Putin removed the word war from the discourse of the Russian media in order to tell his story and win the international community, it is also seen that Putin preferred a special operation narrative to combat the oppression of Ukraine's people instead of this word (Walker 2022). By choosing to portray Ukraine and Western nations as malevolent, Putin provides a justification for revenge, and by portraying Zelenskyy as unreliable, Putin tries to give the impression of an omniscient, reliable and competent Putin.

Ukraine, on the other hand, puts an emphasis on Kiev's successes and identities in the face of difficulties in this war, highlighting a counter-challenge narrative that includes Zelenskyy's videos and stories about Ukraine's brave warriors. For this, it makes extensive use of traditional media and social media (Walker 2022). By expressing that the invasion of Russia is a damage to international peace, Ukraine conveys the need for universal condemnation as a new narrative within a narrative. The events that started in 2014 and continue into 2022 are presented with comprehensive stories that explain the war posing a serious problem for European security, the cities that were shattered after the Russian attack, the hardships experienced by people and the uncertainties in the diplomatic solution, and migration.

Ukraine uses a style to convey the truth, and Ukraine, which does not pose a strong military threat to Russia with this style, actively shares its narratives with the world through traditional media and especially the internet. Ukraine portrays the Russian Army as a force that commits daily atrocities, using the level of emotional interest to tell the world about the war and highlights aspects of everyday life in society to enable people to develop a new perspective.

## **Human Rights**

Moral arguments mobilize and restrain people. Morality is a powerful reality and can be used as propaganda in an epic way. Those with more power may ignore moral concerns. Moral arguments are not the same, and some moral arguments are compelling. It is questioned whether moral arguments are logical and consistent. The moral argument is based on impartiality (Nye and Welch 2013: 31-32). Human rights play an important role in international relations. When discussing comments and criticisms on this subject, it is important whether the arguments are based on sound information, and that they are objective and constructive. Defending the mistakes and not accepting the mistakes without investigating the facts reduces credibility and admitting the mistake strengthens the impression left by the actor (Öymen 2011: 290).

Human rights issues are an embracing issue and some countries prioritize hard power over soft power (İskit, 2012: 367). However, as technology develops over the centuries, it is understood that the sources of war power have changed and war power alone is not enough in international politics. The agenda of world politics in the distribution of power resources in the modern information age is like a game of chess. Many political leaders rely on classical military solutions and military assets. In the long run, focusing only on these will result in loss and in order to achieve the desired results in international matters, it is often necessary to use soft power values (Nye 2005: 13-14). In this context, Moscow's strategic thinking in the Russia-Ukraine War puts soft power aside and focuses on hard power. Moscow ignores human rights culture and can spread information that raises questions in the minds. As a matter of fact, Kyiv also prefers dissemination of misinformation from time to time and partially correct or incorrect information is shared with the world. In this battlefield between Russia and Ukraine, there is a strong awareness of the strategic aspect of knowledge.

Prepared narratives and human rights constitute a communication platform for the struggle, and there are accusations of committing war crimes. Information that both Russia and Ukraine committed war crimes is shared by both sides. In this sense, while it is claimed that the Russian forces committed crimes against humanity such as torture, rape, bombing of civilian buildings and executions in Ukraine, it is claimed that the prisoners, who are stated to be Russian soldiers, were also tortured by the Ukrainian army. With these accusations, both sides try to establish a justification for the struggle based on the importance of the human rights movement.

## **Representation, Story and Micro-Mythology**

Propaganda and disinformation have been used by many states for a long time; periodic cognitive warfare operations may vary. Russia resorts to cognitive warfare to revive the Soviets, protect the Putin regime, consolidate the country's power and expand its sphere of influence. Russia uses official government communications and cyber-assisted disinformation. Russia has also been involved in cyber attacks against Ukraine. While using disinformation as a weapon, Putin tries to protect the intended line of attack against Ukraine with cognitive attacks.

In 2014, a story was produced by Russia during the East Ukraine crisis that a Ukrainian militant killed a baby in front of its mother and the child was crucified like

Jesus. The news received wide coverage in the Russian media and an attempt was made to justify Russia's struggle among Russian-speaking people. With this misinformation, which is disinformation and war propaganda, Russia wanted to use a symbol to create an emotional element. However, this unreliable and untrustable information was condemned by the international press while dealing with a character's relationship with another character.

Cognitive development mechanisms are often inherited and people use their sociocultural experiences and many other experiences. This also controls mentalization (Heyes 2012: 2095). Based on past experiences, Ukraine aims to create mass consciousness by adapting the negative image of Russia and myths to today's conditions in the cognitive warfare and it tries to portray Russia as an unreliable character who deliberately spreads false information and has the ability to create tension with stories. Russia is in the media with an overly ambitious military agenda, and the prolongation of the war day by day causes the Kremlin's reputation to be questioned. Putin states that there is genocide against Russian speakers in the Donbas region, and he desires to break Ukraine's will to fight through Russia's information warfare, cyber attacks and propaganda. In addition, Russia is trying to consolidate the domestic target audience with pro-occupation propaganda. Regardless, Ukraine is forming a broad online coalition with international actors.

Ukraine has created a virtual battlefield that it carries out through the mass media and in which everyone is involved, especially via the internet. It leverages the power of the United States over social media sites and NATO's role in strategic communications on this battlefield. Ukraine designed its strategic communications management plan by taking advantage of Russia's development of complex strategies. Ukraine has taken on a challenge with stories and videos showing the devastation and misery caused by the war. Sharing images of Moscow harming civilians on social media created sympathy for Ukraine from the outside world and gave a message to the world for aid. With this strategy, Ukraine tried to prevent Russia from controlling the story and forced Russia to react. In this process, the United States shared intelligence information about Russia's movements with the whole world in order to prevent the effectiveness of Putin's narrative. Satellite photos of Russian military deployments were shared, images of Russian tanks were transferred, and the scale and details of Russian plans were revealed. Ukraine aimed to raise the spirits within the country by sharing about everything and systematically brought up Russia's attempts to spread disinformation.

Rapid changes in information movements cause changes in identities and interests. Developments in the field of communication enable rapid processing of information (Nye and Welch 2013: 382). In this context, days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, posts about the war started to be shared on social media, and information on how the Russian attack would be was conveyed on Twitter, Instagram and many social media platforms. A paradox also occurred in the war. The occupation of Russia reinforced the determination of the Ukrainian people to resist and brought the people closer; they did not see the Russian troops as saviors. Moreover, the resentment of the Ukrainian people increased and a form of protection based on self-determination was created. In this form of protection, Ukrainian nationalism was about excluding Russia,

which could be perceived as an enemy. For Ukraine, the war was founded on survival and it was seen that it was not in the name of the West.

Ukraine led to a virtual citizen mobilization through cognitive warfare and used plots in stories as a technique. Ukraine also resorted to exaggerations and untrue stories. The alleged operation of the “Ghost of Kyiv” story, built as a heroic pilot, against the Russian Air Force conquered people’s hearts. This legendary character turned out to be a character created by Ukrainians, and this story went viral on social media. The myth of “Ghost of Kyiv”, which is a propaganda to raise morale, has become a topic that people need sentimentally. As can be seen in the example, there is a reference to legends and myths in cognitive warfare, and these are widely used in social media.

Symbols are communicated through spoken and written languages, and by using languages, knowledge is developed about history and diversity, and all aspects of the physical and natural world (Heyes 2012: 2091). Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a former TV actor, develops a knowledge of the future of Ukraine’s history with the language he uses and he gives the impression of an exemplary role model by appearing on the streets with his soldiers and soldiers. Reflected as a risk-taking leader, Zelenskyy is seen as a figure who focuses on goals, challenges and strengths. Zelenskyy issued a call for global help on various TV channels. Using his acting talent, Zelenskyy also spoke at the Cannes Film Festival and left his mark on the world agenda. At the beginning of the war, Zelenskyy underlined that he was personally involved in the struggle, with effective words such as “I need ammunition, not a ride” to the United States’ evacuation offer and it became one of the inspiring stories of the strategic roadmap for Ukraine to stay at war.

All mental activities are related to “something”. It’s like a job, like the face of a friend you see across the road, and the way knowledge is internally represented is important. A representation is a physical state that carries information, describing an object, event, or category. There is a content and meaning conveyed through representation (Smith and Kosslyn 2017:11). In this sense, Tractors have also become a representation of the resistance in Ukraine, and images of a Ukrainian farmer stealing a Russian tank with his tractor have spread on the internet. In the video, a man believed to be a Russian soldier desperately chased after the vehicle and the people there watched the incident laughing (The Independent 2022).

Another representation is the images of women at the front in Ukraine preparing Molotov cocktails. Photos of many women with military uniforms and weapons, who expressed their readiness to resist the Russian occupation, and images of Molotov cocktails prepared for ammunition spread quickly on social media. The story of the resistance was given a tone with the posts that emphasized on the importance of women in the resistance of Ukraine and the character of the Ukrainian women was tried to be reflected.

Objects were used to develop the main themes and representation was added to the stories to reveal a form of expression for Ukraine. A technique was used to distinguish the Ukrainians from the Russians, and with the sound developed, the impression that there could be an element of surprise in the war was created. By



emphasizing the heroic resistance of the people, the Ukrainian authorities created a warrior society that fits the micro-mythology, and the narrative of the liberation of the Ukrainian people was widely covered in the media. Namely, in cognitive warfare, a specific operational plan of action creates favorable conditions on the ground and elicits public support for the continuation of military operations.

### Conclusion

The Russian tendency to re-establish the old empire has always aroused a fear in the Eastern European satellite states about Russian expansionism. Countries neighboring Russia did not share the American belief that the security of their countries would be ensured with the change of Russia and they constantly lived in fear (Kissinger 2012: 797). Ukraine has also been one of the countries experiencing this fear, and the military operation launched by Russia on February 24, 2022 included asymmetric engagements, weapons, air strikes, the use of hypersonic missiles and nuclear threats. In the Russia-Ukraine War, Moscow adopted the Machiavellian principle, frequently resorted to manipulation within the framework of hybrid warfare, and its operational stalemates turned into stalemates on cognitive warfare. Due to Moscow's design of its cognitive operations, there has been a battlefield where communities that care about democracy protect democratic values.

In the Russo-Ukrainian War, in which the structural features of contemporary security environments exist, full-scale conflicts are experienced and the war brings together traditional and modern elements. Samuel Phillips Huntington states in *The Clash of Civilizations* that people can redefine and construct their identities, that some countries have cultural homogeneity, and that there is a disagreement over whether their societies belong to one civilization or another (Huntington 1993). The Russo-Ukrainian War confirms Huntington's thesis. Ukraine is redefining and constructing its identity with the war it has waged. Ukraine uses narratives to leave emotional and mental effects with stories that are sometimes real and sometimes unreal, and tries to create a perspective on the world by creating a series of events. In the war where Putin continues to be perceived as an invader, Ukraine focuses on multiple characters, from female fighters to Zelenskyy and sharing the words and images of the characters instantly is a source of motivation to "achieve victory". Within the framework of all this, Ukraine forms an archetype with cognitive warfare. In this archetype, symbolic expressions occur and certain behavioral patterns are created. The war between Russia and Ukraine has shown that not thinking intellectually and not conducting the cognitive warfare analytically is strategic shortsightedness.

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