

Don't Sleep on Russian Information-War Capabilities

Indeed, the Ukraine invasion should galvanize U.S. investment in its own messaging infrastructure.

Last month, when CIA Director Bill Burns appeared before the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee to speak on the situation in Ukraine, he was asked about Russia's use of disinformation and counter-narratives as instruments to legitimize its invasion.

"This is one information war that I think Putin is losing," [Burns responded](#).

He is not alone in his view. The [Washington Post](#) and [CNBC](#) have run separate articles under the headline: "Ukraine is winning the information war" against Russia.

It certainly appears as though Russia's opening portrait of the "special operation" as a quest to emancipate the people of Ukraine from [drug-addicted Nazi oppressors](#) has fallen too far outside of global audiences' existing belief systems to gain traction. At the highest levels of government, world leaders have [nearly unanimously](#) come out in support of Ukraine, even hurling a [tsunami of sanctions](#) at Russia. On the other end of the spectrum, [blue-and-yellow flags](#) now dot American neighborhoods as symbols of solidarity for Ukraine. From this vantage point, Ukraine looks to have Russia beat. But this is only part of the story.

Instead of fixating on Russia's missteps, policymakers and analysts would benefit from studying Ukraine's sophisticated information campaign while bearing in mind that Russia retains significant [information warfare capabilities](#) and [a willingness to use them](#). Moreover, Russia is endowed with several related advantages such as a robust state-backed media apparatus, an increasingly hermetic [PB1] domestic information space, and the capacity for [wholly manufactured yarns or deliberately misrepresented half-truths](#). In fact, we see evidence of these capabilities, advantages, and this willingness working on some of Russia's target audiences. In Russia and small pockets of eastern Ukraine, [anecdotal reporting](#) indicates that some audiences are buying the Kremlin line. [Stories](#) of Russians refusing to believe their Ukrainian family members' own harrowing [personal accounts of the war](#) have surfaced.

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Kyiv restaurateur Misha Katsurin, who posted on Instagram about his father's refusal to acknowledge Russia's role as the aggressor, received an outpouring of support in the form of [135,000 likes and shares](#), and hundreds of comments by people with similar experiences. Katsurin has since established a site, [Papa pover](#) ("Dad, believe") designed to help Ukrainians engage family members in Russia who believe the Kremlin's stories. The site has gathered a catalogue of disinformation narratives and suggestions about scripted responses.

In Russia, the de-Nazification narrative [is not new](#). Talking heads on Russian state-operated TV—which [62 percent of Russians rely on for news](#), according to recent polling—have spent the past eight years [fearmongering](#) about this supposed [threat](#). Years-long [exposure](#) to such narratives can have a profound and durable [effect on one's perceptions](#) and beliefs. It's the first-mover advantage, reinforced by [repetition and familiarity](#). In fact, [58 percent of Russians](#) polled between February 28 and March 3 indicated approval for the invasion of Ukraine. This suggests that attempts to message to, influence, and/or mobilize Russian military personnel or the broader public may fall on deaf ears for much of this audience.

The claims to be rooting out supposed Nazis are but one element of Russia's broader information campaign. Perhaps recognizing the failure of these early narratives to take root among global publics, the Kremlin has pivoted to manufacturing conspiracies on Ukrainian chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs. Though similarly far-fetched on their face, these stories are at least plausible, in that most industrial countries have chemical production and laboratories, and Ukraine has a history of [weapons manufacture](#) dating back to the Soviet era. What's more, the believability of this narrative is aided by the fact that it is rooted in a kernel of truth: In early March, a U.S. authority figure, Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, [confirmed](#) to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Ukraine is home to biological research facilities, a fact which Russia has [latched onto and distorted](#).

More concerning for U.S. policymakers is the fact that these narratives and others propagated by Russian officials and their proxies appear to be [gaining some traction](#) among segments of the U.S. public. If Russia's past propensity to [target American audiences](#) is any indication, more disinformation and propaganda of this nature is likely forthcoming. And Russia possesses other instruments in its informational toolkit. Within Russia, for instance, the Kremlin has tightened its grip on information with the implementation of a sweeping set of new restrictions on [journalism](#) and [social media](#). Meanwhile, President Biden has recently warned the nation against the increasing [likelihood of Russian cyberattacks](#). Moreover, this first month of the war in Ukraine has [demonstrated](#) Russia's willingness to use [false-flag operations](#) and various other [instruments of subversion](#) in service of political and military ends.

For its part, the evidence so far suggests that the Ukrainian government has mounted a stunningly sophisticated informational campaign in an effort to shape global opinions, to rouse domestic morale, and to persuade Russian soldiers to lay down their arms. Aided by the U.S. intelligence community's exposure of Kremlin machinations and the introduction of [unprecedented intelligence sharing practices](#), officials in Kyiv have mounted a coordinated yet agile, high-volume, multi-platform information effort. In the first moments of the conflict, Zelensky deftly [set the narrative](#) in the informational battlespace, hijacking and inverting Moscow's attempts to paint the authorities in Kyiv as fascists—instead casting the Kremlin as Nazis by tapping into deeply rooted historical memories of the Second World War.

From compelling captured-soldier videos, to social media posts targeting Russian troops, to the daily video updates from officials in Kyiv demonstrating continuity of government, to Zelensky's tailored remarks to legislators, the Ukrainian leadership has used the information environment to its advantage. U.S. analysts, scholars, and practitioners of influence and information campaigns would benefit from monitoring, dissecting, and learning from Ukrainian information efforts.

The Ukrainian government's information campaign over the past five weeks offers another important dimension to this lesson: that sophisticated information capabilities are not built in a day but honed over time. In 2014, Kyiv's messaging in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and incursions into the Donbas was [incongruous and slow](#). [Officials reported divergent casualty figures](#), which Russian actors exploited in their messaging as evidence of the incompetence of authorities in Kyiv. Since then, Ukraine has invested in and [retooled](#) its approach to the informational aspects of crisis and conflict ([in some cases](#) drawing criticism), resulting in the robust capability we're witnessing today.

The U.S. has allowed its information warfare and influence capabilities to atrophy before, particularly in periods of relative peace following [World War II](#) and fall of the Iron Curtain. There are several reasons for this neglect. First, those in the U.S. government responsible for information and influence activities have long been entrenched in [lexical and sectarian disputes](#). Put simply, there is little agreement on what to call information activities and who is responsible for them. Relatedly, the U.S. government community responsible for information efforts has also suffered from an optics problem.

In the wake of WWII, previously accepted terms of art including “propaganda,” “information warfare,” and “psychological warfare,” and their associated activities [gained a reputation as unsavory](#). What is more, informational activities do not fit neatly within any one DOD portfolio where a largely [kinetic-focused culture](#) has meant these capabilities are often treated as “[an afterthought...laminated on to](#)” existing plans, in the words of former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford, Jr. Lastly, the U.S. lacks a national-level information strategy and/or body to set guidance and serve as arbiter between the various entities with hands in this space.

Recently, leaders in the Defense Department and broader U.S. government [acknowledged](#) the criticality of information in conflict and competition. In this vein, federal agencies and the armed services have taken steps to institutionalize this refocusing through the establishment of informationally-focused [organizations, units, and positions in leadership](#). Even so, recent research in this arena has indicated that these nascent efforts still have a [long way to go](#). It would seem to be a mistake to take Russia’s recent blunders in the information space in Ukraine as reasons to deprioritize or reduce American investments in its informational capabilities.

Alyssa Demus and Christopher Paul both study information warfare, influence, and other defense operations in the information environment at the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation.