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COGNITIVE WARFARE IN THE CAUCASUS

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ABSTRACT.

Cognitive warfare, as an emerging domain of contemporary security, is increasingly drawing the attention of international organizations and academic scholarship. In NATO and partner institutions' discussions, it is conceptualized as the "sixth domain of warfare," where the battlefield extends beyond the physical environment to encompass human consciousness and perception. The Caucasus region, with its geopolitical vulnerability and strategic significance, is particularly sensitive to such influences. Actors operating in the region, both states and informal groups, employ mechanisms of disinformation, reflexive control, and narrative manipulation to shape public opinion and political decision-making. Existing research indicates that Russian information strategies, as well as Turkish and Iranian narratives, significantly influence the regional cognitive environment, while local media ecosystems and non-governmental organizations represent both points of vulnerability and potential avenues for resilience-building. This article aims to integrate theoretical frameworks of cognitive warfare with practical experiences from the Caucasus in order to assess the adequacy of current policies and to identify strategies that may effectively enhance resilience.

Keywords: cognitive warfare, information warfare, disinformation, propaganda, perception manipulation, mass control.

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Introduction

Cognitive warfare describes a deliberate set of actions aimed at influencing the consciousness, perception, and decision-making processes of individuals and groups in such a way that the target often remains unaware of both the source and the extent of the influence. The concept is most clearly articulated by the research framework developed at NATO's Allied Command Transformation Innovation Hub, alongside the discourse on "cognitive advantage," which defines the term as a multipolar mechanism for superior analysis and decision-making over adversaries. Within this framework, the "mind" is treated as a battlefield, with mechanisms of defense and attack integrated into streams of informational, cyber, and broader hybrid operations.¹

In the South Caucasus, the geopolitical nexus of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan emerges as a "hot spot" for cognitive influence. The region is characterized by prolonged conflicts, great power competition for spheres of influence, and struggles over energy corridors, which increase both the intensity of direct information operations and the effects of cognitive interventions. NATO's 2021 Strategic Communications report identifies Georgia's information environment as a consistent target of Russian influence², while the Atlantic Council's 2024 study notes that targeted information campaigns in the South Caucasus aim to undermine social cohesion and weaken pro-Western perspectives.³

Historically, discussions on cognitive warfare intersect with the Soviet/Russian theory of "Reflexive Control," which seeks to create an information environment around an adversary such that they make decisions contrary to their own interests. Timothy Thomas provides a classical description of this theory, and contemporary military-intelligence research often regards it as a central component of Russian information-psychological operations.⁴

Although numerous documented instances of disinformation, propaganda, and influence operations have been observed in the region, the impact of cognitive warfare on consciousness and decision-making processes remains fragmented. A significant portion of existing studies focuses on narrative content and platform dynamics, such as social media ecosystems, but provides limited insight into how these flows translate into stable shifts in public perception, erosion of institutional trust, or influence on political choices. Reports by the Media Development Foundation in 2022 detail the content and diffusion of anti-Western message boxes⁵, while IREX studies from 2024 highlight⁶ increasing media-institutional volatility. Additional comparative studies from 2024-2025 illustrate the transnational repertoire of Russian narratives and their adaptation within Georgia's media ecosystem.⁷

This study pursues three interrelated objectives: first, to refine the theoretical and terminological framework of cognitive warfare within NATO and contemporary scholarly discourse; second, to identify specific cognitive effects in the South Caucasus, particularly Georgia, based on empirical material; and third, to formulate practical recommendations for media, state security, and civil society actors, emphasizing prevention and resilience as integral components of public security.

Following the 2008 war, Russian information-cognitive influence became increasingly structured and long-term, manifesting in deepening societal polarization, delegitimization of Euro-Atlantic integration, and erosion of institutional trust. The practical significance of this study lies in adopting an "effects-oriented" approach to cognitive warfare analysis-examining how, when, and under what conditions consciousness and decision-making processes are stably shaped. This perspective is essential for enabling strategic communication units, media, and civil society to develop preventive measures that enhance societal and institutional resilience.

The research is consolidated around two central questions:

¹ Cluzel F. "Cognitive Warfare" June-November 2020, (p. 6-12).

² "Georgia's Information Environment through the Lens of Russia's Influence" (July 2021) Accessed August 19, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/4auRE>

³ Buziashvili E. Gelava S. Gogitashvili G. Mejlumyan A. Olari V. "Information Warfare in the South Caucasus and Moldova" Atlantic Council (October 2024) (p. 3-14).

⁴ Thomas T. "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military" Accessed August 19, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/5OHZs>

⁵ Kintsurashvili T. "ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA 2022" (p. 52-60).

⁶ Vibrant Information Barometer. Accessed August 19, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/He3iX>

⁷ Vardanyan E. Zolyan M. "IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND THEIR ECHOES IN GEORGIA AND ARMENIA" (p. 17-22).

1. How does cognitive warfare manifest in the Caucasus, which forms, methods, and mechanisms are employed, and how do these differ from classical information warfare approaches?
2. How effectively do local states and civil society respond to cognitive threats, and which strategies could enhance societal resilience?

This study employs a qualitative social research methodology. The advantage of the qualitative method lies in its capacity for in-depth, multifaceted theoretical examination, allowing for analysis of the distinctive features of information-cognitive influence from various actors in the South Caucasus. Data collection utilized qualitative content analysis of scholarly sources.

Main Chapter

1.1 Theoretical Framework of Cognitive Warfare

Cognitive warfare represents a strategic process aimed at influencing the consciousness, perception, and decision-making processes of individuals or groups. Its essence goes beyond mere information provision or manipulation, encompassing targeted influence that takes into account the structures of consciousness, often resulting in victims making decisions contrary to their own interests. NATO's concept of cognitive warfare defines this domain as the "sixth dimension of warfare," existing alongside physical (land, water, air, and space), cyber, and informational operations. At the center of the concept lies cognitive advantage, which entails superior and faster information perception, analysis, and decision-making than the opponent, a key component in contemporary warfare.⁸

The Russian theory of reflexive control forms a classical foundation of cognitive warfare. Its objective is to predict an adversary's actions and manipulate their decisions so that the opponent independently makes choices contrary to their interests. Classical approaches rely on the psychological, social, and cultural characteristics of the adversary, enabling highly precise informational influence. In contemporary military-intelligence research, the principles of Russian reflexive control are integrated with platform algorithms, artificial intelligence, and social media tools, reducing temporal gaps in influence execution.⁹

1.2 Regional Context: The South Caucasus

The South Caucasus constitutes a geopolitically and strategically vulnerable region, where historical, ethnic, and political conflicts create a highly sensitive environment for narratives and cognitive influence. Energy corridors, military bases, and transit lines in the region are exploited not only for physical control but also for shaping perception. Considering this vulnerability is crucial for analyzing cognitive operations, as global and regional interests often conflict, intensifying the competition of narratives.¹⁰

In the South Caucasus, narratives are disseminated through multiple¹¹ channels. Russia employs pro-Russian and anti-Western messaging, including social media, media platforms, and political campaigns. These narratives aim to erode public trust, increase political polarization, and manipulate institutional decision-making. Turkey exerts influence through cultural, linguistic, and historical narratives, promoting Neo-Ottoman perspectives among local populations. Iranian influence is primarily expressed via military-cultural and religious narratives, particularly within Shiite communities, where short-term influence attempts occur.¹² Arab actors, including diplomatic and informational organizations, leverage cultural, religious, and economic instruments to shape perceptions, often within the framework of regional conflicts. Western actors attempt to maintain trust, increase societal resilience, and support democratic processes through media assistance, fact-checking platforms, and informational programs.

Local media and civil society are critical components in countering cognitive warfare. They establish defense mechanisms, slow the spread of disinformation, and raise public awareness. However, challenges such as trust deficits, political polarization, and targeted algorithmic attacks reduce this resilience. Consequently, cognitive

⁸ "Allied Command Transformation develops the Cognitive Warfare Concept to Combat Disinformation and Defend Against "Cognitive Warfare". Accessed August 19, 2025. <https://www.act.nato.int/article/cogwar-concept/>

⁹ Paulauskas K. "Why cognitive superiority is an imperative". Accessed August 19, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/1iI2o>

¹⁰ Buziashvili E. Gelava S. Gogitashvili G. Mejlumyan A. Olari V. "Information Warfare in the South Caucasus and Moldova" Atlantic Council (October 2024) (p. 22).

¹¹ "Georgia's Information Environment through the Lens of Russia's Influence". Accessed August 19, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/A4dKF>

¹² Thomas T. "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military". Accessed August 19, 2025. <https://shorturl.at/5OHZs>

influence often goes unnoticed by the population, increasing the potential for shaping decision-making processes.

Notably, in the South Caucasus, cognitive warfare elements are not solely defined by international actors, but also by local political forces, media platforms, and NGOs. This creates a complex network in which narratives compete and their influence on the population fluctuates constantly. Analyzing this context is essential for developing effective strategies to address cognitive threats while enhancing societal resilience.

1.3 Empirical Analysis: Case Study Method in the South Caucasus

In South Caucasus countries, elements of cognitive warfare manifest in both public consciousness and the formation of political processes. In Georgia, these effects are particularly evident during election periods, when pro-Russian, anti-Western, and diverse cultural narratives are actively used to manipulate public opinion. These narratives influence not only supporters of political parties but also the broader society, fostering polarization and undermining public trust in state institutions. Media independence and the activity of fact-checking platforms provide partial protection against disinformation, though the speed of attacks and targeted algorithmic campaigns often exceeds local resilience capabilities.

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, cognitive influence is closely linked to conflict-related narratives, particularly regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. National and ethnic narratives play a significant role in shaping public perception, influencing political decisions and regional stability. For example, Azerbaijani state media actively constructs narratives that reinforce a sense of national unity, while pro-Russian narratives and historical memory politics in Armenia significantly shape public opinion.

Empirical data confirm that the effects of cognitive operations in the region are multifaceted. Different societal groups respond differently to narratives, necessitating tactical and adaptive approaches to managing cognitive influence. For instance, youth groups in Georgia are more receptive to Western counter-narratives, while older generations are more sensitive to Russian and traditional narratives. Such data are important not only for scholarly analysis but also for policy-making aimed at strengthening societal resilience.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that elements of cognitive warfare significantly influence both public perception and political decision-making in the South Caucasus countries. The region is affected not only by Russian influence but also by the active involvement of Turkey, Iran, Arab actors, and Western states. This multifaceted intervention creates a complex narrative environment in which actors with diverse interests attempt to shape public consciousness and affect decision-making processes.

The analysis of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan confirms that cognitive operations are not solely the initiative of international actors; local political groups, media, and NGOs actively participate in shaping narratives. In Georgia, pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, especially during election periods, exacerbate political polarization and hinder independent institutional decision-making. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, national and ethnic narratives heighten societal sensitivity to territorial and historical conflicts, further complicating regional stability.

The effects of cognitive influence vary across age, social, and cultural groups. Youth, who are more integrated into contemporary technologies, are more receptive to Western counter-narratives, whereas older generations are more sensitive to Russian and traditional narratives. This highlights the need for strategies tailored to different groups to enhance societal resilience against disinformation and cognitive influence.

At the conclusion of this study, the research questions can be addressed more clearly. Regarding the first question - how cognitive warfare manifests in the Caucasus, which forms, methods, and mechanisms are employed, and how these differ from classical information warfare approaches - the findings indicate that the effects of cognitive warfare in the region are multifaceted. In Georgia, pro-Russian, anti-Western, and culturally targeted narratives during election periods increase political polarization and hinder independent institutional decision-making. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, national and ethnic narratives reinforce societal sensitivity to historical and territorial conflicts, influencing political stability. Both international actors and local political groups and media participate in these processes.

Regarding the second question - how effectively local states and civil society respond to cognitive threats, and which strategies could enhance societal resilience - it can be concluded that strengthening future resilience requires the enhancement of local initiatives, independent media, fact-checking platforms, and civil society

activities. Adapting international practices, including NATO and Western organizational experiences, ensures effective control against cognitive influence, increases public awareness, and contributes to maintaining strategic balance in the region.

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