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ANALYSIS

RUSSIA

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Russia Seeks to Exploit
Western "War Fatigue"
to Win in Ukraine

Executive Summary

The Kremlin very likely believes that continued economic and military support for Ukraine is becoming increasingly unpalatable and politically unpopular for Western countries (an attitude framed as “war fatigue” in the West). However, Russia very likely believes that the collective Western nations have the economic and military capacity to continue to provide aid to Ukraine. Therefore, Russia will almost certainly endeavor to influence Western elections throughout 2024 to exploit perceived political consternation associated with continued support to Ukraine. Notably, Russia makes determinations regarding Western “war fatigue” based on Western political statements, economic data, and public sentiment analysis, then exploits the information through the Kremlin’s approach to “information confrontation” to further Moscow’s goals. Russia forces its adversary — via its “reflexive control” strategy — to confront a critical question: Is the pursuit of the current national security objective worth the associated social, economic, or political instability?

By exploiting Western “war fatigue”, Russia seeks to outlast Western support for Ukraine and achieve victory in the war. The Kremlin’s stated objectives in Ukraine are “de-Nazification”, “demilitarization”, and Moscow’s strategic goal of preventing Ukraine from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Due to a lack of specificity concerning what accomplishing some of these goals looks like, specifically “de-Nazification” and “demilitarization”, Moscow likely retains the flexibility to claim success in Ukraine when it is politically expedient. Based on Russia’s stated goals and NATO’s requirements for membership in the military alliance, we judge that Moscow is currently achieving its strategic objective of preventing Ukraine from joining NATO, akin to the process Russia used in 2008 to prevent Georgia from joining NATO — by seizing territory.

Moscow’s view concerning Western “war fatigue” is anchored in a key assumption that Russians are better “professional sufferers” than Western citizens. Whereas Moscow believes Russians will more readily accept austerity measures associated with national conflict, the Kremlin believes Western societies would more likely appeal to national government leadership to end conflict and re-establish pre-conflict societal normalcy. Additionally, Russia likely believes that Western societies could engage in nationally destabilizing activities (such as protests or riots) linked with national leadership’s intent to support or engage in armed conflict abroad while the citizenry faces economic discomfort. As a result, Moscow is spreading influence narratives highlighting the economic impact on Western citizens of their governments dedicating economic and military resources to multiple conflicts (in Ukraine, Israel, or the Red Sea, for example), and exploiting concerns around a potential future direct conflict with Russia.

To increase its legitimacy with Western audiences, Russian information operations actors, specifically overt Russian media organizations targeting Western audiences, are increasingly citing Western media outlets, current and former government officials, official government data, academic institutions, think tanks, and influential individuals who operate within the geopolitical and military information space. This is almost certainly designed to undermine Western efforts to claim Russia is engaged in mis- or disinformation concerning narrative propagation about Russia’s war against Ukraine and Western support.

Western collective efforts to undermine Russian exploitation of perceived “war fatigue” will likely require alterations to the West’s approach in the information space and domestic economic policy. Specifically, information activities designed to counter Russian influence operations should be judicious when employing information control measures and ensure the correct use of the terms misinformation and disinformation. If Western nations employ more restrictive information policies, Moscow will very likely attempt to weaponize Western information censorship practices, especially in nations with traditional Western civil liberties enshrined in founding documents. Concerning domestic economic policy, Western nations should seek options to alleviate the economic strain on their citizens, such as that caused by increased food and energy prices. In doing so, national governments will likely reduce public fatigue regarding economic and military support to Ukraine and undermine Russian efforts to exploit associated pain points.

Key Findings

- Russia’s primary strategic objective — to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO — is likely already accomplished under the current geopolitical conditions and NATO’s current requirements for obtaining membership (due to Russia’s seizure of Ukrainian territory).
- Western political elections in 2024 will almost certainly provide Russia with an avenue to attempt to exploit perceived political angst concerning continued support of Ukraine — the Kremlin will almost certainly conduct information confrontation efforts in support of candidates and policies that are more closely aligned with Russia’s national security interests.
- Russia very likely believes that the collective West possesses the economic and military capacity to continue supporting Ukraine; however, continued support is likely undermining Western domestic political and fiscal stability and therefore becoming increasingly unpopular.
- The Kremlin seeks to weaponize economic pain and political discontent related to armed conflicts among Western populations in order to reduce public support for providing economic and military aid to Ukraine, similar to Soviet “active measures” during the Vietnam War.
- The Kremlin is adapting to the modern information environment, weaponizing Western information sources to garner legitimacy among Western audiences and undermine Western claims that Moscow is engaged in mis- or disinformation.

Conceptualizing Russian “Victory” in Ukraine

Based on Moscow’s publicly stated goals in Ukraine, “victory” for Russia likely includes 1) no advanced NATO military capabilities based in Ukraine and 2) Ukraine not becoming a NATO member. Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow has [articulated](#) a number of strategic goals. The Kremlin has repeatedly stated that Russia endeavors to “de-Nazify” and demilitarize Ukraine and to prevent it from joining the NATO alliance. It is very likely that Moscow’s primary strategic objective in Ukraine is [preventing](#) the continued expansion of NATO along its periphery, a red line the Kremlin has increasingly articulated since 2008 when former president George W. Bush [proposed](#) that Georgia and Ukraine gain NATO membership. Although Russia’s actions have resulted in Finland and Sweden (pending) joining NATO, Moscow has [articulated](#) for nearly 2 decades the red line that Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO [represents](#), which is very likely [linked](#) to the Kremlin’s national security interests [associated](#) with each nation.¹ In response to Finland and Sweden’s pending NATO memberships, the Kremlin has claimed that Russia will concentrate military capabilities to counter potential military threats emanating from NATO in the region.^{2 3 4 5} However, senior Russian decision-makers have provided very little detailed information concerning how Moscow will seek to achieve its objectives in terms of operational timelines or its vision of Ukraine in a post-conflict geopolitical environment.

Concerning “de-Nazification”⁶, Moscow believes that the current Kyiv administration is in league with or operating under the direction of neo-Nazism.⁷ Of note, Russia does not define neo-Nazism in the same manner the West does. According to official Russian policy, neo-Nazism is not synonymous with “antisemitism” and is framed as an alignment with extreme nationalistic, “totalitarian”, “fascist”, and discriminatory ideas. Although discrimination is a key feature of what Russia frames as “Nazi” or “neo-Nazi”, it is not just government-driven discrimination against Jews, but any ethnic, racial, religious, or political minority group, according to the same Russian official document.^{8 9 10} In this, prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Moscow classified its perceptions of Kyiv’s treatment of ethnic Russian minorities in eastern Ukraine as “Nazi” behavior, specifically referring to Ukrainian military attacks and

¹ Russia’s aversion to Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO is very likely linked to Moscow’s national security interests, specifically strategic terrain in the Caucasus Mountains and retaining a stronghold in the Black Sea — which enables Russia to defend against threats along its southern flank and provides strategic access to the Mediterranean Sea.

² <https://tass.com/politics/1599407>

³ <https://tass.com/politics/1451583>

⁴ <https://www.rt.com/russia/589228-finland-nato-putin-response/>

⁵ <https://www.rt.com/russia/582789-kremlin-nato-ukraine-sweden-finland/>

⁶ According to the Russian national policy titled “Regarding the Situation with the Glorification of Nazism and the Spread of Neo-Nazism and Other Practices That Contribute to Fuelling Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance”, Russia’s definition of “Nazi” or “neo-Nazi” is not simply “antisemitic”, but is more nuanced and accounts for the broad abuse of nationalistic government powers against minority groups. Because of this, the “Nazi” designation” is expanded beyond anti-Jewish sentiment.

⁷ <https://www.rt.com/russia/572443-dugin-ukraine-nazi-paradise/>

⁸

https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/1918450/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab20007b1248c3ebdb56a8ed085ab963d3c307869925ffeae1d54605bc0295375afb280884a9bee21430002ee3f551815930940836e877b5468bd644df6a51787dd243bdcb2072c3591171336b5875a9e5def1b67bc306f9c1c7d8

⁹ <https://tass.com/politics/1518285>

¹⁰ <https://tass.com/politics/1532573>

laws that illegalized Russian language and history.¹¹ Soon after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow pointed to the Azov Battalion, which the Kremlin accused of being a Western-supported, neo-Nazi military element that held official status within the Ukrainian Armed Forces.¹² Over the past year, Moscow has claimed that Ukraine's national government continues to align with neo-Nazism, pointing to reports of Kyiv memorializing Stepan Bandera (a WWII-era Ukrainian nationalist and reported Nazi collaborator) or Ukrainian Armed Forces wearing Nazi symbols on their military uniforms, such as the Black Sun or Schutzstaffel (SS) lightning bolts—some of these reports were later found to be fabricated.^{13 14 15 16 17} Despite Russia's official government policy and perceptions of Ukrainian government actions, we do not discount that Russian framing of Ukraine as a "neo-Nazi" state is almost certainly also intended to disparage the country and undermine Western support for Kyiv.

Regarding "demilitarization", we judge that the Kremlin very likely seeks to prevent Ukraine from fielding a military that represents a legitimate threat along Russia's borders.^{18 19} In this, Moscow will likely attempt to prevent the deployment of or destroy advanced Western military capabilities deployed to Ukraine that can hold Russian sensitive equities at risk, such as the US Mark-41 (also known as AEGIS Ashore), which Moscow [believes](#) has an offensive strike capability.

The Kremlin very likely believes Russia can take certain military steps that undermine NATO expansion, specifically the seizure or annexation of territories. Under NATO's current rules for membership, a nation with active territorial disputes cannot join the military alliance. Similar to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, which was very likely intended to [prevent](#) NATO expansion along its southern flank, Moscow very likely [believes](#) that its current actions will result in Ukraine's inability to join the military alliance. Akin to Russia seizing the separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, partly to prevent Tbilisi from joining NATO, the Kremlin likely judges that seizing terrain in eastern Ukraine, specifically Crimea, Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia, will accomplish the same with Ukraine. Based on our understanding of Russia's stated national security interests, especially concerning NATO expansion, Moscow's current military operations in Ukraine and [annexation](#) of Ukrainian territory are almost certainly intended to prevent Ukraine from becoming a NATO member under the military alliance's current membership [guidelines](#).²⁰

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https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/1918450/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab20007b1248c3ebdb56a8ed085ab963d3c307869925ffeae1d54605bc0295375afb280884a9bee21430002ee3f551815930940836e877b5468bd644df6a51787dd243bdcb2072c3591171336b5875a9e5def1b67bc306f9c1c7d8

¹² <https://www.rt.com/tags/azov-battalion-news/>

¹³ <https://www.rt.com/russia/577967-putin-ukraine-stepan-bandera/>

¹⁴ <https://www.rt.com/news/566262-america-nazi-collaborators/>

¹⁵ <https://www.rt.com/russia/583014-poroshenko-nazi-patch-ukraine/>

¹⁶ <https://www.rt.com/news/582351-neo-nazi-biden-ukraine/>

¹⁷ <https://www.rt.com/russia/566414-ukraine-nazi-insignia-soldiers/>

¹⁸ <https://tass.com/politics/1634505>

¹⁹ <https://tass.com/politics/1634505>

²⁰ https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/

Historic Context and Strategic Anchoring

Since the Soviet era, Russian military theorists have [posited](#) that in the event of a Russia-West conflict or war, Western country populaces would be unable to [handle](#) sustained and prolonged economic hardship. In this hypothetical, as the West and Russia exchange punitive economic measures and conduct non-kinetic or kinetic targeting of national critical assets, such as food, energy, banking, or communications infrastructure, the Kremlin believes Western societies would appeal to national leadership to bring an end to the conflict and return to a degree of pre-war normalcy. Further, Moscow believes the Russian citizenry is better suited to deal with domestic [hardship](#) associated with conflict than Western societies, citing Russia's long [history](#) of wars, [revolutions](#), and historically [austere](#) standard of living (further explained in **Appendix A**).^{21 22}

Russia's Strategy Exploits Economic Pain and Political Discontent

Moscow's approach to exploiting perceived "war fatigue"²³ and conducting information confrontation is embodied by the activities of Russian government officials and Russia's state media apparatus. At the senior levels of the Russian government, officials make statements citing information about the adversary nation's economic stability and how perceived domestic hardship for the adversary nation's citizenry could end if its national leadership negotiated for peace or de-escalation of tensions. Concurrently, Russia's state media apparatus focuses on and amplifies narratives, in many instances derived from Western sources, that highlight the negative implications associated with Western continued support for foreign conflicts.

Another part of Russia's strategy is an effort to frame Western actions against Russia as ineffective or having limited impacts. As of this writing, the degree to which Western economic measures against Russia are affecting the day-to-day life of the Russian citizenry remains unknown. However, in March 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged that Western sanctions could affect Russia's economy in the "medium term" and highlighted the need for Russia's domestic economic market to adapt.²⁴ According to July 2023 polling data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the vast majority of Russian citizens are either [unaffected](#) or not concerned with Western sanctions. In December 2023 data from [Gallup](#), Russian citizen's opinions on life in Russia have remained largely unchanged or have improved since January 2022, data which Russia's state media outlet RT cited.²⁵ Insikt Group is unable to determine the validity of this sentiment analysis as of this writing.

²¹ <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/330100-7-reasons-why-russians-are-tough>

²² Russia Beyond is a media outlet with direct links to Russian Cultural Centers and the Russian Foreign Ministry. Although not considered a notable source in the West, this outlet serves as a means for the Russian government to promote Russian history, culture, traditions, and values abroad.

²³ The concept of "war fatigue" is related to a nation's willingness or desire to engage in armed conflict, not necessarily its capacity to do so.

²⁴ <https://tass.ru/politika/17397055>

²⁵ <https://www.rt.com/russia/588769-russia-living-standards-poll/>

Russian Assessment of the West's Economic and Political Capacity for Subsidizing Conflict

As Russia's war against Ukraine persists, the Kremlin is almost certainly making continuous assessments of the West's capacity to continue to provide military and economic aid to Kyiv. In order to inform these assessments, Russia is very likely focusing on and analyzing data concerning the impact that the provision of financial and military aid is having on Western economies. Moscow also very likely makes determinations about Western nations' societal sentiment and the political popularity of continued support for the conflict.

Assessment of Anti-Russia Sanctions' Impact on Western Economies

The Kremlin very likely believes that sustained strategic sanctions against Russia are negatively affecting Western economies. The statements in the list below are almost certainly intended to reinforce Russia's information-psychological activities (explained in **Appendix A**) and reflect the legitimate perception of Russian national leadership. Additionally, these statements are also very likely intended for Russian domestic audiences, especially when reported in Russian-language media outlets targeting the Russian populace versus English-language, Western-facing Russian media outlets (additional instances of reporting noted in this section are provided in **Appendix B**).

- On November 2, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Moscow has weathered long-term Western sanctions and that “the statistics show that they [the West] have hit their own economies, their own jobs”.²⁶
- In early November 2023, Reuters, citing Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, reported that Moscow [believes](#) that Western sanctions will continue and escalate but that they will harm Western economies.
- On September 12, 2023, during a statement at the Eastern Economic Forum, Putin said that Western sanctions, specifically restrictions on “settlements with US dollars”, are resulting in nations around the world looking for alternative financial instruments, undermining “global trust” in the West.²⁷
- On August 22, 2023, Putin provided a statement at the Council for Strategic Development and National Projects concerning the state of Russia's economy and claimed that Russia overtook Germany as the fifth-biggest economy in the world. He also claimed that Western sanctions against Russia have not resulted in the results the West hoped for and that European economies are declining.^{28 29}
- On February 21, 2023, Putin commented during an economic meeting with Russian government officials that Western sanctions against Russia “failed” and that “The sanctions have provoked

²⁶ <https://www.rt.com/russia/586388-putin-sanctions-hurting-west/>

²⁷ <https://www.rt.com/business/582818-western-sanctions-eroding-global-trust/>

²⁸ <https://sputniknews.jin/20230822/russia-overtook-germany-as-5th-largest-economy-president-putin-3765540.html>

²⁹ <https://www.rt.com/business/581660-putin-russian-economy-growth/>

price increases and other problems in the West itself, but they are trying to blame Russia for everything”.³⁰

Russian Western-facing state media, such as RT, Sputnik News, and others, frequently report on Western domestic economic data and sentiment analysis that suggests there is growing domestic discontent with the conflict or economic hardship linked to Western actions. In many cases, Russian information operations actors will cite Western data, elected officials, major media outlet reports, and influential individuals. Moreover, Russia exploits perceived internal political divisions concerning the conflict. In addition to using factual information to support its information efforts, the Kremlin will almost certainly also employ out-of-context or fabricated information to exacerbate the perception of domestic economic hardship in the adversary nation(s).

- On December 31, 2023, Russian state media outlet Sputnik published an article, citing a former senior US Department of Defense official, that the West no longer has the “stomach” to continue supporting Ukraine, pointing to supposed concerns about Ukrainian corruption, political infighting, and unsuccessful military operations against Russia.³¹
- In early December 2023, Russian state-funded media outlet RT published an article that cited a body of Western media reports highlighting the ineffectiveness of Western sanctions against Russia, claimed that Western economic measures against Moscow have failed, and pondered what steps the collective West will take next.³²
- On September 19, 2023, RT, citing Western media, reported on the increase of energy prices in Germany. The article suggested the German populace is facing a higher cost of living because of “EU-imposed sanctions on Moscow”.³³
- On September 16, 2023, RT reported on Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán’s comments concerning how Western nations’ domestic economic hardship may “force the West to want peace”. Additionally, Orbán suggested that potential domestic unrest associated with negative economic trends could pressure Western national governments to reconsider their approach towards Moscow.³⁴

The Kremlin is also almost certainly paying close attention to Western economic analysis of the impacts of continued financial aid to Ukraine. Between mid-2022 and September 2023, Western economic institutions, think tanks, and media outlets published research and analysis that suggests continued economic support for Kyiv is negatively affecting, to varying degrees, the domestic economic stability of Western nations.^{35 36 37 38 39}

³⁰ <https://www.rt.com/business/571827-western-sanctions-russia-failed-putin/>

³¹ <https://sputnikglobel.com/20231231/there-is-no-stomach-in-us-to-continue-funding-ukraine---ex-pentagon-official-1115908133.html>

³² <https://www.rt.com/russia/588392-ivan-timofeev-western-sanctions-failed/>

³³ <https://www.rt.com/business/583162-germany-higher-gas-bills/>

³⁴ <https://www.rt.com/news/583065-west-want-peace-ukraine-hungary>

³⁵ <https://www.eib.org/en/stories/ukraine-trade-inflation>

³⁶

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d903e848db1d1b83e0ec8f744e55570-0350012021/related/Implications-of-the-War-in-Ukraine-for-the-Global-Economy.pdf>

³⁷ <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2510-1.html>

³⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/11/world/europe/ukraine-russia-western-solidarity.html>

³⁹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/03/15/blog-how-war-in-ukraine-is-reverberating-across-worlds-regions-031522>

- On December 11, 2023, the European branch of a major US media outlet [reported](#) that Western sanctions against Russia aren't working and that Moscow has successfully circumvented Western economic actions.
- According to a December 7, 2023, report from the [DW](#), a European media outlet, the cumulative domestic effects of continued aid to Ukraine are inducing political divisions within the European Union.
- On June 8, 2023, Western media reported on the [impact](#) Western sanctions are having on Western economies. Specifically, the reporting addressed how the loss of Russian natural gas and rising food costs are affecting European nations.
- Western media reporting on January 30, 2023, posited that Western sanctions against Russia could "[backfire](#)" on Western economies. Most notably, there were concerns about how the increased price of oil and gas in Europe would negatively affect Western economies.

Assessment of Western Societal Sentiment Toward Continued Support of Ukraine

Moscow likely believes Western nations are increasingly growing weary of continued aid to Kyiv, based on Western economic information, polling data, political discourse, and media reporting. As the Kremlin continues to frame Western support to Ukraine negatively, especially in citing Western elected politicians, there are almost certainly Russian information confrontation efforts underway to determine and influence how Western nation citizens view continued support to Ukraine, which has been part of Russia's strategy since the Soviet era (explained in **Appendix A** — specifically "[active measures](#)"). Although Russia has not specifically cited the following reports, this is almost certainly the kind of information the Kremlin uses to make assessments concerning Western societal sentiment toward continued support to Ukraine (additional instances of reporting noted in this section are provided in **Appendix B**).

- On December 14, 2023, the Carnegie Endowment's European branch [published](#) a report that analyzed a perceived decline in European support for Ukraine over the past eighteen months and asked, "Is Europe still committed to Ukraine?"
- In mid-November 2023, US state-owned media outlet Voice of America [reported](#) on concerns about Europe's commitment to providing long-term support to Ukraine.
- In early November 2023, Gallup published polling data that [indicated](#) that Americans are increasingly in favor of reducing aid to Ukraine, believe Washington should seek an end to the conflict quickly, and feel there should be limits on Western long-term aid to Kyiv.
- On September 9, 2023, Western media reporting highlighted how political fissures are [forming](#) in the US Congress concerning continued aid to Ukraine versus domestic economic issues. Separate Western media reporting indicated the US Congress risks a potential government [shutdown](#), partially due to US financial [aid](#) to Ukraine.
- According to an August 8, 2023, Brookings Institute analysis, continued US aid to Ukraine is becoming increasingly politically [divisive](#), and US domestic support is decreasing as Russia's war against Ukraine continues.

Russian Efforts to Weaponize the Perception of Shifting Support to Israel

In the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack against Israel, Russian media published articles suggesting the US would reduce support to Ukraine and focus defense resources on supporting Israel's military operations. In each instance, these articles cited the statements of Ukrainian or Western government officials or Western media outlets. Notably, Russia's state media coverage suggested that the West, specifically the US, is unable to support multiple concurrent wars.

- On October 30, 2023, RT cited Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in an interview with *Time Magazine* as saying that as Western support shifted to Israel, "we [Ukraine] lose out".⁴⁰
- On October 23, 2023, RT cited High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell's statements concerning international interest in Ukraine and Israel that "If international attention shifts away from Ukraine, one way or another, it will have consequences".⁴¹
- On October 15, 2023, RT published an article citing Ukraine's finance minister Sergey Marchenko saying that Western nations are "tired" of supporting Ukraine and that the focus is shifting to Israel. He is also quoted as saying that "they [the West] would like to forget about the war [in Ukraine]".⁴²
- On October 13, 2023, RT published an article citing US defense secretary Lloyd Austin in stating that the US can support Israel and Ukraine simultaneously. However, the article also cited previous statements from the US Department of Defense and NATO that weapons stockpiles are "stretched thin" as a result of support to Ukraine.⁴³
- On October 10, 2023, RT published an article, citing the statements of Hungarian foreign minister Peter Szijjarto that international focus will not remain on Ukraine and that Hamas's attack on Israel would garner the majority of global attention.⁴⁴

As with other instances, the Kremlin is almost certainly monitoring Western leaders, media outlets, and polling data to determine whether the US has the capacity to allocate resources to multiple armed conflicts at the same time.

- On November 23, 2023, Western media [published](#) an article titled "The US may no longer be able to fight more than one war at a time", citing information from the US Department of Defense concerning the need to amend strategic plans to account for the potential of war with Russia and China.
- On October 27, 2023, Foreign Policy [published](#) an article titled "How Many Wars Can America Fight at the Same Time?", which suggested that the US's adversary "may" sense that Washington is "stretched too thin".

⁴⁰ <https://www.rt.com/news/586204-west-betrayed-ukraine-zelensky/>

⁴¹ <https://www.rt.com/news/585605-dont-forget-ukraine-borrell/>

⁴² <https://www.rt.com/business/584960-western-partners-losing-focus-ukraine-aid/>

⁴³ <https://www.rt.com/news/584852-us-israel-ukraine-support/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.rt.com/news/584597-hungary-israel-replaced-ukraine/>

- On October 24, 2023, The Economist [published](#) an article titled “The overstretched superpower”, arguing that the US is ill-prepared to address escalating conflicts in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East simultaneously.

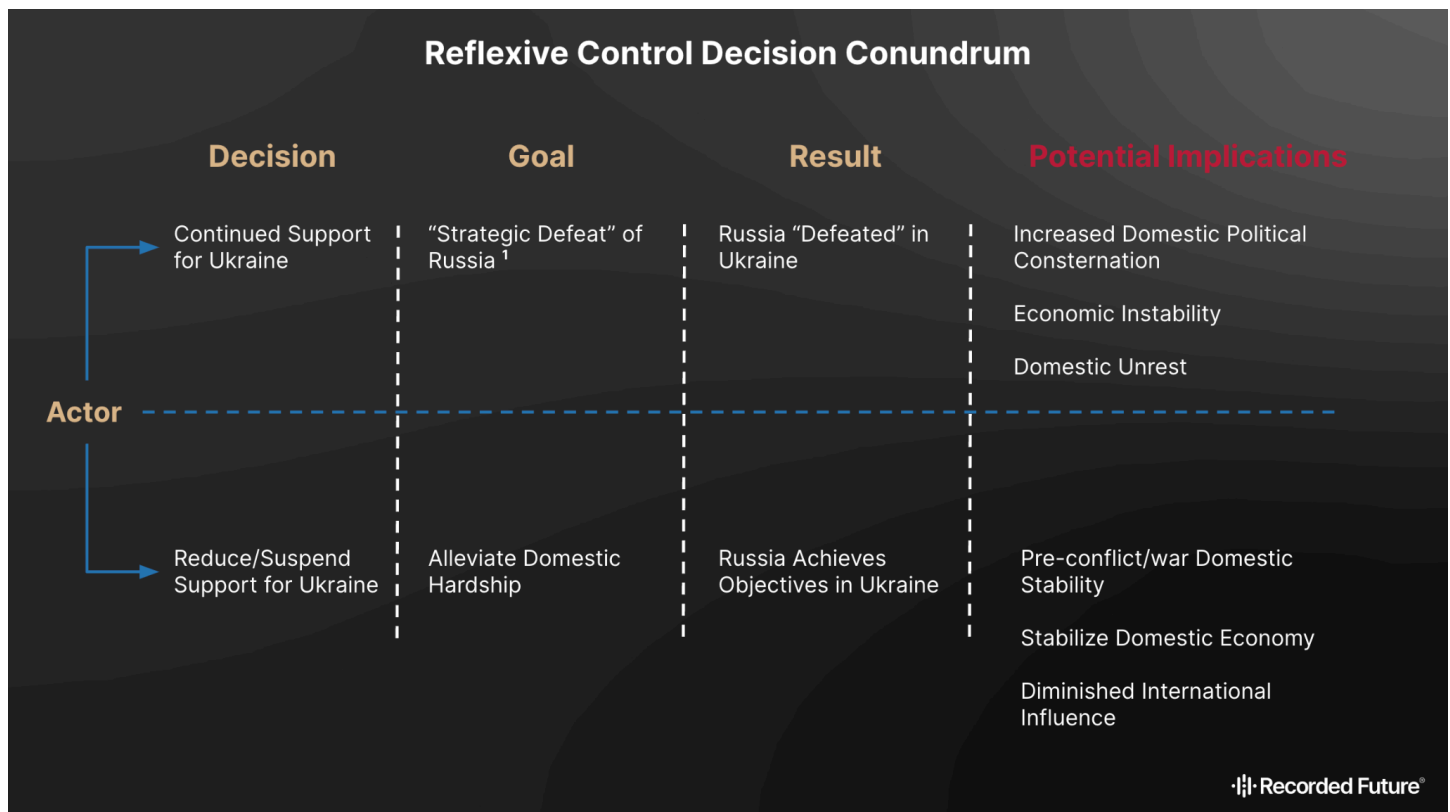


Figure 1: A depiction of the strategic conundrum Russia very likely seeks to exploit associated with the Kremlin’s strategy of “reflexive control”. “Strategic defeat” of Russia is associated with US president Joseph Biden’s stated goal against Russia in Ukraine. (Source: Insikt Group)

Assessment of Western Collective Political Aversion to Continued Support to Ukraine and Direct Military Conflict with Russia

Russia, although they have not officially stated so, likely believes that continued support to Ukraine will be a key political issue that will affect Western nation elections through 2024. Russian targeting of Western elections in 2024 is a near certainty, as it is a [practice](#) that spans [100](#) years. Moreover, the Kremlin likely believes the prospect of war with Russia is politically unpopular in the West, especially as Russia’s war against Ukraine becomes increasingly protracted. According to a body of Western [think tank](#) publications, [polling data](#), and [media](#) reports, continued economic and military support for Ukraine will very likely be an issue that shapes Western elections, and the US citizenry [views](#) the prospect of US military combat deployments as unpalatable, especially after over two decades of combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other nations since 2001.

- On December 28, 2023, RT published an article authored by the editor-in-chief of Russia in Global Affairs — a Kremlin-linked think tank — that assessed Western elections could result in the reduction of support to Ukraine. More specifically, the article suggests that anti-war political candidates in the West could shift Western foreign policy away from support to Kyiv.⁴⁵
- On December 27, 2023, the European media outlet Euronews [published](#) an article concerning the potential implications of European elections in 2024 for upending aid to Ukraine.
- On December 19, 2023, Foreign Policy [published](#) an article concerning the potential for Western elections, specifically the US 2024 presidential election, to likely result in a significant reduction of aid to Kyiv. Additionally, the article highlights concerns that the US could reduce support for or participation in NATO as a whole.
- On May 17, 2023, the Financial Times [reported](#) on Ukraine's allies being concerned that support for Ukraine will wane during the US 2024 election year and specifically noted that the “strategic defeat” of Russia is unlikely to occur without the continued support of the US.

Moscow very likely believes the West, specifically the US, is unwilling to engage in overt armed conflict with Russia in relation to continued conflict escalation in Ukraine. Western national officials, elected politicians, foreign policy experts, [influential individuals](#), and media outlets have [repeatedly warned](#) about the [potential](#) for World War III (WWIII) if the West and Russia [engage](#) in overt military conflict, potentially escalating from Russia's war against Ukraine. Russia is almost certainly exploiting these concerns. Collectively, these concerns are grouped with suggestions that the West should seek a diplomatic solution with Moscow and [avoid](#) the potential for war between nuclear-armed powers (additional instances of reporting noted in this section are provided in **Appendix B**).

- On December 13, 2023, Michael O'Hanlon and Caitlin Talmadge wrote an opinion article, published by The Hill, which [argued](#) that “America shouldn't insist on a strategic defeat of Russia” and posited that the strategic goals President Biden established concerning Russia risks a prolonged, costly, and politically contentious war.
- On September 30, 2023, former US foreign policy advisor Fiona Hill claimed that the US and Russia have been engaged in WWIII for “a while”, pointing to escalating US-Russia tensions in Ukraine that risk sparking kinetic conflict between Washington and Moscow.⁴⁶
- On September 6, 2023, Aleksey Danilov, the head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, suggested that WWIII has already started, but is in a “hybrid period” and has now entered the “active phase”, at the Kyiv Security Forum with former US CIA director David Petraeus.⁴⁷
- On August 30, 2023, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán warned that the deployment of Western military forces in Ukraine and a continuation of the conflict with Russia risks WWIII.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ <https://www.rt.com/news/589841-west-liberal-elites-lose-control/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.rt.com/news/563828-west-russia-world-war/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.rt.com/news/582447-ukraine-nato-danilov-petraeus/>

⁴⁸

<https://web.archive.org/web/20230830163830/https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/hungarian-premier-warns-of-danger-of-world-war-iii/2979432>

Western media has also reported on Russian senior leaders discussing the potential for WWII directly related to conflict escalation in Ukraine. In June 2023, CNN [reported](#) on Putin's warning that NATO's direct involvement in Ukraine risks global conflict between nuclear powers. Shortly after, in August 2023, Newsweek [reported](#) on the claim by the Russian Security Council's deputy head, Dmitry Medvedev, that Western nations were ignoring Russia's strategic signals, which could lead to WWII. As early as March 2022, Reuters [reported](#) on Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's claims that the West-Russia escalation in Ukraine presented the "real danger" of WWII.

Outlook

As Russia's war against Ukraine continues, the Kremlin will endeavor to exploit perceived Western "war fatigue" as part of its national strategy against the West, which includes persistent information operations. We judge that a critical target of Russia's strategic information operations will almost certainly be Western nation presidential elections, where Moscow will very likely seek to exploit what it perceives as political consternation associated with continued support for Ukraine. Consistent with Russia's "reflexive control" strategy, the Kremlin very likely believes Western nations will be forced to select between a few options: reduce or suspend support for foreign conflicts to prioritize domestic national issues or continue providing support for foreign conflicts and risk exacerbating domestic discontent among the populace.

Western nations, especially senior government officials, influential individuals, and media outlets, should understand that Russia will actively seek to weaponize information that enables Moscow to reinforce its claims. This tactic is, in part, intended to support Russian efforts to undermine Western claims that Moscow is engaged in mis- or disinformation about any particular topic, engaging in a form of "appeal to authority" to Western audiences.

As the West becomes militarily or economically involved in multiple concurrent armed conflicts or wars, such as the US currently committing military and economic resources to support Israel and Ukraine and safeguard commercial shipping in the Red Sea, Russia will very likely attempt to highlight the perceived compounding effects on Western populaces, weaponizing Western reporting when beneficial. For example, the Business Insider article [mentioned](#) above, titled "The US may no longer be able to fight more than one major war at a time", posited that the Pentagon is likely unable to handle multiple large-scale wars simultaneously. Although Russian media did not cite this specific article, this is the type of content Russia will likely use to reinforce its strategic information operations.

Concerning US economic stability, in 2022, Putin criticized US monetary policy, specifically "money printing" as a general economic policy practice, and the impact that it has on international economics.⁴⁹ A Western media opinion piece in 2020 [posited](#) that the US has "money for wars but not for the poor", which is the specific kind of Western narrative Moscow will likely continue to exploit. Western nations should anticipate that Russia will very likely directly quote, conflate, or exploit the perception that Western countries are able to budget funding for foreign wars while citizens in Western nations are

⁴⁹ <https://www.rt.com/business/563819-putin-slams-western-money-printing/>

perceivably facing increasing economic hardship, in a move designed to undermine confidence in governmental institutions — a well-established practice that dates back to Soviet “active measures” [targeting](#) the US during the Vietnam War.

Russian efforts to dissuade Western nations from continuing to support Ukraine will very likely expand to account for other domestic issues and information that suggests the West is unprepared for or unable to conduct sustained military operations against Russia. For example, Russian state media is already starting to highlight that the US military is unable to meet recruitment and retention goals, [citing](#) the New York Times.⁵⁰ Additionally, Russian state media is reporting that nearly 70% of the active US military force does not meet physical standards for service, [citing](#) Western, defense-focused, non-profit data.⁵¹ Although Russian media has yet to directly cite the following Western media reports, we judge Russia will almost certainly continue to exploit this kind of content to further Moscow’s information efforts. According to a December 14, 2023, article from Military Times, more than 50% of Americans would [dissuade](#) young people from joining the US military. An ABC news article from July 2022, citing US government data, stated that only 23% of Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 are eligible to join the military without a service waiver, [undermining](#) US military recruiting efforts.

Recommendations

Western nations’ efforts in the information domain should exercise precision and nuance when using terms like “misinformation” and “disinformation” to frame Russia’s narratives. As captured in polling data, the US public’s [trust](#) in American mass media is at an all-time low, a situation that Moscow is almost certainly seeking to exploit. Although Western nations are collectively employing fact-checking concerning domestic and international narratives, Western [analysis](#), especially in the US, [suggests](#) that citizens [believe](#) there is an inconsistent and selective application of the [practice](#), highlighting potential bias associated with the methodology.

Options to undermine Russia’s efforts could likely include highlighting where Moscow is factually incorrect and acknowledging where it is correct, even at the risk of Russian media using that acknowledgment to further influence efforts. As previously stated in this report, Moscow is adapting its information activities to account for Western claims that Russia is employing nefarious influence operations, citing what the Kremlin likely believes are unimpeachable Western sources of information. In this, efforts to “fact check”, censor, or ban access to information where Russia is citing credible Western sources risk amplifying and providing credence to Russia’s claims,⁵² especially about Western information control measures.⁵³ Russia very likely anticipates that Western nations will endeavor to control the information space via a combination of censorship and domestic information-shaping activities. In this instance, the Kremlin will likely attempt to frame Western nations, especially those that are based on Western traditional civil liberties — such as freedom of speech and expression — as

⁵⁰ <https://www.rt.com/news/585247-us-army-recruitment-shortfall/>

⁵¹ <https://www.rt.com/news/585482-report-us-military-personnel-obese/>

⁵² In Western parlance, censorship that results in the amplification of a narrative is colloquially called the “Streisand Effect”. Generally, this posits that official efforts to de-amplify an idea result in the amplification of the idea, more so than would have occurred naturally.

⁵³ <https://www.rt.com/news/580741-western-media-special-services/>

authoritarian or engaged in efforts that violate the rights enshrined in Western nation founding documents.

With respect to domestic economic policy, Western nations should consider policies that counteract the effects of prolonged conflict with Russia, such as rising food and energy prices. Additionally, Western leaders should be mindful that Russia will almost certainly exploit statements that enable Moscow to exacerbate existing fissures between citizens and government. Specifically, Moscow will attempt to aggravate differences between citizens with differing policy views than those expressed by government leadership. In September 2023, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov quoted and reacted to a statement by German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, replying, “Yes, our [German] citizens are suffering, but they will have to suffer because we will support Ukraine no matter what”.⁵⁴ While acknowledging the domestic impacts of being engaged in foreign conflicts helps undermine Russian attempts to claim Western nations are ignoring the impact on their citizens, Moscow will almost certainly continue to exploit perceived legitimate discontent with Western nation leadership policy decisions.

⁵⁴ [https://tass\[.\]com/politics/1501023](https://tass[.]com/politics/1501023)

Appendix A: Historic Context and Strategic Anchoring Expanded

As part of their overall strategic effort, Russian state media and information operations actors highlight and amplify information that suggests Western nation citizenry is suffering under increased economic or quality-of-life hardship or is struggling with “war fatigue”, almost certainly part of Russia’s “[information confrontation](#)” (информационное противоборство) strategy and Soviet-era “[active measures](#)” (активные мероприятия) campaigns.⁵⁵ Within this effort, Russia cites and exploits the statements of Western individuals, specifically elected officials, foreign policy experts, and current or former Western intelligence officers to underpin its claims. Moreover, the tactic of citing Western individuals is almost certainly employed to counter Western claims that Russian state media is engaged in mis- or disinformation.

As a conflict with an adversary persists, the Kremlin makes assessments about its opponent’s international and domestic economic stability and its ability to allocate economic resources to war. At the granular level, Russia very likely makes assessments concerning how its adversary’s citizenry is dealing with perceived economic hardship, such as increasing domestic prices, supply shortages, and inflation, as national resources are increasingly allocated to support a war effort abroad, which are all linked to Russia’s correlation of forces and means (COFM) analysis process.

Russian Analysis of the Adversary and Exploitation of Unfavorable Strategic Situations
Russian Correlation of Forces and Means (COFM) Analysis and “War Fatigue”
Russia’s COFM approach to assessing an adversary’s capacity to conduct combat operations stems from the Soviet era. At the strategic level, the Kremlin makes determinations concerning a nation’s capacity across the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) domains. COFM finds its prominence, typically, in the comparison and analysis of military capabilities, helping the Kremlin identify where Russia has advantages or disadvantages concerning its adversary. However, when making assessments concerning an adversary’s capacity within the information and economic domains, Moscow very likely makes assessments based on economic and sentiment analysis data about the adversary. This information almost certainly includes data concerning the adversary’s domestic economic stability, domestic support for war, and internal consternation concerning the potential for conflict. Citing this data and information, Russia very likely makes assessments concerning the adversary’s willingness to engage in a prolonged conflict or war, which in modern vernacular is called “war fatigue”.
Russia’s Reflexive Control Strategy
Reflexive control is a theory of operations that calls for setting the conditions in certain circumstances and then exploiting the adversary’s disadvantageous position to Russia’s benefit. Since the Soviet era, Russian theorists have posited how reflexive control can be employed in military operations, information operations, and national-level diplomatic engagements. The execution of

⁵⁵ [https://istina.fnkcorr\[.\]ru/conferences/presentations/8664063/](https://istina.fnkcorr[.]ru/conferences/presentations/8664063/)

reflexive control against an adversary requires the Kremlin to account for the potential decisions an actor would reasonably make based on the situation, assuming the actor will make the decision that is most advantageous and least painful to itself. With respect to national-level conflicts or wars, reflexive control suggests that nations would act in their own best short-term interests — national stability — versus prolonged instability and uncertain future destabilization.

Table 1: Russian concepts and strategies concerning strategic conflict (Source: [RAND](#))

Russia’s strategy, with respect to “war fatigue” in the West, is [anchored](#) in the assumption that Russians are better “professional sufferers” than Western citizens. The term “professional sufferers” refers to Moscow’s belief that Russians can and will [tolerate](#) prolonged [austere](#) living conditions for the sake of their nation better and for longer than people in the West. To reinforce this notion, Moscow [espouses](#) its “besieged castle” narrative, which posits that Russia has been on the receiving end of unjust, prolonged, and aggressive attacks throughout history, most recently from the West. Additionally, Russia almost certainly employs a subset of the Kremlin’s information confrontation strategy, called “[information-psychological](#)” (Информационно-психологический). Information-psychological calls for Russian information operations that are designed to target the psyche of the target nation’s populace to shape perception in Moscow’s favor (**Table 1**).

Russia’s Information Confrontation	
Strategy	Definition and Intent
Information Confrontation (Информационное Противоборство)	The overarching framework that guides “information warfare” against Russia’s adversary. There are two primary subsets (below) that span Russian information environment-shaping efforts from peacetime to wartime.
Information-Technical (Информационно-техническая)	Information operations that are constrained to “war” and “armed conflicts” (as defined in Russian strategy and doctrine) that specifically target the information systems of the adversary.
Information-Psychological (Информационно-психологическая)	Information operations conducted as a normal state of geopolitical great power competition which target the psyche of the adversary nation’s populace to shape perception in Moscow’s favor.

Table 2: Russian information confrontation strategy and two subset lines of effort (Source: [NATO](#))

Appendix B: Additional Reporting Affecting Russia's Assessments

Assessment of the Impact Anti-Russia Sanctions Are Having on Western Economies

Official Russian Statements

- On September 21, 2022, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov asserted that the West is undermining its own global financial prowess in levying sanctions against Russia. Additionally, he claimed that Western societies were facing undue economic hardship as a result of Western strategic economic actions towards Moscow.⁵⁶
- On September 7, 2022, Putin [claimed](#) that Western leaders are “sacrificing” European citizens’ quality of life in order to sanction Moscow, framing Western economic measures as Western economic “aggression”.
- On May 13, 2022, Putin [stated](#) that Western nations are hurting their own economies in an effort to impose sanctions against Russia.
- On April 18, 2022, Putin claimed that Western economies are [deteriorating](#) as a result of the sanctions against Russia.
- On March 26, 2022, the former Russian president and current deputy head of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, [claimed](#) in an interview with Russian state media that Western sanctions against Russia will “destroy the entire global economic structure”.

Russian State Media Citing Western Media

- In a September 14, 2023, report citing the European Central Bank, RT highlighted rising interest rates within the EU, linking inflation rates to Western sanctions against Russia.⁵⁷
- On September 5, 2023, RT published a report, quoting the Bank of Canada, stating that nations that refuse to sanction Russia have the potential to see economic benefits, as neutral nations can provide alternatives that circumvent Western sanctions.⁵⁸
- In April 2023, RT published a report citing Austrian polling data that suggested “most Austrians” want an end to EU sanctions against Russia.⁵⁹ In a separate report, RT, citing the Bloomberg food index, highlighted increasing food prices in France and Spain.⁶⁰

Western Media Reporting

- On December 6, 2022, US media outlet NPR published an article about “Why sanctions against Russia aren’t working — yet”, which [argues](#) that strategic economic measures against Moscow require more time to have the desired impact.

⁵⁶ <https://www.rt.com/russia/563286-lavrov-west-sanctions-china/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.rt.com/business/582970-eurozone-interest-rates-hit-record/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.rt.com/business/582399-countries-benefit-refusing-russia-sanctions/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.rt.com/news/574383-austria-russia-sanctions-poll/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.rt.com/business/574895-france-spain-food-prices/>

- In July 2022, a Western media report stated that Western sanctions against Russia were negatively [affecting](#) Europe but would induce more significant economic effects on Russia's economy later (on an undefined timeline). In another report from July 2022, a Western media outlet [argued](#) that Western sanctions were having more negative impacts on the West than on Russia, pointing to European interest rate increases, fuel and food prices, and domestic energy instability.

Assessment of Western Societal Sentiment Toward Continued Support of Ukraine

Western Media Reporting and Data

- Western media reporting from early August 2023 indicated 55% of Americans are not in favor of sending additional financial aid to Ukraine, citing a CNN-linked poll [conducted](#) by SSRS.
- In mid-2023, Western media reported on the [increasing](#) prices of oil and food in the US and Europe, [linked](#), in part, to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the compounding effects of Western sanctions against Moscow. Western media reporting in August 2023 pointed to the [increase](#) in global food prices [associated](#) with the West and Russia's inability to negotiate Ukrainian grain shipments in the Black Sea.
- In February 2023, Chatham House [assessed](#) that internal US consternation concerning continued support for Ukraine indicated that political pressure could end aid to Kyiv.

Assessment of Western Collective Political Aversion to Continued Support to Ukraine and Direct Military Conflict with Russia

Western Senior Government and Military Official Statements

- In June 2022, the United Kingdom's chief of the general staff, General Sir Patrick Sanders, [said](#) that UK military forces must be prepared to fight in Europe to defeat Russia.
- In March 2022, US president Joseph Biden [addressed](#) military aid and the potential for Western military involvement in Ukraine, stating that overt Western military forces engaging Russian military forces would lead to WWII.

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