

## COGNITIVE WARFARE AS A TOOL TO COUNTER EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: THE CASE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**Abstract.** *This article explores the concept of cognitive warfare as a distinct and increasingly influential form of non-kinetic conflict that targets the human mind as a battlefield. Drawing on case studies from the Western Balkans, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, the article analyzes how external actors use psychological operations, propaganda, and digital technologies to manipulate perceptions, reinforce ethnic divisions, and obstruct democratic integration. The study explains the mechanisms of influence through cognitive biases such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, and framing effects and demonstrates how they are systematically exploited in political communication and media narratives. Special attention is given to the role of the Overton Window in shifting public discourse toward the normalization of extreme ideas. The article argues that cognitive warfare represents a paradigm shift that merges information, psychological, and semantic operations, calling for increased societal resilience and awareness of the subtle methods used to influence individual and collective cognition.*

**Keywords:** *Cognitive warfare, propaganda, Western Balkans, cognitive bias, Overton Window.*

The concept of cognitive warfare has only recently gained widespread scholarly and strategic attention, yet it emerges from a broader tradition of non-kinetic conflict, particularly psychological and informational operations. Cognitive warfare is fundamentally concerned with the manipulation of the human mind, aiming to influence perception, emotional response, decision-making, and ultimately, behavior. It is important to recognize that cognitive processes in this context are not random or spontaneous they follow a clear strategic logic. These processes involve targeted actions that seek to alter the worldview of individuals and groups through technological, psychological, and media-based interventions, often without the audience's awareness.

In today's hybrid threat environment, cognitive warfare is frequently conflated with related concepts such as information warfare and cyber warfare. However, as scholars have noted, these forms of conflict are distinct in scope and method. For instance, Martin Libicki, a researcher affiliated with the RAND Corporation, defined information warfare as a multifaceted construct consisting of command-and-control warfare, intelligence-based warfare, cryptographic and electronic operations, hacker warfare, economic information control, cyber warfare, and psychological warfare which includes cognitive manipulation directed at allies, adversaries, and neutral parties (Libicki, 1995:3). Yet, unlike information warfare, which primarily targets access to and

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control of information flows or cyber warfare, which seeks to disable digital infrastructure, cognitive warfare targets the mind itself. Its goal is not just to misinform, but to reshape how people think, feel, and act, often by exploiting existing cognitive biases and emotional vulnerabilities.

As this article demonstrates, the Western Balkans, a region marked by post-conflict fragility, ethnic fragmentation, and contested geopolitical alignments, has become a critical testing ground for cognitive warfare tactics. Through propaganda, digital disinformation, selective framing, and psychological manipulation, external actors most notably the Russian Federation have deployed cognitive tools to undermine democratic processes, fuel ethnic polarization, and obstruct the region's path toward European integration. These efforts do not operate in isolation but are part of a broader strategy that combines semantic, psychological, and technological instruments to gradually shift public discourse, normalize extremist views, and erode trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions.

This article aims to explore the specific mechanisms of cognitive warfare as applied in the Western Balkans, analyzing its use in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. It focuses on the ways in which cognitive biases such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, framing effect, and bandwagon effect are systematically manipulated. Special attention is given to the Overton Window as a theoretical model for understanding how previously unthinkable ideas become normalized in public discourse. By highlighting the interplay between cognitive manipulation and strategic geopolitical interests, the article offers a critical lens through which to assess emerging threats to European integration and democratic resilience in the region.

A group of authors, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Purcell, Major Brian McLaughlin, and research fellow of the Center for Advanced Operational Culture at the Marine Corps University, Blagovest Tashev, note in their joint article that «the cognitive dimension is the highest aspect of the information environment» (Tashev B., Purcell M., McLaughlin B., 2019:133). At the same time, the 2017 publication by Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler from the Center for Naval Analyses, «*Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare*», emphasizes that cognitive manipulation is a key element of cyber warfare (Connell M., Vogler S. 2017:7). However, other researchers argue that the control of cognition is not limited solely to information warfare or cyber warfare, as many political tools, such as propaganda, public relations, and public diplomacy – can also be employed to influence cognition. At the same time, a document from the Information Center highlights that cognitive warfare can be used by external actors to manipulate public opinion with the aim of destabilizing state institutions and influencing government policy.

Attention is also focused on the distinction between the concepts of information warfare and cognitive warfare: while the former aims to control information flows and the media, the latter is centered on controlling the mind and tracking people's reactions to particular information. Moreover, cognitive warfare can leverage new channels of public communication, such as social media, which can be used to effectively influence the population. A group of researchers in the field of digital technologies and security argues that equating information warfare with cognitive warfare is a mistake. This, in turn, highlights the lack of a unified understanding in the interpretation of the concept of cognitive warfare (Fenstermacher L., Uzcha D., Larson K. G., Vitiello C., & Shellman S. 2023:163). In any case, based on the above, it can be concluded that elements of

subconscious influence are inherent in any war. However, how exactly cognitive influence alters the perception of human goals and what technologies are used in this process will be discussed below.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the difference between the concepts, it is important to formulate clear definitions. According to NATO, information warfare is «Information Warfare is an operation conducted in order to gain an information advantage over the opponent. It involves control of your own information space, protection of access to your information, acquisition and use of the opponent's information, destruction of their information systems, and disruption of their information flow» (North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2014: 14-1). In other words, information warfare is directed against decision-makers.

Cyber warfare is a type of cyber conflict and involves the destabilization of computer systems and internet access of government and financial institutions, the large-scale destruction of critical infrastructure, which may lead to significant losses, physical damage, and numerous fatalities (Andress J., Winterfeld S. (2014:306). In turn, cognitive warfare encompasses information warfare, offensive cyber operations, and psychological operations. It is, to some extent, an interdisciplinary approach that combines social sciences and emerging technologies with the aim of influencing understanding and decision-making processes, disrupting the heuristics of the human brain in the ultimate attempt, as French Chief of Defence General Thierry Burkhard put it – «to win the war before it even begins» (Pappalardo D. 2022). It is worth noting that propaganda is used in all wars, however, cognitive warfare differs in that the mass audience is influenced in a subtle and often unnoticed way, leading people to actively absorb imposed informational content. To some extent, this represents a kind of revolution, as it combines the use of psychological biases, reflexive thinking, and influence over decision-making by obstructing actions at both individual and collective levels. Most importantly, it involves the use of neuroscience as a weapon within the system of geopolitical transformation.

Cognitive warfare is increasingly recognized as a profound shift in the nature of conflict, aiming to exploit the brain itself as a battlefield. As noted in Polytechnique Insights: «Cognitive warfare uses technology as a weapon. It can use invasive technologies to alter the medium of thought, the brain, and more broadly the nervous system that underpins its functioning» (Claverie B. 2025, February 5). In this context, we can cite examples of the use of cognitive warfare to influence public opinion in the United States during the 2016 presidential election, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union (Cassidy, J.A. 2018, March 28). All of these cases lead to the conclusion that, in comparison to information warfare, cognitive warfare focuses less on controlling the media and more on the psychological and emotional state of the audience, appealing to fear, anxiety, or passive sentiments, often intensified by widespread disillusionment and apathy. Through social media and information technologies, covert information campaigns are conducted that can destabilize a country's economy and sow chaos by interfering in political processes both in democratic and authoritarian regimes.

A clear example of cognitive warfare being used to counter European integration can be found in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly within the entity of Republika Srpska. Russian-backed information operations, often carried out through state-sponsored media such as *Sputnik Srbija* and local outlets like RTRS, have promoted narratives aimed at fostering fear, distrust, and a sense of external threat among the Serb

population. These campaigns portray NATO and the European Union not as partners but as existential dangers to Serbian identity and autonomy. Rather than relying solely on traditional media control, these operations exploit the emotional and psychological vulnerabilities of targeted audiences – hallmarks of cognitive warfare. They amplify societal divisions and trigger cognitive dissonance through appeals to ethnic loyalty, historical grievances, and perceived cultural threats. As a result, such strategies undermine pro-European attitudes, fuel political polarization, and obstruct the country's path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. This is particularly visible in the rhetoric of Republika Srpska's leadership, which increasingly echoes Russian strategic messaging. According to the Re-Engage Horizon Europe project, this instrumentalization of ethnic fragmentation in Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a deliberate tactic by external actors to maintain regional instability and weaken EU influence (Re-Engage Project. 2024).

Additional support for this assessment is provided by a report from the European Parliament, which highlights Russia's hybrid tactics in the Western Balkans, including disinformation and psychological influence aimed at derailing democratic consolidation and European alignment (Caprile, A., & Stanicek, B. 2023:3). These examples clearly demonstrate how cognitive warfare is leveraged as a strategic tool to counteract European integration in the Western Balkans.

It is worth mentioning the scholarly work of Ukrainian researcher Heorhii Pocheptsov, who notes that «each type of war targets its own domain. Information warfare does not change a person's beliefs it shapes the informational agenda through facts. Semantic warfare, on the other hand, sets the agenda for decades, as it transforms knowledge. Once knowledge is altered, facts lose all meaning, because a person makes decisions based on the new framework. The main danger lies in the fact that semantic warfare turns a person into a kind of 'censor' who interprets facts in a predetermined direction, thus achieving the ultimate goal – self-destruction of large social groups and even nations». Moreover, semantic warfare influences the public through mass culture, which includes informational, virtual, and commercial products, enhancing levels of appeal and aesthetic perception through the entertainment industry (Pocheptsov H. 2016:3).

Thus, semantic/cognitive wars that use «soft power» are less noticeable than informational ones, as they are wrapped in a veil of aesthetic appeal. This is where their danger lies because their disguise operates subtly yet effectively, always aiming for long-term impact. This allows us to conclude that semantic/cognitive warfare possesses a deeper structure of influence.

To better understand the methods and technologies of semantic/cognitive warfare aimed at changing the value systems of social groups and their collective consciousness, let us briefly examine the specifics of the psychology of cognitive influence and its history. The development of cognitive science began in the 1950s and marked a revolutionary shift, as the scientific interdisciplinary field for studying human intelligence and behavior emerged under the influence of the scientific and technological revolution. It encompasses functions of the nervous system such as mental abilities, developmental psychology, perception, memory, emotional experience, decision-making, and more. All of this aligns with new approaches in philosophy, linguistics, neuroscience, and the emergence of artificial intelligence (Gardner H. 1985:6). As well as the development of cybernetics in the 1930s-1940s.

For several decades, behaviorism dominated experimental psychology, effectively rejecting the study of mental responses and thinking. According to

behaviorists such as J. B. Watson, psychology should be limited to examining the relationship between observable stimuli and behavioral responses (Watson J. B. 1924:11). The discussion of consciousness and mental representations was absent from scientific discourse because behaviorism continued to dominate in North America through the 1950s. However, in the second half of the decade, the situation began to change with the active development of artificial intelligence research. By the 1970s and 1980s, cognitive science had emerged as a distinct academic discipline, and in 1986, the world's first Department of Cognitive Science was established at the University of California, San Diego (University of California, San Diego).

An interesting fact is that in 1972, American psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, as part of their scientific research, introduced the concept of *cognitive bias* – a deviation in judgments that manifests as a tendency to think in a certain way, violating the logic of common sense and leading to illogical conclusions about other people or situations. Indeed, our brain's resources are insufficient to analyze all the information we receive especially now, when we live in an era of total information overload. In order to filter out unnecessary details, react more quickly, and believe that our conclusions are correct and rational, our brain sometimes deceives us. This «deception» happens precisely because of cognitive biases, a concept studied by both psychologists and behavioral economists.

Most researchers agree that cognitive biases help us deal with four key problems: information overload, difficulty in understanding complex issues or questions, the inability to remember large amounts of information, and heuristic availability. It is worth noting that in 1973, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman were the first to study this phenomenon and called it the *availability heuristic* – an intuitive process in which a person perceives events based on how easily they come to mind, relying on examples that are most readily recalled when evaluating a specific situation, topic, or decision (Tversky A., Kahneman, D. 1974:1124). The main goal of propaganda is the development of cognitive heuristics that reject any alternative version of reality. Propaganda aims to create an emotional state in people that lowers their capacity for critical thinking. A continuous stream of television shows is primarily used to keep people in this state of heightened emotional involvement. These shows follow the rules of theatrical performance and strive to become addictive to their audience an approach actively employed by Russian propaganda.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing the aforementioned Israeli-American psychologist, economist, and sociologist Daniel Kahneman, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2002. He gained widespread recognition for his 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Kahneman D. 2017: 480), in which, drawing on research in cognitive and social psychology, he explores how the human brain functions. The book details unconscious biases and the role of emotions in evaluative judgments.

Propaganda actively leverages various cognitive biases to manipulate public consciousness and shape desired narratives. One of the most common is confirmation bias, where people attend only to information that reinforces their existing beliefs and ignore anything contradictory. This allows propaganda to continuously reinforce its preferred views for example, by showcasing only the «victories» or «heroism» of one side while concealing defeats. It also heavily relies on the availability heuristic (Tversky, A., Kahneman, D. 1973:208), where frequent exposure to specific types of events such as violence or aggression by the enemy creates the false impression that such events are widespread.

A concrete illustration of cognitive bias exploitation in the Western Balkans can be seen in media portrayals of Kosovo within Serbian-speaking communities across the region. Russian-aligned platforms and sympathetic local outlets frequently highlight isolated instances of violence allegedly committed by Kosovar Albanians against Serbs, disproportionately amplifying these events compared to broader realities. This repeated exposure to violent imagery or reports fosters the *availability heuristic* the impression that such violence is systemic and constant, even when statistical data suggests otherwise (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973:208).

Simultaneously, confirmation bias is engaged through selective reporting that reinforces pre-existing Serbian narratives of victimhood and betrayal by Western actors. Pro-Russian media often frame EU and NATO support for Kosovo as proof of a Western agenda against Serbs, feeding into historical grievances and distrust toward Euro-Atlantic institutions. This method creates a closed cognitive loop, where audiences reject alternative perspectives as disinformation or enemy propaganda.

Such tactics have been particularly effective during moments of political tension, like the 2023 North Kosovo unrest, when media outlets presented events in a way that deepened ethnic divisions and mobilized public opposition to Western diplomacy. These narratives, consistently reinforced, undermine efforts at regional stabilization and European integration by presenting the EU as biased and incapable of protecting Serb interests. This strategy has been documented in both policy research and European institutional analysis (Caprile & Stanicek, 2023:3), and is further supported by findings from the Horizon Europe *Re-Engage* project, which highlights how external actors exploit ethnic fragmentation to sustain instability in the Western Balkans (Re-Engage Project, 2024:78).

The framing effect plays a significant role in shaping public perception in the Western Balkans, particularly within the context of geopolitical tensions and strategic communication campaigns. Framing allows the same event to be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on how it is presented linguistically and contextually. In the post-Yugoslav region, foreign and local actors have strategically used framing to influence attitudes toward the European Union, NATO, and national governments. A notable example is the persistent reframing of military or political interventions. In Serbian-language media affiliated with Russian interests, NATO-led operations or regional peacekeeping efforts are often described not as security cooperation, but as «Western pressure» or «threats to sovereignty», thus turning neutral or supportive actions into perceived aggressions (Entman, 1993:52). During the 2023 unrest in North Kosovo, for instance, pro-Kremlin media such as *Sputnik Srbija* and *RT Balkan* framed violent attacks against Kosovar police as legitimate «defensive actions» by local Serbs rather than acts of provocation or sabotage. This reframing redirected public sentiment away from criticism of violence and toward solidarity with the aggressors (Caprile & Stanicek, 2023:3).

Similarly, during the 2018 referendum in North Macedonia on the country's name change a prerequisite for NATO and EU accession disinformation campaigns reframed the agreement with Greece as a «betrayal of national identity». This framing, amplified by pro-Russian actors, portrayed the name change not as a diplomatic achievement, but as the forced erasure of Macedonian heritage. As a result, public opposition increased, and voter turnout was significantly affected (GMFUS, 2019:4).

Another clear application of the framing effect occurred during the post-2022 energy crisis in the Balkans. Pro-Russian narratives in Serbia and Republika Srpska

reframed rising energy prices as a consequence of «anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the West», ignoring the broader global energy context. Meanwhile, EU institutions framed the crisis as a «temporary challenge during the green transition». This divergence in framing shaped opposing interpretations of the same economic event and influenced public blame attribution (Re-Engage Project, 2024:78).

These strategically curated frames shape not only emotional responses but also cognitive processing. By presenting EU efforts in the region as either «imperialist manipulation» or «economic colonization», these actors delegitimize democratic reforms and create a sense of cultural encroachment. As Entman (1993) notes, framing involves both *selection* and *salience*: choosing which aspects of reality to emphasize and how to present them in ways that guide interpretation (Entman, 1993:52).

Thus, in the Western Balkans, the framing effect is a powerful tool of cognitive warfare. It amplifies ethnonationalist sentiments, reinforces geopolitical alignments, and weakens trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Unless countered through narrative resilience and critical media literacy, such frames will continue to distort democratic discourse and obstruct regional integration.

The bandwagon effect – a cognitive bias where individuals adopt beliefs or behaviors because they perceive them to be widely accepted – has been strategically employed in the Western Balkans to influence public opinion and political alignment. In highly polarized and transitional societies, the desire to conform to the perceived majority opinion can become a powerful tool for information manipulation, especially when combined with nationalistic rhetoric or geopolitical framing.

In Montenegro, during the mass protests surrounding the 2019 *Law on Religious Freedom*, state-affiliated and pro-Serbian media repeatedly portrayed opposition to the law as a «national movement» supported by the «entire Orthodox population». This messaging framed participation in protests not just as a political act, but as a collective cultural obligation. Through visual coverage of massive processions, religious symbols, and emotional appeals, the narrative reinforced the idea that «everyone» was resisting the government's pro-European stance. This mobilized even apolitical individuals to join for fear of being seen as outsiders or traitors (European Western Balkans. 2021, September 6). In Serbia, the government has frequently used the bandwagon effect during elections by emphasizing “national unity” behind President Aleksandar Vučić's leadership. State-controlled outlets amplify poll results and street interviews that depict overwhelming support for the ruling party, often sidelining dissenting voices. Such one-sided coverage cultivates an impression that public consensus already exists, thereby pressuring undecided voters to «go with the flow» to avoid marginalization (Freedom House, 2022:18).

Another illustrative case emerged in Republika Srpska during the 2022 general elections, where local media linked support for Milorad Dodik's SNSD party with loyalty to Serbian heritage and resistance to «foreign interference». Citizens who questioned Dodik's governance or expressed pro-European views were often portrayed as working against «Serb unity», framing dissent not as legitimate criticism, but as betrayal. This form of social shaming relies on the bandwagon mechanism: people are made to feel that opposition is not only unpopular, but socially dangerous (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020:141). Importantly, this effect is further reinforced online. Social media campaigns driven by bots and coordinated troll networks artificially inflate likes, shares, and supportive comments on pro-government content, simulating public consensus. In turn, genuine users are nudged toward accepting and amplifying dominant narratives, believing they

reflect the actual majority (Jovanović V. 2022, December 5). The illusion of mass support becomes a substitute for real debate.

Thus, in the Western Balkans, the bandwagon effect is not merely a passive psychological phenomenon – it is actively engineered through media ecosystems and political messaging. It leverages cultural identity, nationalism, and fear of social exclusion to drive conformity and suppress dissent. Addressing this challenge requires not only media literacy but also pluralistic platforms that visibly reflect diversity of opinion.

In the context of the Western Balkans, cognitive biases are not merely abstract psychological concepts – they are actively harnessed in political communication, media framing, and foreign influence strategies. Among the most influential are the polarization effect and the illusory truth effect, both of which are particularly effective in fragile, post-conflict societies. These biases shape not only how people interpret events, but also how they relate to one another often reinforcing division, distrust, and resistance to democratic reform. The following examples illustrate how these effects operate in the region and the risks they pose to social cohesion and political stability.

The polarization effect intensifies inter-group hostility rather than merely encouraging disagreement. Ethnic identities are continually pitted against each other through media segmentation and political framing, creating stark «us versus them» narratives. According to a report on political dynamics in Bosnia and North Macedonia, ethnic identity is wielded as a political tool party strategies are tailored to specific groups, reinforcing divisions rather than bridging them (Political Staff Report, 2018:3). This practice ensures that citizens increasingly see political issues through an ethnic lens, fostering distrust and opposition toward other communities.

A tangible example comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the implementation of the «two schools under one roof» model in mixed Croat–Bosniak areas consolidates segregation. Students from different ethnic groups attend the same building but are physically, symbolically, and psychologically separated. This arrangement perpetuates division, encouraging each community to view the other as fundamentally different – thereby reinforcing polarization at an early age (OSCE, 2018:2).

Equally pervasive is the illusory truth effect, whereby repeated statements even false ones become accepted as fact. Experimental studies have demonstrated how mere repetition increases perceived accuracy (Unkelbach C., Fiedler K. 2021:1). In the Balkans, propagandistic narratives about geopolitical threats are relentlessly broadcast across radio, TV, and social media. Claims such as «EU accession equals loss of national identity» are repeated continuously, especially during referenda or elections. Over time, even skeptics internalize these statements as credible, weakening support for EU integration and embedding distrust through sheer repetition.

Both cognitive biases polarization and illusory truth become especially potent under conditions of societal fear, economic uncertainty, or external pressure. When trust in institutions is low, endorsements from one's in-group carry disproportionate weight. Falsehoods repeated amid such stress feel familiar and thus plausible, even to educated individuals.

Modern propaganda frequently employs non-contradictory or simplified models of perception such as binary oppositions like «us vs. them» or «friend vs. foe». These cognitive frames serve to justify the severity of criminal actions and reshape public perception. In this context, the concept of the Overton Window plays a crucial role in

legitimizing previously unthinkable ideas (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2006, January 4). American engineer and lawyer Joseph Overton developed a model explaining how public attitudes toward controversial topics can shift – from total rejection and moral condemnation to political acceptance and integration into mainstream ideology. The Overton Window follows a progression: first, a shocking idea appears in the media; then it faces public backlash; subsequently, rational arguments are introduced to normalize the idea; and eventually, it becomes embedded in public discourse and even popular culture.

In the Western Balkans, propaganda and cognitive manipulation go beyond simple framing or repetition they actively seek to shift the Overton Window, that is, what ideas are considered acceptable in public discourse. This strategy gradually moves previously extreme or taboo notions into mainstream conversation, ultimately normalizing them. A clear regional example is the campaign in Montenegro surrounding the 2023–2024 debate over the UN’s Srebrenica resolution and census-driven national identity measures (Disinformation Surrounding the Resolution on Srebrenica, Digital Forensic Center, 2024, pp. 1–2).

According to a detailed analysis by the US-based Defense & Foreign Affairs Council (DFC), pro-Serbian and pro-Russian actors used targeted influence operations to introduce radical constitutional changes into mainstream discourse. Initially, radical ideas like amending Montenegro’s constitution based on ethnic census results or obstructing EU-backed resolutions were presented as legitimate public concerns (DFC, 2024:3). Through repeated media messaging and political statements, these ideas moved from being deemed extremist to being perceived as prudent or necessary measures. Montenegrin politicians such as Andrija Mandić publicly stated plans to amend the constitution depending on census outcomes (DFC, 2024:4). This acted as a deliberate Overton Window shift: by repeating such assertions in media and parliamentary discourse, previously fringe positions such as redefining citizenship or national identity became part of acceptable political conversation. This process minimized dissent; actions that would have been unthinkable months earlier were now seen as viable.

The strategy reflects the logic of the Overton Window, a model describing how ideas shift from the unthinkable to mainstream policy. First came the shock phase: the proposal of census-based constitutional reforms. Then followed normalization, as political actors and commentators increasingly presented these reforms as legitimate protections of Serb cultural rights. Finally, institutionalization occurred through formal parliamentary debate and legal drafting, marking the acceptance of previously marginal ideas into the legislative process (Lehman, 2006, p. 1).

Importantly, these developments operated against a backdrop of polarization and illusory truth, which reinforced the narrative’s perceived legitimacy. As the Overton Window shifted, more traditional media outlets began echoing these ideas, reinforcing the notion that they represented mainstream opinion (NATO Review, 2020:2). By embedding constitutional amendment discussions in everyday political talk, the Overton Window strategy facilitated a stealthy yet dramatic transformation of what was considered «acceptable» in Montenegrin public life.

## CONCLUSION

Cognitive warfare represents not merely a supplementary tactic in modern conflict, but a strategic and paradigmatic shift in the nature of influence operations. As demonstrated in the Western Balkans, this form of warfare exploits the vulnerabilities of the human mind to reshape political behavior, social cohesion, and collective values.

Unlike conventional or information warfare, cognitive warfare targets the inner architecture of thought memory, identity, emotion, and perception operating across multiple domains including media, education, culture, and digital ecosystems.

Through mechanisms such as confirmation bias, the availability heuristic, the framing effect, polarization, the illusory truth effect, and the bandwagon effect, actors like Russia, often in alliance with local political elites or sympathetic media, undermine the legitimacy of Euro-Atlantic institutions, normalize once-radical discourses through Overton Window shifts, and reengineer national narratives. This manipulation is not overt it works precisely because it is subtle, mimicking organic social processes while covertly steering public discourse toward desired geopolitical outcomes.

What makes cognitive warfare especially dangerous in transitional societies like those of the Western Balkans is the legacy of ethnic fragmentation, fragile democratic institutions, and persistent economic and political instability. These factors create a fertile ground for manipulation, where disinformation is not only consumed but often internalized, particularly in environments with low media literacy and high distrust in public institutions. The Balkan examples show that undermining European integration does not require large-scale military aggression; it requires the gradual erosion of belief in its necessity and legitimacy.

Therefore, the response to cognitive warfare must go beyond cyber defense or counter-disinformation efforts. It must involve a holistic strategy of narrative resilience, grounded in education, pluralistic media ecosystems, inclusive political discourse, and public campaigns that reinforce critical thinking, civic values, and democratic legitimacy. Regional and international actors must also recognize the urgency of developing early-warning mechanisms that detect not only propaganda, but subtle shifts in discourse and emerging social narratives that indicate cognitive intrusion.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that cognitive warfare has become the invisible frontline of 21st-century conflict a silent war for perception in which victories and defeats are often unseen, but deeply consequential. Its deployment in the Western Balkans should serve as a cautionary case study for democratic societies worldwide, emphasizing the imperative to protect not just borders and institutions, but the very cognitive frameworks that underpin freedom, rationality, and social trust.

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