

“I Want to Live”: Psychological Warfare for the Modern Era

Description

In the evening of August 6, 2024, the smartphones of Russian soldiers in Kursk Oblast lit up with [messages](#) decrying “the flames of war unleashed by Putin” that “have spread to the Kursk region” and the “senseless bloodbath in Ukraine.” They called on Russian troops to “extinguish this fire” by “voluntarily surrender[ing] through the ‘I Want to Live’ project.” That [same day](#), Ukraine had launched an offensive in the region, marking a significant shift in the Russia-Ukraine War. Ukrainian forces were now moving beyond their borders to target Russian territory directly, with the goal of destabilizing Russian troops. The messages received by Russian soldiers that day were a critical part of this effort, which Ukraine is [still waging](#).

The products of the “[I Want to Live](#)” project—a Ukrainian psychological operation (PSYOP) launched in September 2022—represent Ukraine’s strategic decision to use twenty-first-century technology to bolster its kinetic campaign. By replacing traditional PSYOP methods with mobile technology and social media, Ukraine can now reach enemy soldiers through the smartphones in their hands, aiming to stoke fear, spread confusion, and encourage surrender. More broadly, Ukraine’s “I Want to Live” project reflects the shifting character of warfare, where battles are no longer confined to physical fronts and digital spaces emerge as arenas for shaping perceptions and influencing outcomes. However, this approach also introduces new challenges and ethical considerations that underscore the complexity of PSYOPs in modern conflicts.

Evolution of PSYOPs

[PSYOPs](#) are activities planned during times of conflict that use communication methods and other means to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of target audiences in order to achieve political and military objectives. These operations can be directed at enemy forces, civilian populations, or other approved audiences to weaken an enemy’s will, strengthen support from allies, and gain cooperation from undecided groups.

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PSYOPs have evolved significantly over the last three decades of conflict. Traditional methods, like [dropping leaflets](#) over Iraqi positions during the 1991 Gulf War, have given way to more advanced

digital strategies. One notable example is Israel's use of short message services, or SMS, since 2009 to warn civilians during conflict and collect information about Palestinian militants. Another example is Russia's 2014 deployment of Leer-3 Electronic Warfare (EW) systems in Ukraine to intercept and [manipulate](#) mobile communications, aiming to undermine Ukrainian troop morale and confuse their relatives. Ukraine's "I Want to Live" project demonstrates the latest advancement in leveraging digital platforms to reach enemy soldiers directly.

Project Overview and Goals

Operating under Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR), the "I Want to Live" project aims to encourage Russian soldiers in Ukraine to surrender voluntarily. Through this initiative, Ukraine seeks to weaken Russian military leadership, erode troop morale, and promote surrender as a safe, legitimate option. The project's name reflects its core message: for soldiers seeking to preserve their lives, surrender offers an alternative to continued combat.

The program assures humane treatment according to international standards like the Geneva Conventions. Through its [website](#), the project provides detailed surrender procedures, legal guidance, and information about potential asylum options. Russian soldiers can access these resources through a range of secure channels, including dedicated hotlines, encrypted communications, and QR codes embedded in social media posts. The project's integrated approach, which combines several distinct features discussed below, maximizes its reach and effectiveness.

Practical Instructions and Individualized Outreach

Building on earlier technological developments in the PYSOPs realm, Ukraine's "I Want to Live" project fully embraces the ubiquity of smartphones, recognizing their potential as a direct channel to individual soldiers. Whereas Israel's aforementioned use of standard or GSM phones and SMS capabilities was more of a broadcast, meant to reach a critical mass of individuals, Ukraine has jumped on the evolution of cellular technology to establish actual and bidirectional contact with potential defectors and soldiers who want to surrender. And it has done so successfully: by January 2024, the project had drawn more than 48 million visits to its website, hochuzhit.com, primarily from within Russia.

In seizing on the evolution of cellular technology, the project has also marked a shift from earlier, less targeted methods of psychological operations by directly engaging soldiers rather than relying on the "shotgun" strategy of leaflet drops or mass SMS campaigns. Ukrainian psychologists and analysts focus on one-on-one communication with Russian personnel, offering [practical instructions](#) on

how to surrender safely. Their goal is to convince Russian soldiers to lay down their weapons and turn themselves over to Ukrainian forces. This individualized outreachâ??made possible by smartphones and their pervasivenessâ??is integral to the projectâ??s success by offering soldiers a direct, personal channel to plan their surrender.

Video Testimonials

Ukraineâ??s strategy is particularly noteworthy for its use of personal video testimonials from surrendered Russian soldiers and prisoners of war (POWs) to alter enemy perceptions about Ukraine. For example, in one [testimonial](#), a Russian soldier who had surrendered to Ukrainian forces discusses how the Ukrainians gave him and other soldiers â??water to drink from the last bottleâ?• and â??a smokeâ?• and how they had â??expected a completely different attitude.â?• By sharing such accounts on social media, the project not only challenges Russian soldiersâ?? preconceptions of Ukrainian forces but also exploits the platformsâ?? ease of dissemination, relying on third parties to re-share the messages and thus reach a wider audience.

Operational Coordination

By closely integrating military intelligence with operations, â??I Want to Liveâ?• demonstrates the Ukrainian militaryâ??s high level of coordination. The aforementioned recorded interviews of captured Russian POWs, who often express disappointment in their leadership, are tactically distributed through social media to influence enemy morale and undermine Russian command in contested areas. The project has also proactively engaged Russian villagers in Kursk Oblast, encouraging them to report on â??Kadyrovâ??s gangs.â?• As Ukrainian forces advanced, the project adapted its messaging in real-time, warning Russian units of potential encirclement and abandonment by their commanders. This alignment of timely, targeted messaging with military operations illustrates how the project strategically influences enemy troops in key areas.

Leveraging Internal Tensions within Russian Forces

A significant part of the projectâ??s messaging strategy exploits [reported](#) tensions within Russian forces, particularly between Chechen so-called Kadyrovtsy units and regular Russian military personnel. The term *Kadyrovtsy* refers to units under the control of Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic within the Russian Federation. For example, after Chechen commander Apti Alaudinov criticized young Russian conscripts for surrendering in Kursk Oblast, Ukraine, through its â??I Want to Liveâ?• project, responded by highlighting perceived [inequalities](#) between Chechen and Russian soldiers. To drive a wedge between these groups and thus exacerbate divisions within the

Russian ranks, one “I Want to Live” message described how Kadyrov’s bandits loot freely while young conscripts die. Aпти blames their mothers, but his own son won’t go to war. So why are you needed? To die for them? Another [message](#) that generated significant interaction on Telegram (1,626,117 views and 4,540 reposts as of August 15, 2024) discussed and depicted the [surrender](#) of more than a hundred Russian soldiers, stating that it was “understandable” and “hard to conduct military operations when you’re commanded by tyrants and embezzlers and your flanks are “protected” by Kadyrov’s bandits who abandon everything and everyone just to avoid being captured themselves.” By using such personalized messages and targeted communication strategies, the project aims to erode trust within the Russian military, fulfilling the ultimate goal of encouraging surrender and undermining troop cohesion.

Metrics-Driven Adaptation

“I Want to Live” also exemplifies a dynamic approach to psychological operations. By monitoring key metrics like message spread, surrender requests, and civilian inquiries about mobilization, the project can adjust its messaging to respond to battlefield developments and shifts in Russian public sentiment. It has thus been able to refine its strategies based on data throughout the conflict in Kursk Oblast.

The following [statement](#) from the project team underscores the value of this metrics-driven approach (see also Figure 1): “It has only been a week of fighting in the Kursk region, and the number of applications to “I Want to Live” has sharply increased by a third during this period! In total to date, we have received almost 40,000 requests through all channels: hotline, Telegram, WhatsApp, and chatbot. We are contacted by both active servicemen of the Russian army for voluntary surrender and civilians who are afraid of the announcement of a new wave of mobilization and do not want to become cannon fodder for Russian commanders.” This message highlights the project’s ability to reach both servicemen and concerned civilians, using social media not only to broadcast conflict dynamics but also to undermine enemy confidence, morale, and security where it benefits Ukraine most.

Such data regarding surrender requests enables the project to be both responsive—adapting to immediate battlefield conditions—and proactive—anticipating future shifts in the conflict. For example, when surrender requests spike after military engagements, the project can tailor its messaging to target vulnerable Russian units in order to capitalize on heightened fears of encirclement and abandonment. Similarly, civilian inquiries about mobilization allow the project to influence public opinion, positioning itself as a reliable source of information amid growing uncertainty.

The project's immediate impact is significant, with over [300 Russian surrenders](#) and more than 26,000 individual applications as of June 2024. By late August 2024, the number of young Russian conscripts who had [surrendered](#) provided enough pressure on the Kremlin to facilitate the first POW swap since the start of Ukraine's Kursk incursion. The long-term effects of the "I Want to Live" project on Russian troop morale and broader public opinion may be even more consequential: by consistently undermining the credibility of Russian commanders and offering a clear alternative to continued fighting, the project is eroding military cohesion and civilian support for the war, potentially creating lasting divisions within Russian society and its armed forces.

Ethical Considerations

Notwithstanding their advantages, Ukraine's use of such psychological tactics, particularly POW interviews, raises important legal and ethical questions. Article 13 of the [Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War](#) (Geneva Convention III) requires that POWs be protected from "insults and public curiosity." Thus, some [debate](#) exists about whether sharing POW interviews on social media constitutes exposure to such "insults and public curiosity" in violation of this provision. Relatedly, there is a [question](#) as to whether POWs can genuinely consent to these interviews while in captivity, which could assuage concerns regarding an alleged failure on Ukraine's part to protect these soldiers. Furthermore, coercion—explicit or implicit—is hard to assess, and the project's use of video testimonials raises additional anxieties regarding potential exploitation even where POWs appear to be willing participants.

The project's promotion of videos of Ukrainian celebrities like [Yarmak](#), a popular rapper, conversing with a captured Russian soldier, could be seen as exploiting Russian POWs' vulnerability to highlight admiration for Ukrainian icons and infringing on their rights and dignity for the sake of strategic influence and broad appeal. Thus, while such tactics may serve the goal of undermining Russian morale, they must be balanced against the potential harm to the individuals involved. This includes conducting careful legal and ethical analyses of proposed tactics before they are employed in a media environment where persuasion and coercion can blur. Given the reach of some of these videos, consideration should also be given to possible retaliatory actions against the POWs upon their prospective return to Russia.

Broader Impact on Modern Warfare

While currently a novelty, "I Want to Live" exemplifies a more general shift in modern warfare, with digital influence and data-driven strategies shaping military outcomes and extending conflict beyond physical battlefields into the digital domains of information and perception. This trend, often

called [participatory warfare](#), which blurs the lines between combatants and civilians. Combining footage of POWs, messaging about internal Russian army divisions, and reports of alleged mistreatment by Russian commanders, [I Want to Live](#) engages both military personnel and civilians, including families of POWs. With technology and intelligence services converging to make projects like [I Want to Live](#) possible, traditional intelligence cycles are evolving into more participatory models where diverse actors, such as celebrities and POWs, are used to persuade enemy forces to surrender. For policymakers and strategists, this blending of information warfare with conventional operations emphasizes the need to monitor and carefully consider legal and ethical boundaries in modern conflict.

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Main Image: Image created by DALL-E, generated with assistance from ChatGPT, OpenAI, 2024.

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