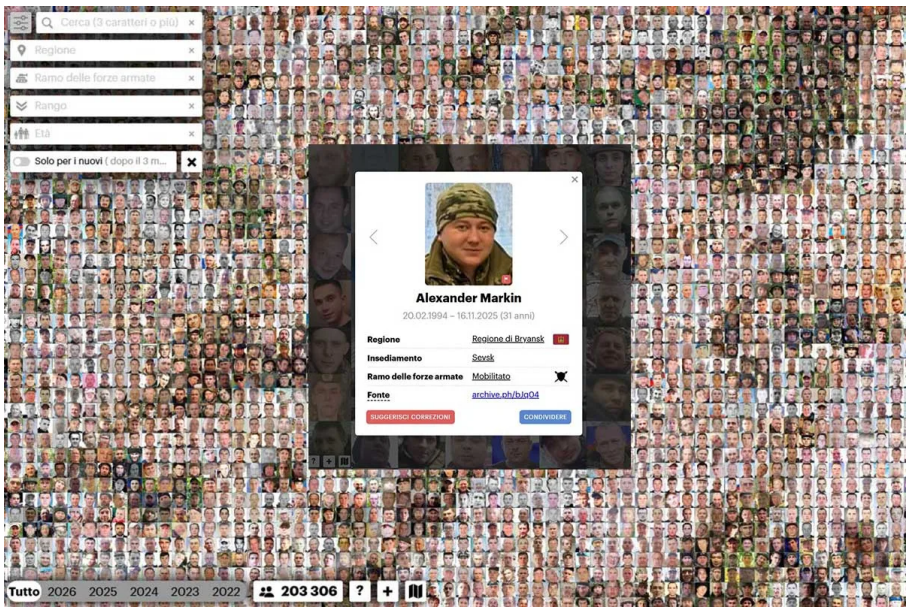

Between Hearsay and Ignored Sources: We Are in a Cognitive War.

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There is a war that is not fought with tanks, artillery, or missiles. It does not destroy infrastructures, does not produce spectacular images, and rarely enters official bulletins. Yet it is already underway and is an integral part of contemporary conflicts. It is the cognitive war, which in doctrinal terms is increasingly often referred to by analysts as a possible **"sixth domain"**, alongside land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace.

NATO has been talking about it for years as an operational dimension where **the goal is not to conquer territory, but to influence human decision-making**. It is not simply about propaganda, but a set of activities aimed at shaping perceptions, altering the understanding of facts, and ultimately influencing individual and collective behaviors.

The Battlefield is Public Debate

To understand how this domain manifests, it is not necessary to analyze complex military scenarios. It is enough to observe public debate. Comments under a news story today represent

one of the most evident places of this dynamic: **immediate reactions, polarization, refusal to engage with sources**, systematic use of labels like “propaganda” to delegitimize any data not conforming to one's beliefs.

These are not isolated episodes, but a recurring pattern. The speed with which opinions are formed, often based on headlines or fragments of information, replaces verification. In this context, informational content loses centrality, while narrative prevails.

Some of the derogatory comments on our Facebook page under the post of the article **“Over 200,000 Dead: Moscow's War Fueled by Forced Recruitment and Social Vulnerability”**

Sources Exist, but Are Not Consulted

A concrete example concerns the topic of Russian losses in the conflict in Ukraine. In our article **“Over 200,000 Dead: Moscow's War Fueled by Forced Recruitment and Social Vulnerability”**, data based on open and verifiable sources were reported.

The main reference is the Mediazona database, accessible through the section **200.zona.media**. It is an independent project that collects information on Russian casualties identified by name. It is not about aggregate estimates, but about **verifiable individual identities**: name, surname, origin, unit, rank, and age.

The data is constructed through the analysis of obituaries, local official communications, and content published on Russian social networks through the families of the fallen. Each entry is verified before being included, and when inconsistencies arise, it is corrected or removed. This approach, while not guaranteeing absolute completeness, gives the dataset a **high level of**

reliability.

The database of Russian casualties can be consulted at the internet address 200.media.zona

Mobilization and Structure of Losses

Faced with this type of data, the most frequent reaction is not critical analysis, but delegitimization. In the comments, statements are observed that attribute the numbers to political sources, or arbitrary comparisons between Russian and Ukrainian losses, often lacking any documentary basis.

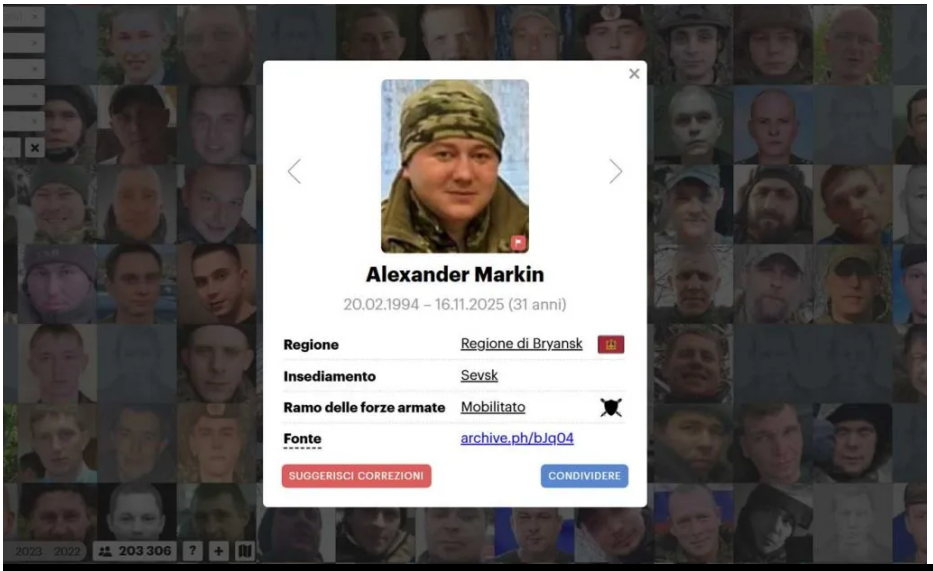
In reality, the overall picture of losses remains incomplete for both sides. The available information is partial, fragmented, and often subject to manipulation. Precisely for this reason, the existence of a **nominative and verified database** represents a relevant element, not easily dismissed as propaganda.

The problem, therefore, is not the presence of data, but **the willingness to engage with it**.

The analysis of the database also allows for capturing qualitative aspects of the conflict. Among the categories present are the so-called **“mobilized”**, that is, civilians called up as part of the partial mobilization initiated by the Russian Federation in 2022.

These individuals do not fall into the category of contract volunteers, nor into that of annual compulsory conscripts. They are recalled personnel, often coming from socio-economically vulnerable contexts. Their presence among the fallen helps to outline a picture in which the war effort also relies on **internal social dynamics**, as well as on traditional military structures.

This complexity is often ignored in public debate, where simplified and dichotomous representations prevail.



One of the Russian casualties. Media Zona's work documents confirmed losses through obituaries, local communications, and family reports from Russia

The Invisible Enemy

The cognitive war, as outlined also within NATO, does not have as its main objective to impose a version of the facts, but to **destabilize the very concept of truth**. When every piece of data can be immediately labeled as propaganda, when every source is placed on the same level regardless of the method by which it was constructed, the result is a loss of orientation.

In this scenario, the advantage is not of those who convince, but of those who manage to create confusion.

The risk is not so much believing in an erroneous narrative, but **ceasing to distinguish between verifiable information and opinions**. When this distinction is lost, the conflict is no longer confined to the traditional battlefield.

It has already entered the cognitive space of the observer.