

THE COGNITIVE ATTACK AGAINST THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN FRANCE

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Abstract: The opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games became the target of one of the most successful cognitive attacks of the decade. A festive scene celebrating French fashion, diversity, and the Dionysian tradition was deliberately reframed by an information attacker, as a blasphemous parody of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper." Within hours, the false narrative went viral globally, provoked institutional responses, and caused sustained reputational damage to France, the Olympic movement, and Western liberal values. This paper demonstrates, through chronological reconstruction and

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narrative analysis, that the scandal exhibits all the hallmarks of a planned cognitive operation: rapid seeding, bot amplification, selective editing of official statements, and exploitation of existing cultural cleavages. The primary beneficiaries, Russia (banned from the Games), domestic far-right movements, and conservative political forces in the United States, are clearly identifiable. The case constitutes a textbook example of contemporary cognitive warfare executed in the open-source information environment.

Keywords: cognitive warfare, disinformation, character assassination, Paris 2024 Olympic Games, narrative seeding, Russia hybrid operations

Introduction

The Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony on 26 July 2024 was the first in modern history to take place outside a stadium, along the Seine River. Conceived by artistic director Thomas Jolly as a celebration of French history, fashion, and cultural diversity, it included a segment inspired by the Dionysian feasts depicted in Jan Harmensz van Bijlert's "The Feast of the Gods" (1630s) and the festive spirit of French cabaret and haute couture.

Within hours of the broadcast, a coordinated campaign transformed this artistic tableau into an alleged mockery of Christianity's most sacred image, Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper", presenting the time Eucharistic was established. The speed, scale, and durability of the false narrative provide a rare real-time case study of cognitive warfare in the social media era.

The primary goal of the paper is to demonstrate, through rigorous chronological reconstruction, narrative analysis, and application of established cognitive warfare frameworks, that the global controversy surrounding the Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony was not a spontaneous cultural misunderstanding but a deliberately orchestrated cognitive attack.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, combining chronological event reconstruction, narrative analysis, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) techniques to examine the disinformation cascade surrounding the Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony.

Data were collected from primary sources, including archived Twitter posts, official statements by Paris 2024 organizers, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as well as secondary sources such as mainstream media articles (e.g., The New York Post) and state-affiliated commentary (e.g., Russian Foreign Ministry Telegram posts). Narrative amplification was assessed using specialized tools, including Blackbird AI's narrative intelligence platform, which identified 29 coordinated boycott narratives and quantified bot-like activity through network graphing.

The Cognitive Warfare

Cognitive warfare (CW) has emerged as a distinct domain in contemporary security studies, extending

traditional psychological operations and information warfare by targeting human cognition, the processes of perception, memory, judgment, and decision-making, as the primary battlespace (Claverie & du Cluzel, 2023; NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2021). NATO defines CW as "the weaponization of public opinion" and other techniques to alter how individuals and groups think and act, often through disinformation, computational propaganda, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and neuroscience (Backes & Swab, 2019; NATO, 2021).

Early conceptualizations trace CW to hybrid warfare paradigms, where non-kinetic tools exploit cognitive biases to achieve strategic effects below the threshold of armed conflict (Bernal et al., 2020). Scholarly analyses highlight its evolution from psychological warfare, incorporating neuroscientific advancements (e.g., transcranial stimulation) and big data analytics to enable precise manipulation of populations (Di Pietro, 2023).

Recent literature emphasizes CW's interdisciplinary nature and ethical challenges, including its potential for societal polarization and erosion of democratic institutions (Kuznetsova & Kuznetsov, 2024; Di Pietro, 2023). NATO's framework positions CW as a "whole-of-society" threat, necessitating resilience through awareness, education, and layered defenses (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2024). Cognitive warfare represents an evolved and integral dimension of hybrid warfare, a paradigm that blends conventional military capabilities with unconventional methods, such as disinformation, cyber operations, economic pressure, proxy forces, and psychological influence, to achieve political objectives while remaining below the threshold

of overt conflict (Hoffman, 2007; Galeotti, 2019). Within this framework, CW specifically targets the cognitive domain (individual and collective perception, reasoning, and decision-making) as the decisive battlespace, enabling adversaries to erode societal cohesion, manipulate public opinion, and induce strategic paralysis without kinetic engagement (Claverie & du Cluzel, 2023; Bernal et al., 2020).

NATO explicitly positions cognitive warfare within the broader hybrid threat spectrum, describing it as “the most advanced form of manipulation currently available” because it exploits neuroscientific insights, big data, and algorithmic amplification to achieve effects traditionally pursued through physical coercion (NATO Innovation Hub, 2021; NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2024).

Russian and Chinese doctrines similarly embed cognitive/information-psychological operations as core elements of “new-generation” or “unrestricted” warfare, confirming that CW is not only complements but increasingly dominates contemporary hybrid campaigns (Thomas, 2022; Cheatham et al., 2024). The Paris 2024 case therefore illustrates how cognitive warfare operationalizes hybrid strategy in the open information environment: a single fabricated narrative, amplified globally within hours, inflicted greater reputational and political damage on France and Western liberal institutions than any conventional sabotage could have achieved.

Case Study: Paris Olympics Scandal

The opening of the Olympic games was glamorous and bold. For the first time in the history of the modern

Olympic games, it went out of the stadium and manifested on the streets of Paris the freedom and the beauty of human creativity and genius vision. The Olympics Opening ceremony was more than four hours celebrating emblematic symbols of the French history and culture. Around the middle of the ceremony, in an artistic way was presented France with its festivity and the work of famous French designers. The scene was representing the popular French fashion shows. For the purpose, one of the Sena bridges was turned into a catwalk with cheering extravagant audience. In the middle of the catwalk was positioned Barbara Butch, a famous French DJ. On the catwalk paraded French celebrities dressed by French designers which was followed by performances of different music and dance arts, from classical ballet to drag queens celebrating the diversity of the French culture.



Picture 1: The opening of the Festive scene¹

¹ Ceremony's pictures (1 to 5) were extracted from:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onP5-DKSb14>, accessed January 10, 2026



Picture 2: The representation of the French Fashion shows, side view



Picture 3: Fashion show representation



Picture 4: Classical ballet performance

After this part, followed a scene of Philippe Katerine who appears on stage, painted in blue, decorated with grapes, other fruits and flowers. The resemblance of the way how the Greek God Dionisius is depicted is evident.



Picture 5: The Greek God Dionisius

What Caused the Scandal?

The disinformation cascade ignited within minutes of the broadcast on 26 July 2024 and unfolded with remarkable speed and coordination, exemplifying a textbook cognitive attack in the social media age. Initial seeding began organically but was rapidly hijacked and amplified.

Canadian journalist Harrison Faulkner (@Harry_Faulkner) posted (Picture 6) one of the earliest viral reactions during the live ceremony, sharing a clip of the fashion/Dionysian sequence with the caption: “Wtf is going on at the Olympics opening ceremony?” The post, which highlighted the presence of drag performers without initially referencing Christianity, quickly accumulated thousands of likes and replies, where commenters began drawing explicit

parallels to Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* due to the central table arrangement and diverse performers surrounding DJ Barbara Butch.



Picture 6: Harrison Faulkner post on X²

This perceptual link was decisively reinforced hours later by U.S. podcaster Clint Russel (host of *Liberty Lockdown*), who posted: “This is crazy. Opening your event by replacing Jesus and the disciples at *The Last Supper* with men in drag.” Russel’s framing, direct, emotionally charged, and religiously provocative—provided the authoritative narrative anchor, receiving tens of thousands of reposts and serving as the primary quote in subsequent mainstream coverage.

² https://x.com/Harry_Faulkner/status/1816994667197559012, accessed January 10, 2026

By the morning of 27 July 2024, the New York Post legitimized the interpretation with its headline “Apparent drag ‘parody of Last Supper’ at Paris 2024 Olympics opening ceremony sparks controversy,” embedding Russel’s quote alongside side-by-side collages that superimposed ceremony screenshots onto da Vinci’s painting, further entrenching the visual misassociation despite factual discrepancies (e.g., the absence of twelve apostles, presence of Dionysian symbols like grapes, and the separate blue-painted Philippe Katerine performance).



Picture 6: Harrison Faulkner post on X³

State actors and aligned networks accelerated escalation that same day. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova published a comprehensive

³ <https://x.com/LibertyLockPod/status/1816938415822159951> accessed January 10, 2026

denunciation on Telegram, labeling the ceremony a deliberate mockery of Christianity and Western decadence, incorporating themes of satanism, moral decay, and anti-Christian hostility that would dominate global discourse.

Pro-Russian outlets and Eastern European media rapidly translated and amplified her statement, while conservative influencers including Collin Rugg (Rugg, n.d), Marjorie Taylor Greene (Geerene n.d), and others posted high-engagement content (many exceeding 10,000–100,000 likes) explicitly calling the scene “satanic,” “blasphemous,” and grounds for boycott. Selective editing compounded the damage: Paris 2024 spokesperson Anne Descamps’s nuanced statement, “Clearly there was never an intention to show disrespect to any religious group (Reuters, 2024, July 27).

If people have taken any offence, we are really sorry”, was clipped and recirculated with misleading titles such as “Olympics organizers apologize for mocking Jesus,” creating a false impression of admitted guilt.

Bot networks and inauthentic accounts provided the final accelerant; Blackbird AI (Blackbird AI, 2024) identified 29 coordinated boycott narratives with significant bot-like activity, including hyperactive profiles posting dozens of times daily, far beyond human capacity.

Within 48 hours, the fabricated narrative overwhelmed factual clarifications (e.g., Thomas Jolly’s confirmation of Dionysian/Bacchanalian inspiration from Jan Harmensz van Bijlert’s “The Feast of the Gods”), achieving perceptual dominance: Google searches for “Olympics opening 2024” returned primarily scandal-related results, and polarized discourse flooded social

media with keywords like “anti-Christ,” “Satanic,” and “blasphemy.”

This meticulously layered escalation, beginning with ambiguous outrage, crystallized by influential reframing, legitimized by media, weaponized by state actors, and saturated through inauthentic means, transformed an artistic celebration into a perceived global assault on Christianity. Thousands of aggressive reactions were circulated of the opening associated with da Vinci’s work.

The Organizers’ reaction

Faced with rapidly escalating global outrage, Paris 2024 organizers mounted a multi-layered defensive response that combined factual clarification, artistic contextualization, and a carefully worded conditional apology, yet this reaction was immediately exploited to reinforce the false narrative.

As early as July 27, the official Olympics account on X posted an explicit clarification that the blue-painted figure was Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and festivity, arriving “to make us aware of the absurdity of violence between human beings” (Paris 2024, 2024a).

Artistic director Thomas Jolly repeatedly and categorically denied any inspiration from Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, insisting the tableau was a celebration of pagan mythology and French libertarian festivity modeled on Jan Harmensz van Bijlert’s *The Feast of the Gods* (1635–1640), a Dutch painting depicting the wedding of Thetis and Peleus with Apollo at the center (Jolly as cited in *Le Monde*, 2024; van Bijlert clarification in *The Art Newspaper*, 2024).

At the IOC daily press briefing on July 28, spokesperson Anne Descamps stated: “Clearly there was never an intention to show disrespect to any religious group. [The ceremony] tried to celebrate community tolerance... We believe this ambition was achieved. If people have taken any offence, we are really sorry” (International Olympic Committee, 2024).

This measured expression of regret, explicitly not an admission of blasphemous intent, was immediately clipped, stripped of context, and recirculated millions of times with headlines such as “Olympics organizers apologize for mocking Jesus” or “Paris admits Last Supper parody,” creating the false impression of contrition and guilt (Reuters, 2024; France24, 2024).



IOC STATEMENT ON THE OPENING CEREMONY:

“The IOC has taken note of and welcomes the clarification given by the Paris 2024 Organising Committee regarding the Opening Ceremony.

In the daily press briefing, the Organising Committee said that there was never any intention to show disrespect towards any religious group or belief.

They reiterated that their intention with the Opening Ceremony was always to celebrate community and tolerance. The Organising Committee also said that if anyone was offended by certain scenes, this was completely unintentional and they were sorry.”

Picture 7: IOC statement on the opening ceremony

The selective editing transformed a defensive clarification into apparent validation of the accusations, triggering a second, even larger wave of indignation that

swept through conservative, Christian, and far-right networks worldwide and further entrenched the fabricated narrative in public perception.

Nowhere in the statements, not in the press conference nor in the IOC statement, is there any admission that “The Last Supper” has been represented. The artistic director, Thomas Jolly, informs that his inspiration is the painting “The Feast of Gods,” which shows a celebration of the Greek Gods on Olympus.

Despite this, Anne Descamps's answer has been cut from the question and widely circulated on YouTube, X, and conventional media with variations of the title “The organizers apologize for mocking Jesus/ representing “The Last Supper,” making the false statement that she is apologizing for this on behalf of the Organizers.

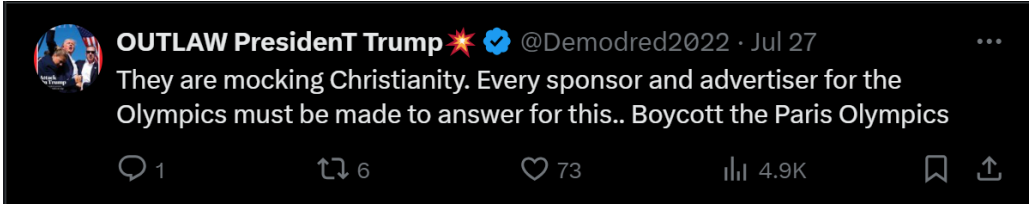


Picture 8: Misleading titles about organizers’ apology in popular media⁴

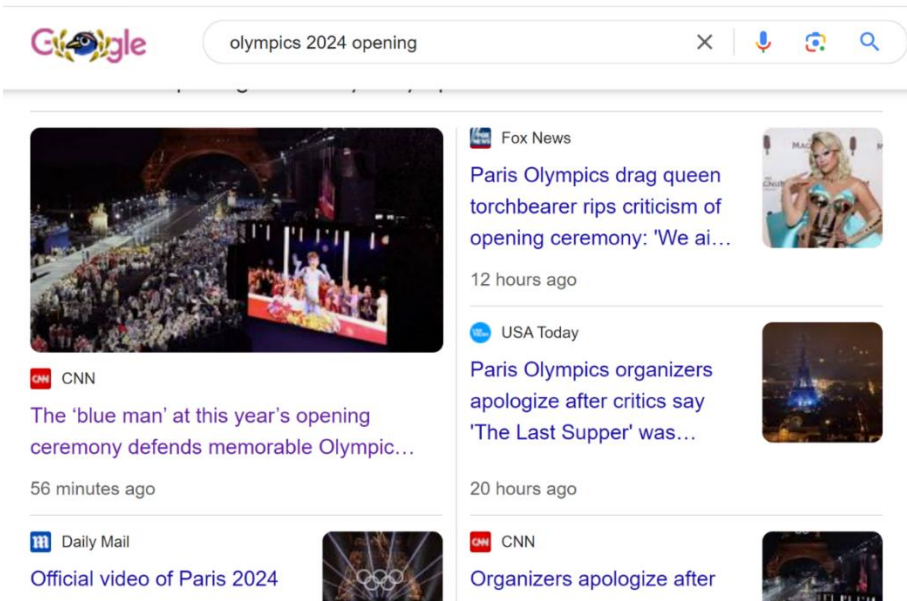
⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2024/07/28/paris-olympics-opening-ceremony-last-supper-apology/>

This provoked media from all political spectrums to circulate news that the Organizers apologized for mocking Christianity, which made even the apathetic people think that the Organizers admitted guilt.

A new wave of negative comments was generated continuing the call for boycotting the games:



The escalation reached a point when a simple Google search about the opening shows on the first page only results regarding the scandal.



Picture 9: Results for Google search on Olympics opening 2024, November 2025

From this moment on, it looked like the topic of mocking Christianity turned to be the highlight of the evening, leaving everything behind. In Social media, people from all over the world were engaging in highly polarized discussions about the event. Keywords that were mostly seen were: antiChrist, Satans, evel, demons, disgrace etc.

Shortly after it was published, it appeared as a quote on one of the popular Russian Telegram channels.



Analysis: Was The Scandal a Cognitive Attack?

Cognitive attacks aim to change the interpretation of a situation by an individual and in mass consciousness. They actively use cognitive biases as automatic shortcuts for mass consciousness (Pocheptsov, 2018) , such as changing concepts for describing a situation by adapting negative images.

Cognitive attacks as part of cognitive warfare are used to fragment states and polarize the public opinion taking political advantage of this polarization.

The planning and performance of cognitive attacks are complicated matters, but here, we will give just a small glimpse of the “how” that may be relevant to the discussed case.

Rand Waltzman from the Information Professionals Association summarizes a few basic elements of the

attack: "Character assassination". Character assassination is an intentional operation for reputational damage. The "Character" is the target of the attack who has already achieved an important position of power or reputation.

The goal is to damage the reputation and present a person or an organization disgracefully, as dishonest, not worthy, weak, evil, etc., depending on the political goals.

The main element in character assassination is the audience. According to its values, beliefs, and expectations different narratives are designed which aim to:

- Discredit – showing the incompetence of the target
- Defame – damaging the target's good name and reputation.
- Demonize – turning the targets into bad people that everyone hates so anything they do will be considered bad.
- Dehumanize – treating the targets as non-human with negligible values.

Once designed, the narratives shall be disseminated appropriately. At the beginning, posts of bots and avatars or comments on posts of authentic personalities are used. In the best-case scenario, these personalities are celebrities with high number of followers and high reach.

Reading multiple confirmatory comments focusing on the desired misinterpretation would help the audience

shape an opinion. In the current era, technologies are only facilitating the execution of cognitive attacks, especially when the target audience can be targeted and multiple shares of a post guarantee the content's receptivity and influence. A good way for this to work is to use tactics for the audience to disseminate, create, interpret and adapt forged content.

The attack is successful, and the target's reputation is damaged when the audience believes it is and establishes a negative perception and belief about it.

As a result from the spread of this narrative, the call for boycotting the Olympics has increased significantly, for not watching or attending the mega event. This is not the only narrative that has been raised around the event.

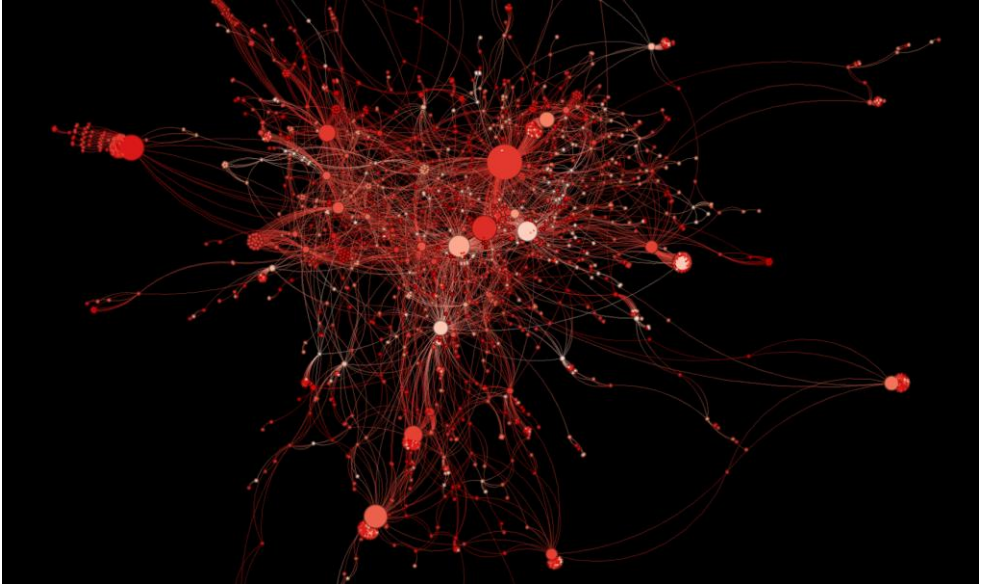
The narrative intelligence platform conducted a comprehensive analysis of the disinformation ecosystem surrounding the Paris 2024 opening ceremony and identified 29 distinct but interlocking harmful narratives, all strategically designed to converge on a unified call for boycotting or delegitimizing the Games (Blackbird AI, 2024). These narratives ranged from accusations of blasphemy and satanism to claims of moral decay, anti-Christian hostility, and organizational incompetence, exhibiting high thematic coherence and cross-lingual synchronization (English, French, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, and Eastern European languages).

The platform's network graph of interactions, constructed from retweets, quotes, replies, mentions, and coordinated posting bursts, revealed a densely interconnected amplification structure characterized by central hubs of dark-red nodes representing accounts with unequivocal bot-like or automated characteristics

(Blackbird AI, 2024). These nodes were flagged using multi-vector scoring: extreme posting velocity (dozens to hundreds of posts daily), near-identical phrasing repetition across geographically dispersed accounts, anomalous engagement ratios (high output with artificially suppressed or farmed inbound metrics), account-age-to-activity discrepancies, and burst patterns timed to algorithmic peak-visibility windows.

A paradigmatic case is a profile created in January 2023 that, by 28 July 2024, had published over 32,500 original posts—averaging 54 posts per day for 550 consecutive days, excluding replies and comments. This cadence is not merely improbable but physiologically impossible for a human operator, even one working full-time in shifts, and far exceeds documented outputs of professional social-media teams. By comparison, Elon Musk, the platform’s most prolific verified user, averaged only 8–9 posts per day over 15 years.

The graph’s topology further betrays professional orchestration: high betweenness centrality of bot clusters, rapid cascade initiation within minutes of Maria Zakharova’s Telegram post (which served as the authoritative narrative anchor), and synchronized multilingual rollout are hallmarks of pre-positioned influence infrastructure rather than organic outrage.



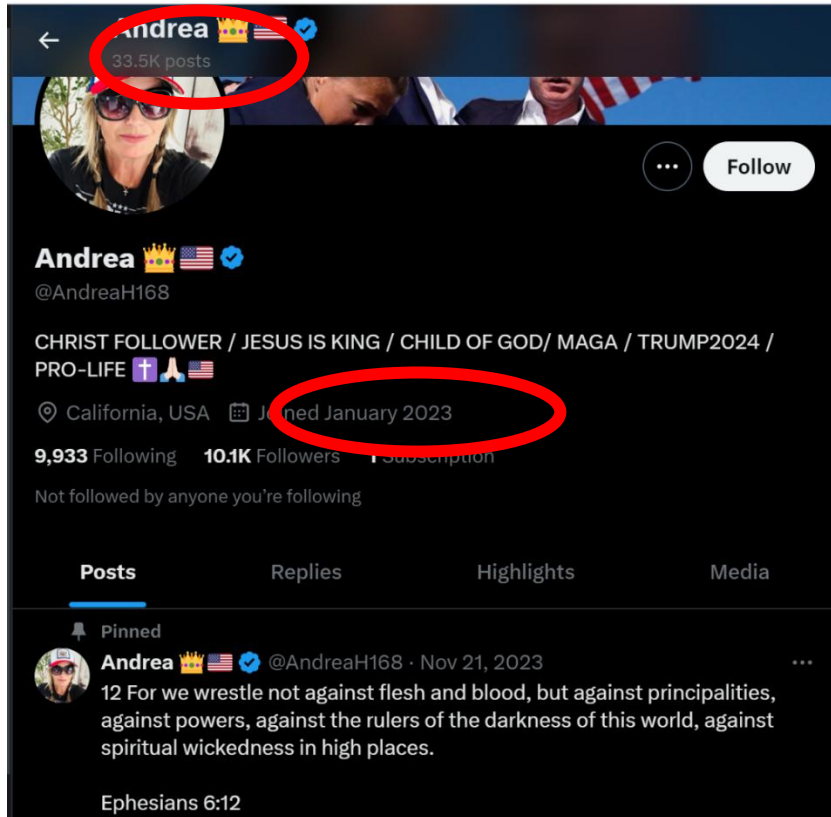
Picture 10: Interactions between entities calling to boycott Paris 2024

Attribution to Russian-Directed Cognitive Warfare

The totality of indicators, immediate exploitation by official Russian state voices (Zakharova’s post contained the complete narrative package subsequently amplified globally), perfect alignment with longstanding Kremlin information-psychological objectives (portraying the West as morally corrupt while positioning Russia as defender of Christian civilization), technical signatures matching previously attributed Russian coordinated inauthentic behavior campaigns (Microsoft Threat Intelligence, 2024; DFRLab, 2024; Graphika, 2024), and the fact that Russia was the primary strategic beneficiary (banned from the Games yet able to inflict asymmetric reputational damage), allows us to conclude with high confidence that the post-ceremony amplification wave constituted a Russian-

state-directed (or at minimum Russian-orchestrated) cognitive warfare attack.

The operation transformed a potential minor cultural misunderstanding into a sustained global perception crisis, achieving strategic sabotage of France's image and the Olympic movement's legitimacy through industrial-scale narrative manipulation.



Picture 11: Profile of an activist seeing the "Last Supper" in the opening

Analysis: What Are the Consequences and Who Is Benefitting from The Scandal?

The Olympic Games represent the foremost global sporting mega-event and a paramount instrument of soft power, providing host nations with a unique platform to project national strength, cultural vitality, and ideological leadership in a nominally apolitical context (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Successful character assassination occurs precisely when the target audience internalizes the damaging narrative as truth (Waltzman, 2023). In this instance, France, positioned as the historic cradle of European Enlightenment, secular democracy, and liberal pluralism, sustained profound reputational injury with cascading political, societal, and (potentially) economic consequences.

Although the controversy did not ultimately derail the Games' commercial success, Paris 2024 achieved record ticket sales and positive overall economic impact estimates ranging from €6.7 to €11.1 billion (Centre de Droit et d'Économie du Sport, 2024)—the orchestrated outrage generated short-term risks including localized boycott threats, heightened sponsor caution in conservative markets, and temporary viewership dips among certain demographics (Reuters, 2024).

More enduringly, the episode intensified societal fragmentation across Western democracies, exacerbating culture-war divisions and rendering populations more susceptible to subsequent information operations (Kuznetsova & Kuznetsov, 2024).

Politically, far-right and socially conservative movements in Europe and North America derived significant benefit, acquiring potent visual evidence for

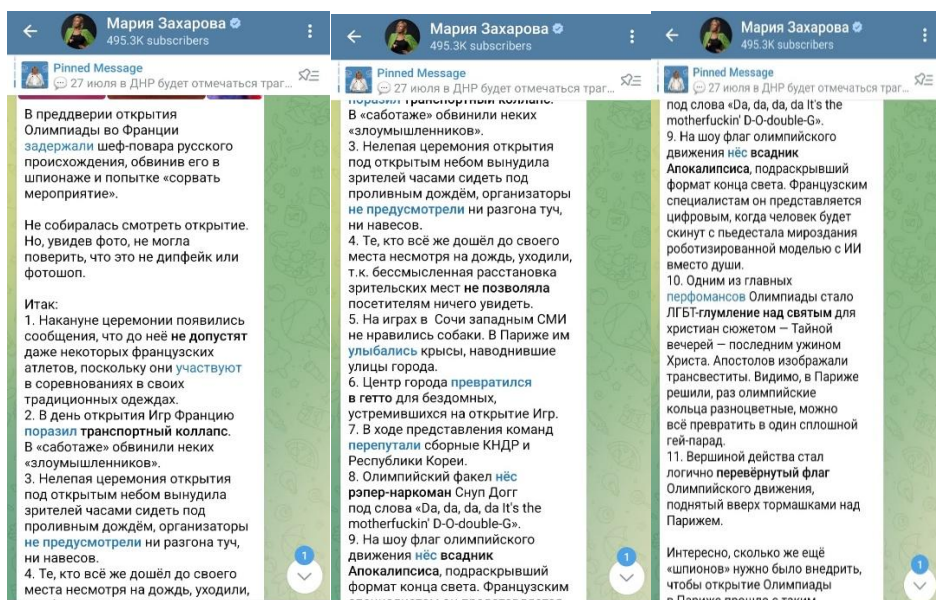
narratives portraying liberal institutions as morally bankrupt and hostile to “traditional values” (Mudde, 2024). Figures across the U.S. political spectrum, including Donald Trump and several Republican lawmakers, leveraged the controversy for domestic electoral advantage during the 2024 campaign cycle.

The principal strategic beneficiary, however, was the Russian Federation. Excluded from official participation under its flag due to the invasion of Ukraine, with only 15 athletes ultimately competing as Individual Neutral Athletes (International Olympic Committee, 2023; ESPN, 2024), Moscow weaponized the scandal to reinforce its carefully cultivated image as the global guardian of Christian morality and traditional values against Western decadence (Pocheptsov, 2018). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova (Picture 13) delivered one of the earliest and most virulent condemnations, deriding the ceremony as a “massive failure” and evidence of moral decay (Zakharova as cited in *The Moscow Times*, 2024; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2024). The Russian Orthodox Church echoed this framing, further entrenching the narrative domestically and among sympathetic audiences worldwide.

This orchestrated demonization served multiple interlocking objectives: it justified Russia's absence from what state media branded “sinful” and “cringe” Games; validated the Kremlin's long-standing “Third Rome” ideology positioning Russia as the true heir to Christian civilization (Laruelle, 2022); and burnished the appeal of Moscow's alternative multilateral initiatives, including the repeatedly postponed World Friendship Games (originally scheduled for 2024,

deferred to 2025, and ultimately suspended indefinitely in December 2024) as a morally superior substitute to the supposedly exhausted and decadent Olympic model (Putin, 2024; Reuters, 2024b).

The cognitive operation thus achieved exemplary hybrid-warfare outcomes: weakening a geopolitical adversary (France/EU), deepening polarization in target societies, and advancing Russia's preferred narrative of multipolar moral leadership, all at near-zero kinetic cost (Claverie & du Cluzel, 2023; Pocheptsov, 2018).



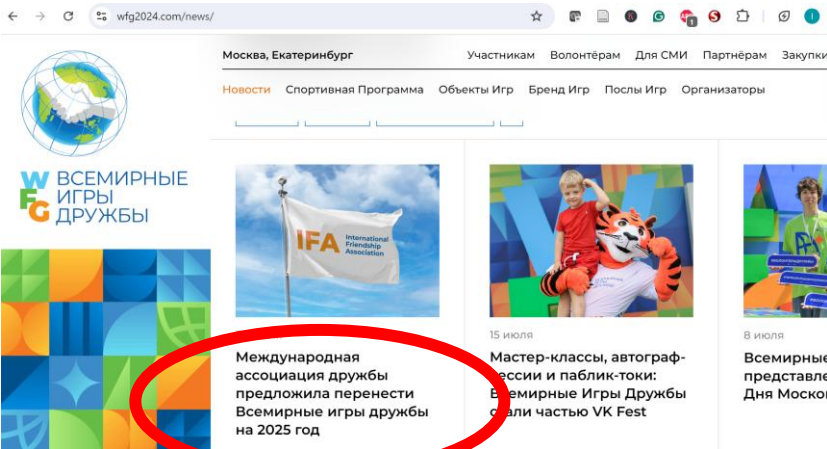
Picture 12: Fragments from Maria Zakhariova Telegram profile

Russian government or state officials are also banned from attending the Paris Olympics and cannot be invited as guests or accredited.

Stanislav Pozdnyakov, the head of Russia's Olympic Committee (R.O.C.), criticised the Russian athletes competing in the Summer Games, calling them "foreign agents".

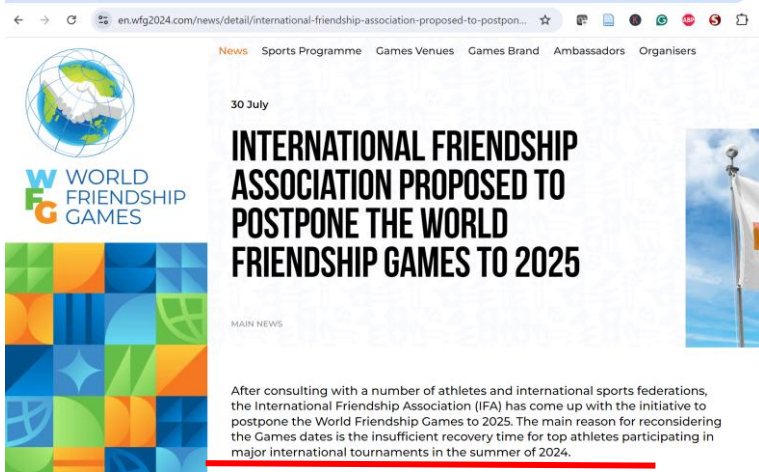
In a show of support to those who chose not to compete, the R.O.C. made payouts of \$2.3million to at least 245 athletes, the ROC's director general told RIA Novosti, a Russian state-owned news agency.

Picture 14: Fragments of an article by NY Times quoting the Russian media RIA Novosti



Picture 15: The official website of Druzhba World Friendship Games showing news that they will be held in 2025

⁵ <https://wfg2024.com/news/>



Picture 16: A message for postponing the Druzhba/Friendship games in 2024 because of "major international tournaments in the Summer of 2024". The Olympics is not

Conclusion

The fabricated controversy surrounding the Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony exemplifies a highly effective cognitive warfare operation, executed with precision in the open-source information environment to exploit visual ambiguity, pre-existing cultural divisions, and algorithmic amplification mechanisms (Claverie & du Cluzel, 2023; Pocheptsov, 2018).

Through systematic narrative seeding, selective editing of official responses, and industrial-scale bot deployment, as evidenced by Blackbird AI’s identification of 29 coordinated boycott narratives and extensive inauthentic activity, the attack progressed through all stages of Waltzman’s (2023) character assassination model: discreditation of French cultural competence, defamation via alleged blasphemy,

demonization of Western liberalism as satanic, and dehumanization of inclusive artistic expression.

The evidentiary chain permits a high-confidence judgment of Russian-state direction (or at minimum orchestration) of the moment the ceremony ended:

1. **Trigger synchronization:** Maria Zakharova’s Telegram post appeared within hours of the broadcast and contained the fully formed narrative package—blasphemy, satanism, Western decadence, anti-Christian hostility—that subsequently dominated global discourse in every major language cluster.
2. **Pre-positioned infrastructure:** The instantaneous activation**: The bot/account networks exhibited readiness, multilingual capability, and thematic coherence that require months to years of preparation, not ad-hoc mobilization.
3. **Perfect strategic alignment:** The amplified narratives precisely mirrored Kremlin doctrinal priorities codified since at least 2013 (Gerasimov doctrine, information-psychological operations) and subsequent “Russian Firewall”/sovereign internet initiatives): degrade Western moral authority, justify Russia’s international isolation, position Moscow as protector of traditional/Christian civilization, and accelerate the perceived decline of Western institutions (Pocheptsov, 2018; Thomas, 2022; Laruelle, 2022).

4. **Unique beneficiary status:** Russia alone gained a comprehensive strategic advantage, legitimizing its Olympic exclusion, undermining the Games' prestige, polarizing Western societies, and burnishing the appeal of its own postponed World Friendship Games initiative, while suffering zero downside risk.

The Russian Federation emerged as the primary strategic beneficiary, leveraging the scandal to reinforce its narrative as the global defender of traditional Christian morality, justify its exclusion from the Games amid the Ukraine conflict, undermine the Olympic movement's legitimacy, and promote alternative forums such as the postponed World Friendship Games, all while inflicting reputational, societal, and potential economic harm on France and the broader Western liberal order at negligible cost.

The Paris 2024 operation demonstrates that a single, carefully exploited cultural moment can inflict greater long-term damage on an adversary's global standing and domestic stability than any feasible physical attack, confirming that the human mind, not the battlefield, has become the primary theater in which twenty-first-century conflicts are won or lost.

The operation thus represents a mature manifestation of Russia's cognitive warfare doctrine in action: a low-cost, high-yield perceptual strike that inflicted greater damage on France's global brand and the Olympic movement's moral legitimacy than any conceivable physical sabotage could have achieved.

This case vividly underscores the profound evolution of cognitive warfare into the predominant and most

insidious modality of contemporary hybrid conflict. In this transformed paradigm, explicitly anticipated in Russian military doctrine since the 2013 Gerasimov article and increasingly operationalized by multiple state actors, perceptual dominance (the ability to impose a preferred interpretation of reality upon target audiences) has definitively supplanted traditional kinetic action as the decisive metric of strategic success.

Adversaries can now achieve decisive political, societal, and reputational effects, fragmenting cohesion, eroding institutional legitimacy, and paralyzing decision-making, while remaining far below the threshold of conventional war, at negligible material cost and with near-complete deniability.

For NATO and allied institutions, the incident imperatives include: (1) establishing persistent, AI-assisted real-time narrative monitoring capabilities during high-visibility events; (2) developing preemptive cognitive resilience doctrines that integrate rapid factual clarification, strategic counter-narratives, and proactive alliance-wide information coordination; (3) enhancing public–private partnerships with platforms to detect and disrupt inauthentic amplification networks at scale; and (4) incorporating cognitive warfare scenarios into joint exercises and strategic foresight planning to inoculate societies against similar operations in future mega-events or electoral cycles (NATO, 2021; Bernal et al., 2020).

Only through such proactive, whole-of-alliance measures can liberal democracies neutralize the asymmetric advantage currently enjoyed by revisionist actors in the cognitive domain.

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