

(Con)Trolling the Russian Information Warfare Efforts: North Atlantic Fella Organization's Digital Activism against Moscow's Wartime Efforts



Author: Răzvan Ceuca

Peer review: Iulian Popa

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Author: Răzvan Ceuca, Expert on cyber & international relations, New Strategy Center
Peer review: Senior associate expert, New Strategy Center

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CEUCA, RĂZVAN OVIDIU

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Introduction

In contemporary conflicts, the frontlines have increasingly extended into the digital sphere, where narrative control, symbolic influence, and information warfare shape the political landscape as profoundly as military operations. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did not merely unleash conventional warfare but ignited an intense battle over legitimacy, perception, and public sentiment—waged in part through memes, viral videos, and online communities. As hybrid warfare integrates military aggression with psychological operations, cyber tactics, and disinformation campaigns¹, new forms of resistance have emerged from the digital grassroots. Among the most notable is the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), a decentralized, leaderless online movement that deploys humor, irony, and visual culture as weapons of informational resilience and civic solidarity.²

NAFO's emergence in May 2022 illustrates a paradigmatic shift in digital activism and civil resistance. Initially founded on a satirical meme, featuring a Shiba Inu dog, or "fella," placed in militarized or Ukraine-themed contexts, the movement quickly transformed into a transnational network of digital participants who engage in "ratioing" Russian officials online, circulating pro-Ukrainian memes, and fundraising for Ukraine's defense.³ Rather than traditional advocacy or organized protest, NAFO's actions blur the boundaries between meme-making, civic engagement, and cultural diplomacy. Its members include veterans, diaspora groups, and online activists, many of whom adopt NAFO avatars as both symbolic identity

markers and tools of disruption.⁴

Theoretically, NAFO can be situated at the intersection of hybrid warfare, influence operations, and what scholars increasingly describe as memetic warfare. Memes are not merely vehicles of entertainment but act as tools of "symbolic compression," enabling users to communicate complex geopolitical positions through brief, emotionally charged visuals. In NAFO's case, this memetic activity has taken two primary forms: offensive memetic warfare, which seeks to ridicule and delegitimize Russian propaganda, and defensive memetic warfare, which reinforces Ukrainian legitimacy, sustains morale, and normalizes global civic participation.⁵

Importantly, NAFO's decentralized structure enables a rapid and adaptive response to narrative opportunities and disinformation events. Its absence of formal hierarchy resembles what Zeynep Tufekci describes as "networked protest," in which spontaneous digital swarms can be more effective and resilient than top-down campaigns.⁶ The movement thrives on platform-specific practices such as irony, ratioing, remix culture, and participatory avatar creation, each of which contributes to its resilience, virality, and symbolic coherence. Moreover, NAFO has transcended the digital sphere by raising millions of dollars through personalized avatar donations, organizing summits, and gaining recognition from figures such as Ukraine's Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov⁷ and U.S. Congressman Adam Kinzinger.⁸

This study hence explores NAFO as a unique actor within the memetic frontlines of hybrid war. It approaches the movement not as an

anomaly but as a signpost of broader transformations in civic resistance, public diplomacy, and online political communication. By analyzing NAFO through the dual lens of offensive and defensive memetic warfare, the study contributes to a growing body of literature that recognizes memes as strategic, affective, and ideological weapons in global conflict.⁹ It argues that NAFO exemplifies a new model of civic engagement—where humor becomes resistance, identity becomes infrastructure, and the “fella” becomes a semiotic warrior in the battle for narrative supremacy.

How It All Started? The Emergence of the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO)

NAFO emerged in May 2022 as a decentralized online movement in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Originating on X (former Twitter), the initiative initially coalesced around a humorous meme depicting a Shiba Inu dog superimposed onto military-themed and Ukraine-related imagery. What began as a satirical visual trope rapidly developed into a grassroots digital campaign aimed at expressing support for Ukraine and contesting pro-Kremlin narratives.¹⁰ Anonymous users employed meme-based mockery and “ratioing” practices, using NAFO avatars to overwhelm disinformation with sarcastic and humorous replies.¹¹ The movement’s symbolic and organizational point of inception is commonly dated to 24 May 2022, following a tweet by digital artist Kamil Dyszewski (@Kama_Kamilia), whose Shiba

Inu “Fella” imagery provided NAFO with a recognizable visual identity.¹² While the Shiba Inu had previously gained prominence in online culture through the unrelated “doge” meme since at least 2010, its appropriation within NAFO marked a distinct political and communicative adaptation. Through the circulation of these icons, users coalesced into an informal yet relatively cohesive online community that blurred conventional distinctions between political activism and passive audience participation. The “fella” functions as a memetic symbol that anchors shared norms and values, facilitates the dissemination of collective narratives, and channels humor into a mode of civic engagement and expressions of solidarity with Ukraine.¹³

Beyond satire and online mockery, NAFO has generated discernible material, political, and symbolic effects. A defining characteristic of the movement is the deliberate fusion of digital humor with real-world fundraising mechanisms. Central to this model is the production of personalized “fella” avatars, offered in exchange for financial contributions to Ukrainian defense-related organizations such as the Georgian Legion and the Come Back Alive Foundation.¹⁴ This practice exemplifies how memetic participation is converted into a form of transactional civic engagement, where symbolic belonging is directly tied to material support. This convergence of memetic culture and crowdfunding positions NAFO as an innovative actor within hybrid civil resistance, demonstrating the capacity of digital communities to transform performative online behavior into sustained financial assistance for wartime causes.¹⁵ Although the absence of centralized leadership precludes comprehensive financial accounting, journalistic estimates

suggest that NAFO-associated fundraising and merchandise initiatives exceeded one million USD by mid-2022, underscoring the movement's capacity to mobilize significant resources without formal organizational infrastructure.¹⁶

Organizationally, NAFO is distinguished by its decentralized and explicitly leaderless structure. There is no formal hierarchy, membership registry, or centralized command, and participation is open to any individual who adopts the “fella” avatar and engages in online activities aligned with the movement's ethos. This horizontal configuration mirrors the logic of swarm activism, allowing the movement to respond rapidly to shifts in the information environment and to exploit fleeting moments of narrative opportunity. The absence of identifiable leadership also enhances resilience, as the movement cannot be neutralized through the removal of a single figure or account.¹⁷ Engagement within NAFO appears to be driven less by institutional coordination than by peer recognition, shared identity, and platform-based validation, reflecting broader trends in digital activism where affect, humor, and collective visibility function as primary mobilizing forces. Participation is particularly pronounced among current and former service members from Ukrainian and NATO militaries, as well as among Eastern European communities and diasporas, with media estimates indicating the involvement of tens of thousands of participants by late 2022.

Over time, NAFO has developed a distinctive symbolic vocabulary and repertoire of action that reinforces internal cohesion and facilitates collective sense-making. Members commonly refer to opponents, both online and on the battlefield, as “vatniks,” a term that

functions simultaneously as an insult and as a boundary marker distinguishing in-group and out-group identities. Particular emphasis is placed on countering forms of rhetorical deflection, especially “whataboutism,” which is frequently employed to relativize or justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹ The movement gained wider public visibility following a high-profile exchange on X in June 2022 between Russian diplomat Mikhail Ulyanov – who claimed that the 2022 Russian invasion was justified by Ukraine allegedly shelling civilians in the Donbas since 2014 – and several NAFO-affiliated accounts using cartoon dog avatars.²⁰ The phrase “you pronounced this nonsense,” originating from this interaction, was rapidly appropriated as a memetic shorthand for dismissing pro-Russian claims. This episode illustrates how isolated discursive encounters can be transformed into enduring symbolic resources, reinforcing the movement's collective identity and communicative effectiveness.²¹

NAFO's sustained online presence has also translated into symbolic and diplomatic recognition from political elites, further enhancing its legitimacy. High-profile figures, including Ukraine's former Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov and U.S. Congressman Adam Kinzinger, have publicly acknowledged the movement's contributions, with Reznikov explicitly thanking “the fellas” for their support.²² Such recognition is significant insofar as it demonstrates how bottom-up digital movements can penetrate formal political discourse and gain acknowledgment within the geopolitical arena.²³ This external validation reinforces NAFO's credibility while simultaneously contributing to Ukraine's strategic soft power by projecting an image of resilience, creativity, and transnational solidarity rooted in participatory digital culture.

As the war in Ukraine continues, NAFO remains an adaptive and evolving digital actor whose activities increasingly extend beyond the online sphere. In addition to sustained fundraising initiatives—such as financing symbolic military equipment adorned with memetic inscriptions, the movement has begun to institutionalize aspects of its engagement through offline gatherings and events. Notably, NAFO’s first summit, held in Vilnius in July 2023 alongside the NATO summit, brought together activists, policymakers, and supporters both in person and online, further consolidating its visibility and networked character.²⁴ More broadly, NAFO has attracted scholarly attention as a paradigmatic case of “cultural jamming,” illustrating how humor, symbolic inversion, and popular culture can be mobilized to destabilize authoritarian narratives and reshape contemporary forms of civic participation.²⁵ Whether NAFO persists beyond the current conflict or evolves into a different organizational form, it represents a novel mode of political engagement shaped by platform affordances, memetic semiotics, and the dynamics of hybrid conflict.



Figure 1. The original “Doge” meme, featuring a Shiba Inu dog, served as the creative foundation for NAFO’s internet culture ecosystem

Source: Atsuko Sato, *The original Doge meme photo*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Original_Doge_meme.jpg

Theoretical Framework: From Hybrid Warfare to NAFO’s Memetic Warfare

In the context of contemporary conflicts, the battlefield has expanded beyond the physical and conventional military domain into the digital sphere, where symbols, emotions, and perceptions have become strategic tools in the fight for influence and legitimacy. NAFO represents a paradigmatic case of how decentralized digital actors engage in this new form of warfare, which previous research has conceptualized as hybrid warfare. The term refers to a multidimensional strategy of conflict that integrates conventional military force with unconventional tactics such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, economic pressure, and psychological manipulation. It is designed to exploit the ambiguities of international norms and the vulnerabilities of open societies, often operating below the threshold of formal war. As defined by NATO and military scholars, hybrid warfare is a means of blending kinetic operations with digital and symbolic tools, making attribution more difficult and resistance more complex.²⁶ In the case of the Russian war in Ukraine, the digital dimension of conflict – particularly the control of narratives through online platforms – has become a strategically vital domain. Russia’s efforts to frame its invasion as a “special military operation,” Ukraine’s rapid response using memes and satire, and the viral spread of symbolic imagery like “Saint Javelin” or “NAFO fellas” all illustrate the memetic frontlines of hybrid war. In this evolving landscape, memes are not frivolous artifacts of internet culture, but semiotic weapons used to frame reality, mobilize sentiment, and contest legitimacy.²⁷

Closely tied to the logic of hybrid warfare are influence operations, which can be defined as coordinated efforts to manipulate the perceptions, emotions, and behaviors of target audiences through media, cultural production, and psychological tactics. Influence operations can be conducted by state actors (e.g., intelligence agencies, ministries of defense), but increasingly also by non-state actors, online communities, and grassroots networks. Their objective is not always to persuade in the traditional sense, but to shape the information environment, sow confusion, polarize publics, or reinforce existing loyalties.²⁸ During the war in Ukraine, influence operations have played a central role in shaping international attitudes, domestic morale, and transnational solidarity. Russian state-sponsored disinformation campaigns have attempted to delegitimize Ukrainian sovereignty and portray the West as “morally decadent,” while Ukraine and its supporters have countered with emotionally compelling narratives rooted in heroism, irony, and resistance. NAFO fits into this paradigm as a civic influence actor, using memes to ridicule Russian propaganda, build online alliances, and sustain a continuous symbolic resistance that supports the Ukrainian cause across borders.²⁹

Within the broader realm of influence operations, memetic warfare has emerged as a distinct and increasingly influential tactic. The concept refers to the deliberate use of internet memes—humorous, satirical, or emotionally charged images and texts—to shape ideological narratives, attack adversaries, and construct collective identities. As a form of symbolic communication, memes are particularly powerful due to their brevity, emotional

resonance, and capacity for viral spread.³⁰ They serve as tools of what scholars call “symbolic compression,” distilling complex geopolitical issues into instantly recognizable and emotionally charged visuals. Memetic warfare is not a monolithic strategy; it encompasses a wide spectrum of actors, intents, and modalities. Meme campaigns can be orchestrated by authoritarian regimes seeking to destabilize democracies, by grassroots communities mocking oppressive powers, or by ordinary individuals participating in digital activism. In the Ukrainian context, memetic warfare has manifested through both top-down messaging (e.g., official military campaigns) and bottom-up participation, exemplified by NAFO’s decentralized meme activism. Memes thus operate as both weapons and shields, capable of inspiring, mocking, uniting, or dividing—depending on their framing and circulation.³¹

On the weaponizing side, offensive memetic warfare refers to the use of memes as a strategic means to undermine, delegitimize, or psychologically demoralize an adversary. These operations are typically characterized by the ridicule or public humiliation of political leaders—for instance, through caricatures or digitally altered images that mock figures such as Vladimir Putin. Another prominent tactic involves the dehumanization of enemy soldiers or civilians, where memes strip individuals of complexity and reduce them to objects of scorn or contempt. Additionally, offensive memetic strategies often amplify the perceived failures of adversaries through satire or hyperbole, exaggerating missteps to erode confidence and authority. A further technique involves the symbolic inversion of ideological slogans or narratives, whereby the enemy’s own discursive tools are repurposed or subverted to expose contradictions, hypocrisy, or absurdity within

their communicative framework. This form of memetic warfare is particularly effective in digital environments where irony, parody, and sarcasm dominate communicative norms. It is often deployed by both state actors (e.g., Russia's use of Telegram to circulate anti-Western memes) and informal networks like NAFO, which target Russian diplomats and propagandists through online trolling, coordinated "ratioing," and the viral use of custom avatars. In NAFO's case, offensive memetic warfare is not limited to humor; it serves as a disruptive strategy, aimed at overwhelming enemy narratives with ridicule and digital noise. For instance, when Russian government officials post misinformation, NAFO accounts flood the replies with memes that ridicule their claims, thereby diluting their credibility and making it harder for them to maintain authority online. The offensive dimension here is symbolic, participatory, and often improvisational, reflecting the evolving nature of digital power.³²

On the defensive side, defensive memetic warfare involves the strategic deployment of memes aimed at safeguarding one's own narrative space, reinforcing collective identity, and sustaining the morale of supporters. This form of memetic activity often centers on the construction of heroic or sympathetic figures, such as the widely circulated icons of Saint Javelin or the NAFO fellas, which serve as emblematic representations of resilience and righteousness. Humor and irony are employed not merely for entertainment, but as coping mechanisms that render trauma more bearable and transform suffering into shared experience. Defensive memetic tactics also harness emotionally resonant visuals to mobilize solidarity across geographically dispersed audiences, cultivating a sense of

belonging and mutual commitment. Furthermore, such memes play a critical role in reframing victimhood—not as passive suffering—but as a source of agency and pride, thereby reinforcing a dignified and empowered narrative of resistance. This defensive posture is essential in asymmetrical conflicts, where memes can serve as psychological shields that protect populations from despair, foster resilience, and provide symbolic cohesion. For NAFO, defensive memetic warfare is seen in the way memes celebrate Ukrainian perseverance, normalize the involvement of foreign volunteers, or mock Russian narratives while strengthening the legitimacy of Ukraine's struggle. By reinforcing shared values and identities, NAFO's defensive memes contribute to the narrative stabilization of the Ukrainian cause. They humanize the resistance, connect disparate communities through shared humor, and transform symbols of violence into emblems of courage. In this way, NAFO does not merely attack the opponent—it sustains and protects the symbolic infrastructure of a global solidarity movement.³³

In sum, the theoretical framework developed here situates NAFO within the broader dynamics of contemporary hybrid conflict, highlighting the organization's strategic engagement in the symbolic and informational domains of warfare. Through its decentralized and participatory deployment of memes, NAFO exemplifies how digital actors operate simultaneously on offensive and defensive fronts—undermining adversarial narratives while reinforcing collective identity and morale. Memetic warfare, as both a communicative and affective strategy, allows NAFO to weaponize humor, irony, and visual symbolism to contest legitimacy, foster resilience, and mobilize transnational solidarity. This dual function positions NAFO not merely as a cultural byproduct of online activism, but as a

consequential agent in the ongoing reconfiguration of power and resistance in the digital age.

Case study

This case study section analyzes NAFO as a memetic warfare actor, focusing on how visual artifacts function as tools of both offensive and defensive information operations. Drawing on an extensive corpus of images circulated within NAFO-affiliated networks, the analysis treats these visuals as a unified dataset reflecting recurring symbolic patterns, narrative strategies, and affective dynamics. Rather than approaching individual images in isolation, the study clusters them thematically, identifying broader logics of meaning-making and communicative intent. The analysis is organized into two core sections. The first examines NAFO's use of offensive memetic warfare, in which humor, ridicule, and symbolic inversion are deployed to undermine adversarial narratives and erode the credibility of pro-Kremlin discourse. The second focuses on defensive memetic warfare, highlighting how NAFO uses visual culture to reinforce pro-Ukrainian narratives, normalize civic participation, and protect the information space from manipulation.

Offensive Memetic Warfare

A defining characteristic of NAFO's offensive memetic warfare is its consistent use of ridicule as a tool of delegitimization. Rather than functioning as simple mockery, ridicule operates symbolically by removing the aura of authority from pro-Kremlin narratives and recasting them as implausible, incoherent, or

fundamentally unserious. Instead of directly refuting hostile claims, NAFO's imagery frequently reframes them through exaggerated humor, thereby weakening their credibility by altering the context in which they are received. This strategy is particularly visible in memes that parody accusations commonly leveled against NAFO, such as allegations of intelligence agency coordination or covert Western control. Images showing the "fella" surrounded by overstated symbols of power—large sums of money, intelligence insignia, or NATO iconography—do not seek to disprove these claims. Instead, they exaggerate them to the point of absurdity. In doing so, the symbolic effect shifts from denial to delegitimization: the accusation becomes an object of ridicule rather than a serious threat. At the narrative level, this approach disrupts the adversary's framing power by exposing the fragility of narratives built on insinuation and moral equivalence. Affectively, these memes rely on irony and detached amusement, encouraging audiences to treat hostile claims as laughable rather than persuasive. Over time, this repeated exposure erodes the perceived authority of adversarial narratives within the contested information space.

A closely related offensive tactic is NAFO's hyperbolic appropriation of conspiracy narratives. Symbolically, these images absorb accusations of secret coordination, foreign manipulation, or intelligence backing and redeploy them in deliberately exaggerated form. Rather than resisting conspiracy discourse, NAFO adopts it performatively, transforming suspicion into satire. This is evident in memes that parody the visual language of intelligence agencies, including mock seals resembling Western intelligence logos or slogans suggesting omnipresent surveillance and control. The "fella"

is often portrayed as a knowing participant in an exaggerated shadow network, complete with uniforms, insignia, or bureaucratic aesthetics. The symbolic logic here is one of inversion: conspiracy narratives are not challenged through factual correction but hollowed out through over-identification. Narratively, this strategy functions as a form of offensive inoculation.

By exaggerating accusations before they can be weaponized, NAFO reduces their effectiveness and limits their capacity to gain traction. Affectively, these images combine playful defiance with self-aware humor, strengthening in-group cohesion while frustrating external attempts to delegitimize the movement. In this way, offensive memetic warfare operates through narrative exhaustion rather than direct confrontation.



Figure 2. NAFO-generated memes satirizing conspiracy theories about the group's alleged ties to Western intelligence. In the second image, NAFO mocks Russian narratives by referencing the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, Virginia

Source: North Atlantic Fella Organization X Page

NAFO's offensive imagery also makes extensive use of absurdity to undermine claims of moral equivalence between Russia and Ukraine. Symbolically, absurdity disrupts attempts at false balance by juxtaposing grave geopolitical assertions with intentionally ridiculous visual elements. The "fella," as a cartoonish Shiba Inu, is central to this process, introducing visual dissonance that

resists solemn framing. Memes showing the fella in exaggerated military poses, wielding oversized weapons, or appearing in implausible operational settings exemplify this technique. These images do not celebrate violence; instead, they parody the performative seriousness characteristic of militarized propaganda. Symbolically, they expose the theatrical nature of authoritarian narratives that

rely on displays of strength and inevitability. Narratively, absurdity denies such narratives the dignity of serious engagement. While pro-Kremlin messaging often depends on tones of inevitability and moral relativism, NAFO's absurdist memes reject this register entirely. The affective tone is irreverent and destabilizing, inviting audiences to reject false equivalence through laughter rather than debate. The cumulative effect is a reframing of the moral landscape in which authoritarian claims appear brittle and performative instead of credible.

Alongside irony and absurdity, some offensive memes adopt a more confrontational humorous style aimed at reinforcing symbolic boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Symbolically, these images mark pro-Kremlin narratives and rhetorical strategies as illegitimate, often through derogatory labels or simplified visual cues. The goal is not persuasion but exclusion.

Examples include memes that explicitly mock "whataboutism" or dismiss pro-Russian talking points through short, derisive slogans embedded in exaggerated visual contexts. In these cases, the "fella" may be shown rejecting or overpowering hostile speech, though always within a stylized and non-literal frame. Symbolically, such imagery delineates the boundaries of acceptable discourse within the NAFO community. Narratively, aggressive humor serves an offensive function by regulating the information space, discouraging engagement with disinformation by making it socially costly or emotionally unrewarding. The affective register here shifts toward contempt and sardonic confidence rather than playful irony. This illustrates how offensive memetic warfare not only targets adversarial narratives but also enforces community norms and expectations.



Fellas will flood the mentions of a Russian official of your choosing

\$1,742,550.00

26,456 bids

\$31.78 shipping

8d 1h

Benefits charity

Figure 3. NAFO memes trolling and ridiculing both Russian wartime propaganda and Kremlin officials
Source: North Atlantic Fella Organization X Page

Finally, pop-cultural parody constitutes an important offensive strand within NAFO's visual strategy. Symbolically, these memes draw on widely recognizable cultural references—films, video games, advertising aesthetics—and recontextualize them within the framework of the Ukraine war. The familiarity of these references lowers cognitive barriers, allowing complex political positions to be communicated through accessible visual language. Common examples include parodies of iconic film posters, corporate branding, or video game interfaces, with the “fella” positioned as a central character. The symbolic effect is twofold: geopolitical conflict is domesticated through popular culture, while adversarial claims are trivialized by embedding them within entertainment formats. This reframing undermines the seriousness that pro-Kremlin narratives seek to project. Narratively, pop-cultural parody functions offensively by exploiting attention economies. Rather than competing with hostile messaging on informational depth, NAFO leverages cultural recognition and shareability. Affectively, these memes are inclusive and playful, inviting participation through familiarity rather than outrage. The broader implication is that offensive memetic warfare succeeds not through informational dominance, but through cultural fluency and symbolic adaptability.

Defensive Memetic Warfare

In contrast to the disruptive aims of offensive memetic warfare, NAFO's defensive visual practices are oriented toward stabilizing meaning and reinforcing coherence within the pro-Ukrainian information space. Rather than mocking or undermining an adversary, defensive memes work to consolidate a moral and political framework that affirms support for Ukraine. In symbolic terms, these images act as anchors in an otherwise volatile digital environment, repeatedly reaffirming themes of legitimacy, solidarity, and shared responsibility. Their function is constructive rather than corrosive: while offensive imagery seeks to unsettle and destabilize hostile narratives, defensive imagery strengthens common understandings by consistently presenting Ukraine as a legitimate object of defense and international support. This dynamic is visible in visuals that highlight Ukrainian symbols—such as flags, military insignia, or references to specific units—rendered within NAFO's distinctive visual style. In this context, the “fella” shifts from a figure of mockery to a mediating symbol that connects popular culture with serious political commitment. Narratively, defensive memetic warfare emphasizes continuity rather than rupture, reaffirming that the conflict is not morally ambiguous and that various forms of participation—symbolic, financial, or discursive—are justified. Affectively, these images foreground reassurance, pride, and moral clarity, counterbalancing the uncertainty and fatigue typical of protracted conflicts. Overall, defensive memetic warfare operates as a stabilizing layer that limits fragmentation within pro-Ukrainian digital communities.



Figure 4. NAFO meme created in 2022 in support of Ukraine

Source: Nafu Fella X Page

A central defensive function of NAFO's imagery lies in its visual construction of moral legitimacy. Symbolically, these images present support for Ukraine not as a radical or exceptional stance, but as an ethically obvious and socially normalized position. This effect is achieved through repetition and visual familiarity, which embed moral judgment into everyday online interactions. Images showing donations, charity confirmations, or concrete outcomes of fundraising campaigns illustrate this mechanism clearly. Their symbolic role is evidentiary: they demonstrate that online engagement leads to tangible results. Rather than relying on abstract assertions, these visuals provide visible proof of effectiveness, reinforcing the credibility of NAFO's activities. At the narrative level, this counters claims that online activism is merely performative or manipulative. By foregrounding outcomes—such as financial transfers, equipment purchases, or institutional acknowledgments,

defensive memes ground the narrative in observable action. Affectively, the tone is one of quiet affirmation rather than triumph, fostering trust and encouraging sustained involvement. The broader implication is that defensive memetic warfare secures moral legitimacy not through argumentation, but through the visible alignment of discourse and practice.

Defensive memetic warfare also plays an important role in consolidating collective identity. Symbolically, the repeated appearance of the “fella” functions as an identity anchor, allowing participants to recognize themselves as part of a coherent collective without formal membership or hierarchical organization. The consistent visual presence of the character creates a shared symbolic language that cuts across national, linguistic, and institutional boundaries. Images portraying the fella in supportive or protective roles—standing alongside Ukrainian forces, participating in fundraising efforts, or appearing in institutional settings—reinforce a sense of collective belonging. The symbolic message is one of normalization: involvement in NAFO is depicted as ordinary, legitimate, and socially accepted within the pro-Ukrainian digital sphere. Narratively, these visuals reduce the psychological distance between individual users and the broader geopolitical conflict. Rather than positioning supporters as passive observers, the imagery integrates them into a shared identity defined by humor, solidarity, and commitment. Affectively, the tone is inclusive and reassuring, countering feelings of isolation or insignificance. In this way, defensive memetic warfare enhances resilience by transforming dispersed individuals into an emotionally cohesive community.

Although humor is commonly associated with NAFO's offensive activities, defensive memetic

warfare employs humor in a distinctly different manner. Here, humor functions not as a weapon but as a regulatory tool, helping to manage emotional strain and sustain long-term engagement. These images acknowledge the seriousness of war while offering cognitive and emotional relief. Examples include self-referential memes that gently joke about recurring accusations against NAFO or depict the fella engaged in mundane or exaggeratedly ordinary activities. Symbolically, this humor modulates emotional intensity, absorbing stress without trivializing the underlying conflict. Unlike offensive ridicule, which targets an external adversary, defensive humor is largely inward-facing and focused on reinforcing group morale. Narratively, such imagery supports continued participation over time by preventing emotional exhaustion. Prolonged exposure to conflict-related content can lead to burnout or desensitization; defensive humor mitigates this risk by allowing emotional variation rather than constant intensity. Affectively, the tone is light, ironic, and self-aware, encouraging endurance rather than mobilization. The key implication is that defensive memetic warfare contributes to informational resilience by regulating emotional tempo within the community.

Another notable feature of NAFO's defensive visual strategy is its ability to signal institutional proximity without formal institutionalization. Symbolically, images that reference NATO iconography, Western political figures, or official events situate NAFO within the broader Euro-Atlantic security discourse while preserving its grassroots character. The symbolic effect is one of dual alignment. On the one hand, the imagery communicates ideological closeness

to Western institutions and values; on the other, it maintains NAFO's autonomy by presenting this alignment in a humorous or informal manner. The fella appears alongside institutional symbols not as an official representative, but as a playful intermediary. Narratively, this positioning allows NAFO to occupy a liminal space between state and society. Defensive memetic warfare thus reinforces the legitimacy of institutional support for Ukraine while protecting the movement from accusations of direct control or orchestration. Affectively, the tone combines familiarity with mild irreverence, sustaining trust without demanding reverence. The broader implication is that defensive memetic warfare enables alignment without dependency, preserving narrative flexibility.



Figure 5. NAFO illustrating its pro-Western ideological orientation by “attending” and posing with NATO leaders at the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague. Source: North Atlantic Fella Organization X Page

Defensive memetic warfare is especially visible in NAFO's use of imagery related to fundraising and material support. Symbolically, these visuals act as markers of credibility, demonstrating that digital activism can produce concrete outcomes. Donation receipts, acknowledgments from charities, and images of purchased equipment all serve this function. Narratively, such visuals counter claims that online engagement is purely symbolic or ineffective. By repeatedly showing the material consequences of participation,

NAFO constructs a defensive narrative centered on practical impact. Affectively, these images combine reassurance with a sense of pride, reinforcing the belief that individual contributions matter. The key insight is that

defensive memetic warfare strengthens informational legitimacy by firmly linking symbolic participation to material reality—a connection that is essential for sustaining trust over time and addressing skepticism among both supporters and neutral observers.

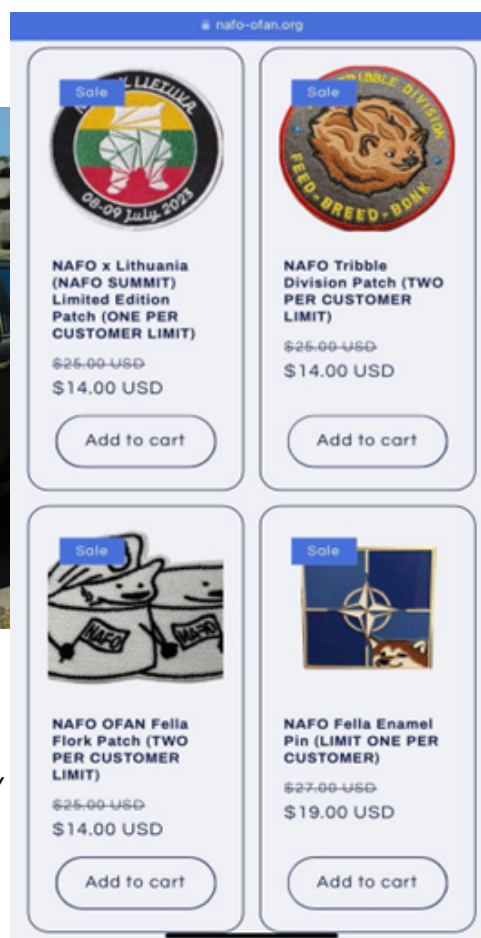


Figure 6. Images reflecting NAFO's crowdfunding efforts in support of Ukraine. In the first image, NAFO's 69th Sniffing Brigade acquired the "NAFO Truck" for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The second image presents military patches created by NAFO for sale, with the proceeds donated to Ukraine
Source: 69th Sniffing Brigade X Page

Rather than directly challenging false claims, NAFO's defensive memetic warfare frequently relies on narrative saturation. Symbolically, the repeated affirmation of core themes—Ukraine's right to self-defense, the legitimacy of international assistance, and the moral clarity of the conflict—gradually crowds out competing interpretations. Images that reiterate these ideas in varied visual forms exemplify this approach. The symbolic effect is cumulative: while no single image is decisive, together they create an environment in which alternative narratives struggle to gain relevance.

Narratively, saturation reduces the visibility and appeal of disinformation by making it appear redundant or out of place. Affectively, the tone remains steady and confident rather than reactive. By avoiding direct engagement with falsehoods, defensive memetic warfare also minimizes the risk of amplifying hostile narratives. The broader implication is that informational resilience is achieved less through constant rebuttal than through sustained narrative presence.

A further defensive function of NAFO's visual corpus is the normalization of participation in the information struggle. Symbolically, images

present actions such as liking, sharing, donating, or creating memes as ordinary forms of civic engagement rather than exceptional activism. The fella embodies this normalization through its casual posture and frequent appearance in everyday scenarios. Narratively, this framing lowers barriers to entry by presenting participation as accessible and non-threatening. As a result, NAFO extends its reach beyond already politicized audiences. Affectively, the tone is welcoming and empowering, countering apathy and intimidation. In this way, defensive memetic warfare transforms political engagement into a routine social practice, strengthening resilience by broadening the base of participation.

Taken together, NAFO's offensive and defensive memetic practices form a coherent strategic ecosystem rather than two isolated modes of action. Offensive memes work to destabilize adversarial narratives through ridicule, absurdity, and symbolic inversion, while defensive memes stabilize pro-Ukrainian narratives through affirmation, normalization, and emotional regulation. Both rely on the same visual vocabulary but differ in orientation and purpose. Symbolically, the "fella" functions as a flexible signifier, capable of expressing aggression, reassurance, irony, or solidarity depending on context. Narratively, NAFO's visual strategy favors repetition and saturation over linear messaging, aligning with the dynamics of platform-based attention. Affectively, the movement sustains engagement by balancing humor, pride, reassurance, and defiance. As a case study, NAFO illustrates how memetic warfare can operate effectively outside formal state structures while still shaping geopolitical discourse. More broadly, it offers insights into

how decentralized visual cultures can influence contemporary information environments through a carefully calibrated balance of offense and defense.

Conclusions

This study has examined NAFO as a distinctive actor within the evolving terrain of hybrid conflict and memetic warfare, demonstrating how decentralized digital communities can meaningfully intervene in contested information environments. Far from constituting a marginal or purely ironic online subculture, NAFO illustrates the strategic potential of grassroots networked publics to weaponize humor, irony, and visual symbolism in ways that produce both psychological and material effects. Its dual strategy—offensive memetic warfare aimed at destabilizing adversarial narratives and defensive visual practices designed to reinforce pro-Ukrainian solidarity—reveals a coherent and adaptive model of digital resistance embedded within the broader architecture of hybrid warfare.

Importantly, NAFO should not be understood merely as an episodic meme trend, but as a potential prototype of a new model of digital activism in hybrid conflicts. Unlike traditional digital advocacy campaigns or centrally coordinated influence operations, NAFO operates through decentralized participation, identity-based avatar culture, narrative saturation, and the continuous blending of symbolic and material engagement. It collapses distinctions between audience and actor, satire and strategy, humor and influence. In doing so, it exemplifies how digitally native forms of communication—memes, irony, remix culture—can be operationalized as instruments of informational resilience. NAFO therefore

represents not only a response to Russian information warfare, but a structural adaptation to the affordances of platformized conflict.

A key question emerging from this analysis is whether NAFO constitutes a genuinely autonomous model of digital resistance or rather an unconventional adaptation situated in the grey zone between civic activism and state-aligned strategic communication. On the surface, NAFO is explicitly leaderless, horizontally organized, and participatory, aligning with theories of connective action and networked protest. Yet its discursive alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions, its symbolic proximity to NATO narratives, and its resonance within Western security communities suggest a more complex positioning. NAFO operates in a liminal space where civic initiative and geopolitical alignment intersect. In hybrid conflict environments—where state and non-state actors increasingly overlap—such formations may function as reservoirs of unconventional resilience capabilities that can be indirectly amplified, socially legitimized, or strategically tolerated by state actors without formal integration. In this sense, NAFO occupies what may be described as a “grey zone” of digital resistance: neither fully institutional nor entirely detached from broader strategic ecosystems.

This grey-zone positioning is analytically significant. It indicates that contemporary hybrid warfare no longer unfolds solely between clearly bounded institutional actors, but within fluid assemblages of digital publics, informal networks, and affective communities. NAFO’s success suggests that memetic activism can supplement formal strategic communication by introducing cultural fluency,

emotional adaptability, and participatory legitimacy—qualities that institutional messaging often struggles to achieve. Whether intentionally or organically, NAFO demonstrates how decentralized digital collectives may serve as unconventional force multipliers in information environments, particularly during protracted conflicts.

At the same time, NAFO’s case complicates simplistic dichotomies between “authentic” grassroots activism and orchestrated influence operations. Its memetic warfare practices—ranging from ridicule and parody to narrative saturation and morale reinforcement—show that digital resistance can be simultaneously spontaneous and strategically consequential. Rather than operating through centralized coordination, NAFO achieves coherence through shared symbolic infrastructure, most notably the “fella” avatar, which functions as a flexible identity anchor. This symbolic cohesion allows the movement to adapt rapidly to narrative shifts while maintaining a recognizable collective presence.

Beyond its immediate empirical relevance, NAFO offers broader theoretical implications for the study of hybrid warfare, influence operations, and digital activism. First, it demonstrates that memetic warfare is not exclusively a top-down tool of authoritarian regimes but can be appropriated as a participatory form of civic resistance. Second, it challenges assumptions that online activism is inherently superficial or performative, showing instead how symbolic engagement can generate sustained material support. Third, it underscores the importance of affect, humor, and cultural literacy in shaping contemporary information struggles, where emotional resonance often outweighs factual rebuttal in determining narrative traction.

In conclusion, NAFO exemplifies an emergent model of digital activism embedded within hybrid warfare—a model characterized by decentralization, symbolic adaptability, affective mobilization, and the fusion of humor with geopolitical positioning. Whether viewed as an autonomous civic innovation or as a grey-zone component of broader strategic ecosystems, NAFO demonstrates that

contemporary resistance increasingly unfolds through memes as much as through institutions. As platform logics continue to shape the battlespace of information, movements like NAFO may foreshadow a future in which unconventional digital publics become enduring actors in the architecture of conflict and resilience alike.

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