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# Preparing for War: Strategic Narratives and Disinformation in Leadership Rhetoric during the Ukraine War

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**Abstract:** During the preparation for the Ukraine war and especially after the Ukraine invasion, Russia and the West were involved in a rhetorical battle aiming to establish their strategic narratives and influence the public's perception. Strategic Narratives were used to deconstruct the image of Putin and Russia or to rally the public around Western ideology to make it immune to Russian propaganda. Disinformation was another tool used to disorient the public's decision-making process and perceptions. Leadership rhetoric concerning the misrepresentation of historical events like the questioning of the history of Ukraine by President Putin developed a strategic narrative for legitimizing purposes. The paper examines the strategic narratives and the formation of disinformation narratives used in the speeches of the protagonists of the Ukraine war.

**Keywords:** Russia-Ukraine War, strategic communications, strategic narratives, leadership rhetoric, disinformation

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*Préparation à la guerre : Narrations stratégiques et désinformation dans la rhétorique du leadership*

**Résumé :** Pendant la préparation de la guerre d'Ukraine et surtout après l'invasion de l'Ukraine, la Russie et l'Occident ont été impliqués dans une bataille rhétorique visant à établir leurs narrations stratégiques et à influencer la perception du public. Les narrations stratégiques ont été utilisées pour déconstruire l'image de Poutine et de la Russie ou pour rallier le public autour de l'idéologie occidentale afin de l'immuniser contre la propagande russe. La désinformation était un autre outil utilisé pour désorienter le processus décisionnel et les perceptions du public. La rhétorique des dirigeants concernant la fausse représentation d'événements historiques comme la remise en question de l'histoire de l'Ukraine par le président Poutine a développé une narration stratégique à des fins de légitimation. L'article examine les narrations stratégiques et la formation des narrations de désinformation, utilisée dans les discours des protagonistes de la guerre d'Ukraine.

**Mots-clés :** guerre Russie-Ukraine, communications stratégiques, narrations stratégiques, rhétorique de leadership, désinformation

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### **Introduction**

Interstate crises constitute a disruption in good relations between two states and increase the threat of military conflict (Boin et al., 2005). Crisis Communication in conflicting situations plays an integral part in narrative dominance upon different stakeholders, perception shaping about the attribution of blame for the cause of the conflict, and rally effect construction around the leadership of conflicting sides. Exactly that happened during the initial stages of the Ukraine invasion. Leadership communication at that time used every means necessary to control the narrative of the crisis.

Both Russia and the West were involved in a rhetorical battle aiming to establish their strategic narratives and influence the perception of the public. Strategic Narratives were used by both sides to legitimize their course of action, delegitimize the narratives of the opponent, inoculate against foreign propaganda, and rally the public around their leadership.

Furthermore, disinformation was another tool used to disorient the public's decision-making process and perceptions. Fake news and leadership deniability increased the "fog of war" and disorientation of the actual events happening in Ukraine. In addition, leadership rhetoric concerning the misrepresentation of historical events like the questioning of the history of Ukraine by President Putin constructed a strategic narrative that aimed to deconstruct the very legal existence of a whole country.

Strategic Narratives in the context of strategic communication may be a part of information warfare to provoke information disorder in the opponent's home front. When those narratives include disinformation practices, they may disseminate alternative realities and facts about events, alter the perception of the victim and the victimizer or even change the support for the leadership. As a result, Strategic Narratives, disinformation, and information warfare may become tools of crisis communication during conflict situations and work toward the direction of manipulating the information environment.

The paper examines the strategic narratives used in the speeches of European leaders, specifically, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, the Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholtz, and the President of France, Emmanuelle Macron, and the Russian President Vladimir Putin. It also examines the concept of "strategic disinformation narratives" which consists of misrepresentation of events during wartime to form certain attitudes.

The outline includes a literature review on the concept of Strategic Narratives in International Relations and on Disinformation. Then, it tries to define the concept of "Strategic Disinformation Narratives" concerning the two concepts. Finally, it presents the main findings of the research and discusses them before reaching the paper's conclusions.

## **1. Strategic Narratives in International Politics**

Strategic Narratives are the means used by political actors for the construction of collective meaning for the past present and future of international politics, to influence the behavior of domestic and international aspects of political life (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Strategic narratives may influence aspects of collective memory, which has the promise to enact collective identity and legitimize their policies (Liao, 2012). Thereby, strategic narratives play an integral part in the information operations of today (Wilson et al., 2018). This section discusses the concept of strategic narratives in international politics, and how it relates to the contemporary concept of strategic disinformation and information operations.

According to Miskimmon et al. (2013), narratives are central to human relations and try to form the world in a way that determines our behavior. As a result, political actors try to use certain narratives strategically. Strategic Narratives define two central procedures in politics: Identity and legitimization (Antoniades et al., 2010). Legitimization is a central concept in international politics as it is a core element in the effectiveness of a state's grand strategy (Goddard & Krebs, 2015; Platias & Koliopoulos, 2000). All States engage in legitimization, justifying their aims and actions to their audiences: to get their public to support their foreign policies and to convince other nations to accept their aims (Goddard, 2020). Legitimacy, thereof, is a symbolic resource that strategy theorists understand and can transform into competitive advantages (Pamment, 2014).

On the other hand, the concept of identity originates from the field of psychology and social psychology. In International Relations, *identity* relates to the concept of *national identity* and *collective identity*. These two core concepts build on the self-awareness and otherness of a community forming national states, self-images, and enemy images (Curanović, 2012). In conflict situations, the concept of identity forms collectivity and otherness or enmity (Nabers, 2009), rallying the citizens of a nation-state against another (Baker & Oneal, 2001).

Thus, political actors seeking to mobilize societal resources typically resort to strategic narratives to invoke public memory, which has the promise to enact collective identity and legitimize their policies (Liao, 2012). The practice of international relations includes the construction of scenarios from events or political history (Antoniades, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2010). For example, the Cold War era initiated a narrative that legitimized politics created an international system, and defined the boundaries of the legitimate policy and power of the United States (Krebs, 2015). By projecting its narrative and that narrative being comprehensible and appealing to other powers or transnational audiences a country may meet aims where the use of material resources and capabilities would fail to do so (Antoniades et al., 2010).

Consequently, Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future to achieve political objectives. Critically, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals—they articulate end states and suggest how to get there (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

## **2. Strategic Narratives as Information Operation**

In the contemporary international political environment, strategic narratives have become an integral part of conflict strategy as a method of information operations to influence the perception of foreign audiences. This section elaborates on the role of strategic narratives in contemporary information operations and examines why they fit into this category.

Information Operations and warfare include the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent (Waltzman, 2017). Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) define information operations as actions taken by governments or organized non-state actors to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome. Information campaigns or operations are usually government-directed and sponsored to achieve policy results (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994). Information is considered to be an instrument of power, used as a weapon since the beginning of human history (Liaropoulos, 2022). The objective of these information operations is primarily to muddy the waters and cast doubt upon objective truths (Chivvis, 2017). Another view is that Information operations

represent a type of collaborative work undertaken by groups of actors integrated within online social networks (Wilson et al., 2018). It is a term that originates within the U.S. intelligence community, where it refers to actions of “soft warfare” that aim to degrade the decision-making capabilities of a geopolitical adversary by targeting human perception and cognition (Starbird et al., 2019).

On the other hand, as described in the previous section, the objective of strategic narratives is to influence the behavior of others by forming their interests, their identity, and their understanding of the international system (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Strategic narratives work in a way of propagating the preferred narratives of the in-group and at the same time work to undermine the other side’s narratives (Wilson et al., 2018). In the framework of information operations, Strategic Narratives may become a strategic and tactical weapon (Hinck et al. 2020) which may lead to an information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Russia, for example, uses the information environment to distort, manipulate and influence foreign audiences through structured governmental information operations (Chivvis, 2017; Giles, 2016; Waltzman, 2017).

In July 2014, Russian news channels broadcasted a false narrative about a young boy crucified by Ukrainian soldiers to portray Russian intervention in the Donbas region as noble. This tactical narrative works in terms of undermining any goodwill that Russians might have for Ukrainian nationalists. On the contrary, a narrative that posits that the current battle is part of a long epic war between “our people” and “the enemies of freedom” is strategic (Hinck et al. 2020). These operations can use a combination of methods, such as false news, disinformation, or networks of fake accounts aimed at manipulating public opinion (false amplifiers) (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

In the digital era, information operations are easier to expand to different audiences. As the research of Starbird et al. (2019) suggests, online information operations are participatory in nature since their messages spread through—and with the help of—online crowds and other information providers. Their work focuses on strategic information operations which they consider to be a collaborative work that expands the focus beyond “bots” and “trolls” and considers the role of online crowds (unwitting and strategic) central in spreading disinformation and political propaganda.

Strategic Narratives, therefore, may be distributed through online crowds within a community or across communities and indirectly affect foreign domestic audiences. Although traditionally Strategic Narratives are an outcome of the strategic decision-making of political elites, the spread of their word and the influence they may provide through an orchestrated information campaign may reach nowadays a wide range of audiences. As a result, Strategic Narratives may be part of a strategic information operation as well as part of a strategic disinformation campaign. This paper argues that Strategic Narratives may include also Strategic Disinformation to distort the information environment of a foreign nation. Disinformation narratives may become Strategic Disinformation Narratives that draw from the characteristics of traditional

Strategic Narratives only that they aim to disinform or just to provide alternative realities. The next sections will elaborate more on this concept.

### 3. Disinformation and Propaganda

Much attention has been focused in recent years on growing levels of disruptive communication such as “fake news,” disinformation, and misinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2021). Disinformation includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit (Freelon & Wells, 2020). However, the literature distinguishes usually between misinformation and disinformation. The main distinction between the two concepts is intention. Misinformation is false, mistaken, or misleading information, whereas disinformation entails the distribution, assertion, or dissemination of false, mistaken, and misleading information in an intentional, deliberate, or purposeful to mislead, deceive or confuse way (Fetzer, 2004).

The root of the term “disinformation” is attributed to the Russian *dezinformatsiya*, a term with roots in Soviet intelligence operations (Starbird et al., 2019). Disinformation messages under these definitions are munitions in campaigns of information warfare, non-lethal weapons intended to subdue adversaries rather than reason with them (Freelon & Wells, 2020). The question that arises, however, is what the relation of disinformation with propaganda may be, as both terms seem to be quite similar concepts. Are there any differences or are those terms referring to the same concept?

Disinformation is not necessarily propaganda, although the two concepts overlap significantly (Lanoszka, 2019). The term propaganda has gained several definitions throughout the ages. A complete definition is that of Jowett & O’Donnell (2012) who define propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist”. Although originally, the term propaganda was considered to be a dissemination of biased ideas and opinions through the use of deception and lies, further studies showed that it was more of an influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). Through the myth it creates, propaganda imposes a complete range of intuitive knowledge, susceptible to only one interpretation, unique and one-sided (Ellul, 1965).

Subsequently, propaganda is more than just disinformation. Although propaganda may include lying and deception, it is much more than that. The main objective of propaganda is to persuade whereas, disinformation is to deceive the audience (Jowett & O’Donnell; Fetzer, 2004; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Starbird et al., 2019). Propaganda pursues persuasion and attitude change in a way that tries to convince the victim to adjust to a specific angle of reality. Disinformation, on the other hand, pursues to alter reality and change the perception by providing false information to the victim.

Although the end may be the same such as to change the attitude of the receiver, propaganda uses psychological means and persuasion whereas disinformation uses deception realities.

There are several types of Mis- or Disinformation. Some of them are Fake News, misleading content, fabricated content, false context, and manipulated content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Fake News are being defined as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The term has gotten many faces since its appearance in the public discourse including aspects of disinformation and deception or dissemination of false or fake information in news media platforms or social media (Althuis & Haiden, 2018; McManus & Michand, 2018; Simons, 2017). All the content that is disseminated usually online or through different kinds of sources, or without ones, can provoke information disorder, misleading and disorienting the public (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The dissemination of disinformation in online news environments can be achieved through automated or manual bots that reproduce systematically specific news content through fake accounts increasing the perceived reliability of the content (Agarwal et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2015). Both true and false information is propagated online via informational cascades whereby individuals share messages in a way that makes diffusion grow exponentially until it reaches a peak (Tucker et al., 2018). Russia seems to be using trolls and bots as a method of inoculation that aims to undermine public discussions that oppose the desired interpretation of events (Giles, 2016).

As Khaldarova & Pantti (2016) suggest, false news stories may represent the distillation of the Russian state narrative, having the purpose of supporting already-constructed identity claims, rather than reporting on events. This means that Fake News acts as a kind of Strategic Disinformation Narrative that is not only trying to mislead and disorient the public discourse but also to provide a completely alternative reality. These practice changes the perception of the use of Fake News and Disinformation at a state level and brings new challenges to the field. The next section will elaborate on the new concept of “Strategic Disinformation Narratives”.

#### **4. Strategic Disinformation Narratives as Information Operations in International Relations**

The evolution of disinformation practices through different kinds of methods, as articulated in the previous section, drives the informational space towards longer, more sustainable alternate presentations of reality that are being formed in a narrating process. This means that disinformation practices are no longer presented in an abstract way such as fake news, manipulated or fabricated contents but in more concrete and well-developed narratives that construct whole meanings and storylines. A disinformation story is one singular false (news) story placed in a foreign

information sphere. The false stories often seek to create confusion about the circumstances and facts surrounding a given event (la Cour, 2020).

Narratives, on the other hand, are tools for making sense of the world and sense-making rarely lends itself to fact-checking (la Cour, 2020). Public narratives are everywhere, as meaning-making is necessary for the human condition (Krebs, 2015). Narratives are therefore politically efficacious, since an overall heroic or inspiring national or personal plot may mask any episodes that contradict that plot (Antoniades et al., 2010). But failure to single out the role of false narratives as opposed to non-false narratives is problematic because false narratives are distinct in their underlying objectives (la Cour, 2020). These tools can be used to stoke tensions and animosity between and within states and feed false narratives about the past (Landon-Murray et al., 2019). A disinformation campaign, for example, may include a systematic spreading of multiple false stories in a foreign country linked to a particular event (la Cour, 2020) causing an information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

According to Miskimmon et al. (2013), in *International Relations*, narratives are being formed by Great Powers that aim to give meaning to their strategic choices and actions. Contemporary information operations need to influence foreign audiences through the use of digital tools and journalistic practices (Michelsen & Colley, 2018; Swimelar, 2018; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019). At the same time, foreign citizens may transfer their own stories through social media (Meijas & Vokuev, 2017). That story may be not as innocent, however, as it may seem (Starbird et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2018). Whereas most narratives are formed to build a particular conception, whether it be national identity, past experiences, or the world order, disinformation has a destructive aim to disrupt, divide and confuse (la Cour, 2020).

Exposure to disinformation may help to mobilize supporters and demobilize opponents (much as with many campaign tactics) (Tucker et al., 2018). When planted by foreign powers with malign intent, false information becomes disinformation—and thus a tool employed in a global power struggle (la Cour, 2020). Disinformation brings distortion of information and can contribute to a polarization process (Tucker et al., 2018). Information operations can exploit this ambiguity by blending misleading rhetoric with accurate and inaccurate content as well as inaccurate sourcing information (e.g. by using fabricated identities) (Starbird et al., 2019). The disinforming state might even find ‘useful idiots’ who disseminate its preferred message so that it gains circulation within an internal audience (Lanoszka, 2019). False narratives, as stark as fake videos or as subtle as lies intermingled with truth, can also fuel polarized and extreme views, aggravating political and social fissures (Landon-Murray et al., 2019).

As Lanoszka (2019) points out, perhaps disinformation is most effective if the domestic politics of a target society is highly polarized. The disinforming state could try to swing political outcomes in its favor by spreading disinformation that undercuts the legitimacy or platform of one political group to the benefit of another. Of course, there is a plethora of ways in which disinformation is used in international relations:



it may be private individuals trying to make a profit from click-bait, it may be a civil society organization or state actor seeking to influence public debate in other countries; it may also be private companies, which may or may not be acting on behalf of other actors, such as a state actor (la Cour, 2020). However, a recent series of research shows that states like Russia and China are spreading false narratives and disseminating rumors to shape public attitudes and, by extension, government policies to their liking (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Liaropoulos, 2022; Blank, 2013; Giles, 2016; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Lanoszka, 2019).

Moving from disinformation to Strategic Disinformation Narratives gives disinformation campaigns a whole new perspective on how to use such methods as part of an information operation. A disinformation campaign as a systematic government effort aiming to mislead a particular audience—whether a government or key members of society—to influence the policy process (Lanoszka, 2019), may use strategic narratives to distort the reality of events and question the perceptions. As Disinformation is considered a deep, historical process of erasing history itself, culminating in a disruption or blockage of critical thinking (Cheyfitz, 2017), Strategic Disinformation Narratives is a systematic process of narration that is altering or changing, intentionally, the facts and/or realities. In international relations, this concept may be a part of information warfare that aims to change long-lasting and deep-rooted beliefs in a society. This questioning of values and history provokes an art of collective cognitive dissonance in society raising issues and leading to internal instability.

##### **5. Findings: Strategic Narratives in the Ukraine War**

The Ukraine War which began in February 2022 led both the West and Russia to influence their people in an attempt to inoculate them against foreign propaganda, legitimize their actions and Grand Strategy, rally their populations and distort the enemy's information environment. To that end, Strategic Narratives were used as a means of information warfare. The outline of this section includes the methodological approach of the study and the results of the empirical analysis of the speeches of the main political figures in Europe and Russia during the first few months of the conflict.

The analysis of Strategic Narratives is based mostly on empirical typologies that serve the needs of every research. For example, Wagnsson & Barzanje, (2019), analyzed the internet page of Sputnik in Sweden in search of strategic narratives that were promoted by Russia for Sweden. Their analysis was based on the search for the narrating contexts of a story like a search for the actors, the attribution, the facts, and the sub-stories (small stories within a story). Those search categories that are based on the model of narrative analysis by Somers (1994) do not help our analysis as their method works best for the search of Strategic Narratives in the News Media.

On the other hand, Hinck et al. (2020) analyzed the strategic narratives developed for the American Elections of 2016 in News Media of China, Russia, and the Arab

World using a grounded thematic analysis. They searched for the frames that constructed general thematic narrations for the US elections, the candidates, and the projection of American Power in relation to China. Furthermore, Miskimmon et al. (2012;2013) do not present a coherent methodological approach for the search and analysis of Strategic Narratives. They just differentiate between narrative analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis focusing on the search for the questions like who, what, where, and when.

The current analysis, however, focuses on political speeches in a period of conflict and crisis. To spot and categorize the Strategic Narratives, a mix of Critical Discourse Analysis and an empirically grounded thematic analysis was used. Through the critical discourse analysis words, semantic ecologies, and arguments used in political speeches can be spotted and highlighted. Then, through the thematic analysis, we construct broader categories of thematic areas derived from the text that could form a narrative. This approach helps in determining the argumentative thinking and constructs of the political speeches and also builds on general categories that (may) form narrations.

Furthermore, to characterize a narrative as a strategic narrative, it had to have some specific characteristics like a specific purpose, a target, and a specific formation that could mobilize specific actions or emotions. To achieve this, the research considered the methodological approach of strategic thinking in political discourse, which is driven by the campaign mode (Burton and Shea, 2002).

The campaign mode, as defined by Burton and Shea (2002), approaches strategic thinking during campaigns as a black box examining the environmental conditions as inputs and the decision-making process as outputs. Through this approach, the strategic thinking of political actors may become more obvious through the examination of political speeches. When used in Strategic Narrative analysis in political discourse it may help spot the strategic orientation of the political rhetoric and evaluate the “strategic” behind the narrative.

Another challenge faced in the research was the categorization of Strategic Disinformation Narratives. The difficulty was to prove that a Strategic Narrative was a disinformation narrative. To overcome this obstacle without leaning on official fact-checkers, we tried to spot falsification or propaganda practices (e.g., unilateral presentation of events or highlighting of specific facets over others) in the argumentative justification of the narrative.

The period of the analysis is February to April 2022. The focus of the research is on the beginning of the conflict as the rhetorical speeches of that time were at their peak both for the Russian and the European Leadership. In addition, at the beginning of the conflict or a crisis, the aim to influence foreign and domestic publics to gain control of the narrative is at its highest point in comparison to later stages. The corpus was collected through the official web pages of the examined units during that period with a focus to address the Ukraine conflict. In total 37 speeches and press releases

were examined that were addressed during that period, for the Ukraine conflict. The next sections present and discuss the finding of the research.

## 6. European Strategic Narratives

The European leaders, as the findings suggest, build upon three main Strategic Narratives. The Strategic Narratives seem to be aligned among the three European Leaders under study. Therefore, they are being presented altogether. The first Strategic Narrative spotted is: *Putin's war is a war on European Principles*. This Strategic Narrative is personalizing the Ukraine War on Putin and connects it with the European Values of Peace and Security in Europe. The aim is to transfer the Stakes from the war front to the “level of ideas” showing that this war is much more than a geopolitical answer to “Western expansionism” to the East as the Russian side is claiming.

Leveling up the war as an “attack on principles” of the European lifestyle like democracy, national sovereignty, and freedom increases the threat of the Russian invasion and aims to totally delegitimize it. The Ukraine War may end if the typical strategic objectives of Russia would be met, but the “War on European Values” will not stop making Russia a bigger and more unpredictable threat to European security.

Putin's attack on Ukraine is an attack on all the principles we hold dear. It is an attack on democracies, on national sovereignty, on the freedom of peoples to choose their fate and to shape their future. [...] So let us stay true to the principles that have guided our joint response so far, namely responsibility, unity, solidarity, and determination. (Von der Leyen, 11 March '22)

The Russian Strategic Objectives for the invasion are being presented as excuses that may be changed according to Russia's future interests as the main goal is to destroy the European way of life. The uses of this rhetorical schema and Strategic Narrative are not new in the Western discourse. President Bush used it back in 2001 to legitimize the invasion of Afghanistan and to explain the attacks on the World Trade Center (Goussios et al., 2014). Since then, this narrative was reused to justify the Iraq invasion and to depict imminent threats of other cultures against the West and the US. Thus, it can be inferred that this schema as a Strategic Narrative is quite embedded in Western political thinking for public mobilization. It seems to have a strong mobilizing and delegitimizing effect at the same time.

The second Strategic Narrative developed in European Rhetoric was: *President Putin wants to change the Status quo*. This International System Strategic Narrative tries to explain the Russian attitude in terms of Great Power politics. It depicts a blunt Russia that does only care about territorial gains. Russia is depicted as a revisionist power of that time. The narrative is containing a hidden dipole between Europe and Russia. This dipole is the new vs the old way of thinking. Russia is depicted as acting as a great power of the past when the World was divided into spheres of influence.

Russia, meanwhile, is in the process of demolishing this status quo with its war on Ukraine. What Putin wants is to *turn back the clock to a time* when the great powers divided up the map of the world among themselves. (Scholtz, 17 March 2022)

Russia is an “old fashioned” power that does not care about humanity and other contemporary values that Europe and the Western World have reached since the Second World War and wants just to change the status quo. The narrative aims to present Russia and in particular President Putin as an inhuman dictator that does not want stability and peace. The personification process “Putin wants” makes connections with other “power hungry” figures of the past without, however, directly referring to them.

This war is the result of a revenge mentality fueled by a *revisionist interpretation of European history* that would have us return *to the darkest days of empires, invasions, and exterminations*. (Macron, March 2022)

The strategic mobilization of the past is used intentionally to highlight the connection of revisionist powers to the “darker times” of the European continent. The appeal to time plays a specific role in highlighting progress versus regression, showing a conflict of values and worldviews between the two parties. Revisionists are connected with empires, invasions, and exterminations so they belong to the “darkness” and thus to the “evil side” of history.

The third Strategic Narrative is related to NATO but has also to do with peace and security in Europe: *NATO is not a threat to Russia but will secure peace and security in Europe*. This Strategic Narrative plays a role in both domestic and international audiences as it aims to deconstruct perceptions of NATO’s responsibility. On the one hand, this Strategic Narrative plays the role of a counter-narrative against some publications and the Russian narrative of NATO posing a threat to the independence of Russia.

This war is not a conflict between NATO and the West, on one hand, and Russia on the other, as some have written. NATO has no troops or bases in Ukraine. These are lies. Russia has not been attacked. It is the aggressor. (Macron, 2 March 22)

In effect, this narrative is a denial of the accusation that NATO is the reason behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This accusation was a main legitimization strategy that was used by the Russian side to justify the invasion. On the other hand, it aims to ensure the purpose and capability of NATO to maintain peace and security in Europe. These two facets do not seem to be contradictory, at least for the Western audience, as NATO is a defense mechanism of European Security and therefore, never intended to attack Russia or provoke it. Finally, this narrative aims to deconstruct the domestic public discourse of distrust of NATO’s responsibility for the Ukraine war.

## 7. Russian Strategic Narratives

The Strategic Narratives the Russian side is using were formed primarily through the speeches of President Putin. They cannot be characterized as counter-narratives to the European or Western Strategic Narratives but they aim to justify and legitimize the actions taken against Ukraine. The interesting part, however, is that this justification is based on Western legitimation standards. Similar legitimization techniques were used in different Western or US campaigns.

The three main Strategic Narratives President Putin is building on are:

1. The (De-) Nazification of Ukraine and the terrorist threat posed in Russian Borders
2. The “Empire of Lies” and the West’s empty promise
3. The historical rehabilitation of the errors of the Soviet Union with Ukraine

The first Strategic Narrative President Putin is building on is the threat posed by Nazis in Ukraine. This narrative is developed rhetorically in two main ways. The first is the justification of the existence of the Nazi threat in Ukraine and the threat they impose on Russia and other nearby Russophone territories.

They will undoubtedly try to bring the war to Crimea just as they have done in Donbas, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler’s accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War. They have also openly laid claim to several other Russian regions. (Putin, 24 February 2022).

The second is the connection between the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War – the Great Patriotic War – as is known in Russia and that is the term President Putin is using, with the current invasion of Ukraine to destroy the Nazis.

The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been *facing humiliation* and *genocide* perpetrated by the Kyiv regime. To this end, we will seek to *demilitarise and denazify Ukraine*, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation. (Putin, 24 February 2022)

In this context, President Putin induces the term “genocide” to demonize the “Kyiv regime”. With this wording, President Putin aims to delegitimize the government of Ukraine and draw a line between those who obey this regime and those who suffer. The genocide and human suffering of Russophones give President Putin the right to invade to secure the people and Russian territories. This Strategic Narratives presents Ukraine as a failed state that cannot protect minorities or certain people living in its territory. What is worse, the Ukrainian government does not wish to protect those people. Therefore, Russia must do it.

Your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today's neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine. You swore the oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people and not to the junta, the people's adversary which is plundering Ukraine and humiliating the Ukrainian people. (Putin, 24 February 2022)

The presentation of Ukraine as a state of Nazis is considered an ultimate strategy for enemy demonization and has been used quite often in the Western political discourse for reasons of delegitimization and country reputation assassination.

The second Strategic Narrative focuses on Western rhetoric, reassurances, and politics toward Russia. The Russian president is characterizing the West as an "Empire of Lies". This way he aims at deconstructing the image of liability and credibility that the European Union and the United States are culturing.

Incidentally, US politicians, political scientists, and journalists write and say that a veritable *empire of lies* has been created inside the United States in recent years. It is hard to disagree with this – it is really so [...]. Therefore, one can say with good reason and confidence that the whole so-called Western bloc formed by the United States in its own image and likeness is, in its entirety, the very same "empire of lies". (Putin, 24 February 2022).

He builds on this narrative through the presentation of the "false" reassurances of NATO and the United States on issues of the past and of the Ukrainian issue after the crisis of 2014. The ecology of this narrative includes the victimization of Russia as is being presented as not taken seriously in the Western Alliance, even if it wants to discuss important European Security matters.

Despite all that, in December 2021, we made yet another attempt to reach an agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of European security and NATO's non-expansion. Our efforts were in vain. The United States has not changed its position. It does not believe it necessary to agree with Russia on a matter that is critical to us. The United States is pursuing its objectives while neglecting our interests. (Putin, 24 February 2022).

In addition, he brings up several examples of how NATO and the Allies tried to underestimate Russian proposals and security concerns and that it is of secondary importance. This way he aims to legitimize his unilateral actions as NATO is being presented as a closed club of elites that do not hear from outside counterparts. Furthermore, the problem that seems to be addressed by President Putin is that NATO considers Russia as the enemy without any pretexts. This enables Russia to think about its security and legitimizes it to the realist principle of Self-help.

We are well aware of our enormous responsibility when it comes to regional and global stability. Back in 2008, Russia put forth an initiative to conclude a European Security Treaty under which not a single Euro-Atlantic state or international organization could strengthen its security at the expense

of the security of others. However, our proposal was rejected [..]. Last December, we handed over to our Western partners a draft treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States on security guarantees, as well as a draft agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and NATO member states. The United States and NATO responded with general statements [...]. (Putin, 21 February 2022).

Finally, the third Strategic Narrative Russia used, concerns a new issue posed by President Putin as a legitimization strategy for the Ukraine invasion. The “historical rehabilitation of the errors of the Soviet Union with Ukraine” is a narrative developed by President Putin giving a new meaning to the War. The invasion is not presented anymore just as a security operation for the sovereignty of Russia or as a rescue or assistance operation for the Russophone public living in areas under threat. The historical narrative, President Putin is using shows a deep reason behind the invasion.

To build on this narrative, the President of Russia, makes a thorough revision of Russian and Soviet history, deconstructing practically the political decisions taken by the USSR. He aims to present the Communist governments as problematic and with poor decision-making mechanisms.

I will remind you that after the 1917 October Revolution and the subsequent Civil War, the Bolsheviks set about creating a new statehood. They had rather serious disagreements among themselves on this point. In 1922, Stalin occupied the positions of both the General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the People’s Commissar for Ethnic Affairs. He suggested building the country on the principles of autonomisation that is, giving the republics – the future administrative and territorial entities – broad powers upon joining a unified state. (Putin, 21 February 2022).

This led according to President Putin to wrong decisions and practices in the Russian Empire. Another aspect is to build on how Ukraine was formed and question its historical existence. By doing this, President Putin practically delegitimizes the Ukraine State as a sovereign country.

So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, and severing what is historically Russian land. Nobody asked the millions of people living there what they thought. (Putin, 21 February 2022).

At the same time, the President of Russia legitimizes himself to restore this historical error and occupy the lands. In addition, according to this narrative, there is no Ukraine nation, thus, the occupation of Ukraine would not be an invasion of foreign territory and a sovereign country but a restoration of a historical right. This exact strategy was used and succeeded in the annexation of Crimea.

## 8. Discussion

The Strategic Narratives used by both sides during the first months of the Ukraine war map the way both sides perceived the series of events and the way they tried to frame the perceptions of their audiences and that of their opponent.

President Putin's narrative of the "Empire of Lies" for characterizing the stance of the European and US Allies towards Russia and its issue on Ukraine joining NATO was to show his audience that NATO and the Allies have given "empty promises". This narrative is justified through a historical analysis of rejections and victimization of the Russian side. In addition, Russia's security concerns do not seem to be considered by the West, which is justified through the discussions of the accession of Ukraine into NATO and the EU.

On the contrary, the European side tries to deconstruct this narrative by claiming that NATO is not a threat to Russia and by denying that Ukraine would not become a member of NATO. These conflicting strategic narratives show a gap between Russia and the West as both seem to be well-grounded with solid historical and political arguments. This provokes a polarization between the two publics and does not allow any infiltration of the opposing narrative.

Another interesting Russian narrative is the Ukrainian Nazi Narrative. President Putin sets a series of security threats towards Russia and Russophones living in Ukraine. The use of the Nazi metaphor is not new however in political discourse. Examples can be found in Western political discourse on past conflicts like Kosovo in 1999, against Iraq in 2003, and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (Goussios et al., 2014). The difference however in the use of the Nazi frame is that in the above situations, the use was metaphorical. In this case, President Putin actually accuses the Kyiv government of being real Nazis. In addition, he makes connections of "genocide" with the Nazis of Ukraine accusing the government of trying to cleanse Russophone areas to gain control of the whole territory. Through this narrative, President Putin legitimizes his intervention into Ukraine and at the same time demonizes the Ukraine government.

In terms of strategic disinformation, the Strategic Narrative of the historical error of the USSR with Ukraine bears a Strategic Disinformation Narrative. By questioning the very existence or the Right to the existence of a sovereign state and by characterizing its government as Nazi to question its legitimacy, Russia is instrumentalizing parts of history to serve its purpose. This process leads to manipulated sides of history and therefore may be categorized as a Strategic Disinformation Narrative. When the strategic narration includes several different characteristics that may alter the final meaning of events then the narrative may include a strategic falsification.

On the other hand, the European Strategic Narratives of Putin's war against European Principles and his attempt to change the status quo may also be classified among the Strategic Disinformation Narratives. The reason is that both those



narratives aim to construct an enemy image for Russia and Putin himself and to persuade the public of the imminent threat. It's nothing more than a political interpretation of the situation. In addition, the personification process aims to hold only President Putin accountable for the invasion of Ukraine and for this decision isolating him and demonizing him. Subsequently, it can be inferred that the use of contradictory Strategic Narratives may lead to partial or total misrepresentation of reality, constructing this way a Strategic Disinformation Narrative.

### **Conclusions and Limitations**

The paper examined the strategic narratives that have been formed by political leaders of the European Union and Russia to influence their publics and legitimize their actions. The study aimed to examine the way those narratives may have included a disinformation trail that was used to highlight specific facets of reality rather than others with the purpose to influence perceptions and decision-making. The study argues that this way of producing Strategic Narratives may form a kind of Strategic Disinformation Narratives. These narratives include half-truths or distortion of real events to manipulate public perceptions.

In the case of the Ukraine War, as the findings suggest, there may have been some Strategic Disinformation Narratives in both political discourses. From the Russian side, the subjective presentation and interpretation of historical events concerning the establishment of Ukraine as a State, the demonization of historical decisions made by the leadership of the USSR, and the accusation of Nazism in the Ukraine government shows towards that direction. On the European side, the personification of the war and demonization of President Putin as well as the denial of EU and US intervention in Ukraine could be included in the category of Strategic Disinformation Narratives.

In terms of crisis communication, the study adds to the way political leaders use different strategic communication approaches during conflicts to influence public and stakeholder perceptions. The use of disinformation and Strategic Narratives in interstate crises may influence decision-making processes and perceptions. In addition, the use of disinformation as a crisis communication tool in interstate crises shows a differentiation from casual crisis communication approaches where de-escalation is the target. Distortion of information is an important factor of narrative management in crisis communication. Therefore, Strategic Disinformation Narratives may alter crisis evolution or become strategic tools in the crisis and conflict management process.

However, the study contains important limitations related to the fact that disinformation is quite difficult to acknowledge and justify. Therefore, indirect ways of assumptions and constant justification need to be undertaken. In addition, further clarification of the concept of "Strategic Disinformation Narratives" needs to be established to make the term more precise in its uses. Finally, future studies may

articulate more on the connection between leadership Strategic Disinformation Narratives and information warfare.

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