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Understanding Russia’s Disinformation Narratives about Ukraine: A Ratio- Oriented Approach to Strategic Crisis Narratives

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Abstract: Using a qualitative content analysis, this study examined 84 reports from the EUvsDisinfo website regarding Ukraine from April 8, 2021, to September 29, 2022, to explore changes and continuities in narrative ratios across different crisis phases. Using a ratio-oriented approach to political crisis narratives, this article demonstrates that Russia’s disinformation narratives strategically define its narrative ratios to easily exchange one adverse motive for another at the level of system narrative, identity narrative, and policy narrative. Specifically, to legitimize Russia’s adverse foreign policy posture, Russian disinformation narratives mostly develop agent-act, act-act, and scene-act ratios, while quickly exchanging the content of those rhetorical drivers as the crisis develops. This study advances ideas about political crisis narrative by introducing a framework for analyzing narrative elements as drivers

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and dependencies within strategic narratives. Finally, the article draws our attention to the importance of exploring motives during political crisis situations to reveal shifts in narrative strategies.

Keywords: strategic narratives, Ukraine crisis, russian disinformation, EUvsDisInfo

Comprendre les récits de désinformation de la Russie sur l'Ukraine: Une approche orientée vers les ratios pour les récits stratégiques de crise

Résumé : À l'aide d'une analyse qualitative du contenu, cette étude a examiné 84 rapports du site web EUvsDisinfo concernant l'Ukraine entre le 8 avril 2021 et le 29 septembre 2022, afin d'explorer les changements et les continuités dans les rapports narratifs à travers les différentes phases de la crise. En utilisant une approche orientée sur les ratios des récits de crise politique, cet article démontre que les récits de désinformation de la Russie définissent stratégiquement leurs ratios narratifs afin d'échanger facilement un motif négatif contre un autre au niveau du récit du système, du récit de l'identité et du récit de la politique. Plus précisément, pour légitimer la position défavorable de la Russie en matière de politique étrangère, les récits de désinformation russes développent principalement des rapports agent-acte, acte-acte et scène-acte, tout en échangeant rapidement le contenu de ces moteurs rhétoriques au fur et à mesure de l'évolution de la crise. Cette étude fait progresser les idées sur la narration des crises politiques en introduisant un cadre d'analyse des éléments narratifs en tant que moteurs et dépendances au sein des récits stratégiques. Enfin, l'article attire notre attention sur l'importance d'explorer les motivations dans les situations de crise politique afin de révéler les changements dans les stratégies narratives.

Mots-clés: récits stratégiques, crise ukrainienne, désinformation russe, EUvsDisInfo

Introduction

During political crisis situations, fragmented media environments impede governmental efforts to legitimize and defend strategic democracy narratives against disinformation (Aelst et al., 2017; Aelst & Blumler, 2021; Tian & Yang, 2022). While disinformation manifests itself in several subsets including misinformation, hoaxes, lies, rumors, and propaganda (Christopher & Wei Yi, 2019), fluid media ecologies disrupt the traditional function of news media as the mediator for political crisis management and communication (Castells, 2018; Habermas, 2006, 2012). In contrast to traditional news media and despite recent efforts by internet companies to regulate disinformation (Sanz & Thorbecke, 2020), new media ecologies erode the function of public spheres, news media, and political leadership to maintain and defend democratic narratives during political crisis situations. The 2016 US election, the Brexit referendum, and Europe's efforts to counteract Russian interference in several European elections (Maurer, 2018; Tennis, 2020) are testaments to this declining

communicative power of media to function as crisis narrators (Persily, 2017; Taylor, 2019). 27% of people visited a fake news source in the final weeks before the 2016 US election, whereas visits to fake news sources were only 2.6% for traditional news sites (Deepak et al., 2021, p. 252). Driven by engagement algorithms that increase false information via novelty, outrage, and virality (Dizikes, 2018), new media sources lack traditional editorial filters for democratic narratives to reduce the impact of disinformation during moments of political crises. As disinformation and engagement-driven media logics diminish the power of communication to legitimize political crisis narratives, anti-fake news initiatives are trying to generate discourses to distinguish fact from fiction and build strategic democratic narratives to inform public, media, and policy agendas.

In 2015, the East StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Services established EUvsDisinfo, an anti-fake news initiative “to increase public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin’s disinformation operations, and to help citizens in Europe and beyond to develop resistance to digital information and media manipulation” (EUvsDisinfo). EUvsDisinfo aims at building disinformation resilience by increasing EU citizens’ knowledge about and trust in EU institutions, improve free and independent media, including public service media, and raising awareness by framing disinformation as a problem for EU values and EU policies toward the Eastern neighborhood (*EU Action Plan against Disinformation*, 2018; *EU Action Plan on Strategic Communication*, 2015). EUvsDisinfo is a semi-independent operation in that it is run by the EU’s East Stratcom Task Force. It targets Eastern European and international audiences by publishing in 13 different languages including English, Russian, Italian, Spanish, French, German, Polish, Bulgarian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Ukrainian, Romanian, and Georgian. To offset Russian disinformation narratives, EUvsDisinfo includes media sources from different domestic and international news organizations and relies on analyses from the East Stratcom Task Force.

While most studies in international political crisis communication focus on image repair strategies by political leaders (Anagondahalli, 2013; Avery et al., 2010; Benoit, 2006; Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Edwards, 2008; Liu, 2007) with crisis communication theories primarily offering ways to discuss crisis types and crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2002; Huang, 2006; Coombs, 2007, 2016; Benoit, 1997), this study introduces a ratio-oriented approach to strategic crisis narratives regarding the war in Ukraine. The focus on crisis types and responses by political leaders largely ignores the nature of crises transpiring at the government and societal level (Auer, 2016, p. 119) as well as the dynamics of transnational communication (Ehrl & Hinck, 2021). Within these contexts, anti-fake news initiatives play an important role with scholars calling for research to examine how disinformation is constructed and contested (Freelon & Wells, 2020), especially as international political crises impact national politics.

Specifically, in today's hybrid media systems, anti-fake news initiatives function as important journalistic and political agents for developing narratives that (de)legitimize policies as well as domestic and international identities (Chadwick, 2017; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). While it is increasingly difficult to legitimize strategic narratives within a global media system, with several international and domestic crisis actors generating converging and diverging narratives, strategic narratives create a context to communicate motivation during moments of political crisis (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Highlighting the rhetorical drivers within strategic narratives enables crisis actors to create a context for crisis resolutions. As the rhetorical power of narratives not only depends on the presence and absence of narrative elements (i.e., Agent, Act, Agency, Scene, Purpose), but also on the relationships between and among them (Birdsell, 1987; Burke, 1969b; Overington, 1977), it is important to explore what narrative ratios are highlighted in Russia's disinformation narratives and how EUvsDisinfo uses them to develop its own strategic narrative.

According to Burke (1969b), narratives communicate motivations and direction by implying dependencies between the agent (e.g., NATO, EU, the West), act (e.g., provoke, discredit, justify, violate, liberate), agency (e.g., sanctions, biological weapons), scene (e.g., global Russophobia, Russian Sphere of Influence, Liberal World Order, genocide), and purpose (e.g., exploitation, provocation, Nazification). The first element of a narrative ratio (e.g., Scene-Act) determines or drives the second element in a ratio. For example, Russia's disinformation narratives about genocide in Ukraine highlight a *scene* that rhetorically drives and legitimizes Russia's *act* to invade. Importantly, these narrative elements not only correspond with key journalistic questions about events and issues (i.e., Who?, What? How? When? Where? Why?), but by exploring the narrative drivers within strategic narratives, it is possible to gain insights into how crisis actors legitimize their actions and motivations. A ratio-oriented approach to political crisis narratives then draws our attention to the process of legitimizing strategic narratives via narrative-drivers and not only by means of characterizing narrative elements.

Thus, this study sets out to expand upon Miskimmon's (2013) ideas of strategic narratives by examining the narrative ratios that drive EUvsDisinfo's reports about Russian disinformation regarding Ukraine. If the goal is to raise awareness, gain an understanding, and develop resistance to Russian disinformation, then what are the adverse narrative elements that drive Russian disinformation according to EUvsDisinfo? While recent research explores strategic narrative within political crisis situations (Newsom et al., 2022), existing literature on strategic crisis narratives tends to identify topos and propaganda strategies within policy, identity, and system level narratives (Grigor & Pantti, 2021) or focus on great power politics within media reporting (Antoniades et al., 2010; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2017b). This study, however, draws our attention to the relationships between narrative elements (i.e.,

agent, act, agency, scene, purpose) and EUvsDisinfo's depictions of Russian narratives as hostile to EU narratives. Accordingly, this research extends the theoretical understanding of strategic narratives during political crisis situations into the realm of semi-institutionalized anti-fake news initiative. These are important theoretical considerations as anti-fake news initiatives are now important political crisis actors within today's global and hybrid media systems. They possess the potential to (re)introduce corrective discourses and directions for crisis resolutions into digital and traditional media agendas. Finally, a ratio-oriented approach for disinformation narratives allows us to transcend ideological dualisms that harden political ideologies and redirect our attention to the narrative drivers that legitimize EU policies and identities toward Russia. In turn, a deeper understanding of narrative-ratios helps to improve strategic political messaging to communicate motivation during moments when political legitimacy is at risk.

1. A New Threat for EU's Strategic Narratives

The increase of Russian disinformation targeting political crisis situations in European democracies in recent years is not new. Numerous studies and reports from various disciplines, ranging from media and communication studies to international relations and security studies, have documented Russia's disinformation narratives during the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests (Smith, 2022), the 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula (Golovchenko, 2020), the 2016 Brexit referendum (Llewellyn et al., 2019), EU elections (Apuzzo & Satariano, 2019; Magdin, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson & Marcellino, 2021), and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Holroyd, 2022; Perez, 2022).

While political crises offer opportunity for corrective action and discourse, they also expose the (geo)political, economic, and societal divisions of actors. Whether it is Ukraine's young and fragmented democratic identity or the European Union's democracy deficit and political legitimacy crisis, Russian disinformation narratives often aim at exacerbating existing divisions to delegitimize democratic actors and actions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Yet, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is different from other political crises in Europe's recent history in that it constitutes an existential threat to EU countries' policy, identity, and system narratives toward Russia. Foreign Policy experts and the European Union External Action Service speak of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a "geopolitical awakening" for the EU (Europe in the Interregnum: Our Geopolitical Awakening after Ukraine, 2022; Youngs, 2022). As one of the key political functions of crisis narratives is to (re)legitimize the political order and restore the political value and symbol systems (Boin et al., 2009; Boin & Lodge, 2021; Heath, 2004), it is difficult for Europe's existing peace and prosperity and shared-value narratives to legitimize energy dependencies and Europe's hesitancy to act geopolitically and militarily.

Germany's hesitancy to rewrite its economic and geopolitical narratives toward Russia in the beginning of 2022 is a perfect example of these implications of Russia's invasion for European political crisis narratives toward Russia. In an effort to express solidarity with Ukraine but also honor Germany's foreign policy not to supply weapons to war torn countries, the German Defense Minister announced in January of 2022 that Germany will deliver 5,000 helmets to Ukraine (von der Burchard, 2022). During his speech to the German parliament in February of 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz then broke with Germany's traditional *Ostpolitik* narrative toward Russia by announcing that military and geopolitical power are vital to German and European security (Muttreja & Blumenau, 2022). Germany's existing policy, identity, and system narratives toward Russia, including its change through reproachment ("Wandel durch Annäherung") and change through trade narratives ("Wandel-durch-Handel"), its civilian and normative power identity narratives, and its multilateralism and rule-based system narratives make it difficult to legitimize a firmer geopolitical and economic position toward Russian (Blumenau, 2022). The economic and geopolitical threats of Russia's invasion of Ukraine demand German and European political crisis narratives to legitimize their new hard power postures.

2. Anti-Fake News Initiatives as Political Crisis Actors

In connection with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, anti-Fake news initiatives function as crisis actors by creating narrative contexts to communicate and legitimize Europe's new political and economic directions and motives in opposition to Russian disinformation narratives. Russia's invasion of Ukraine created a blame game over the culprits, causes, consequences, and cures of the situation. To win the blame game and avoid escalation of the situation, it is important to maintain political legitimacy even if this means to publicly reflect all causes and consequences. This specifically applies to situations when managing complex and transnational crises that bear the risk of narrative inconsistencies and mixed messages (Ansell et al., 2010). As Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes (geo)political and economic threats, uncertainties, and urgencies for European countries, it is thus key for European crisis actors to navigate the rhetorical constraints of existing narratives, while also legitimizing desirable and actionable directions vis-à-vis Russia's disinformation narratives (Boin et al., 2018). Accordingly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine opened a rhetorical arena for European crisis actors to revise its policy, identity, and system narratives.

Anti-fake news initiatives like EUvsDisinfo (2015), Digital Forensic Research Lab (2016), StopFake (2014), and the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (2014) not only expose and counter Russian disinformation narratives, but they act as crisis narrators by communicating their own strategic narratives to domestic and international audiences (Bolin, 2016; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Sienkiewicz, 2015). Specifically, StopFake and the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC) aim at communicating a "Ukrainian Narrative" that supports the Ukrainian government's messaging, while

trying to remain independent of governmental influence. Despite attempts to maintain its journalistic and strategic integrity, Bolin (2016) argues that due to their training and experience in nation branding, public diplomacy, soft power, and journalism as well as their loose but supportive relationship with the Ukrainian government, they also produce strategic narratives vis-à-vis their efforts of “‘righting the wrongs’ of falsifications from Russian media” (p. 14). Likewise, Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) reason that “[t]he verification of news, in this way, becomes also a form of ideological voluntary assistance contributing toward the political goals of governments or other actors” (p. 896). While the specifics of public and governmental outreach and involvement vary across anti-fake news organization and initiative, they are, however, emerging as important political crisis actors, especially in the age of hybrid media systems.

On their AboutUs page, EUvsDisinfo openly recognizes that they “brief and train EU institutions, Member State governments, journalists, and civil society organizations, and regularly speak at international conferences” and define themselves as an “important resource for political leaders, state agencies, researchers, think tanks and journalists around the world”. While political and journalistic outreach and involvement strengthen EUvsDisinfo’s role as a crisis actor, it is also its specific communicative strategies and resources that enable it to generate corrective crisis discourse and strategic narratives.

EUvsDisinfo uses several different methods to counter Russian disinformation narratives. For its “Disinfo Targeting Ukraine” feature, EUvsDisinfo frequently depicts Russian media narrative as inconsistent and repetitive. For instance, in response to statements that Russia’s military build-up only happens in response to Western aggression and NATO expansion, EUvsDisinfo mentions that “[a]ge-old disinformation narratives by pro-Kremlin outlets of an alleged betrayal concerning NATO enlargement to the East, Russia being the victim of so called ‘anti-Russian’ rhetoric, and Russia being encircled by hostile forces have also been dusted off and put yet again to use to give a justification for the Russian military deployments, and possibly more” (“Disinfo Targeting Ukraine”, Dec 9, 2021). To further highlight the repetitive nature of these statements and identify narrative inconsistencies, EUvsDisinfo includes hyperlinks to its own open-source Disinformation Database, which archives pro-Russian disinformation stories targeting different countries and regions. Another dominant method frequently used for their “Disinfo Targeting Ukraine” articles includes surrounding Russian disinformation narratives with stories from journalistic sources (e.g., BBC, DW, The Guardian, NYT, RFE&RL, Reuters, AP), academic sources (e.g., Foreign Policy Magazine, Encyclopedia Britannica), other fake news organizations (e.g., StopFake, Digital Forensic Research Labs, The Insider), think tanks (e.g., Atlantic Council, International Crisis Group, RISS, Chatham House, CFR), and intergovernmental organizations (e.g., NATO, UN, EU, OSCE). Finally, EUvsDisinfo directly quotes Russia’s state-owned domestic (e.g.,

TASS, RIA Novosti) and international media (e.g., RT, Sputnik) and then reveals the disinformation strategies that drive those disinformation narratives. For example, after mentioning claims by Russian media that the European Medicines Agency (EMA) does not approve Russia's Sputnik V vaccine to discredit the Russian vaccination efforts, EUvsDisinfo writes: ". . . they follow a trend in the pro-Kremlin media to portray the EU as predisposed against the Russian vaccine, with the aim to undermine trust in the European vaccination efforts" ("Disinfo Targeting Ukraine", April 8, 2021). This strategy is of particular interest to the current study because it generates strategic narratives at the policy, identity, and system level in opposition to Russia's strategic narratives.

3. Strategic Narratives and Political Crisis Communication

This study is situated within the theoretical framework of strategic narratives and political crisis communication. While scholars are applying the concept of strategic narratives to political crisis communication in the area of European (geo)politics (Chaban et al., 2019; Dagnall et al., 2020; Hertner & Miskimmon, 2015), there is also a growing body of research conceptualizing disinformation as strategic narratives (Flaherty & Roselle, 2018; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Further, Liu et al. (2020) argue that despite an increase in narrative research, "comparatively, there have been only a handful of studies on the role of narratives in crisis communication" (p. 1). This study aims at contributing to this growing body of research by applying the concept of strategic narratives to EUvsDisinfo as a political crisis narrator within the context of Russia's recent disinformation narratives toward Ukraine and the West in general.

At a basic level, strategic narratives are "means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future . . . to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 2). Rooted in Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm and Kenneth Burke's understanding of dramatism (Heath, 2004; Millar & Heath, 2003), narratives suggest constraints and opportunities for political action (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2017a). Specifically, as a means of soft power, strategic narratives aim at legitimizing policies, political identities, and political worldviews as desirable (Roselle et al., 2014). Policy narratives describe an event or issue in a way so that it warrants a specific policy. Identity narrative define policy actors in relations to other policy actors. System narratives project a specific political world order or world view.

While the power of strategic narratives depend upon coherence and consistency (Schmitt, 2018), political crisis situations also depend upon clear directions for crisis resolutions. As political crisis events – and disinformation about these events – threaten the existing discourse of political legitimacy, it creates an urgency for crisis actors to articulate political directions to defend or rebuild existing narratives (Boin et al., 2009). To articulate rhetorical trajectories for crisis resolution, crisis actors

implicate relationships between the who, what, where, when, why, and how, which define and drive crisis solutions (Burke, 1969b). Thus, political crisis situations open rhetorical arenas for crisis actors to define what narrative elements drive the crisis resolution at the level of policy, identity, and system narratives.

When managing a complex international crisis like the one in Ukraine (e.g., global food crisis, humanitarian crisis, energy crisis, geopolitical crisis), it is key to communicate clear directions and drivers for crisis resolutions to survive the framing contest (Boin et al., 2009, 2018, 2021). In their study about political speeches and media reporting regarding the 2006 terrorist attacks in Madrid, Canel and García Gurrionero (2016) draw upon Burke's dramatism to argue that "the Burkean pentad and ratio on the one hand and the corresponding causes and remedies of the problem . . . on the other is worth commenting on" (p. 146). To explore the narrative drivers within strategic political crisis communication, this study examines the role of a narrative ratios for countering disinformation narratives. Key questions for this exploratory study include: What narrative elements drive Russian Disinformation Narratives at the level of policy, identity, and system narratives according to EUvsDisinfo? What narrative levels and ratios dominate during Russia's military build-up, Invasion, and Ukraine's counter offensive? What narrative ratios tend to co-occur with what topic?

4. Method

To explore these questions, this study uses a qualitative content analysis guided by Burke's dramatic pentad and ratios (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000, 2015). Burke's dramatic pentad includes five elements: 1) acts, refers to actions or what happened; 2) agent, the person or type of person performing the act; 3) agency, the means or instrument by which the agent carries out the act; 4) scene, the context or situation in which the act occurred; and 5) purpose, the goal, addressing the question of "why" the acts occur or the agent carries out certain actions. These narrative elements, however, are not intended to be examined in isolation, but understood in relation to others (Crabbe & Makay, 1972). Burke (1969a) calls these narrative relationships "ratios" or "principles of determination" (p. 15). Finally, Kneupper (1979) argues that these ratios perform a heuristic function for analyzing the motivational meaning between narrative elements.

4.1. Data Selection

This study collected 84 reports from the EUvsDisinfo feature called "Disinfo Targeting Ukraine" ranging from April 8, 2021, to September 29, 2022. Using MAXQDA 2022, the reports were organized according to publication date and broad geopolitical developments over the course of the crisis, consisting of Russia's military build-up (Mar 2021 - Feb 2022), Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Feb 2022 - Apr 2022), shifts of military engagement toward the south-east of Ukraine (Apr 2022 – July

2022), and Ukraine's counter offensive (Aug 2022 - present). To determine these general shifts in Russian hard power, the study draws upon timelines from different sources including the *Council of Foreign Relations* (CFR, 2022), *New York Times* (Bigg, 2022), and *Bloomberg* (Bloomberg, 2022). Finally, articles were only included in the dataset if they included Russian disinformation narratives, which led to three articles being excluded from the set. *Figure 1* lists the number of articles by publication date and general geopolitical developments.



Figure 1. *Frequency of Articles by Month and General Hard Power Development*

4.2. Data Analysis

After an initial reading of the material, it emerged that the “Disinfo Targeting Ukraine” articles mention several Russian disinformation narratives within one article. Typically, the disinformation narratives develop within a paragraph and only occasionally extend into another paragraph. Thus, the unit of analysis for the study is the paragraph. Guided by Miskimmon’s categories of policy, identity, and system narratives and Burke’s ideas of narrative ratios, the analysis inductively generated sub-codes for EUvsDisinfo’s depictions of Russian disinformation narratives. By constantly comparing coded segments, and to minimize pentadic ambiguity (Birdsell, 1987), the analysis grouped codes and sub-codes together or created new categories until data saturation was reached.

To systematically distinguish narrative elements and ratios between policy, identity, and system level narratives, the analysis identified recurring terminology, which corresponds with keywords and phrases. For example, common system narrative terms for agents include ‘NATO’, ‘EU’, ‘US’, ‘the West’, and ‘Nazis’; acts include ‘provoke’, ‘discredit’, ‘justify’, ‘violate’, ‘nazify’; agencies include ‘sanctions’, ‘weapons of mass destruction’, and ‘biological/nuclear weapons’; scenes include ‘global Russophobia’, ‘global food crisis’, ‘civil war’, ‘genocide, and

‘western world order’; and purpose include ‘exploitation’, ‘provocation’, and ‘nazification’. It quickly emerged that agents play a significant role in driving Russian disinformation narratives at the system level, which allowed for a semi-automated coding in MAXQDA 2022 after an initial reading of the material.

As identity narratives define political motivations and legitimacy via us-them distinctions (Miskimmon et al., 2013), there is occasional overlap between system and identity narratives in international political crises communication, especially when dealing with agent-ratios as the dominant drivers within narratives. While Russian disinformation narratives in the present dataset mostly target domestic audiences via state-controlled media, EUvsDisinfo reporting targets international audiences and specifically audiences in the Eastern European neighborhood. Hence, to distinguish between system-level and identity-level agents, this analysis considered whether the agent’s act(s) primarily pertain to Russian-Ukrainian relations (i.e., identity narrative) or whether the agent plays a broader geopolitical role within the international system (i.e., system narrative). This process allowed to differentiate between narrative elements that are simply present within a paragraph and those suggesting narrative motivations and dependencies.

This type of qualitative content analysis lends itself to a ratio-oriented examination of political crisis narratives because the data-driven approach aids in revealing context-dependent motivations within crisis discourse, while the theory-driven aspect generate nuanced insights into the continuities and changes within narrative structures. Narrative elements of the pentad (i.e., act, agent, agency, scene, purpose) operate on different levels of strategic narratives, yet, what allows for qualitative comparisons between strategic narrative levels (e.g., system, identity, policy) are the drivers behind these elements.

5. Findings

Across the entire dataset, 11 different narrative ratios were identified. At the system and identity level, the agent-act ratio emerged as the dominant ratio, while policy narratives were mostly driven by scene-act and act-act ratios. As *Figure 2* indicates, policy narrative ratios dominate during the Russian Invasion, the Southeastern Shift, and Ukraine’s Counter Offensive, while system narrative ratios dominate during the military build-up phase.

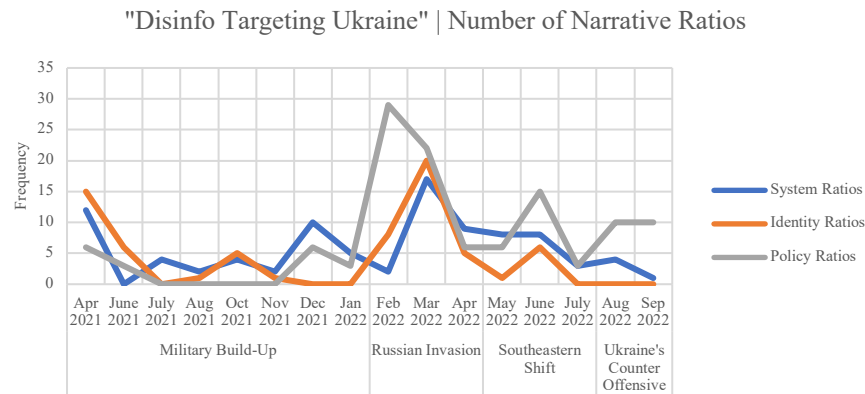


Figure 2. *Number of Narrative Ratios by Month and General Hard Power Development*

5.1. Narrative Ratios at the System Level

While there are a few narrative ratios that are driven by the act and purpose, EUvsDisinfo mostly narrates Russia's disinformation narratives with agent-act ratios at the system level. Frequent sub-codes for system level agent-act ratios include the West is preparing weapons of mass destruction, Russia is defending itself against Western provocations and Ukraine, and the West terrorizes Ukraine. The agents within those ratios include several different codes ranging from the West as exploiter, elite, imperialist, hypocrite, liar, failure, aggressor, and instigator; to Ukraine as Russian territory, Ukraine as a puppet of the West, and Ukraine as testing ground for a global vaccine race; to Russia as a great power, defender, liberator, and peacemaker. For this paper, the following examples highlight the most frequent agent ratios.

During the military-build up phase, EUvsDisinfo's system narratives drew attention to Western agents as disruptors who create socio-political tensions for Ukraine, while also mentioning Russian sources that depict Russia as a victim who defends itself against Western provocation and aggression. Typical acts for creating tensions include the EU organizing color revolutions in Eastern Europe, Western countries running anti-vaccine campaigns, promoting Western values, and nazifying Ukraine. For example, in its December 16, 2021, article, titled "The Kemlin's main target of disinformation", EUvsDisinfo writes: "The Euromaidan revolution is portrayed as a coup d'état sponsored by the West. According to this narrative, all subsequent domestic developments have served to please Kyiv's Western paymasters and transformed Ukraine into a hotbed of Russophobia where Russian identity, language and religion are all trampled upon". This paragraph uses the topics of color revolution and global Russophobia to enact a system narrative in which the West

functions as a global puppet master who creates social, cultural, linguistic, and religious tensions. This example further illustrates how Russian disinformation narratives follow a divide-and-conquer pattern, by which existing tensions within Ukraine are exploited to discredit Western actors and actions toward Ukraine. While the paragraph alludes to domestic developments within Ukraine, these developments are narrated as results of actions by the West as a foreign puppeteer, turning Ukraine into a puppet of the West.

This portrayal of Western powers as foreign aggressors who divide Ukraine from within is frequently used in connection with Nazi references. An earlier article during the military build-up phase, titled “Behind the smokescreen of Kremlin lies lurk the Russian military deployments”, mentions: “But should there be any deployments, in the twisted view of pro-Kremlin outlets, it is due to the imminent aggression expected from a Ukraine dominated by neo-Nazis, who in a pro-Kremlin distortion have been trained by Western countries. Moreover, it is not Ukraine alone, but as per well-rehearsed disinformation lines, there is always the hidden hand of the United States and NATO, and their aggression and sinister motives behind the events”. Here, EUvsDisinfo reveals how Russia’s disinformation media develops agent-act narratives that depict Western actors as hidden, aggressive, and evil, which further alludes to the idea that Ukraine is controlled by foreign forces. Whereas in this example, the Nazi references are used to describe Western powers as evil puppet masters, Nazi references also legitimize Russia as an agent that liberates Ukrainians, defends Russia against West aggression, and rescues Ukraine from fascism as a natural extension of Russia’s role during the Great Patriotic War.

Finally, during the military build-up phase, system narratives are also driven by Russia as an agent who only defends itself against Western provocation and aggression. While described as “militarily superior”, Russia’s defensive persona hinges upon the impression that it is “encircled by hostile”, “aggressive”, “dangerous”, and “destabilizing” forces. Military exercises by NATO and the US are described as provocations, which justify Russian military deployment if necessary. In the December 9, 2021, article titled “Behind the smokescreen of Kremlin lies lurk the Russian military deployments”, EUvsDisinfo writes: “Despite overwhelming and publicly available evidence from credible sources, pro-Kremlin outlets have denied the existence of any deployments and continued to spread the disinformation about their purely defensive motives and NATO provocations”.

During the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, a new dominant agent-act ratio emerged at the system level, while examples for Russia as defender and Western powers as disrupters started to be de-emphasized. Russian disinformation narratives now describe Ukraine as working with the West to build biological and nuclear weapons to attack Russia. Specifically, they describe Ukraine as a puppet of NATO and the US Defense Department who use it as a “trojan horse for nuclear strikes against Russia”. This disinformation narrative appears to be particularly important in that “the story

was amplified by diplomatic accounts on Twitter, Russian Embassy in Spain, Russian Embassy in North Macedonia”. In addition, China’s state-controlled media recycled the story and linked the development of bioweapons to viruses and diseases: “China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and affiliated media have also chimed in by resurrecting a debunked pro-Kremlin conspiracy narrative about US biolabs in Ukraine and the rest of the world. The piece called on the US to disclose information about and protect its bioweapons laboratories in Ukraine, which supposedly store large quantities of dangerous viruses, citing dubious Russian evidence. China’s state-controlled TV network CGTN linked the US bio-labs allegedly based across the world to local disease outbreaks”.

Another variation of this agent-act ratio identifies neo-Nazis as the agent running the secret labs in Ukraine. Quoting Putin’s televised speech on March 16, 2022, the article mentions: “Putin gave a long speech, throwing verbal attacks and wild allegations: the ‘Neo-Nazis’ in Kyiv preparing chemical attack, biological weapons, anthrax, even soon to have nuclear weapons ready against Donbas and Russia”. The media reach as well as the aggressive depiction of the West and Ukraine regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD) suggest a shift in Russia’s disinformation narratives. Previous ratios during the build-up phase described Western powers as evil puppeteers and disrupters. Now, Western powers play the role of an imminent military threat, which not only increase perceptions of urgency but also communicate stronger justification for Russia’s invasion and aggression toward Ukraine. For example, in its June 17, 2022 article, titled “When Words Kill”, EUvsDisinfo writes: “. . . the ‘Neo-Nazis’ in Kyiv are preparing attacks with chemical and biological weapons, anthrax or something similar. Soon Kyiv will have nuclear weapons ready to use against Donbas and Russia”.

This shift continues during the Southeastern Shift and Ukraine’s Counteroffensive phases. Notable exceptions include language that explicitly defines Putin as the “tamer of Neo-Nazis” who are preparing chemical and biological weapon attacks against Russia.

In addition to the topic of secret biological and nuclear weapon labs, the most common system level agent ratios are also frequently discussed within the context of color revolutions. Akin to the false flag narrative about secret labs, Russian disinformation narratives suggest that orange revolutions are organized by Western powers, turning Ukraine again into a puppet of the West. In an article titled “The Roar of the Russian War Machine” from January 26, 2022, EUvsDisinfo writes: “Simply put, according to the Kremlin all good comes from Moscow. Kyiv and the territory known as Ukraine was and should be an integral part of Greater Russia. The idea of an independent Ukraine in such narratives is portrayed the sick brainchild of Poles or Lithuanian knights, or their imperialist descendants. In these stories, Ukrainians are portrayed as misled by corrupt leaders, who are just puppets of Washington and Brussels organising orange revolutions and forced to comply with instructions from

the Western powers”. In this example, orange revolutions function as acts by Western powers who play the role of the puppet master and imperialist exploiter of former Soviet states.

5.2. *Narrative Ratios at the Identity Level*

At the identity level, most narrative ratios are also agent-act ratios, while scene-agent ratios also play a role. The agents within those ratios include a variety of different codes ranging from ‘Ukraine as fascist’, ‘non-traditionalist’, ‘human rights violator’, ‘instigator’, ‘aggressor’, and ‘Satan’ to ‘popular Putin’, ‘Russian opposition as traitor’, ‘mighty Russia as liberator’, and ‘impartial Russia’. Typical actions consist of ‘attacking its own people and territory’, ‘liberating Ukraine/bringing Ukraine home’, ‘censoring media’, and ‘provoking armed conflict’. The scene-agent ratios mostly communicate that internal conflicts turn Ukraine into an authoritative country. The following instances highlight the most frequent agent ratios at the identity level.

During the military build-up phase, Russian disinformation narratives predominantly portray Ukraine as a “relentless aggressor” who terrorizes and attacks its own people and territory. One story that stands out is about a boy allegedly killed by a Ukrainian army drone in Donbas April 3, 2021. EUvsDisinfo narrates the story in a way that also reveal Russia’s disinformation strategies: “The pro-Kremlin media do not hesitate: the tragedy is described as a premeditated attack on the children of Donbas: an improvised explosive device was dropped from a Ukrainian UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle), intentionally, on the family’s home. On 4 April, the head of the Russian Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, Leonid Slutsky, added unique details to the case: Kyiv is waging a fratricidal war, sending missiles with the text ‘To the Children of Donbas’ to southeast Ukraine”. Vis-à-vis the depiction of Ukraine as a fratricidal actor, Russia creates a narrative context to act as liberator and rescuer. Further, it sets up a context to legitimize violence, hatred, and aggression against Ukrainians. Drawing upon its own Disinfo database, EUvsDisinfo also links the story to the 2014 crucified boy story in which a three-year old boy is allegedly being crucified by Ukrainian nationalists in front of his mother. For example, the April 8, 2021, article reads: “This approach is similar to the infamous ‘crucified boy’ story the pro-Kremlin media spread back in 2014 to incite hatred against Ukrainians among Russian domestic audiences, and justify its armed aggression against Ukraine”.

A context frequently used to narrate Ukraine as a fascist and human rights violator during the build-up phase is genocide. These narratives accuse Ukraine of genocide against Russian minorities in the Donbas region. These “acts of genocide against Russian compatriots in Ukraine” are also linked to neo-Nazis running Ukraine. This example illustrates the importance of context for narrative ratios to communicate motivation. The context of genocide allows Russian disinformation to enact strategic narratives that not only communicate Russian identity in opposition to Ukraine, but it

opens up room for ratios to legitimize a variety of geopolitical agents and acts including Russia as liberator, Ukraine as fascist, and Ukraine as human rights violator.

During the Russian Invasion of Ukraine phase, we see a slight decline in agent-act ratios at the identity level. Yet, those agent-act ratios that are present extensively draw upon Nazi-symbolism to narrate Ukraine as a fascist “enemy” and justify Russia’s “special operation” to invade Ukraine. Sometimes, Russia’s media exploits the Azov Battalion, a military group instrumental to Ukraine’s resistance with ties to right-wing networks, to craft its disinformation narratives about neo-Nazis running the Ukrainian military and government. In an article titled “No, We Did Not Bomb the Hospitals” from March 15, 2022, EUvsDisinfo writes: “The Kremlin regularly tries to ‘prove’ the presence of Nazis in Ukraine, including at the highest levels of government, by using the narrative of the Azov Battalion, a unit of some 1,000 men. The unit was originally set up by nationalists in 2013, and donned some insignia with strong connections to Nazism. The Kremlin disinformation machine has inflated this battalion to enormous and absurdly overblown proportions: a fairly small army unit inflated to the size of an entire army”.

These ratios continue during the Southeastern Shift and Ukraine’s Counteroffensive phases. Notable exceptions include ratios that introduce Roskomnadzor, Russia’s Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, as a new agent during the Russian Invasion and subsequent phases. These narrative ratios, however, include hardly any references to Russian disinformation and focus on the real implications of Russia’s new media law on domestic and international media.

5.3. Narrative Ratios at the Policy Level

Policy level narratives differ from identify and system narratives in that they are mostly driven by act-act, scene-act, and agent-act ratios. The acts include codes mentioning Ukrainian military aggression and provocation, Russian invasion, and possible EU membership for Ukraine. Scene codes describe Ukraine’s situation as a humanitarian crisis, an anti-Christian system, genocide, and a civil war. Finally, inductive codes for agents depict Russia as savior, Ukraine as aggressor, and Ukraine as an illegitimate country without sovereignty. The following examples present the most frequent act-act, scene-act, and agent-act ratios at the policy level.

During the military build-up phase, Russia’s military deployments at the Ukrainian boarder are not only defined as self-defense, but also as a legitimate policy to protect Russia from Ukrainian aggression. In an article titled “Donbas creating Fakes on the Ground”, from April 9, 2021, EUvsDisinfo writes: “Pro-Kremlin media has by now created a setting where Ukraine is the aggressor. Any kind of operation will be described as a defensive measure or as measure in the line of Responsibility to Protect. A military action is justified, well in advance, prepared by a carefully set-up information campaign”. This act-act ratio enables Russia to (pre)legitimize a wide range of policy as “defensive measures” including military build-up and invasions.

Finally, this act-act ratio construes an eye-for-an-eye narrative in which the suggested Ukrainian military aggression is only matched by Russian aggression. Russian aggression appears as a natural response to the alleged Ukrainian actions.

The scene-act ratio is commonly used during the military build-up phase to describe Ukraine as a humanitarian crisis that demands help. Toward the end of the build-up phase, on February 23, 2022, EUvsDisinfo reports: “The ordered relocation of people to create a false ‘humanitarian crisis’ in Donbas was quickly used by the Kremlin as a pretext to send in troops under the guise of ‘peacekeeping’ in another outright act of aggression against Ukraine”. This scene-driven ratio further supports Russia’s agent-driven narrative that narrate Russia as a rescuer and savior in order to build “a justification of offensive actions against Ukraine”.

During the Russian Invasion phase, we see an incline in act-act ratios, a slight decline in scene-act ratios and a consistent use of agent-act ratios. The material for Russia’s act-act ratios does not change significantly. Russia’s disinformation narratives continue to narrate Russian self-defense and aggression as a result of Ukrainian military aggression and provocation. Noteworthy exceptions are paragraphs that develop implicit act-act ratios regarding nuclear weapons. In an article from February 24, 2022, the day Russia invaded Ukraine, EUvsDisinfo writes: “Lastly, the volume of mentions of the keyword ‘nuclear’ in the context of Ukraine has been growing steadily since November 2021. It is consistent with Russia’s military posturing and the pro-Kremlin outlets’ loose talk about the country’s nuclear weapons and military might. A recent example includes the EU-sanctioned propagandist Dmitry Kiselev thanking ‘comrades Stalin and Beria’ (among others) for creating Russian nuclear weapons”. While these act-act ratios are rather implicit in nature, they speak to the confrontational and escalatory momentum within Russia’s disinformation narratives during and after the invasion.

6. Discussion

Within today’s fluid and fragmented media ecologies, it is difficult to communicate consistent motivations regarding complex international crises. A ratio-oriented approach to political crisis narratives recognizes the importance of rhetorical motives within strategic narratives, while also addressing the contextual differences between policy, identity, and system narratives. The present study draws our attention to the importance of communicating motives during political crisis situations to reveal continuity and change in narrative strategies. Using the example of the Ukraine crisis, this study explored the dominant narrative elements that drive Russian disinformation narratives at the policy, identity, and system level, as well as shifts in dominant ratios across key crisis phases, and the co-occurrences of ratios and topics. The following paragraphs will now discuss these findings according to system, identity, and policy level narratives.

The findings suggest that agent-act ratios dominate Russia's disinformation narratives at the system level. These strategic system narratives mostly depict the West as an aggressor who is preparing WMDs or the West as a puppeteer that manipulates and exploits Ukraine for its own economic and geopolitical interests. When describing Russia's role at the system level, Russia appears as a victim of Western aggression. Within those narratives, Russia assumes the role of a great power, peace maker, and liberator who defends Russia and Ukraine against Western aggression. During the military build-up phase, the West as puppeteer frequently carries out acts like organizing color revolutions, nazifying Ukraine, and spreading Russophobia in Ukraine. The adverse nature of the agent (i.e., puppeteer, aggressor) allows the acts to be easily exchanged for one another, without jeopardizing the adverse characterization of the actor as the driver of the acts. Thus, the rhetorical motivations for Russia's disinformation about the West emerge not from the specific content but from the consistent agent-act structure, repeatedly depicting the West as aggressor, manipulator, and puppeteer and thereby legitimizing different adverse acts. During the Russian invasion, we see a continuation of the agent-act ratio, but Western powers are now narrated as an imminent military threat for Russia. The West is frequently portrayed as working with Ukraine to build nuclear and biological weapons to attack Russia. While Russia's system narratives during the military build-up phase focused on the West as an aggressor and puppeteer, during the Russian invasion phase, there is not only a shift toward threatening language, but the adverse nature of the West is now rhetorically linked to Ukraine, making it a more imminent threat. In turn, this allows Russia to strengthen its strategic system narratives as a liberator and defender of Russian interests. This is also noticeable during the Southeastern Shift and Ukraine's Counter offensive, where Russia and Putin appear as a tamer of neo-Nazis and Western aggressors in Ukraine. Finally, the most common topics for agent-act include color revolutions and secret biological and nuclear weapon labs in Ukraine, further amplifying the image of the West as a subversive and threatening actor.

At the identity level, the findings demonstrate that agent-act ratios also dominate Russia's disinformation narratives. However, in contrast to the agent-act ratios at the system level, there are no significant shifts across crisis phases at the identity level. Across the different crisis phases, Russian disinformation narratives mostly define Russia's identity vis-à-vis Ukraine. While Russia's role as a liberator and defender continue to drive and legitimize Russian actions, Ukraine is narrated as a relentless aggressor against its own people. Whether it is Ukraine terrorizing its own people, fascist Ukraine oppressing its own people, or Ukraine committing genocide against the Russian population in Ukraine, Ukraine is narrated as the driver of aggression and terror. In opposition to Ukraine's image as a relentless aggressor, Russia depicts itself as a liberator and savior. In addition to Russia's role as the liberator who frees Ukraine from fascist rule, Russia also narrates itself as a liberator who brings Ukraine home, which further supports Russia's view that Ukraine is a country without sovereignty and belongs to Russia's sphere of influence. Like the agent-act structure at the system level, the adverse nature of the agent (i.e., Ukraine as relentless aggressor) allows the

acts to be easily exchanged for one another, while rhetorically warranting Russia as a legitimate driver of the acts. Finally, the most common topics for agent-act include fascism, human rights violations, and genocide, which offers a context for Russia to maintain its consistent, yet flexible agent-act motivations.

The findings for Russia's disinformation narratives at the policy level provide a mixed picture regarding narrative ratios. Act-act ratios as well as scene-act ratios dominate Russia's disinformation narratives at the policy level. During the military build-up phase, act-act and scene-act ratios dominate. The act-act ratios mostly portray Russian military deployment as an act of self-defense, while the scene-act ratios define Ukraine as a crisis ridden country (e.g., civil war, humanitarian crisis, genocide) that demands and legitimizes Russian military deployment. During the military build-up phase, Russia's disinformation narratives highlight acts of aggression and provocation (e.g., NATO & EU enlargement, Ukraine military committing atrocities against its own people), which legitimize Russia's military build-up. Russian disinformation narratives tend to define Russia's military build-up as reacting to Western and/or Ukrainian aggression and provocation. This also manifests itself in scene-act ratios, which frequently define Russia's actions as humanitarian efforts to evacuate innocent victims from Ukraine's atrocities and civil war. During the Russian invasion phase, there is an increase in act-act ratios that depict Russia's actions as defensive measures against nuclear threats. Like the narrative shift toward threatening language at the system level, there is a similar shift at the policy level that defines Ukraine's actions as potential military threats during the Russian invasion phase. Specifically, Russian disinformation narratives highlight Ukraine's potential to develop nuclear weapons. Importantly, these narratives legitimize Russia's military build-up and invasion of Ukraine as they only happen in response to Ukrainian and Western threats. Military threats and aggression as well as human rights violations, civil war, and genocide are the most common topics for act-act and scene-act ratios.

7. Implications and Conclusion

This study set out to expand upon Miskimmon's ideas of strategic narratives by examining the narrative ratios that drive Russian disinformation narratives regarding Ukraine at the system, identity, and policy level. The study conceptualized anti-Fake news initiatives as crisis actors who create narrative contexts to strategically communicate and legitimize political motives. Using a qualitative content analysis guided by Burke's ratio-oriented approach revealed context-dependent motivations within political crisis discourse, while also appreciating the continuities and changes within narrative structures. Narrative elements of the pentad (i.e., act, agent, agency, scene, purpose) operate on different levels of strategic narratives (e.g., system, identity, policy). Yet, what allows for qualitative comparisons of rhetorical motivations between different narrative levels are the narrative ratios. The findings of this study lend support to the usefulness of a ratio-oriented methodology for analyzing

the rhetorical drivers within disinformation narratives. Specifically, the study not only aids in recognizing general changes and continuities within disinformation narratives, but also helps to distinguish rhetorical drivers at the system, identity, and policy level across crisis phases. The proposed methodology allows researchers to address the limitations of theories that prioritize salience of narrative elements over rhetorical drivers within political crisis narratives (Canel & García Gurrionero, 2016).

Identifying the drivers within strategic narratives is particularly important as disinformation and fragmented media systems diminish the power of communication to legitimize political crisis narratives and inform public, media, and policy agendas. Russia's strategically defined narrative ratios, specifically its agent-act, act-act, and scene-act narratives enable Russia to continuously legitimize its adverse foreign policy posture, while quickly exchanging the content of those rhetorical drivers as the crisis develops. While it is easier to rhetorically legitimize strategic narratives within Russia's state-controlled media system compared to democratic media systems, it is also important within democratic systems to communicate motivations during political crisis situations to inform public, media, and policy agendas (Cross & Ma, 2015; Canel & García Gurrionero, 2016). As Russian disinformation narratives continue to exploit existing divisions to delegitimize democratic actors and actions, it is key for Europe's political crisis actors to publicly legitimize foreign policy decisions by communicating motivations. This study demonstrates how Russian narrative ratios are strategically defining its foreign policy motivations at the system, identity, and policy level by quickly exchanging the content of one adverse motive for another. A practical implication of this is for European political crisis actors to avoid rhetorical power plays and consider communicative opportunities to articulate foreign policy motivations during moments of crisis. The dominance of agent-act and act-act ratios within Russian disinformation narratives invite confrontation and provocation, whereas a focus on purpose-driven and agency-driven narratives would allow European crisis actors to develop distinct motivations without engaging in Russia's rhetorical power play. While motives exist within the rhetorical opportunities and constraints of existing narratives, there is an opportunity for EU crisis managers to redefine or recombine narrative elements to communicate new political motivations in opposition to Russian disinformation narratives.

In addition to the methodological and normative implications, this study helps to further explore Russian disinformation narratives regarding rhetorical motivations. For example, Russian disinformation narratives are often considered to lack narrative consistency (Paul & Matthews, 2016; Fitzgerald & Brantly, 2017; Shekhovtsov, 2022). While this study reveals strategic inconsistencies in Russia's disinformation narrative, it also suggests narrative consistencies concerning agent-act, act-act, and scene-act ratios. The narrative inconsistencies are often the result of changes in content, rather than the general motivational structures that legitimize Russia's actions. Thus, understanding Russian disinformation narratives via a ratio-oriented approach allows researchers to explore motivational structures and shifts during political crises, while also recognizing the permutations of narrative elements.

8. Limitations and Future Directions

While this study aids in theorizing strategic narratives within the context of Russian disinformation narratives, limitations exist. First, this study only considered a limited dataset, making it difficult to generalize about EUvsDisinfo's broader narrative strategies, especially strategies that construct narrative-ratios and reveal the (in)consistencies in Russian disinformation narratives. Second, the narrative context from hyperlinks was not included in the analysis. Future research should examine how the selection of sources contributes to the construction of strategic narratives as well as the journalistic practices and resources of anti-fake news organizations. As this study focused on narrative projection, an examination of selection of sources and journalistic processes would speak to what Miskimmon et al. (2013) considers narrative formation, creating a more complete picture of strategic narratives by anti-fake news organizations. Third, due to the exploratory nature of this study, quantitative methods would help to refine the approach and allow for statistical comparisons across crisis phases, narrative levels, and anti-fake news organizations. Finally, additional research is needed to examine cases where Russia uses the Ukrainian crisis to communicate motivations to non-European countries. Comparisons between Russian disinformation narratives targeting Europe's Eastern neighborhood and African countries could be used to specify narrative ratios by region.

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