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# PIPELINE OF INFLUENCE: NORD STREAM 2 AND ‘INFORMATSIONNAYA VOYNA’

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**Keywords**—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Nord Stream 2, ‘informatсионnaya voyna’, Russia, Germany, Critical Discourse Analysis.*

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## ABSTRACT

This article studies Nord Stream 2 by analysing Russian and German discourses within a combined approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology, strategic communications, and Russian ‘informatсионnaya voyna’ (information war) theories. It argues that the holistic approach of strategic communications and its closely corresponding Russian concept of ‘informatсионnaya voyna’ help to explain Nord Stream 2 as a project that, alongside its economic goals,

aims to increase schism in the West. Using CDA the article presents an analysis of official Russian and German media discourses which points to a discursive dynamic between them. Ideas that were promoted by Russia were aimed at inducing divisions and discord in the West. This makes a novel contribution to the understanding of Nord Stream 2 as a confrontation in media space. Furthermore, it contributes to the understanding of how the Russian concept of 'informatsionnaya voyna' is applied in practice.

## INTRODUCTION

In July 2021 the White House announced it had reached a deal with Germany that would allow the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The project agreement, run by Gazprom subsidiary 'Nord Stream AG' and dubbed 'Putin's pet project', attracted conflicting reactions.<sup>1</sup> While former German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the agreement a 'good step', Ukraine and Poland jointly stated that it 'significantly deepened' the security crisis in Europe, and the EU declared that Nord Stream 2 was 'not of common EU interest'.<sup>2</sup> This type of discourse, revealing divisions, discontent, and disruption was not new to Nord Stream 2.

Nord Stream 2 has many controversial features that have attracted much criticism over the years. The project was announced in September 2015, a mere year and a half after Russia annexed Crimea and initiated the crisis in east Ukraine. Gazprom and a consortium of European energy companies had agreed on a financing scheme of \$11 billion.<sup>3</sup> The project aimed to add two pipelines alongside the existing Nord Stream 1 pipelines and to double the capacity of direct Russian gas flows from Vyborg in Russia to Lubmin in Germany by a further 55 BMC.

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1 Chris Miller, 'Will Anything Stop Putin's Pet Project?', *New York Times*, 25 February 2021, (accessed 15 December 2021).

2 'Mixed responses to US-Germany Nord Stream 2 deal', *DW*, 22 July 2021, (accessed 15 December 2021); 'Nord Stream 2: Ukraine and Poland slam deal to complete controversial gas pipeline', *Euronews*, 22 July 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

3 'Gazprom, European partners sign Nord Stream-2 deal', *Reuters*, 4 September 2015, (accessed 23 December 2021).

The pipelines would bypass the current gas transport system in Eastern Europe (Ukraine and Belarus) and weaken transit countries, reducing their fees and their negotiating leverage in the diplomatic arena. These controversial contours of the project attract powerful opposition within Germany, among EU member states, the European commission, Ukraine, and the United States. Yet, despite the fierce debate on Nord Stream 2 and several packages of US sanctions, the project's construction was completed in October 2021, and it is currently pending approval by German regulatory bodies.<sup>4</sup>

The international discord around Nord Stream 2 has resulted in a fragmented academic debate on the subject. Most attention has been afforded to explaining the economic impact of the project on European energy markets and the ability of European regulation to curb possible adverse effects. The geopolitical aspects of the project have been explained primarily through the prism of geo-economics, arguing that Russia used its business relations with Germany to isolate it and to manipulate the German elites on an essentially geopolitical issue. Yet, the communications aspects of Nord Stream 2 have been overlooked.

The current article addresses this gap in the literature by analysing Russian and German narratives on Nord Stream 2 in 2019-2021 using a combined approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology, and strategic communications and Russian 'informatsionnaya voyna' theories. It argues that the holistic approach of strategic communications and its closely related concept of 'informatsionnaya voyna' help to explain Nord Stream 2 as a project that, alongside its economic goals, aimed to increase schism in the West. Utilising CDA the article presents an analysis of official Russian and German media discourses, pointing to a discursive dynamic between them. Certain ideas that have been promoted by Russia are aimed specifically at inducing divisions and discord in Germany and the West. This makes a novel contribution to the understanding of Nord Stream 2, namely as a confrontation in

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<sup>4</sup> Vera Eckert, 'German regulator puts brake on Nord Stream 2 in fresh blow to gas pipeline', *Reuters*, 16 November 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

media space. Furthermore, it contributes to the understanding of how the Russian concept of ‘informatsionnaya voyna’ is used in practice.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The construction of Nord Stream 2 has been at the centre of intense, and at times highly politicised, public and academic debates that touched on a variety of pertinent contemporary global issues. The international discussion engages with various questions, among them the economic rationale of Nord Stream 2, the impact it might have on Europe’s energy market and on political relations between Russia and Western actors, and on trans-Atlantic relations. Within domestic German discussions these issues were labelled ‘the Russia debate’, which became a highly charged political polemic.<sup>5</sup>

Those in favour of the pipeline include a wide array of political actors, who present different arguments in favour of the project. These include official Russian representatives and representatives of Nord Stream AG. As well as their European business partners, such as former CEO of OMV, the Austrian Rainer Seele, who argued that the project would increase security in Europe by eliminating risks of ‘transit problems’ (implying the benefits of bypassing the volatile Ukrainian transit rout).<sup>6</sup> The project also has supporters in German political echelons, including senior figures in the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), in the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and in the far-right Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD).<sup>7</sup> This is by no means a stable and cohesive coalition of actors. Different arguments are used by diverse players ranging from general sympathy towards Russia (AfD) to historical memories about German Ostpolitik during the Soviet era (SPD), to a more calculated economic argument about the need to allow for mutually beneficial business with Russia to continue (CDU and business leaders).

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5 Bjorn Gens, ‘Germany’s Russia policy and geo-economics: Nord Stream 2, sanctions and the question of EU leadership towards Russia’, *Global Affairs* Volume 5 N° 4 (2019): 316.

6 Gens, ‘Germany’s Russia policy’, p. 328.

7 For a discussion on the political fault lines of the German domestic debate on Russia, see Gens, ‘Germany’s Russia policy’, pp. 322-4; For a discussion on how these divides manifested in discussions on Nord Stream 2, see Jeffrey Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 24 July 2020, (accessed 23 December 2021).

The voices of opposition to Nord Stream 2 are also diverse. They include EU member states (particularly from Eastern Europe), the European Commission, officials from the US and representatives of Ukraine, as well as German politicians from the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens. These actors present different arguments about the dangers stemming from such a large Russian state-backed energy project in Europe. In Germany the FDP and the Greens separately argue against the project, citing increased dependency on Russia, weakening of EU solidarity, and undermining Germany's position as a leader in green energy. European officials share these concerns and over the years have tried to address them through the regulatory status of the pipeline, by limiting its potential to undercut the Gas Directive from 2009, and emphasising European principles of security, solidarity, and trust.<sup>8</sup> East European EU member states are adamant in opposing the construction of the pipeline because of their heightened awareness of the Russian threat to European security.<sup>9</sup> Ukraine is the most vocal opponent of Nord Stream 2, which President Volodymyr Zelensky called 'a dangerous geopolitical weapon'. Ukraine stands to lose large transit fees from a possible redirection of Russian gas away from its territory, which would also leave it more vulnerable to future Russian aggression.<sup>10</sup> US officials often cite the dangers to Ukraine, as well as for the rest of Europe, as reasons for their 2019-20 sanction packages against the pipeline.<sup>11</sup>

This very diverse public debate about Nord Stream 2 and the wide variety of topics that it covers, has resulted in a fragmented academic debate that is divided between energy studies, regulatory-legal scholarship, and international relations research on geo-economics. Energy studies assess the economic effect that Nord Stream 2 might have on Europe's energy market. This debate developed around a popular view among some

8 For more on the EU regulatory stance see the 'The European Commission's Priorities', on the European Commission website, (accessed 23 December 2021); Alan Riley, 'Nord Stream 2: A Legal and Policy Analysis', CEPS Special Report N° 151, November 2016, pp. 2-4.

9 Sziklai et al., 'The impact of Nord Stream 2 on the European gas market bargaining positions', *Energy Policy* Volume 144 (2020); Marco Siddi, 'Theorising conflict and cooperation in EU-Russia energy relations: ideas, identities and material factors in the Nord Stream 2 debate', *East European Politics* Volume 36 N° 4 (2020): 544-563.

10 'Nord Stream 2 "dangerous geopolitical weapon": Zelensky', *France24*, 22 August 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

11 Anthony J. Blinken, 'Nord Stream 2 and Potential Sanctionable Activity', Press Release US Department of State, 18 March 2021.

energy experts that ‘concerns about Russia’s potential leverage from gas exports does not fully recognise how much both the European and world gas markets have changed’.<sup>12</sup> They argued that the rise of liquified natural gas (LNG) supplies, US shale gas, and European energy policy regulation severely undercut Russia’s use of energy supplies for political leverage.<sup>13</sup> Other energy experts questioned the erosion of Russian leverage despite these new circumstances. They noted that ‘Asia continuously diverts the LNG production surplus, while the US shale gas with its high variable cost and high sensitivity to LNG market prices cannot currently compete with the cheap Russian gas’.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, as noted by energy expert, Leslie Palti-Guzman, Russian leverage over European gas prices is often achieved through a series of incremental moves that are convoluted and complex, which cannot be forecast in simplified economic models and projections.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the academic debate on the economic impact of Nord Stream 2 did not present definitive conclusions about the risks it might pose to the European energy market.

One of the consequences of the confused picture about the threat emanating from Nord Stream 2 is that different actors who opposed the project chose different and often conflicting mitigating strategies. This is reflected in the academic debate about regulatory-legal issues surrounding Nord Stream 2. Some legal experts, such as Alan Riley, argue the importance of imposing EU law on Nord Stream 2 and the need to ensure that the pipeline complies with the 2009 Gas Directive, as a means to counter Russia’s drive ‘to isolate and divide Germany from

12 Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 108.

13 For more on the impact of LNG and transformation of the European gas market as limiting the possible bargaining power of Russia, see Andreas Goldthau, ‘Assessing Nord Stream 2: regulation, geopolitics & energy security in the EU, Central Eastern Europe and the UK’, *EUCERS Strategy Paper N° 10* (King’s College London, 2016); Anna Mikulska, ‘Nord Stream 2: between monopoly and diversification’, *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* Volume 71 N° 4 (2018): 55-75.

14 According to Sziklai et al. a scenario that envisions Russia closing the transit rout via Ukraine once Nord Stream 2 becomes operational is real and feasible. This would economically hurt Eastern European countries, but would be less detrimental to Western European countries, who, in turn, would be disincentivized from acting against Russia and might also quickly learn that their ability to withstand Russia pressure in real life circumstances is limited. A similar conclusion as to the vulnerability of Ukraine and east European countries and the limited leverages of west European countries once Nord Stream 2 become operations was also reached Eser et al. See Sziklai et al., ‘The Impact of Nord Stream 2’; Patrick Eser, Ndaona Chokani, Reza S. Abhari, ‘Impact of Nord Stream 2 and LNG on gas trade and security of supply in the European gas network of 2030’, *Applied Energy* Volume 238 (2019): 816-830.

15 Interview with Leslie Palti-Guzman, 27 July 2021.

the rest of the EU.<sup>16</sup> Other experts, such as Moniek de Jong and Thijs Van de Graaf, note that this very strategy has become a problem.<sup>17</sup> They argue that the European Commission attempts to ‘solve a (geo)political issue through its regulatory framework’, which politicises legalisation, since Nord Stream 1 and other pipelines were not regulated by EU law.<sup>18</sup> This murky regulatory situation resulted in a compromise in 2019, when the Gas Directive was amended and the responsibility to ensure that the pipeline complies with EU laws was transferred to Germany. As the EU was coming to terms with its limited control over the pipeline, the US began to work to stop the pipeline through sanctions, the lawfulness of which has been debated by legal experts, with some mixed conclusions.<sup>19</sup> This regulatory-legalistic debate did not pay attention to the fact that by choosing divergent and contradictory legal strategies, Brussels and Washington weakened each other and possibly played into Moscow’s hands.

International relations scholars draw on the theoretical framework of geo-economics in trying to explain how Moscow created divisions in the West, which allowed it to pursue the construction of Nord Stream 2 despite strong opposition from many powerful actors. The framework of geo-economics describes situations in which the projection of power is rooted in economic rather than geopolitical logic, which depoliticises certain issues through a ‘reciprocal manipulation’ between politics and business.<sup>20</sup> Vihma Antto and Wigell Mikael argued that before 2014 Russia successfully used geo-economics as means to exert power by keeping the EU divided. But the shift to geopolitical actions in the aftermaths of the

16 Alan Riley, ‘Nord Stream 2: A Legal and Policy Analysis’, *CEPS Special Report* N° 151, November 2016; Alan Riley, ‘Nord Stream 2: A Pipeline Dividing Europe?’, Centre for European Policy Analysis, 2019, (accessed 23 December 2021).

17 Moniek de Jong and Thijs Van de Graaf, ‘Lost in Regulation: Nord Stream 2 and the Limits of the European Commission’s Geo-Economic Power’, *Journal of European Integration* Volume 44 N° 4 (2021): 495-510.

18 De Jong and Van de Graaf, ‘Lost in Regulation’.

19 The US Congress adopted a package of sanctions including ‘Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act’ [CAATSA], the ‘Protecting Europe’s Energy Security Act’ [PEESA], and the ‘Protecting Europe’s Energy Security Clarification Act’ [PEESCA]. See ‘Risch, McCaul: Nord Stream 2 Subject to CAATSA Sanctions’, US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 26 May 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021); ‘Rirche, Shaheen Urge Biden Administration to Fully Implement Nord Stream II Legislation’, US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 12 February 2021; For legal analysis see, Olivier Malherbe, ‘U.S. Economic Sanctions against Nord Stream 2 under International Jurisdiction Principles’, *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* Volume 53, N° 3 (Summer 2021): 1017-1030.

20 Gens, ‘Germany’s Russia policy and geo-economics’.



annexation of Crimea, made geoeconomics secondary in EU-Russian relations, to Russia's own detriment.<sup>21</sup> They acknowledge, however, that Nord Stream 2 was uniquely positioned to serve Russia as a tool of geoeconomics even after 2014. Bjorn Gens argued that except for a short setback in the aftermath of the downing of the Malaysian MH17 airliner by Russia-backed Ukrainian separatists, debates in Germany on Nord Stream 2 were continuously dominated by geo-economic logic.<sup>22</sup>

While these highly informed debates describe well the pertinent questions around Nord Stream 2 within different disciplines, they consider the pipeline through primarily economic or legal lenses. International relations scholarship on geo-economics comes closest to describing the wide-ranging impact of Nord Stream 2 by focusing on divisions and creation of cleavages as part of Russia's strategy around the project. Yet, the over-emphasis on the economic and financial ends of this strategy overlooks the possibility that the schism might be one of Russia's goals, rather than a means to deliver an economic end. An outlook that incorporates strategic communications theories may help to overcome this omission.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

To overcome the fragmentary and limited nature of the current academic debate on Nord Stream 2, this study proposes to examine it within the theoretical framework of strategic communications, and its corresponding concept in Russian strategic thinking – 'informatsionnaya voyna'. Both terms have been debated extensively in Western countries and in Russia, respectively. In the context of international politics the term emerged in a 1997 UN report *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations*, which was written after the UN's shortcomings were revealed in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Vihma Antto and Wigell Mikael, 'Unclear and present danger: Russia's geoeconomics and the Nord Stream II pipeline', *Global Affairs* Volume 2 N° 4 (2016): 377-88; Gens, 'Germany's Russia policy and geo-economics'; Siddi, 'Theorising conflict and cooperation in EU-Russia energy relations'.

22 Gens, 'Germany's Russia policy and geo-economics'.

23 'Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations', Report of the Taskforce on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities (New York: UN, 1997).

At the heart of the report was a call to rethink the way that the UN communicates with populations, and to put ‘itself and its programs, back in touch with people’.<sup>24</sup> In the US, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the insurgency campaigns that followed, the term continued to attract attention from policy makers. In the wake of these new challenges, US policy makers felt, as was expressed by former US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, that it was ‘just plain embarrassing ...how has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world’s greatest communication society?’<sup>25</sup> In that context, strategic communications was used in the US army as a term to overcome bureaucratic factionalism and ‘to bring practitioners of Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, Information Operations to the same table’.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, the term also evolved diachronically in the context of the informational-digital revolution. The rise of what Zygmunt Bauman called ‘liquid modernity’, and Manuel Castells called ‘network society’, meant that the ‘solid’ institutions of classical modernity and their hierarchical and rational logic was giving way to more fragmented and fluid associations.<sup>27</sup> As Bauman explained it, the fragmentation (or melting) of social ‘solids’ in this era is in fact the melting of ‘social bonds’ and ‘patterns of communication’ between individuals and human collectives.<sup>28</sup> The empowerment of individuals in communicating with the collective, results in a diminished importance of hierarchies.<sup>29</sup> Instead, as Castells puts it, contemporary society ‘is constructed around flows’, which are ‘purposeful, repetitive, programable sequences of exchanges and interaction between physically disjoined positions held by social actors’.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the use of the term ‘information space’ in this article corresponds to Bauman’s and Castells’ descriptions of a society that is

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24 Ibid, p. 6.

25 Robert M. Gates, ‘Landon Lecture’, Kansas State University, 26 November 2007.

26 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xviii.

27 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

28 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 6.

29 Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 409.

30 Ibid., p. 442.

in flux, and at the heart of which there is a metaphysical space where different forms of information flow between actors.

The emergence of the space of flows within which the flow of information is a central feature contributed to recognitions that ‘the attitudes and perceptions... created in this new environment are often as important as reality, and sometimes can even trump reality’.<sup>31</sup> Technological advances and the upsurge in the use of social media networks by the end of the 2000s reinforced the trends outlined above. By the 2010s, definitions of strategic communications in the West reflected this new era of flows, calling for ‘a holistic approach to communications based on values and interests’, which includes the ‘use of words, actions, images, or symbols’, as well as ‘other forms of signalling or engagement’.<sup>32</sup> This mode of communications is designated as ‘strategic’ because it aims ‘to inform, influence, or persuade’ specific audiences, and is doing so in a ‘contested environment’, bearing in mind that other actors might try to undermine one’s efforts.<sup>33</sup>

The holistic nature of strategic communications makes it an appropriate framework to explain the broad impact that a large energy project such as Nord Stream 2 has on German and European politics, as well as on trans-Atlantic relations. The relevance of this concept in relations to Nord Stream 2 is further substantiated by frequent references by Russian decision makers, including by President Putin, to a corresponding Russian term – ‘informatsionnaya voyna’ [information war] – to describe geopolitical developments.<sup>34</sup> The concept appears both in Russian official and unofficial discourses. Official definitions of ‘informatsionnaya voyna’ feature three main elements. First, it involves a confrontation in the information space between two or more actors, which are in

31 ‘2009 Congressional Research Service report’, quoted in Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), p. 5.

32 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communication Centre for Excellence, 2019), p. 28; Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, pp. xviii-xix; Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 3.

33 Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 3; Bolt and Haiden, *Improving Strategic Communications Terminology*, p. 46.

34 For more on the parallels between strategic communications and ‘informatsionnaya voyna’, see Ofer Fridman, ‘“Information War” as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications’, *The RUSI Journal* Volume 165 N°1 (2020).

most cases state-backed.<sup>35</sup> Second, in the course of the operations, actors are ‘delivering informational and psychological influence’ by means of ‘propaganda and agitation, disinformation, demonstrative and demonstrational actions.’<sup>36</sup> Last, it aims at ‘destabilizing the internal political and social situation’ and ‘coercing states to make decisions in the interests of the opposing side’.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, popular Russian writers such as Igor Panarin, who write extensively on ‘*informatsionnaya voyna*’ suggest a much broader definition to the concept, referring to it as ‘a form of conduct of war in times of peace by governments and transnational corporations, by use of special (political, financial-economic, sabotage, terrorist and other) methods, means and resources’.<sup>38</sup> The polemic on ‘*informatsionnaya voyna*’ as means to deliver informational-psychological influence suggests that in Russia the term is used to describe a broad framework and a mindset of the Russian political elites. It also shows that Russian views on the information space are not too far from Castells’ understanding of this term.<sup>39</sup>

Russian holistic definitions of ‘*informatsionnaya voyna*’ diverge from Western definitions of strategic communications primarily in the description of the end goals pursued during these activities. Unlike their Western counterparts who strive ‘to shape their [target audience] behaviour in order to advance interests or policies’, Russian thinking on the subject often underlines that the end goals of ‘*informatsionnaya voyna*’ are to destabilise and coerce or negatively influence the informational environment of the adversary.<sup>40</sup> This divergence can be explained by Russian decision makers’ understanding of their country’s relative inferiority in conventional military and economic terms, which

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Konseptual’nyye vzglyady na deyatel’nost’ Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii v informatsionnom prostreanstve’, Russian Ministry of Defence, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> ‘The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation’, Russian Presidential Administration, 2016, (accessed 23 December 2021). Michael Weiss, ‘Aquarium Leaks: Inside the GRU’s Psychological Warfare Program’ (Washington, DC: Free Russia Foundation, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> ‘Konseptual’nyye vzglyady’, ‘Information Security Doctrine’.

<sup>38</sup> Igor Panarin, *Informatsionnaya Voyna I Kommunikatsii* (Moscow: Gorachiya Liniya – Telekom, 2015), p. 217.

<sup>39</sup> Natalya Kovaleva, ‘Russian Information Space, Russian Scholarship, and Kremlin Controls’, *Defence Strategic Communications* Volume 4 (2018):133-172.

<sup>40</sup> Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. xix; Panarin, *Informatsionnaya Voyna I Kommunikatsii*, p. 217.

encouraged them to use the asymmetrical qualities of the space of flows.<sup>41</sup> This point is particularly important in the analysis of Nord Stream 2, where the accentuation of divisions and discords plays a major role.

This research considers Nord Stream 2 within Western frameworks of strategic communications and Russian thinking on ‘informatsionnaya voyna’, through the study of the interactions between official Russian discourses and English language German media discourses. For that purpose, it uses a combination of the theoretical frameworks outlined above and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology. CDA, which is a comprehensive methodology for the study of the social development of language, analyses the formation of discourses as dialectical processes that interact with the social and political conditions in which utterances occur.<sup>42</sup> Hence, this methodology encourages the study of social polylogues as continuous and interdisciplinary processes during which certain terms gain meaning and narrative boundaries are formed. This approach, which accepts the chaotic and permanent state of flux in which language develops, is well matched with the theoretical frameworks of strategic communications. It concurs that information flows within a contested environment. CDA, similar to strategic communications, also does not accept a hierarchy between text and image. It calls to study both the text and the subtext—what is being said and what is being implied, what is shown and what is concealed—together and in relation to each other.<sup>43</sup>

Using CDA, the current research analysed two sets of textual and audio-visual materials. First, it surveyed President Vladimir Putin’s remarks, speeches, and articles on Nord Stream 2, which were published on the Kremlin’s website in 2019-2021.<sup>44</sup> The texts were retrieved using the website’s search engine, searching for the term ‘Nord Stream 2’. This produced six long texts and transcripts in which Putin and other actors

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41 For more on the asymmetrical uses of communication by weak actors and insurgents, see Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (London: Hurst, 2020).

42 Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 3.

43 Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

44 Due to the Coronavirus crisis, there has been a limited number of events with Putin’s participation in the past year. Hence, when surveying Putin’s statements, this research considered text from 2019-2021.

who are aligned with the Russian president (ministers or businesspersons) outlined their views on Nord Stream 2. Due to Putin's authoritarian and personality-centred regime, these statements could be used to chart the boundaries of the Kremlin's discourses on the project and the narratives that circulated on the Russian side. From these materials, the analysis identified four main Russian discourses used to promote Nord Stream 2.

Second, a media survey of English language content from two respectable German publications—the German state-backed news agency *Deutsche Welle* (*DW*) and the reputable German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*—was carried out. In both publications the survey focused on the highly charged period between the election of US President Joe Biden (November 2020) and the time when German and US leaders reached a deal that would allow the completion of the project (July 2021). In this period, media attention was focused on Nord Stream 2, which resulted in higher volumes of publications and more detailed analysis. As the Nord Stream 2 project engaged primarily political and business elites in Germany, Europe, and the US, the choice of the two publications was motivated by the audience reach of both publications (politically informed and engaged elites), as well as the author's need to access content translated from German into English. The survey produced 110 media clippings—93 from *DW* and 11 long magazine pieces from *Der Spiegel* (see Table 1). The news clippings were also analysed using CDA, focusing specifically on whether and how they interacted with official Russian discourses.

Source	Period surveyed	Number of analysed texts
Kremlin website	2019-20	6
<i>Deutsche Welle</i> ( <i>DW</i> )	November 2020-July 2021	93
<i>Der Spiegel</i>	November 2020-July 2021	11

Table 1: Primary Sources Surveyed for the Analysis

In analysing the interaction between Russian and German discourses particular attention was paid to how values, images, and symbols were being presented. And whether and how themes of division and schism, which are stated goals of Russian ‘informatsionnaya voyna’, dominate the interplay of these discourses. To examine whether themes of division and schism indeed dominated the German discourse on Nord Stream 2, German media texts were labelled and organised according to the main themes they discussed (see Chart 1, page 261).<sup>45</sup>

## FINDINGS 1: PUTIN’S DISCOURSES ON NORD STREAM 2

Discourse analysis of Putin’s statements from 2019–2021 found four main narratives on Nord Stream 2:

1. The economic logic of the project;
2. The pipeline as a European project;
3. The proliferation of self-interest and corruption among European business and political elites; and,
4. The viability of green politics in Germany and in Europe.

### Nord Stream 2 Economic Logic

The first narrative promoted by Putin is that Nord Stream 2 is a project governed by economic logic. For instance, in December 2019, at a meeting with members of the influential German Committee on East European Relations, Putin reiterated Russia’s stance that the rationale of the project was ‘purely commercial’, and emphasised that ‘the government does not actually take part’.<sup>46</sup> In a plenary session of Russian Energy Week the same year, Putin stated that ‘the task of projects [like Nord Stream 2] is to *diversify* gas supply routes, remove transit risks and thereby strengthen the energy security of Europe’.<sup>47</sup> This narrative suggests that Putin used

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45 When texts featured more than one theme, they were labelled according to the most prevalent theme that they discussed.

46 ‘*Vstrecha s predstavitelnyami delovykh krugov Germanii*’, Kremlin website, 6 December 2019, (accessed 13 December 2021).

47 ‘Forum “*Rossiyskaya energeticheskaya nedelya*”’, Kremlin website, 2 October 2019, (accessed 23 December 2021). Emphasis added.

the logic of geo-economics to depoliticise the pipeline and repackage it as financially beneficial for Germany and Europe. Yet, Putin's statements also present a manipulative use of terms that reveal a broader agenda.

First, Putin's claims about the project being steered by commercial actors is misleading. Gazprom, together with its subsidiary Nord Stream AG, is a government company, and thus closely controlled by Putin.<sup>48</sup> The second statement about the diversification of energy resources is also deceptive since it presents a Russian redefinition of the term, which is part of an attempt to redefine the term 'energy security'. As the American energy expert Daniel Yergin aptly observed, for Europe energy security means building resilience in its natural gas market through storage, diversification of resources (construction of LNG portals), and crackdown on anti-competitive behaviour, as well as emphasising the impact of climate change and shifting to renewables.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, Russia presents a competing definition of the term, which views securing the export of gas by simply bypassing Ukraine.<sup>50</sup> Considering Russia's aggressive geopolitical stance towards Ukraine, such redefinition of energy security suggests a political motivation. Putin habitually uses the blurring of terms and manipulation of political language as a technique to undermine his critics' abilities to oppose him.<sup>51</sup> The use of such linguistic techniques in the context of Nord Stream 2 indicates that Putin's main objective is not to convince the audience that the pipeline is an economically logical project, but to manipulate and confuse.

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48 Alexey Miller, Gazprom CEO was Putin's deputy at the External Economic Relations Committee at St. Petersburg Mayor's Office, who was reportedly engaged in early corruption schemes perpetrated by his boss in the 1990s. The CEO of Nord Stream AG is former Stasi officer Matthias Warnig, whom Putin allegedly met during his service in East Germany. Alexey Nevalny, 'Putin's palace. History of world's largest bribe', YouTube video, 19 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021); Chris Bowlby, 'Vladimir Putin's formative German years', BBC, 27 March 2015, (accessed 23 December 2021).

49 Yergin, *The New Map*, p. 85-6.

50 Yergin, *The New Map*, p. 84.

51 Vera Michlin-Shapir, *Fluid Russia—Between the National and the Global in the Post-Soviet Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).



## Nord Stream 2 as a European Project

The second narrative depicts Nord Stream 2 as a European project, carried out for the benefit of Europe and by European companies. This narrative has several sub-narratives that reinforce it. First, Putin described Nord Stream 2 as an answer to Europe's rising demand for energy amid decline in local production. As Putin put it: 'It is hard to imagine what would have happened if this route had not existed. Europe would simply be experiencing a shortage'.<sup>52</sup> By using the phrase 'it is hard to imagine' and quickly switching to a shortage scenario, Putin was trying to craft a narrative that depicted Nord Stream 2 as a new source of energy for Europe, making it a pro-European project. This, however, reveals a politically manipulative agenda. The pipeline does not connect to new gas supplies. In fact, Russia's secret services worked to undermine shale oil and gas explorations and to make sure that gas reserves in Europe decline, by covertly supporting environmentalist groups in Europe who successfully campaigned to ban the use of fracking technology.<sup>53</sup>

In the second sub-narrative about Nord Stream 2 as a European project, Putin used historical memory. Putin turned to the experience of Ostpolitik in the 1960-70s, which is remembered, overall, as a success in Germany. He stated, 'the United States, unfortunately, has always been against our energy cooperation with Europe. When back in the 1960s we were implementing the well-known project 'pipes for gas' together with Germany, the first energy routes from the Soviet Union to Germany... the United States tried to derail it'.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein Putin's op-ed for the German broadsheet *Die Zeit*, in which he discussed Nord Stream 2 among other issues, also mentioned the prospect of a unified Europe:

We hoped that ending the Cold War would be a common victory for Europe. It seemed that soon the dream of Charles de Gaulle about a single continent, not even

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52 'Forum "Rossiyskaya energeticheskaya nedelya"'.

53 Guy Chazan and Christian Oliver, 'Nato claims Moscow funding anti-fracking groups', *Financial Times*, 19 June 2014, (accessed 23 December 2021).

54 'Forum "Rossiyskaya energeticheskaya nedelya"'.

geographical “from the Atlantic to the Urals”, but cultural, civilizational—from Lisbon to Vladivostok, would become a reality.<sup>55</sup>

Putin’s texts use historical memory about Ostpolitik and the peaceful ending of the Cold War to draw a connection between Nord Stream 2 and Russia’s contemporary narrative of European sovereignty and independence from the US, which is part of the Russian meta-narrative of multipolarity. Since the annexation of Crimea, Russian narratives have depicted Europeans as ‘being led astray against their own best interests by malign American influence’.<sup>56</sup> Russian officials have repeatedly argued for a common European security architecture ‘from Vladivostok to Lisbon’, which would allow Europe ‘to secure its rightful place in a new international system’ through integration with Russia.<sup>57</sup> This is part of broader Russian geopolitical thinking on multipolarity, since this architecture would make Russia a de facto leader (in terms of geography, population, and military) of a unified European geopolitical power. The narrative of Nord Stream 2 as a European project reveals that the project is more than an economic enterprise for Russia. It is part of broader Russian thinking about improving its place in the world by increasing anti-US and anti-NATO sentiment in Europe.

The third sub-narrative on Nord stream 2 as a European project is intertwined with the next narrative on the proliferation of self-interest and corruption. In his statements, Putin often stressed that the project was not solely Russian, but a European project promoted by a consortium of European companies—Austrian OMV, German Wintershall and Uniper, French ENGIE, and Dutch-British Royal Shell. The participation of these companies in Nord Stream 2 was highlighted as a reassurance that the project was indeed ‘purely economic’, and as a signal that this was a European endeavour, making it more palatable to European audiences. In a meeting with French business representatives, Putin stated that, ‘with

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55 Vladimir Putin, ‘Being Open, Despite the Past’, Kremlin website (originally published in *Die Zeit*), 22 June 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

56 Stephen Hutchings and Joanna Szostek, ‘Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis’, e-ir website, 28 April 2015, (accessed 23 December 2021).

57 Sergei Lavrov, ‘Russia’s Priorities in Europe and the World’, *Horizons* (2015).

the participation of companies from your country... significant joint projects are being implemented... such as... laying Nord Stream'.<sup>58</sup> These were, nevertheless, again manipulative statements, as the companies that entered the Nord Stream consortium were strongly incentivised to do so by the Russian side.

### **The proliferation of self-interest and corruption**

The opaque circumstances of the formation of the Nord Stream consortium and the participation of former high-level European officials in Russian economic endeavours sent a very specific signal to European audiences. The Nord Stream 2 consortium was formed in September 2015, shortly after Russia annexed Crimea, and despite prospects of further sanctions against Russia.<sup>59</sup> Observers noted that European companies entered the consortium despite financial and reputational risks stemming from the project, since 'Gazprom pays the shareholders of the Nord Stream consortium the same amount regardless of gas flows'.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Gazprom 'enticed the other energy companies to participate [in the project] with asset swaps and promises of future co-operation'.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, concurrently to the signing of the consortium, major Western shareholders in Nord Stream 2 were reported to have signed a series of asset swaps with Gazprom that gave them access to Russian gas fields.<sup>62</sup> Russia may have offered generous terms to Western members of the consortium since their membership played an important signalling role. First, they provided a legitimate façade for the project and for Russia. Second, the business deal with Western partners ensured that no European or Euro-Atlantic unity could be achieved on Nord Stream 2. Last, the alignment between Western business interests and Russian state-backed actors sent a demoralising message to the European

58 'Vstrecha s predstavitel'yami delovykh krugov Frantsii', Kremlin website, 29 April 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

59 Conversation with Ben Schmidt, Atlantic Council, August 2021.

60 Noah Gordon, 'Nord Stream 2: More Hot Air Than Gas?', Centre for European Reform Insight, 12 January 2018, (accessed 23 December 2021).

61 Ibid.

62 Denis Pinchuk and Dmitry Zhdannikov, 'Russia's Gazprom eyes asset swap deals with Shell, OMV by year-end', *Reuters*, 20 June 2016, (accessed 23 December 2021); 'BASE: Gazprom swap assets, sign pipeline deal', *DW*, 4 September 2015.

populace. While there might have been nothing illegal or wrong in these business dealings, they were complex and opaque. They were coupled with a growing list of former European officials who joined Russian state companies, such as former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who serves as the chairman of the board of Nord Stream AG.<sup>63</sup> This creeping fraternisation between Western business and political actors and Russian state companies has a strong demonstrational effect: the Kremlin shows Western audiences that liberal-democracies and Russia's authoritarian corrupt political system are not so different after all.

### Green politics

The last Kremlin narrative around Nord Stream 2 focuses on ridiculing green politics. Environmental concerns about the impact of a project that can supply around 110bcm of natural gas to Europe in total, are at the basis of longstanding political reservations to Nord Stream 2 by such parties as the German Greens. This criticism was portrayed by the Russian side as childish, unprofessional, and naïve. Putin stated in an address that 'some political forces believe that electricity is simply produced in the plug'.<sup>64</sup> Ridiculing the debates about the impact of energy resources on the future of the planet, encourages further schism within Western society, where debates about climate change dominate the agenda.

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In this section CDA methodology and strategic communications theoretical frameworks assisted in identifying four narratives promoted by Putin, as well as their dialectic relationship with the political circumstances in which the discourses developed. The texts' analysis points to Russian design of Nord Stream 2 narratives that aimed to

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<sup>63</sup> In 2019-21, former Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern, Austria's ex-foreign minister Karin Kneissl, and Former French Prime Minister François Fillon joined Russian state companies. 'Former Austrian Chancellor Lands Russian Job', *Moscow Times*, 19 July 2019, (accessed 23 December 2021); Andrew Rettman, 'Austrian ex-minister joins list of EU's pro-Kremlin lobbyists', *enobserver*, 4 March 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021); Clothilde Goujard, 'Former French Prime Minister Fillon joins Russian oil company board', *Politico*, 3 July 3 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

<sup>64</sup> 'Vstrecha s predstavityami delovyykh krugov Frantsii'.

accentuate controversial issues in the West. These narratives were crafted to trigger responses in Germany, Europe, and the US, which would increase existing gaps and schisms within Western politics and between Western allies (Germans, Europeans, and Americans). This fits within the Russian thinking on ‘informatcionnaya voyna’. The next section analyses the interaction between these Russian narratives and dominant narratives in German media on Nord Stream 2.

## **FINDINGS 2: NORD STREAM 2 IN DW AND DER SPIEGEL**

Employing CDA to analyse the discourse of German English-language media, the current survey found five main narratives about Nord Stream 2 in German discourse:

1. Economics
2. Sovereignty and historical themes
3. Euro-Atlantic schism
4. Self-deprecation, mostly focused on corruption
5. Green politics

### **Economic logic**

Despite the attention given to the economic logic of the project in academic debate, this study did not find it to be the dominant narrative in media discourse in the surveyed period (see Chart 1). One explanation for the secondary role played by the economic logic of the project is that over the years, as the political motivations behind Nord Stream 2 became more evident, this narrative lost its appeal for the German public and economic arguments were rarely discussed in the media.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Conversation with Julian Jacob, Regional Director of the German Federal Democratic Party (FDP), Berlin, August 2021.

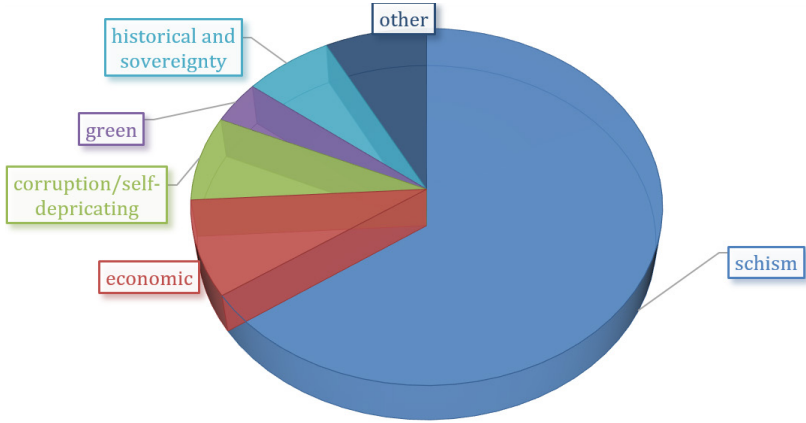


Chart 1: Distribution of Narrative Themes in *DW* and *Der Spiegel* Media Clippings on Nord Stream 2 (November 2020-July 2021)

Nevertheless, the survey revealed how, at critical moments, economic arguments served to trigger responses within German society that were intended to hinder possible unity in the face of Russian challenges. One such instance happened in August 2020 when the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) poisoned the Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny. In the aftermath of the poisoning, Navalny was transferred to a hospital in Berlin where a German investigation determined that his ailment was caused by a military grade nerve agent from the group of Novichok. These revelations, which were contested by Russian authorities, raised questions about the possibility of stopping the construction of Nord Stream 2. The debate that unfolded showed the disruptive power of the ‘economic logic’ argument in stimulating political divisions within German society. Amid revelations of Navalny’s poisoning, the Green Party leader Annalena Baerbock demanded to stop the pipeline that was ‘splitting Europe’.<sup>66</sup> After some hesitation, the German government returned to geo-economic claims that Nord Stream 2 was part of ‘business relationships and business projects that have existed for decades’, and that they should be decoupled from ‘serious human rights violations’.<sup>67</sup>

66 Guy Chazan, ‘Angela Merkel stands firm on Nord Stream 2 despite Navalny poisoning’, *Financial Times*, 23 September 2020, (accessed 23 December 2021).

67 Ankit Mukhopadhyay, ‘German minister: Don’t link Navalny with Nord Stream 2’, *DW*, 7 February 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

The Mayor of Lubmin (where the pipeline lands in Germany), Axel Vogt, warned that ‘it will give us a bad public image if we have an investment disaster of this magnitude’. He also sided with Russia stating that ‘the facts [of the poisoning] are not yet clear enough to place the blame on Russian government’.<sup>68</sup> This showed that the economic argument was primarily a useful tool to ensure that, in the face of Russian violations of international law, no German unity could be achieved.

### Sovereignty and Historical Themes

Media clippings on Navalny’s case featured another narrative that was promoted by Putin in relation to Nord Stream 2: German sovereignty and independence from the US. To explain Russian views on the crisis, *Der Spiegel* presented several Russian speakers who argued that ‘Berlin’s handling of Nord Stream 2 [after Navalny’s poisoning] will now be an indicator for Moscow of how much independence Germany allows itself’.<sup>69</sup> These comments by Russian political actors implied that if Germany responded to Navalny’s poisoning by stopping Nord Stream 2, it would indicate its submission to US pressure to stop the project, rather than opposition to Russian violations of international law. This does not mean that *Der Spiegel* was manipulated by Russian narratives. In fact, the newspaper’s editorial line is often very critical of Russian policies. Russian claims about Nord Stream 2 being a project that reinforces European independence from the US authentically interacted with German and European narratives about sovereignty, which gained traction during Donald Trump’s presidency and US sanctions against the pipeline. In the case of the narrative of sovereignty, it was US pressure that made ‘the pipeline a matter of national sovereignty’.<sup>70</sup> As *Der Spiegel* described it, resistance to US sanctions became ‘the most effective argument used by pipeline proponents in recent years’.<sup>71</sup>

68 ‘German small town of Lubmin caught in the crossfire of geopolitics’, *DIW*, 12 February 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

69 Christian Esch, ‘The Kremlin Will from Now on View Germany as Being Controlled By the US’, *Der Spiegel*, 7 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

70 Kirsten Westphal, ‘Nord Stream 2 – Germany’s Dilemma’, *SWP Comment* N° 32 (April 2021), (accessed 23 December 2021).

71 Mathieu von Rohr, ‘A Price Too High, Russian Pipeline Is Germany’s Greatest Foreign Policy Embarrassment’, *Der Spiegel*, 1 February 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

In German media, themes about German and European sovereignty were also intertwined with historical themes. For instance, member of the Bundestag, Michael Roth (SPD), argued in an op-ed for *Der Spiegel* for continued Nord Stream 2 construction despite Moscow's transgressions.<sup>72</sup> He acknowledged that the SPD's Ostpolitik experience from Soviet times was not applicable today due to Russia's 'increasingly expansive and confrontational...approach', and Moscow's ongoing attempts 'to drive a wedge between us'.<sup>73</sup> Yet, his conclusions were still set within historical frames, calling for 'a considered European policy on Russia... closely embedded within an ambitious European Ostpolitik'.<sup>74</sup> Roth's suggestion to use Germany's experience in dealing with the Soviet Union as a blueprint for a future European policy of engagement with Russia, implicitly excluded the US from this affair. Such a narrative, while it was authentic and not necessarily seen as pro-Russian, revealed an interaction between Russian and German narratives, which ultimately served Russian goals. Putin did not 'plant' questions of sovereignty or historical narratives in the German media. However, the Russian side framed US pressure to derail the project as a question of sovereignty and drew on historical memory of Ostpolitik. Russian discourse thus articulated arguments and amplified messages that would trigger emotional and intellectual responses, which it expected and welcomed. This spontaneous interaction between Russian and German narratives fed into the most adverse discursive consequence of instrumentalising the concept of sovereignty and historical references: the narrative of Euro-Atlantic schism.

### **Euro-Atlantic schism**

The most dominant narrative on Nord Stream 2 in this article's survey of German media discussed the European and trans-Atlantic schism caused by the project. Over half of the surveyed articles (68 out of 104) raise the idea of Euro-Atlantic schism in some way. This narrative

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<sup>72</sup> Michael Roth, 'European Unity and Determination Offer a Path Forward', *Der Spiegel*, 31 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



interacted with the various other narratives in German media (economic logic, sovereignty, and historical memory) in multiple ways, feeding into a growing sense of unease in Germany about the broader consequences of Nord Stream 2. The narrative became particularly poignant during the early months of Biden's presidency. Despite Biden's favourable disposition towards European allies, he branded Nord Stream 2 as a 'bad deal', triggering a rise in what otherwise could be labelled as a narrative of sovereignty. Yet, unlike the narrative of sovereignty, which implied independence from the US, the narrative on trans-Atlantic schism dealt directly with the strained relations between Germany, Europe, and the US. For instance, after Biden's victory *DW* interviewed Benjamin Schmidt, a former State Department official, on the possible extension of sanctions. During the interview, *DW* asked Schmidt whether 'it is not weird that one nation tells a block of other nations what to do?'<sup>75</sup> A few months later, as the Biden Administration continued its pressure on Germany, *DW* reported that 'both Germany and the European Union have criticized US penalties... Washington is using the... sanctions regime to interfere in their foreign and energy policies'.<sup>76</sup> This narrative framed Nord Stream 2 as an 'obstacle' in the way of a more rapid and smooth improvement in US-German relations in the aftermath of Biden's victory.<sup>77</sup>

For months German media continued to describe Nord Stream 2 as a source of constant discontent and friction with the US, pessimistically concluding in December 2020 that US-German relations will remain strained 'no matter who is in the White House'.<sup>78</sup> Both *DW* and *Der Spiegel* were abound with examples of disunity within the Euro-Atlantic community. German officials aired their frustrations about the situation. The German trans-Atlantic coordinator, Peter Beyer, for instance, stated

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<sup>75</sup> 'Will the US stance on Nord Stream 2 change under Biden?', *DW*, 20 November 2020, (accessed 23 December 2021).

<sup>76</sup> 'Nord Stream 2: US hits Russia ship with sanctions', *DW*, 18 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

<sup>77</sup> For examples of such descriptions, see Timothy Rooks, 'Who is US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen?', *DW*, 26 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021); William Noah Glucroft, 'Germany, US revive security cooperation', *DW*, 13 April 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

<sup>78</sup> 'Nord Stream 2: Work continues despite US sanctions', *DW*, 7 December 2020, (accessed 23 December 2021).

that ‘the discussion [on Nord Stream 2] is completely out of control’.<sup>79</sup> In a press conference with the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, his German counterpart Heiko Maas expressed similar irritation with the subject, stating that ‘we could probably save the whole planet, and it would still be about Nord Stream 2’.<sup>80</sup> These statements highlighted that, regardless of Secretary Blinken’s repeated meetings with German and NATO leaders and his flattering statements that ‘the United States has no better partner, no better friend in the world than Germany,’ the debate on Nord Stream 2 caused friction and division within the Euro-Atlantic alliance.<sup>81</sup> While this narrative was rarely expressed by Putin himself, the interaction between Russian and German narratives framed the discussion on Nord Stream 2 as a contentious issue between Germany, Europe, and the US.

### Self-deprecation and Corruption

A further adverse result of the narrative of Euro-Atlantic schism was that it produced a self-deprecating and self-demoralising narrative in German discourse. German critics of Nord Stream 2 described it in the media as ‘one big strategic miscalculation on Germany’s part’.<sup>82</sup> Nord Stream 2 was identified as the cause of distrust from East European countries and from the US towards Germany. A member of the European People’s Party (EPP), a block of European centre-right parties which includes Germany’s CDU, stated that Nord Stream 2 was a ‘mistake from the outset’ since it compromised Germany’s impartial stance as a possible mediator in the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>83</sup> *Der Spiegel* also pointed to Nord Stream 2 being one of several controversial issues that contributed to Biden having ‘little confidence in Europe’s willingness to take care of its own security’, and ‘doubts about Merkel’s resolution when it comes

79 Tessa Clara Walther, ‘Germany hopes Joe Biden will reset trans-Atlantic relations’, *DW*, 20 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

80 ‘US has ‘no better friend’ than Germany, says US top diplomat Antony Blinken’, *DW*, 23 June 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

81 ‘US has ‘no better friend’ than Germany’.

82 Walther, ‘Germany hopes Joe Biden will reset trans-Atlantic relations’.

83 Christoph Hasselbach, ‘US aims to mediate Russia-Ukraine conflict’, *DW*, 5 May 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

to standing up to Putin'.<sup>84</sup> In a damning editorial *Der Spiegel* concluded that the project was 'a price too high' to pay and 'Germany's greatest foreign policy embarrassment', calling for it to be scrapped.<sup>85</sup> It called Nord Stream 2 'Germany's most embarrassing foreign policy problem' and a 'self-inflicted wound', which undermined German goals of a more significant role in global politics.<sup>86</sup> This disapproving narrative, from a psychological-informational point of view, did more harm than good. It painted Germany as being driven by either 'economic selfishness or political naivety'.<sup>87</sup> While the latter description was humiliating, the former was demoralising as it also raised suspicions about possible corruption at the highest levels and erosion of Western institutions of governance.

The spectre of corruption has been looming large over Nord Stream pipelines ever since former Chancellor Schröder joined Nord Stream AG in 2005. The German media have been expressing suspicion. *DW* ran a piece in January 2021 about Schröder's role in the Nord Stream project, alongside references to Tony Blair's advising of the Azerbaijan government on the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), asking 'what is it with 1990s Social Democrats that attracts them to authoritarian leaders and their pipeline?'.<sup>88</sup> The allure of big Russian oil and gas money is evident from the piece. *DW* reported that in 2019 Schröder received a salary of \$600,000 and that since 2017 he has also acted as independent director of the board of Russia's biggest oil producer, Rosneft.<sup>89</sup> In that context, *DW* quoted Benjamin Schmidt's assessment of Schröder as 'one of Putin's most effective Trojan horses in Europe'.<sup>90</sup> Eyebrows were also raised in March 2021 when *DW* reported that German submarines were fitted with Russian technology during Schröder's term in office.<sup>91</sup> These

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84 Rene Pfister, 'Can Antony Blinken Help Restore America's Standing in the World?', *Der Spiegel*, 4 February 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

85 Von Rohr, 'A Price Too High'.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Jo Harper, '2 former European leaders and their post-Soviet power plays', *DW*, 12 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 'German submarines fitted with Russian technology: report', *DW*, 28 March 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

close contacts and high remunerations by Russia to a former Chancellor demonstrate the potential role of Russian money in German decision-making.

The possibility of Russian influence over decision-making in Germany was not limited to Schröder. *Der Spiegel* reported at length how politicians from Schröder's SPD backed the pipeline in their words and actions. Former Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, for instance, was described as having 'used everything in his power to push Nord Stream through', including exerting 'strong pressure on the European Commission not to stop the project'.<sup>92</sup> This was justified by the SPD leadership as commitment 'to Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik'.<sup>93</sup> Yet, other reports about SPD Governor of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (where the pipeline lands in Germany) Manuela Schwesig, were harder to explain. Schwesig sought to save the pipeline from US sanctions by establishing a foundation, the funds for which came primarily from Nord Stream AG.<sup>94</sup> *DW* commented that the proposed foundation's 'financing and organizational structure give critics...more reason to oppose a project they have long warned gives Russia dangerous influence'.<sup>95</sup> The insinuations of non-transparent financial incentives to German actors serve to prove Russia's point that there is no real difference between the Kremlin's authoritarian politics and liberal-democratic leaders. This has a demoralising effect on Western audiences. It serves a deep purpose in Russia's confrontation with the West in the information space—to undermine the morale of target audiences to a point where it does not make sense to resist Russian activities.

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92 Markus Becker et al., 'The High Political Costs of Russia's New Pipeline to Germany', *DW*, 14 July 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

93 Michael Roth, 'European Unity and Determination Offer a Path Forward', *Der Spiegel*, 31 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

94 William Noah Glucoft, 'Nord Stream 2: German foundation fights possible US sanctions', *DW*, 16 January 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

95 *Ibid.*

## Green politics

Finally, Russian narratives, that ridiculed green politics also interacted with German narratives. The most sinister way in which the narrative that derided green politics interacted with German discourse, were attacks on Greens candidate, Annalena Baerbock, in the 2021 German elections. When Baerbock was leading in the polls, concerns were raised by some speakers that her resistance to Nord Stream 2 ‘will set Germany up for fresh confrontation with the likes of Russian president Vladimir Putin’.<sup>96</sup> Intimidation towards Baerbock quickly followed. In May 2021 *DW* reported that pro-Russian groups targeted Baerbock online and she became ‘the target of sexualized hate and baseless claims’.<sup>97</sup> Intimidation of critics was not confined to green politics. A *DW* story from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania’s city of Lubmin described an atmosphere of intimidation where ‘only one person dares to criticise Russia’.<sup>98</sup> Targeting a Green party leader for her and anti-Nord Stream 2 views, or silencing Russia’s critics in Lubmin, are unpleasant reminders of the underlying atmosphere of fear that Russian state-backed actors create around issues that they wish to promote. These state-backed actors achieve their goals in the information space not only by incentives and manipulations, but also through bullying and intimidation.

This survey of German media demonstrates the non-direct ways in which influence works in the media space. In this complex and free-flowing space, Russian narratives, which were presented in the previous section, could have never been directly replicated by the German media, nor was this ever the Kremlin’s intention. Russian thinking on ‘informatsionnaya voyna’ envisions that psychological-informational influence should be achieved by triggering the ‘formation...of predictable opinions, views...and behavioural reactions’ in targets that serve Russia’s goals: demoralising Germans and Europeans and destabilising Euro-Atlantic relations. As the media survey found, in this respect, Nord Stream 2 was a very successful influence endeavour.

96 Nik Martin, ‘Germany: The Green Party’s economic plans’, *DW*, 21 April 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

97 Kate Brady, ‘Germany: Annalena Baerbock becomes prime target of sexist hate speech’, *DW*, 10 May 2021, (accessed 23 December 2021).

98 ‘German small town of Lubmin’.

## CONCLUSION

Dominant discourses shape our perception of reality, affect our language, and consequently impact our decisions. They connect our interpretations and our actions. Panarin, the Russian theoretician-ideologue of ‘*informatsionnaya voyna*’, described Western non-direct forms of influence on Russians in his book:

[N]ow in Moscow... car plates with the number 007 are very popular. They are considered “cool”. How did it happen...? The answer is rather simple – an information war is being waged against Russia and its elites. It is a war of values and worldviews.<sup>99</sup>

Panarin’s work is radical and at times bizarre, but his observations on the impact of Western ‘soft power’ on Russian society are hard to argue with. In his view, shared by many others in the Russian political elite, this is a result of a concentrated effort by the West to undermine Russia. This deep sense of alarm is a heritage of Cold War memories, when demonstrations and practices of Western lifestyle highlighted to Soviet elites that their own system was underperforming and not providing them with similar perks and comforts.

Analysis of Russian and German narratives on Nord Stream 2 and their interactions in media space may offer examples of how non-direct forms of influence and strategic communications work. The Russian and German narratives outlined in this study interacted freely in media space, as Russia did not and could not control the German narratives on Nord Stream 2. Nevertheless, the Russian side crafted narratives that explicitly and implicitly worked to induce schism within German society and between Germany and their European and American allies. Some themes, like the economic benefits of the pipeline, assertions about the historical memory of Ostpolitik, and Nord Stream 2 as a symbol of German and European independence from the US, were apparent both in Russian and German discourses. The Russian side did not inject these

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<sup>99</sup> Panarin, *Informatsionnaya Voyna I Kommunikatsii*, p. 215.

ideas into German discourse, but developed, encouraged, and amplified them. Other narratives within the German discourse were formed in light of the communications and symbolic activities around Nord Stream 2. This set in motion a corrosive dynamic that became evident in the narratives on Euro-Atlantic schism, the German self-deprecating narrative, and the narrative on corruption.

The wide array of topics raised in Russian and German discourses on Nord Stream 2 shows the advantages that the holistic theoretical framework of strategic communications offers in studying complex and multi-faceted geopolitical issues. Emphasis on analysis of energy markets and economic and regulatory issues narrowed the scope of academic debates on Nord Stream 2 and obscured the bigger issues at play. International relations scholarship on geo-economics, which came closest to examining Nord Stream 2 in the context of the divisions that it induced, was also limited by its focus on economics. Geo-economics treats the creation of schism as a tool to achieve ultimately financial goals (the construction of the pipeline and Russian domination of European gas market). Strategic communications, on the other hand, takes into the account the possibility of non-direct and demonstrational forms of influence, and situations where destabilisation and discord become in themselves an end goal. Russian 'informatsionnaya voyna' imagines exactly such outcomes as the ultimate goals of its informational-psychological operations and endeavours. Importantly, influence in such operations is achieved not necessarily through direct informational tools, such as propaganda or agitation. It is also not bound to manipulative informational instruments, such as disinformation. Russian thinking envisages that informational-psychological operations use 'a set of measures to influence the intellectual...and emotional sphere of the psyche and subconscious of...targets, aimed at the formation in them of predictable opinions and views...as well as behavioural reactions.'<sup>100</sup>

Such non-direct methods raise questions about the appropriateness of the term 'war' [voyna] to describe these activities, especially when

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<sup>100</sup> Weiss, 'Aquarium Leaks'.

Western analysts use the English language term ‘information war’ to describe confrontations with Russia in media space.<sup>101</sup> The current analysis reaffirms that describing such actions as a form of war is problematic. The free and often authentic flow of information and interaction between discourses can hardly be called a ‘war’. This renders the term strategic communications semantically more appropriate. It is also important to remember that the Russian term ‘informatsionnaya voyna’ describes neither an official doctrine nor a specific set of tools, but a wide-ranging mindset and theoretical outlook on geopolitics.

This research also highlights the dangers stemming from failure to use strategic communications in analysing geopolitical events. Emphasis on economic and legal-regulatory issues in the debate about Nord Stream 2 did not only obscure the multi-faceted nature of the project, but also hindered the ability of policy makers to devise appropriate solutions. The disregard for the possibility that schism might be one of Russia’s goals in the construction of Nord Stream 2 resulted in inappropriate policy choices, which only widened divides among Western actors.

## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS**

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<sup>101</sup> Vitaly Kazakov and Stephen Hutchings, ‘Challenging the “Information War” Paradigm: Russophones and Russophobes in Online Eurovision Communities’ in *Freedom of Expression in Russia’s New Mediasphere*, ed. by Mariëlle Wijermars and Katja Lehtisaari (Routledge, 2019), pp. 137-158; Joanna Szostek, ‘What Happens to Public Diplomacy During Information War? Critical Reflections on the Conceptual Framing of International Communication’, *International Journal of Communication* Volume 14 (2020).



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