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DEFENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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Defence Strategic Communications

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Foreword

Ch-ch-changes or simply Good Vibrations?

The Summer of Love was the high point of the 1960s. For some.

Not for young Americans called up to fight in Vietnam. Nor for the young and old they would meet in combat. Nor indeed for others, chilled by the Cold War, who felt the weight of Orwell's boot at their throats. But for those who enjoyed greater freedoms, it was a turning point. As that summer in 1967 welcomed the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, so too had colour officially arrived in the monochrome world of the post-war years.

Trying to explain such epiphany to subsequent generations is a thankless task. But rest assured, it redefined what a polished slither of vinyl could bring to a teenager's life. After all, the teenager—a consumer invention of the previous decade—had only just come to terms with the idea that popular music could mean more than to doo-wop or woo the love of the other sex. Now it could embrace political protest too. But *Sgt. Pepper* went way beyond that: it introduced a musical palette, a new colourama, in ways only the bromance of Lennon and McCartney could imagine. The first concept album? Progress?

There's one song on the album, not even its best—only eighty-sixth, in fact, of most plays of the Beatles on Spotify … at *only* sixty million. But it nevertheless captures a tension with its call-and-response that somehow flavours those contradictory times. 'Getting Better' features Paul McCartney singing 'Got to admit it's getting better, a little better all the time', to which the harmonic rejoinder reminds us, 'it can't get

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no worse'. As the story unfolds, the singer darkly confides, 'I used to be cruel to my woman, I beat her and kept her apart from the things that she loved …' But lest we become too concerned, there follows some reassurance: 'Man, I was mean but I'm changing my scene, And I'm doing the best that I can.'[1] A strange confession through today's eyes.

Admittedly, the pull-and-push of the lyrics with a biting beat would soon be overshadowed by the airy 'Here Comes the Sun' from the band's 1969 *Abbey Road* and whose Spotify plays for the song are nearing two billion. Yet the tension of 'Getting Better' recalls strangely the fragile optimism of that short decade, exemplified by the Camelot presidency of John F. Kennedy with its Rostowian development promise. You may recall the five steps of economic take-off from traditional pre-industrial community to the mass consumer society climax. Only to be met with a dampening call-and-response from path dependency theorists who were equally convinced that a society's future path was inevitably hostage to its past. No simple, economic *deus ex machina* for them.

Still, it makes you think. Progress, or the idea of progress, is something we take for granted. It's the mortar in the bricks-and-mortar construction through which we see our lives develop. Indeed the ambition that charts an expected path through the unseeable that leads us to a better life we seek for ourselves and our children. Progress binds market capitalism to liberal democracy, the foundation of the post-war consensus in the West. But lack of progress pulls these uneasy bedfellows apart.[2]

Progress, economic progress, has juddered to a near standstill for this current generation in the early twenty-first century. At least in the West we are told that young people today will be the first generation since 1945 whose standard of living will not be an improvement on what their parents or their parents' parents had come to expect—the ever improving curve of development and progress. Bill Gates once remarked that 'innovation is faster than ever before … yet Americans are more

1 Lyrics ©1967 Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

2 Martin Wolf, *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2024).

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pessimistic about the future'.[3] Sometimes *we have to confess that it's not getting better all the time.*

If progress, technological progress, is to be measured in the popularity of iPhones bought and laid end to end stretching from here to the moon, or by the AI revolution that is already eating itself (such is the speed of change), then there's forward motion. Of a kind. If it's to be measured in 'dual use', that disingenuous exploitation of technologies for consumer and military ends alike, or by the normalisation of political language as it creeps from the extremes of yesterday's margins to today's mainstream, then perhaps we need to rethink what progress means. And how the notion came about.

This is no arcane conversation. Rather it sits at the heart of strategic communications where its sponsors have always, in the field's brief lifetime, sought to achieve change, implying the idea of 'good change' among audiences targeted according to need and vulnerability. That term 'good change' was the answer the development practitioner Robert Chambers offered after much soul-searching when asked to define 'development' following a lifetime's fieldwork for Oxfam.[4] 'Good' had to mean something positive from the perspective of the recipient or target audience, he said, not the donor. Therein lurks a problem. Governments like to talk of a 'theory of change'. For strategic communications the term is a key concept because the field defines itself accordingly, 'to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour' (in NATO civilian thinking), or more broadly 'to understand and shape the information environment' (in NATO military thinking).[5] Jerry Lee Lewis might well have concluded a Whole Lotta Shapin' Goin' On. Subsequently, 'good change' has led governments to embrace psychological methods of behavioural change aimed at affecting what

3 Carl Benedikt Frey, *The Technology Trap* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 10.

4 R. Chambers, 'Editorial: Responsible Well-Being—A Personal Agenda for Development', *World Development* 25, Nº 11 (1997): 1743–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(97)10001-8.

5 Martha Stolze, in Neville Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications,* Terminology Working Group Report No. 3 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023), pp. 9–18.

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the state considers to be bad behaviour while preserving what it regards as implicitly good and under threat, for example, from foreign malign influence. Unmistakably, the actor here is the state as initiator and responder to the object of concern.

So whatever happened to progress? At what point did progress falter … or fail, as an idea? And what do we even mean by it? In short, progress is a broadly accepted idea but one which lacks deep interrogation. Take the modern city, particularly the metropolis. It has that ambiguous association with progress. But reflecting on the city, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith once observed: 'What is the physical face of modern industrial society? […] It is the mirror of social achievement and of misfortune too.' He went on, 'It is not that the city is good, but that the alternatives are always worse.'[6] Is progress to be measured against what no longer is, what went before being almost always thought of as bad, or is it what we should dream it to be, where it is inevitably bound to fall short?

A number of writers are currently engaging with the self-same questions. The geographer Simon Miller McDonald finds a poignant entry into the discussion when he calls progress humanity's worst idea: 'Who defines progress controls the direction of politics, economies and nations. Who controls the parameters of what progress means sets magnetic north for many people's moral, intellectual and political compasses.'[7] That makes it a loaded concept. Miller McDonald's way of seeing the dilemma is intriguing. He unfolds the map of America, reading it from left to right, from Pacific to Atlantic coasts. Then he reverses the reading, moving from right to left. Each offers a different account. Life before European colonisation he describes as one where numerous peoples, ruled over by complex administrative hierarchies, operated in diverse agrarian economic systems with sustainable rather than depletive or parasitic methods that had accompanied the settlers from the east.

6 J.K. Galbraith, *The Age of Uncertainty*, BBC TV, 1977.

7 Simon Miller McDonald, *Progress: A History of Humanity's Worst Idea* (London: William Collins, 2025), p. 30.

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> We see a picture of an agrarian paradise combining great material prosperity with relative ecological stability, achieving an abundance of wealth in which production was mostly innovated, maintained and governed by women. When Europeans arrived, they found societies with elaborate dress and decoration, impressive structures, ample leisure time and entertainment, and complex politics and culture.[8]

Far from Thomas Jefferson's framing of Native Nations as barbaric peoples while he gazed westwards across the unexplored continent, or the philosopher Thomas Hobbes's depiction of the lands they occupied as a brutal state of nature, European progress imported from the Enlightenment east, Miller McDonald argues, was in so many ways inferior to what it now encountered, economically parasitic and pursuing a scorched earth policy. To identify progress, then, should we read his map from left to right rather than the reverse? Whether it was quite so simple, whether pre-Euramerican societies were truly a paradise, is open to question.

The Enlightenment today is considered the beginning of the Age of Reason. In the vein of philosophers like Montesquieu and Kant, the radical Thomas Paine had proposed in 1791 following the French Revolution that 'There is a morning of reason rising upon man on the subject of government, that has not appeared before. As the barbarism of the present old government expires, the moral condition of nations with respect to each other will be changed.'[9] Such noble hopes for humanity would soon be dimmed under the ambitions of the French Jacobins and Napoleon Bonaparte.[10]

8 Ibid., p. 34

9 Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick/New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 30.

10 See Robert Darnton, *The Revolutionary Temper: Paris, 1748–1789* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2024), for the influence of Enlightenment thought on pre-revolutionary discourses.

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Colonisers' human rights abuses over centuries, and their destructive economic policies, have led Miller McDonald to reflect on a nascent United States and compare 'a perfect inversion of genuine progress towards human betterment' with indigenous 'systems that, in general, were better designed to maximise human well-being and nurture the long-term integrity of life than those of the Europeans who arrived later'.[11]

Paradise or no, the Enlightenment had set out to banish superstition, mystery, and blind faith from the human mind. Any distortion in human ambition might be blamed in part on a capitalist system that both grew out of scientific inquiry and technological invention, and accompanied it as it adapted and shaped the marine and territorial littorals into which it spread. If the Enlightenment didn't yet have the answers, regardless, nothing would stand in its relentless path to progress. Science and reasoning would win out. Voltaire and the philosophes in France, Goethe in Germany—at least until the advent of *Sturm und Drang*—and the free-thinking, free-publishing Netherlands, home to Huguenots and other refugees, were the characters in a drama that brought together 'a deliberate undertaking and […] the continuation of a shift in mentality', according to Ritchie Robertson.[12] He highlights the resentment that each successive century has brought to its critique of the Enlightenment:

> It is said to have instilled a narrow, calculating form of rationality that places ends above means in seeking to achieve its purposes, without reference to morality or compassion. This rationality is sometimes also said to commit the opposite error, that of placing means above ends in seeking efficiency at all costs, without examining the purpose which its efficient methods are supposed to serve.[13]

11 Miller McDonald, *Progress*, p. 39.

12 Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: the Pursuit of Happiness, 1680–1790* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 39.

13 Ibid., p. 769.

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Such sentiments will resonate with today's practitioners charged with demonstrating a 'theory of change' through 'measurements of effect', so often a ritual of self-justifying data capture to meet the demands of bureaucratic oversight.

The problem here is that progress is such a big idea, attenuated in its scope and slippery to the touch. In these tumultuous times we see a leap forward in biomedical research and medical treatment, the historic lifting of billions of people from poverty in the world's two biggest populations, and for most people on the planet the extension of better health and life expectancy. Look the other way, and we see a shortening of life in multiple theatres of war, a new industrial revolution driven by digital technologies producing the same inevitable lines of jobless that had followed each previous break with history. Not forgetting a failure on the part of the cool-headed to mitigate the planet's overheating and economic meltdown through market mania, or to ignore the lessons of the past faced with forewarned but invisible pandemics.

Another problem with progress is that it is tied in so closely to our understanding of liberalism. Which in itself is unclear. When the literary critic Lionel Trilling published *The Liberal Imagination* in 1950, it surprisingly proved a popular success, selling 70,000 copies in hardback, 100,000 in paperback. Liberalism, 'a large tendency rather than a complete body of doctrine', he further described as 'that loose body of middle class opinion that includes such ideas as progress, collectivism, and humanitarianism'. And it is this very looseness that makes it difficult but essential to explore. 'Ideology is not acquired by thought […] but by breathing the haunted air. [It] is a strange submerged life of habit and semi-habit in which to ideas we attach strong passions but no very clear awareness of the concrete reality of their consequences.'[14]

Strategic communications thinking in NATO StratCom doctrine,[15] and concurrently elaborated through its Terminology Working Group,[16]

14 Cited in Louis Menand, *The Free World* (London: 4th Estate, 2021), pp. 168–70).

15 NATO, AJP-10, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications*, 2023.

16 Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications*.

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roots this emerging field firmly in a responsibility to promote and protect fundamental freedoms of the individual in a liberal democratic offering. Respect for morals and laws, however, is currently taking a back seat to a rejuvenated realism expressed as national interest. The Progress project is seen by many, including some incumbent elites, to be regressive. Significant minorities inside systems of majoritarian rule, but supported by those stuck at the margins of societal exclusion, see a long-overdue transformation in the making. Their 'progressive' measures, counter to policies pursued by the reconstituted Left of politics that would also call itself 'progressive', fix on an ever growing problem—a spectre that haunts the West. Namely, unconstrained bureaucracy.

Perhaps bureaucracies can always appeal to the moral high ground, empowered to deliver the ideals and ambitions of their political masters. An ideology of universal humanitarianism, for example, comprises individual civil rights and global human rights. As it seeks to create what Antonio Gramsci called 'common sense', it enforces rights and conforms adherence to rules and norms in an international order. In the process it naturally spawns ever greater regulation and surveillance in societies by expanding its own remit. Bureaucracies become a self-sustaining, self-interested organism. The *sine qua non* for delivering 'good change', we are led to believe. Hierarchical bureaucracy binds the individual to the state through a variety of command-and-control measures. At the same time, those who would enforce rules, processes, and sanctions against transgression expand in both numbers and authority, thus pressuring society to become increasingly institutionalised in its behaviour.

Hierarchies and networks sit in eternal tension, as symbiotic as conjoined twins. The German sociologist Max Weber talked of 'ideal types' as a heuristic for seeing divergent tendencies. In reality each extreme could contain something of the other, but essentially hierarchies and networks pull against each other. Hence the hierarchical state seeks to enforce conformity to a central will in the face of decentralising dynamics that take a network form. Yet, in reality, organic network diffusion precedes hierarchical organisation. It is the default of nature. Incentives and

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punishments, however, reinforce the desire to control from the centre. The question, then, becomes whether creativity can emerge from a structure that is conservative and risk-averse by nature yet fuelled by its own moral rectitude. And a further question arises as to what degree creativity and innovation become synonymous with the way we have come to read progress. Thus, how can the new emerge, while somehow protected from the old, cold hand of restrictive intervention?[17]

Scholars from Frey to Fukuyama have followed the path of Weber in trying to answer these questions. China provides the template for the rise and fall of an independent, meritocratic bureaucracy loyal to the emperor, which evolved into a nepotistic and self-serving system more intent on using taxation to stabilise the state while for long periods cutting itself off from foreign trade that would otherwise encourage economic growth. Abandonment of a world-leading position in inventing and developing new technologies from making iron, clocks, paper, gunpowder, to irrigation systems, authors argue, went hand in hand with the failure to adapt its bureaucracy to the idea of progress, being satisfied instead with consolidation or outright regression. This is to oversimplify a rich civilisational history. China's is a complicated story recounted over centuries of territorial expansion and interminable warfare and warlordism,[18] where bureaucratic state administration dates back to the Western Zhou dynasty three thousand years ago. Nevertheless, there are many resonances with the contemporary West, intriguingly in the relationship between technological advances and the nature of state central control.

Europe today faces a similar dilemma. The conversation is current. Financiers and technologists regularly decry the fact that Europe trails China and the US in AI development: 'complexity holds back innovation and optimism alike'.[19] A recent report talked of fixing the

17 Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

18 Carl Benedikt Frey, *How Progress Ends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025); Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (London: Profile Books, 2011); Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

19 *State of European Tech 25* (Atomico, 2025), p. 23.

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friction—making it faster to build across borders at scale, and cement risk culture as foundational infrastructure.[20] Both of these claims jump out of the document. 'The pace of change is slow. The European Commission has promised to create a "28th regime" allowing startups to scale across the continent, but it's not yet confirmed if this will be a Regulation or a Directive.' At the same time, governments are rushing to embrace the new technology for its speed, cost-saving, and web-scraping data capture. And not to be left behind in the race for global dominance between China and the US. Bureaucratic over-regulation and processes nevertheless make this a complicated equation to resolve. The heavy hand of regulation from the centre in Brussels and the national interest and local lawmaking of EU member states make for awkward bedfellows if innovation and creativity require less, not more, control to thrive. The relationship of the individual to the state has become a politically if not ideologically charged debate in liberal democracy today.

Too slow or too fast? Progress or regress? Published at a moment when Nvidia was declared the world's first 5 trillion dollar company in October 2025, its CEO Jensen Huang announced his company's intention to build five new supercomputers for the US government.[21] Meanwhile, shares in Google's parent company Alphabet had doubled in value over seven months to 3.5 trillion dollars, prompting its chief Sundar Pichai to warn against a possible market collapse similar to the dotcom bubble that burst in the late 1990s. 'I think it's both rational and there are moments of irrationality through a moment like this,' he confided.[22] Jamie Dimon, who runs JPMorgan Chase bank, put it another way: 'AI is real. In total AI will pay off. Just like cars in total paid off, and TVs in total paid off, but most people involved in them didn't do well.'[23] That

20 Ibid.

21 Niket Nishant and Rashika Singh, 'Nvidia hits $5 trillion valuation as AI boom powers meteoric rise', *Reuters*, 29 October 2025, www.reuters.com/business/nvidia-poised-record-5-trillion-market-valuation-2025-10-29 [accessed 21 November 2025].

22 Faisal Islam and Rachel Clun, 'Google Boss Says Trillion-Dollar AI Investment Boom Has "Elements of Irrationality"', *BBC News*, 18 November 2025, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy7vrd8k4eo [accessed 21 November 2025].

23 Simon Jack and Michael Sheils McNamee, 'America's Top Banker Sounds Warning on US Stock Market Fall', *BBC News*, 9 October 2025, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg5ej03p604o [accessed 22 November 2025].

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translates as a lot of people, institutions, and investment funds alike are set to lose a lot of money on the way. And the social effects on the general population are yet to be seen.[24] Predictions of global market collapse abound. The historian Niall Ferguson recalls Charles Kindelberger's five-stage model: (1) *Displacement*—change creates new opportunities for some; (2) *Euphoria or overtrading*—rising expected profits bring rapid growth in share prices; (3) *Mania or bubble*—first-time investors are attracted to easy capital; (4) *Distress*—knowledgeable insiders take profits by selling overpriced shares; (5) *Revulsion or discredit*—outsiders panic and the bubble bursts.[25] Ferguson concludes we're now at stage 3.

Throughout, a charismatic tech entrepreneur Sam Altman has been promising a rosy future. His OpenAI is one of those financial conundrums. In a complex web of circular financing and shareholding that ties the firm into other technology sector leads including Microsoft, Google, Nvidia, Oracle, and CoreWeave, Altman's company has annualised income of 12 billion dollars but is losing money at the rate of 13 billion dollars per quarter. In this world, the Magnificent Seven of Big Tech (Nvidia, Microsoft, Apple, Alphabet, Amazon, Meta, Tesla) account for a third of America's S&P 500. Altman meanwhile promises to raise 10 trillion dollars at today's cost to create new computing capacity by 2033 that would also account for a third of US peak energy use.[26] Inside this vortex of the rational and irrational, Meta's Yann LeCun talks of 'world models' that emulate the way humans think. And some Chinese and Western researchers are now focusing on 'neuro-symbolic AI'. These are unlike large language models (LLMs) that some believe are reaching the limits of their potential. Markets instead might better look to the experience of China's DeepSeek or, as IBM proposes, 'By augmenting and combining the strengths of statistical AI, like machine learning, with the capabilities of humanlike symbolic knowledge and reasoning,

24 See also Erik Brynjolfsson, 'What Workers Really Want from AI', *Standford Report*, https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2025/07/what-workers-really-want-from-ai [accessed 22 November 2025].

25 Niall Ferguson, 'Does the World Really Want What Sam-Al-am Altman Is Selling?', *The Times*, 22 November 2025, pp. 38–39.

26 Ibid.

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we're aiming to create a revolution in AI, rather than an evolution.'[27] Much of what we have come to consider progress appears rooted in this technology sector and its precarious economics.

America's railways in the nineteenth century generated new fortunes. They drove the quest to reach the Pacific and to unify a burgeoning nation state by connecting east and west coasts. Steel, labour, land, and vast amounts of speculative capital fed the nationalist ambition that moved in step with dreams of wealth. Nothing stood in their way as deserts were traversed, rivers bridged, and mountains skirted or tunnelled. Telegraphic networks and new towns were born. Millions of European immigrants were transported to settle the continent. Crucially, fresh legislation would reverse earlier legislation to the advantage of the political and market project, appealing to what John P. Bowes characterises as 'the language of constitutional authority, civilization versus savagery, property rights, states' rights, tribal sovereignty, and government jurisdiction'.[28] Even treaties and laws that had once granted indigenous peoples their own legally designated lands were reversed in the Pacific Railroads Act of 1862 during President Abraham Lincoln's 37th Congress.[29] Railways were a game changer, synonymous with progress.

Is AI similarly a game changer, disguised as both national interest and self-interest? By early 2024, J.P. Morgan's researchers were identifying which sectors would be in the vanguard of integrating generative AI into their businesses. The bank's investor-clients predicted marketing (28 per cent), legal (21 per cent), media (20 per cent), data analytics (18 per cent), and consumer technology (13 per cent) would be first movers.[30] Today we see marketing and communications agencies that create strategic communications campaigns for governments rapidly embracing new technologies with the full encouragement of their

27 Gillian Tett, 'Behind the AI Bubble, Another Tech Revolution Could Be Brewing', *Financial Times*, 22–23 November 2025, p. 11.

28 John P. Bowes, 'American Indian Removal beyond the Removal Act', *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 1, Nº 1 (Spring 2014), p. 85. https://doi.org/10.5749/natiindistudj.1.1.0065.

29 Michelsen and Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century*, p. 67.

30 'Is Generative AI a Game Changer?', *J.P. Morgan*, 14 February 2024, www.jpmorgan.com/insights/global-research/artificial-intelligence/generative-ai [accessed 22 November 2025].

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clients, who see greater return on investment or 'value for money' in government bureaucratic language. That's faster turnaround of ideas, shaping of scripts and visuals, and foreshortening of trial and error in an approvals process. And government saves money and gains greater control. Win–win for all parties. Machines use LLMs to plunder the data banks of agencies whose past campaign experiences are now instantly accessible. At the same time, all parties save significant costs, otherwise described as labour or staff. And as in earlier industrial revolutions, machines replace human labour at enormous costs (suffering) but with equally enormous financial gains (rewards).

Progress is a rich idea. Complex and multifaceted. But the notion of 'good change', disingenuous in its simplicity, that sits at the heart of strategic communications, albeit implicit more than explicit, is increasingly being called to account. What change, whose change—in whose interest, and with what legitimacy? The field of strategic communications has yet to penetrate beyond surface-level definitions and 'do the hard yards' of critical interrogation, despite the best efforts of its terminologists. Particularly relevant at this moment is a need to find its position in the family of liberalism and democracy at a time of fracture between libertarians who seek freedom from the central state, liberal democrats with their regulatory and interventionist tastes, and illiberal democrats with more autocratic tendencies. Each seeks to define good change through its own lens. And the early twenty-first century feels like its moment of confrontation in a fight that has been bubbling under for some decades before.

Which brings us back to Lennon and McCartney, and how to change the natural lifespan of a musical chord. The two musicians had developed an enthusiasm for the aleatory, but for many discordant, work of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. And the composers' influence is noticeable in the radical glissandi of the forty-piece orchestra playing on 'A Day in the Life' that climaxes *Sgt. Pepper.* Following which the piece elides

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into a final forty-three second E-major piano chord.[31] Combining seven acoustic pianos with subtly different tones, one electric keyboard, and a harmonium, while using their sustain pedals. The conductor Howard Goodall explains how each instrument was separately recorded so that each track subsequently could be separately controlled and staggered to increase its volume.[32] Hence the chord is kept 'alive' for a period any conventional playing would be unable to produce. Normally that chord would be continually decaying. Instead, it appears to resonate forever. It questions the expected: both warm and inviting, but eerily discomforting.

Now that's progress, isn't it? Of a kind. But progress as the attainment of happiness through positive change aligned with the Enlightenment's scientific motion, ever forwards, ever upwards, remains an elusive concept. At best it's an improvement on what came before, which itself may not be so wonderful. *Got to admit it's getting better, a little better all the time … can't get no worse*. Can't it? For strategic communicators, the complex consideration of what progress and change represent beyond a platitudinous aspiration grows ever more urgent as the world around us appears to have moved up a couple of gears.

In this issue of *Defence Strategic Communications* Mitch Ilbury considers the role the Anglo American mining company played in the final years of apartheid South Africa and argues for a more central position for business corporations in how we theorise strategic communications. Shushan Grigoryan interviews teachers in contemporary Armenian schools to evaluate the degree to which the national curriculum, despite a reformist discourse, remains anchored in hierarchical, educational ideals, a legacy of the Soviet system. Milena Iakimova et al. summarise collective discourses of the Human and Social Studies Foundation, Sofia, focusing on the emergence then curious disappearance of a network of 4,000 'mushroom' websites in Bulgaria, all carrying the same propaganda content. Despite the apparent ubiquity of artificial intelligence, Louis Brooke reflects on

31 'BBC Sgt Peppers Musical Revolution with Howard Goodall', *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqzBPsD3u2s [accessed 22 November 2025].

32 Ibid.

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why the field of strategic communications has been so slow to adopt the new technology, and how to employ it to shape practice. And how AI is already reshaping the environment in which practice plays out. Chiyuki Aoi, Martin Innes et al. use open-source intelligence to capture malign online discourses aimed at Japan's information space, and offer some surprising concerns. Trish Lavery ventures into the controversial area of geoengineering interventions that include reflecting sunlight to address climate change; she reveals how scientific complexity in this emerging field is opening up a space for disinformation from malign actors. Vera Michlin-Shapir explores the origins of twenty-first-century populism while searching for the relationship between a rise in extremist politicisation among young males and the backdrop of economic downturn and democratic backsliding.

We appreciate the generosity of our authors and peer reviewers, who have given freely of their ideas and time.

Dr Neville Bolt
Editor-in-Chief
Autumn 2025

Beyond the State: A Corporate Shaping of South Africa's Political Imagination

Mitch Ilbury

Keywords—*scenarios, foresight, strategic communication, strategic communications, corporate, actor, South Africa, apartheid*

About the Author
Mitch Ilbury is the director of Mindofafox. He co-authored with Clem Sunter the bestselling book *Thinking the Future: New Perspectives from the Shoulders of Giants*, published by Penguin Random House.

Abstract
This article tests the limits of strategic communications by applying Neville Bolt's definition to a corporate-led intervention: Anglo American's High Road/Low Road scenarios in late apartheid South Africa. Through an interpretivist case study methodology that maps the campaign's narratives, performances, and audiences to Bolt's criteria, this article shows that a private actor, like a business, can, under specific conditions, conduct strategic communications in a security-salient environment. Far from diluting the concept, recognising such nonstate agency—anchored in liberal democratic values—sharpens the field's paradigm for a networked era.

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Introduction

This study considers how far Neville Bolt's conception of strategic communications can travel—whether its logic of meaning-making, influence, and legitimacy can also illuminate the communicative practices of a business. By testing this boundary, the article seeks to clarify the relationship between strategy, narrative, and power in contexts where corporate communication acquires political consequence.

At its centre lies Anglo American's *High Road/Low Road* scenario exercise, developed in the mid 1980s as apartheid South Africa entered its terminal crisis. Though conceived as a management foresight initiative, these scenarios—deeply researched stories imagining how the future might play out in different ways—evolved, as argued here, into a form of strategic communications that significantly contributed to the shaping and shifting of discourses from apartheid to a liberal democracy.

In the foreword to *Defence Strategic Communications 6* (Spring 2019), Neville Bolt conceives strategic communications as a practice that 'entails the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies. [It] addresses the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community.'[1]

This definition sets a demanding threshold for inclusion. It requires: (1) long-term, enduring impact; (2) the ability to shape or shift societal discourses—broad, entrenched systems of meaning; (3) engagement with foreign or security policy, a domain typically reserved for the state; and (4) alignment with the national interest or that of a wider political community.

In 2023, through the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group, Bolt and others have gone on

1 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (Spring 2019): 4–5.

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to refine strategic communications even further, founding its architecture on a specific set of values. This refinement advances a normative project, affirming: the right to choose between competing ideas; the need for transparency; and the right of the individual to free speech.[2] Bolt frames this as a liberal project redux, effectively aligning strategic communications with liberal democratic values, marking its genesis in the preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty.[3]

This only raises the bar for who can legitimately claim to do strategic communications, and would appear to exclude most non-state entities, confining strategic communications to the remit of governments or multilateral institutions. Yet this may underestimate the communicative agency of powerful corporate actors whose influence extends beyond markets into the moral and political life of societies.[4] This article argues that a business—under certain historical and communicative conditions—can clear Bolt's high bar.

Measured against this definition, the Anglo American Corporation (AAC) contributed to the 'long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses' about South Africa's political and economic future by framing the country's end of apartheid as a strategic and moral choice between regression—the *low road*—and negotiated reform, the *high road*.

Through sustained engagement—both direct and indirect—with key political figures and institutions across the pro- and anti-apartheid divide, the company influenced security and governance policies by altering the attitudes and behaviours of targeted audiences, from policymakers and

2 Jente Althuis, Neville Bolt, Leonie Haiden, and Martha Stolze, *Understanding Strategic Communications*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group Publication No. 3 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023), p. 22.

3 Neville Bolt, 'The Future Is More Than What Happens Next', *Critique & Humanism* 62, Nº 1 (2025): 63.

4 It is important to distinguish here between possible strategic communications professionals (SCPs)—'private sector communicators contracted on behalf of states to work on international affairs and security issues'—as described by Nicholas Michelsen and Thomas Colley, and businesses that ordinarily are not in this field, such as the 'mining company' Anglo American, possibly performing or projecting strategic communications. This article refers to the latter. See Nicholas Michelsen and Thomas Colley, 'The Field of Strategic Communications Professionals: A New Research Agenda for International Security', *European Journal of International Security* 4, Nº 1 (2019): 62. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2018.9.

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business leaders to elements within the military, police, and liberation movements. The strategic effect was to encourage a controlled, progressive transition that would preserve national stability and, in turn, protect the conditions for economic continuity. In this sense, the High Road/Low Road exercise exemplified the projection of communicative power through words, images, actions, and non-actions—its roadshows, public presentations, videos, and printed materials—operating in the national interest and in pursuit of a broader political community's future coherence, around a core of liberal democratic values.

The article therefore advances the claim that the High Road/Low Road case meets the criteria of Bolt's definition while challenging conventional assumptions about legitimacy and agency within the field. If strategic communications is the art of shaping social discourse, then corporate actors—possessing narrative resources, material power, and reputational stakes—can also act as communicative agents in the political sphere at the highest level of long-term discourse formation. This could complicate the analytical boundaries of the discipline by extending the possible scope of who or what can *do* strategic communications, not as peripheral participants but as principal architects of societal narratives.[5]

Empirically, the study contributes a corporate case to a literature dominated by state and military analyses. Theoretically, it tests the elasticity of Bolt's definition, examining whether a corporation operating under both market and moral pressure can be said to engage in strategic communications. Normatively, it explores the paradox that liberal democratic discourse may emerge from illiberal contexts—that narratives of reform and inclusion can be authored within systems founded on exclusion.

The argument unfolds in five parts. After this brief introduction and detailing of the research methodology, Section 2 situates the historical and political context of South Africa in the 1980s and AAC's evolving

5 The question—who does and does not practise strategic communications—has been discussed since the first wider circulation of the concept in the early 2000s: Althuis et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications*, p. 22.

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corporate identity. Section 3 analyses the High Road/Low Road scenarios as strategic storytelling, examining how narrative foresight functioned communicatively in a contested political space. Section 4 traces the genealogy of scenario planning—from RAND's rationalist foundations to Shell's corporate turn and AAC's adaptation of the method. Section 5 re-engages Bolt's theoretical framework, evaluating its explanatory power and limits when applied to this corporate case. The conclusion considers the broader implications for both business and the field of strategic communications, illustrating how narrative foresight can act as a vehicle of political agency by shaping the imagination of the future, and how corporate authorship unsettles accepted norms about who may legitimately shape public meaning and moral authority.

Research Approach and Methodology

The study integrates three interrelated methods: discourse analysis, case study inquiry, and conceptual mapping. The discourse-analytic component identifies the narrative architecture of the High Road/Low Road scenarios, examining its framing devices, metaphors, and moral vocabularies. Particular attention is given to how the scenarios encoded simplicity and agency: two recurring themes that emerged from the interview stage of data collection.

Following the logic of instrumental case study design, the High Road/Low Road narrative is not treated as unique for its own sake, but as a prism through which to observe how strategic communications might operate from beyond state institutions. This method allows the study to remain contextually grounded in the particularities of South Africa's late apartheid economy while generating theoretical insights applicable to broader questions of corporate influence and political discourse.[6]

6 Daphne Halkias, Michael Neubert, Paul W. Thurman, and Nicholas Harkiolakis, *The Multiple Case Study Design: Methodology and Application for Management Education*, ed. Michael Neubert, Nicholas Harkiolakis, Daphne Halkias, and Paul W. Thurman, vol. 1 (Oxford: Routledge, 2022), p. 17. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003244936.

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The conceptual mapping element systematically tests the empirical material against Bolt's definitional components of strategic communications, especially the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses. Through this mapping, the study assesses how far AAC's communicative conduct aligns with, extends, or problematises an implicitly state-oriented strategic communications framework.

By adopting a constructivist lens, the research seeks to understand how AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios functioned as communicative artefacts—vehicles through which ideas, values, and political imagination were projected into, and received by, the public sphere. By situating the research within the constructivist tradition, it treats language, narrative, and discourse as constitutive of political reality.[7] The purpose of this approach is not to establish causal generalisations, which would be near impossible to track, but to illuminate how narrative foresight operated as a form of strategic communications within a particular historical moment.

The empirical foundation of this study draws on both primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the context, content, and effects of the scenario exercise. Two semi-structured interviews—combining distinctive narrative, biographical, and critical incident formats—provided first-hand testimony from two key participants directly involved in or influenced by the process: Clem Sunter and Roelf Meyer. The interviews with these critical figures form the foundational pillars of the case study exploration.[8]

Clem Sunter was the principal protagonist in the design, coordination, and communication of AAC's scenario-planning division, from setting up the function in 1981 until his tenure as chairman and CEO of AAC's gold and uranium division (1990–96). He was the secretary to the executive committee when Gavin Relly—then CEO of AAC—asked Sunter to help the company shift away from failing predictive forecasts to looking at the underlying drivers of change through imagining multiple

7 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 393. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.391.

8 The unreferenced quotations of both Sunter and Meyer in the article relate to these interviews.

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scenarios. This internal function within AAC produced a report detailing possible scenarios for the world and South Africa in the 1990s, which was first communicated publicly in June 1986. As will become clear in the case study, Sunter then made hundreds of presentations to key political figures and to the broader public over the following years, as well as authoring multiple books on the experience. His insights have provided a first-hand account of what these scenarios were designed to achieve initially, how that aim evolved over time, how the scenarios were disseminated more widely, and the reception they received.

Roelf Meyer was the second source of primary data from semi-structured interviews. He served as a Member of Parliament in South Africa from 1979 to 1997, and represented the National Party in the negotiations with the African National Congress (ANC) that enabled the democratic transition. Meyer's perspective was of crucial value in better understanding the effects of the High Road/Low Road scenarios in the minds of key personnel in government. He was closely involved with key state apparatus at the time, serving as deputy minister for law and order when the scenarios were first published, and oversaw the management of the various security departments dealing with the state of emergency declared by then president P.W. Botha.

Meyer went on to serve as minister of defence (1991–92), minister of constitutional affairs and communication (1992–94), and minister of constitutional development and provincial affairs (1994–96), and therefore could offer valuable insight into the longer-term effects of the scenarios years after they were originally published.

Supplementary evidence was then drawn from corporate statements and speeches by AAC executives, historical and journalistic accounts of South Africa's economic and political transition, published biographies, and the wider literature on scenario planning, strategic foresight, and strategic communications. This provided a textured evidentiary base from which to analyse the form and function of the scenarios contextually, as well

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as assess their role at the intersection of corporate strategic planning and strategic communications.

Through the triangulation of discourse analysis, case study inquiry, and conceptual mapping, this methodological design aimed to achieve both empirical robustness and theoretical congruence with the evolving field of strategic communications. It demonstrates how a corporate foresight exercise can serve as a form of communicative power and how, when examined through Bolt's framework, such power broadens our understanding of what constitutes strategic communications, and who can legitimately perform it.

Readers may ask legitimate questions of why one might choose the case of a mining company operating in apartheid South Africa to test whether businesses can perform strategic communications. Instead, why not explore more obvious examples as contenders, such as modern-day 'big tech' companies or leading media corporations, both of which play in the information and communication spaces?

The choice of AAC's High Road/Low Road scenario exercise as the case study for this inquiry was selected for a variety of reasons. It offers a historically bounded and analytically transparent episode in which a private corporation operated in a security-salient environment, yet outside the formal apparatus of the state. The late apartheid context provides the necessary temporal and political closure to trace how communicative actions shaped long-term discourse—needed to meet Bolt's criterion of enduring influence in ways that contemporary, fast-moving digital examples might struggle or fail. AAC's position at the intersection of business, politics, and moral crisis enables the testing of strategic communications theory in a setting where national stability and corporate survival were inseparable, thereby making the case unusually revealing for examining non-state communicative agency.

Equally important, this historical distance affords a measure of analytical detachment more difficult in ongoing cases such as that of big tech or

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contemporary media conglomerates. The South African context also exposes a deeper paradox: a liberal democratic narrative emerging from within an illiberal system, forcing reflection on the moral and political conditions under which communicative legitimacy can arise. Studying AAC therefore extends the lineage of strategic communications beyond the digital present, illustrating that the corporate shaping of political meaning is not a recent phenomenon but part of a longer continuum of narrative power. This case study places today's hybrid, networked communicators in a historical frame that clarifies both the continuities and the transformations of the discipline.

In applying this interpretive framework, the analysis now turns to the historical and political context in which AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios were conceived. Understanding the communicative function of these narratives requires situating them within the material and ideological conditions of 1980s South Africa—a period defined by economic crisis, international isolation, and mounting pressure for political reform. It was in this volatile environment that AAC, long a cornerstone of South Africa's economic establishment, sought to reimagine its own role and the country's trajectory through the language of foresight.

Context: South Africa in the 1980s

The events and repressions of apartheid South Africa have been extensively documented.[9] This section highlights the salient features of the 1980s to establish the backdrop to Anglo American's High Road/Low Road scenario exercise. The decade was marked by deep turbulence—political, economic, and moral—that destabilised the order on which apartheid

9 For an overview, see: Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2002); Bill Freund, *Twentieth-Century South Africa: A Developmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). For a look at how the apartheid government presented itself internationally, see Ron Nathaniel Nixon, *Selling Apartheid: South Africa's Global Propaganda War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

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had long rested. It was, above all, a period in which the future itself became contested terrain.

By the early 1980s the apartheid government was facing significant internal unrest. Township uprisings, student mobilisations, and organised labour strikes, led in part by the newly established Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985, challenged state authority on a national scale.[10] In response, successive states of emergency were declared, beginning in July 1985 and expanded nationwide in 1986, granting the security forces extraordinary powers of detention and censorship.[11]

The South African Police, unable to contain spiralling violence, called on the South African Defence Force (SADF) for assistance, thereby militarising domestic governance.[12] This fusion of police and military power revealed the fragility of the regime's control and exposed divisions in the ruling elite over whether repression or reform offered the more viable path forward. Figures such as P.W. Botha (president, 1984–89) and later F.W. de Klerk (president, 1989–94) embodied this tension between security conservatism and the reluctant recognition that structural change had become inevitable.[13]

According to data from the South African Institute of Race Relations, the number of politically related deaths rose by more than 400 per cent between the mid 1980s and the end of the decade.[14] This sharp escalation in violence reflected the cumulative effects of successive states of emergency and the intensifying confrontations between security forces, liberation movements, and township communities. By the late 1980s, South Africa had entered what some observers described as a state

10 Seekings and Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality*, pp. 112–15.

11 Hermann Giliomee, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), pp. 288–90.

12 Jan-Ad Stemmet, 'Troops, Townships and Tribulations: Deployment of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in the Township Unrest of the 1980s', *Journal for Contemporary History* 31, Nº 2 (2006): 178–93 (p. 179).

13 Patti Waldmeir, Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 45.

14 Peter Berger, *A Future South Africa: Visions, Strategies, and Realities*, ed. Peter L Berger (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2019), p. 36.

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of low-intensity civil war[15]—an environment in which questions of legitimacy, governance, and national stability were being contested as much through force as through dialogue.

Externally, Pretoria's diplomatic and economic standing eroded rapidly. The global anti-apartheid movement gained traction, with sanctions, cultural boycotts, and corporate disinvestment campaigns striking at both the material and symbolic pillars of white South African power.[16] Under pressure from the US Congress, the International Monetary Fund refused to extend further loans to South Africa after 1983—a move that cut off the government's access to short-term financing and signalled mounting international condemnation.[17] Major multinational corporations began to withdraw their investments, and following the US Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, South Africa's international isolation was near total.[18] The bill embodied a moral-political stance in economic form, seeking to undermine apartheid and promote the establishment of a non-racial democracy through concrete measures such as banning imports of South African agricultural, iron, and steel products and terminating the US–South Africa tax treaty. In combining moral conviction with material pressure, it mirrored the internal dynamic of the period, as economic disruption, including widespread mining strikes, became a vehicle for demanding political liberalisation. This economic and moral quarantine eroded not only the regime's external legitimacy but also the confidence of its domestic supporters, who could no longer plausibly claim alignment with the liberal democratic order of the West.[19]

The country's economic decline mirrored its political unravelling. Dependence on primary commodities made South Africa acutely vulnerable to shifts in global markets. Gold, the cornerstone of its export

15 Stuart J. Kaufman, 'South Africa's Civil War, 1985–1995', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 24, Nº 4 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2017.1422012.

16 Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 165.

17 International Monetary Fund, 'History of Lending Commitments: South Africa', July 31, 2025, www.imf.org/external/np/fin/tad/extarr2.aspx?memberKey1=880&date1key=2025-07-31.

18 United States Congress, 'H.R.4868 - 99th Congress (1985–1986): Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986', 2 October 1986, www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/4868.

19 Terreblanche, *History of Inequality*, p. 364.

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economy, fell from highs around $700 per ounce in 1980 to near $300 by 1984. At the same time, its currency—the rand—weakened sharply, inflating the real value of foreign-denominated debt from $16.9 billion (approximately 20 per cent of GDP) in 1980 to $24.3 billion (46 per cent of GDP) by 1984.[20] By 1985 external debt had exceeded 50 per cent of GDP, well above the level economists typically regard as sustainable.[21]

For South Africa's business elite—particularly in AAC, the country's largest corporate conglomerate—this convergence of financial strain and moral crisis prompted deep introspection.[22] Profitability was no longer separable from questions of political legitimacy, and the prospect of long-term stability appeared increasingly dependent on a negotiated transformation of the social order.

Amid this turbulence, apartheid's ideological coherence disintegrated. Its justificatory discourse—grounded in the construction of 'separate development' and racial paternalism—lost credibility both internationally and in segments of the white population.[23] New and competing tropes emerged: revolution versus reform, nationalism versus reconciliation, security versus negotiation. The communicative architecture of the state—its ability to define meaning and project legitimacy—began to collapse.[24]

Against this backdrop, the 1980s may be read as a period in which legitimacy, identity, and meaning were in profound flux—a communicative battlespace in which competing actors sought to reframe the nation's moral and political trajectory. The apartheid state, liberation movements, the international community, and private business each attempted to

20 Xavier Carim, Audie Klotz, and Olivier Lebleu, 'The Political Economy of Financial Sanctions', in *How Sanctions Work: Lessons from South Africa*, ed. Neta C. Crawford and Audie Klotz (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 164.

21 Ibid.

22 M. Holman and P. Montagnon, 'Business Leaders Urge Pretoria to Open Political Talks', *Financial Times*, 30 August 1985.

23 Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 230–33.

24 James L. Gibson, 'The Legacy of Apartheid: Racial Differences in the Legitimacy of Democratic Institutions and Processes in the New South Africa', *Comparative Political Studies* 36, Nº 7 (2003): 772–800. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414003255104.

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construct narratives of credibility amid the uncertainty, of themselves and in relation to others.[25] In this environment, AAC's High Road/Low Road scenario exercise would function as a form of strategic communications: an attempt to influence the external operating environment through articulating a national story.

Anglo American Corporation and Its Position in Late Apartheid

By the late twentieth century, AAC had become the defining institution of South Africa's modern economy. Founded in 1917—with transatlantic financing that inspired its name—the company's transformation from a mining venture into a vast industrial and financial conglomerate mirrored the evolution of the state itself. Its influence was pervasive, shaping patterns of labour, capital, and infrastructure in ways that made its fortunes inseparable from those of the country. As South Africa entered the turbulent years of the 1980s, AAC stood not merely as a corporate actor but as a central fixture of the national landscape—an enterprise whose size, reach, and authority placed it at the very heart of South Africa's political economy.

It is difficult to overstate AAC's importance to the South African economy at the time of the High Road/Low Road scenario exercise. In 1986 AAC ranked only just behind the state in terms of total asset ownership in the country, and nearly double that of the third-largest asset owner, the Old Mutual Group.[26] AAC accounted for roughly 54 per cent of the value of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, with hundreds of subsidiaries within the group, spanning mining, manufacturing, construction, automotives, freight, and publishing—including ownership of the country's largest

25 See the discursive processes that underpin why an individual or group may be seen as a 'terrorist' versus a 'freedom fighter': Adam Hodges, 'Discursive Underpinnings of War and Terrorism', in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*, ed. Bernhard Forchtner (Routledge, 2018), p. 673.

26 David Pallister, Sarah Stewart and Ian Lepper, *South Africa Inc.: The Oppenheimer Empire* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 15.

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newspaper group.[27] Revenues from its core gold operations underwrote a substantial share of state taxation, foreign exchange, investor returns, and employment, furnishing the apartheid regime with a critical buffer against external pressure.[28]

This diversification strategy became increasingly important as AAC's mining base came under strain from escalating industrial unrest and sharp fluctuations in the gold price. During the late 1970s a series of oil shocks in the Middle East triggered widespread economic instability. The US and the UK experienced *stagflation*—a rare combination of stagnant growth, high unemployment, and rising inflation—which drove many investors to seek refuge in gold.[29] As a result, the gold price rose nearly sixfold between 1976 and 1980, before halving again by 1982.

The rise of organised labour, epitomised by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), reached a significant stress point in the 1987 strike—the largest in South African history at the time. Hundreds of thousands of workers demanded higher wages, but their protests also carried a clear anti-apartheid sentiment.[30] The blurred line between labour struggle and political resistance underscored how deeply industry and ideology had become intertwined.[31] Bobby Godsell—later a key architect of the High Road/Low Road scenarios—represented AAC in negotiations with Cyril Ramaphosa, president of the country today but then leading the NUM strike. It would foreshadow political negotiations

27 Duncan Innes, *Anglo American and the Rise of Modern South Africa* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1984).

28 Theresa Hammond, Christine Cooper, and Chris J. van Staden, 'Anglo American Corporation and the South African State', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 30, Nº 6 (2017): 1400.

29 Michael G. Martin, 'The Changing Gold Market, 1978–80: A View of the Volatile, Mostly Upward Movements in the Real Price of Gold', *Finance & Development* 17, Nº 4 (1980): 40–43, www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/022/0017/004/article-A011-en.xml.

30 Two years before, 800,000 workers stayed off work in protest at the use of troops in black townships. A. Cowell, 'The Struggle: Power and Politics in South Africa's Black Trade Unions', *New York Times*, 15 June 1986, www.nytimes.com/1986/06/15/magazine/the-struggle-power-and-politics-in-south-africa-s-black-trade-unions.html.

31 Kate Philip, *Markets on the Margins: Mineworkers, Job Creation and Enterprise Development* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), pp. 17–23.

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later as Ramaphosa functioned as the ANC's chief negotiator through the democratic transition.[32]

AAC and other major conglomerates secured an institutionalised role in national policymaking through the Carlton (1979) and Good Hope (1981) conferences, which formalised consultations between business and the state. In *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*, Sampie Terreblanche termed this the 'Anglo-Americanisation' of policy, describing how corporate influence became more overt.[33] As pressure mounted in the 1980s, the company faced a delicate balancing act: it sought to project a reformist image and anticipate the inevitability of change without blatantly confronting the state on which its prosperity still depended. To this end AAC invested in discursive platforms such as *Optima*—its in-house journal—to cultivate a liberal, quasi-academic audience and to frame reform as both pragmatic and patriotic.[34] It also aligned itself with voluntary initiatives like the Sullivan Principles, signalling a willingness to move incrementally towards racial equality in employment and social policy.[35]

This reformist impulse, however, provoked tension inside government circles. While some officials viewed AAC's liberal posturing with suspicion, the state's fiscal dependence on the company's revenues limited its ability to intervene. Roelf Meyer later recalled that relations between government and AAC were 'not always easy', particularly after Relly became CEO and steered the company in a more progressive direction.[36] Yet traces of this liberal orientation had been visible long before Relly's tenure. Corporate disclosures from 1917 to 1975 consistently articulated

32 His opposite number in those negotiations was Roelf Meyer (interviewed as part of this case study), and Ramaphosa would go on to be elected president of South Africa in 2018.

33 Terreblanche, *History of Inequality*, p. 74.

34 Hammond et al., 'Anglo American Corporation', p. 1416.

35 The Sullivan Principles were a voluntary code of corporate conduct for US companies operating in apartheid South Africa, promoting workplace desegregation, equal employment and pay, advancement and training for black employees, and broader social and legal reform towards racial equality. See: Zeb Larson, 'The Sullivan Principles: South Africa, Apartheid, and Globalization', *Diplomatic History* 44, Nº 3 (June 2020): 479–503. https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhaa002.

36 Relly opened up a dialogue with the banned ANC in 1985, while many of its key members were in exile in Zambia, keen to impress upon them that AAC would be indispensable to the future economic growth of the country. See Pallister et al., *South Africa Inc.,* p. 101.

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subtle commitments to fairness and inclusion, although scholars have since argued that these declarations functioned as somewhat hollow moral statements—expressions of a corporate diplomacy that still relied on, and simultaneously reinforced, the coercive authority of the state.[37]

To some extent AAC operated as a quasi-state actor—not formally part of the government, nor owned by it, but due to its immense size, power, and reach. Physically, it extracted the minerals that lay beneath the state's soil, transforming the geological foundations of the nation into the material basis and commanding heights of its industrial economy;[38] economically, it accounted for a significant amount of value of the national stock exchange and stood among the state's largest taxpayers; socially, it was the country's single largest employer; and politically, its founding and controlling leadership was historically rooted in governance—its founder Ernest Oppenheimer served as Member of Parliament for Kimberley (1924–38) and his son Harry followed suit between 1948 and 1957. This intricate web of interdependence made AAC both a beneficiary of apartheid's industrial order and, paradoxically, a potential agent of its reform.

By the 1980s the company's reach was so extensive that its fortunes were virtually indistinguishable from those of South Africa itself. To understand AAC during this period is therefore to understand the architecture of the apartheid economy: an economy sustained by exploitation yet increasingly confronted by the moral and political demands of transformation. It is from this unique and conflicted position that the High Road/Low Road scenario exercise emerged—a corporate attempt to imagine, and perhaps influence, South Africa's possible futures.

37 Hammond et al., 'Anglo American Corporation', p. 1416.

38 See: Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

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The Creation, Dissemination, and Influence of Anglo American's High Road/Low Road Scenarios

Although AAC had evolved into a vast conglomerate by the 1980s, with subsidiaries spanning multiple industries, mining remained the company's core identity and economic foundation. For any mining enterprise, understanding the value of the resources still embedded in the ground is paramount: commodity prices serve as the crucial measure for assessing potential returns on the enormous investments of capital, time, and labour required for extraction. Put simply, the expected price of a mineral determines whether it is worth mining at all. Anticipating whether the prices will rise, fall, or remain stable, therefore, becomes a matter of fundamental strategic importance. For a corporation of AAC's scale and influence in South Africa at the time, this forecasting was not merely a technical exercise but a key assumption in its strategic decision-making.

By the late 1970s, AAC's executives had lost faith in conventional forecasting models. 'The metal price forecasts', Clem Sunter recalled, 'were rotten … and got everything wrong.' In search of a more adaptive methodology for thinking about the future, the company turned to the work of Pierre Wack and the Royal Dutch Shell scenario team, whose anticipatory analyses had helped Shell navigate the oil shocks of the 1970s.[39] Before Wack's intervention, Royal Dutch Shell relied on its Unified Planning Machinery (UPM)—a global model that projected operations on the assumption of continuity, reasonable in an era when oil prices had remained steady between one and three dollars a barrel for sixty years. Influenced by the work of Herman Kahn and the RAND Corporation on a potential thermonuclear war, Wack introduced scenario planning, distinguishing between predetermined trends and critical uncertainties, and exploring how their interplay could reshape the future. Crucially, he involved managers directly in constructing the scenarios, arguing that the latter 'help managers structure uncertainty when they are based on a sound analysis of reality, and when they change the

39 Pierre Wack, 'Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids', *Harvard Business Review*, November 1985.

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decision makers' assumptions about how the world works and compel them to reorganize their mental model of reality'.[40] The exercise enabled Shell to reconfigure expectations across its upstream and downstream divisions—those responsible for exploration, production, refining, and transport—alerting them to the potential for extreme price volatility and a shift towards a lower-growth world.

Wack was invited to address the AAC board in Johannesburg, and, Sunter said, 'his maxim, "better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong"', struck a chord' with the leadership at the time, reflecting a philosophical shift away from technocratic prediction towards better understanding the drivers of change. Sunter, then secretary to the executive team, was tasked by CEO Relly to lead an adaptation of this new methodology. Sunter assembled cross-disciplinary teams in London and Johannesburg to map both *global* and *South African* trajectories. Within this process Michael O'Dowd (head of AAC's Chairman's Fund) and Bobby Godsell (group consultant in industrial relations and public affairs) were key in articulating what would become AAC's High Road and Low Road scenarios for South Africa—replacing technical terminology with vivid moral narrative.[41] This linguistic shift, as Sunter observed, was pivotal: it transformed a planning exercise into a national story. The binary choice between two paths gave every listener the role of protagonist—*'to go this way or that way'*—making the scenarios accessible to diverse audiences while cutting through political and economic complexity.

Before examining how the High Road/Low Road scenarios circulated and gained influence across South African society, it is first necessary to understand what they were and how they were constructed. Their initial purpose was diagnostic rather than persuasive: to explore plausible futures for South Africa in light of intensifying political unrest, international isolation, and economic volatility. Understanding the logic and structure

40 Pierre Wack, 'Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead', *Harvard Business Review*, September 1985.

41 Clem Sunter, interview by Maya Fisher-French, 'The Fox Who Helped Shape SA's Future: Clem Sunter's Legacy of Scenario Planning', *News24 Business*, 10 August 2022, www.news24.com/multimedia/podcasts/listen-the-fox-who-helped-shape-sas-future-clem-sunters-legacy-of-scenario-planning-20250810-0599.

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of the scenarios—the assumptions, narrative form, and intended audiences—is crucial, since the communicative power lay as much in the way the scenarios framed moral and strategic choices as in the way they were later shared.

The High Road/Low Road Scenarios

The High Road/Low Road scenario framework was built on two foundational elements. The first sought to define what Sunter called the 'rules of the game'—relative certainties he and the research team could count on as persistent factors that would endure (Table 1).

The second looked at 'key uncertainties'—unpredictable phenomena that could have a significant impact. These latter 'key uncertainties' would establish the need, and provide the framework, for the scenarios themselves, given their inherent unpredictability.

Rule of the game	**Description**	**Key uncertainty**	**Description**
Imbalance of military power	Imbalance of military power in favour of the people in power (vs opposition groups in the country)	*Strategies of power*	The strategies employed by those in power and those who are not
Equilibrium of violence	Despite imbalance of military power, equilibrium of violence will gradually rise through urban violence	*Economic strategies*	The evolution of the economic model employed in South Africa

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Industrialised society	South Africa is an industrialised economy	*World/ South Africa dynamic*	The integration (how and to what extent), or lack thereof, between South Africa and the rest of the world
South Africa cannot fully satisfy world agenda	South Africa cannot satisfy call by several major countries for a quick and virtually unconditional surrender by the people in power		
Statutory apartheid will go	Statutory apartheid—institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination—is being overtaken by demands of increasingly integrated and complex economy		

Table 1. Overview of rules of the game and key uncertainties

These building blocks of the 'rules of the game' and 'key uncertainties' produced what Sunter and AAC pitched as two divergent pathways: the High Road, representing negotiated reform and national renewal, and the Low Road, representing isolation, authoritarianism, and decline. Each path embodied both an economic logic and a moral worldview (Table 2). The scenarios collectively served as a mirror of South Africa's strategic dilemma in the 1980s: to reform through inclusion or to perish through repression.

High Road	**Low Road**
Minimal sanctions	Increasing sanctions
Small government	Controlled economy
Decentralised power	Centralised government
Joint negotiation and synergy	Eventual confrontation and conflict
'Winning nation'	'Fortress South Africa' inevitably leading to further decline and a 'waste land' scenario

Table 2. Overview of High Road and Low Road scenario characteristics

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The High Road envisaged a future in which South Africa moved through cooperation and dialogue towards a pluralist democracy and open economy. It anticipated minimal international sanctions, signalling confidence in reform, and proposed a smaller, decentralised government with authority distributed across regions and communities.[42] Progress depended on enabling a 'dual-logic' economy that valued both enterprise and equity, a 'servant government' accountable to citizens rather than being command-driven, and genuine transformation.[43] Success on this path would produce 'a result better than the separate parties could have achieved alone' and position South Africa as a cooperative, outward-looking, and economically competitive state.[44]

In contrast, the Low Road imagined a descent into isolation, economic contraction, and authoritarian drift. It projected escalating sanctions, a closed and protectionist economy, and the growth of a centralised state apparatus at precisely the moment when decentralisation was most needed.[45] The framing described a society moving from short-term co-option to inevitable confrontation, culminating in a cautionary endpoint the team termed 'Fortress South Africa'—a militarised, inward-looking state beset by declining growth and increasing instability.[46] Sustained over time, this trajectory risked producing a 'waste land', a metaphor for national self-destruction under the weight of repression, fear, and stagnation.

To transcend the paralysis of fear and division, the framework introduced a 'Common Vision' for all South Africans. It effectively represented the 'call to action' and is the only deliberately normative section. Even then, the wording and presentation is not confrontational, but rather places the reader in the position of decision-maker. In *The World and South Africa in the 1990s*, Sunter opened the account of this section with the following:

42 Clem Sunter, *The World and South Africa in the 1990s* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1987), pp. 104–5.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., pp. 105–6.

45 Ibid., pp. 106–7.

46 Ibid., p. 109.

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> You cannot persuade people to take the risk of the 'High Road' by just frightening them with the disastrous consequences of the 'Low Road'. We all talk of the fear of the unknown—never the hope of the unknown—and in the short term the 'Low Road' offers the known path (with comfortable co-option). To launch people into the unknown and make them display exceptional courage—for that is what the 'High Road' entails—requires a common vision. This is our attempt at constructing one.[47]

This vision included four interdependent commitments: to place the nation above sectional interest; to negotiate inclusively with all willing participants; to make South Africa a 'winning nation'; and to establish an income-per-head goal achievable only through cooperation.[48] The 'winning nation' concept fused political reform with global competitiveness, asserting that South Africa's survival depended on its ability to align with the 'rules of the game' of the world economy. Political pluralism and economic liberalisation were presented as two dimensions of the same transformational project.

The High Road, in this logic, was both an ethical and an economic imperative. It held out the possibility of growth rates comparable to the dynamic economies of the Pacific Rim—up to 10 per cent annually—anchored in decentralisation, entrepreneurship, and participation.[49] The Low Road, by contrast, might generate temporary momentum through import substitution, but would soon succumb to inefficiency, social unrest, and declining real income.

The contrast reinforced the moral polarity of the framework: cooperation was rational and progressive; isolation, self-defeating.

The scenarios concluded with a call to collective agency. The High Road was not conceived as a prediction but as an act of will—a future that

47 Ibid., p. 106.
48 Ibid., pp. 106–11.
49 Ibid., p. 109.

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could only be realised through deliberate moral and political choice. The analogy to the American Founding Fathers' deliberations two centuries earlier underscored this ethos: history, Sunter suggested, was shaped not by inevitability but by courage and imagination.[50] The High Road/Low Road framework thus simultaneously offered a moral allegory and a political instrument, providing symbolic language through which to understand the crisis and the possibility of its resolution (Figure 1).

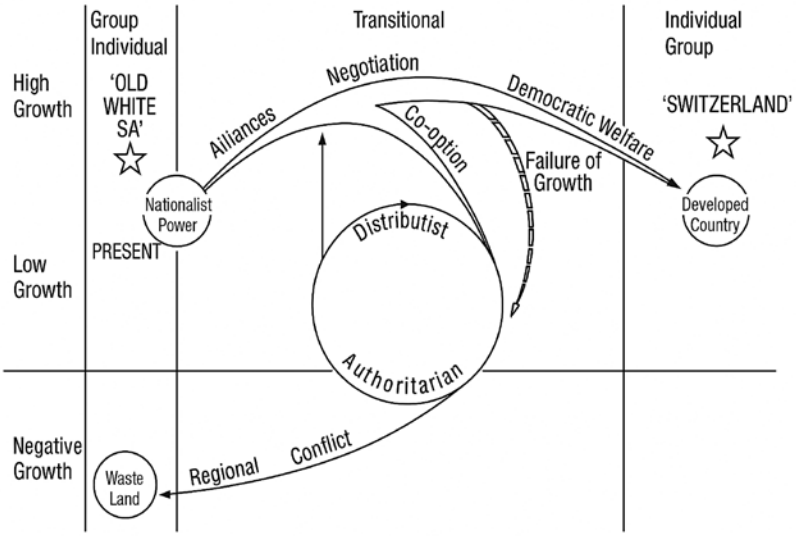

Figure 1. South Africa's possible political evolutionary paths. Source: C. Sunter, The World and South Africa in the 1990s (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1987), p. 101.

The Dissemination of the High Road/Low Road Scenarios

As noted, the scenarios began life as an internal exercise in strategic foresight; after creation, they were communicated internally following that same logic. Sunter was tasked with taking the scenarios across AAC's divisions and testing their resonance with various operating teams. Word of the exercise soon travelled beyond the firm. Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi—Zulu prince, founder of the Inkatha Freedom Party, and

50 Ibid., p. 111.

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chief minister of the KwaZulu homeland—invited Sunter to present at a Durban conference[51] he was hosting in June 1986. With Relly's consent, Sunter accepted.

The first external airing of the scenarios thus occurred not through a planned corporate campaign, but at the request of an influential political and community leader. 'The presentation went off like a bomb,' Sunter recalled; 'it was incredibly well received.' The next morning, more than twenty companies requested briefings. What followed was not a coordinated broadcast or push, but an organic pull across sectors—an emergent, bottom-up diffusion that reflected, in Sunter's words, 'a need in the air', most notably from businesses as they sought a pragmatic and perhaps less emotionally charged solution to the economic pressures to which they were subject. Therefore, the High Road/Low Road narrative did not so much launch, rather it was drawn into public circulation by constituencies seeking a shared language of possibility.

Four turning points punctuated this wider trajectory. First, in November 1986 Sunter briefed President P.W. Botha and his cabinet. At the close, Botha turned to cabinet member F.W. de Klerk and asked, 'Is this guy for real?' De Klerk reportedly replied: 'Yes—and he should go and talk to the police, the army, and the parliamentarians.'[52] The exchange is telling: the scenarios could function not merely as input to policy, but as internal storytelling in government, reframing entrenched institutional mindsets and legitimising new lines of reasoning about South Africa's future.

Roelf Meyer, then deputy minister of law and order, charged with coordinating the national state of emergency, corroborates this internal turn inside government and its apparatus. After hearing Sunter, senior figures from the security forces invited him to brief them. Meyer describes the effect as 'a powerful message' that 'helped tremendously to redirect the mindset of government'—not immediately, but cumulatively. What

51 Sometimes referred to as an indaba.

52 Sunter, interview by Fisher-French.

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made it effective, he suggests, was the combination of a 'very factual' diagnosis with a compelling narrative arc: the two-path framing appealed to 'one's senses', making plain that 'if we do the right things, look where we can go … out of this mess', whereas 'if we kept on doing the same thing, we would have stayed on the low road'. In short, the scenarios endowed officials with agency while gently steering them away from the 'total onslaught/total strategy' paradigm then dominant in the security establishment.[53]

Second, Sunter presented to the Afrikaner Broederbond, the influential secret society that had long underpinned the apartheid establishment.[54] 'I think they were open to hearing me because they didn't consider me a traitor—but I was an outsider,' he reflected. The messenger mattered as much as the message. As an English-speaking AAC executive, Sunter occupied a liminal position—credible enough to be heard, yet sufficiently detached to challenge orthodoxy.

Third, the scenarios' reach extended well beyond the white establishment. Tokyo Sexwale—a prominent anti-apartheid activist—later told Sunter that ANC leaders had watched a video recording of the presentation while in exile in Lusaka: 'They couldn't believe that a capitalist from Anglo American could give such a presentation of the different alternatives facing the country.'[55] The video, Sunter joked, 'had become so popular it had overtaken Michael Jackson's *Thriller* at the video shops'.[56] The publication of *The World and South Africa in the 1990s* amplified this effect, selling over 80,000 copies and widening access beyond Sunter's approximately 230 live presentations, which reached an estimated 25,000–30,000 people.[57]

53 Meyer describes this as the dominant government policy at the time: a sense of feeling a 'total onslaught' on white-minority rule from all directions, especially the threat of communism, and the need, therefore, for a proportionately comprehensive response—a 'total strategy'.

54 South African History Archive, 'Afrikaner Broederbond', *O'Malley Archives*, https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv02730/05lv03188/06lv03190.htm.

55 Sunter, interview by Fisher-French.

56 Ibid.

57 Clem Sunter, *The World and South Africa in the 1990s* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1987), p. 10.

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Fourth—and most symbolically—Sunter was asked to meet a prisoner who had read his work and viewed the presentation: Nelson Mandela, then at Drakenstein prison. Over lunch Mandela and Sunter discussed the scenarios, and Mandela highlighted Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic dictum 'I don't care whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice' as an apt encapsulation of the High Road ethos. That the scenarios reached Mandela in prison evidences their networked diffusion across ideological, institutional, and geographic boundaries, and their embrace by the figure who would most decisively shape the long-term discourse of reconciliation and democratic renewal.

Sunter has consistently maintained that the High Road/Low Road exercise did not 'trigger' the transition. Its contribution lay in providing a framework for conversation—a discursive scaffold through which politicians, business leaders, and citizens could imagine alternative futures. Meyer's testimony supports this: he characterises the scenarios as 'a persuasive tool, an influencing tool … of a general nature that steered the process in the right direction', and credits the scenarios as being one of the most important factors contributing to his own 'paradigm shift' and preparing the cognitive ground for change so that, when leadership shifted in 1989, decision-makers were 'already inclined to do the necessary'.

The diffusion of the High Road/Low Road scenarios was remarkable in both reach and resonance. The narrative circulated across South Africa's political and social spectrum—from the president and cabinet to the army, police, and security services, from business leaders to members of the ANC in exile, and to tens of thousands of citizens through Sunter's presentations, videos, and publications. Most notably, it reached Nelson Mandela himself while still imprisoned. Few communications initiatives at the time, corporate or otherwise, achieved such breadth: from the enforcers of apartheid to its opponents, all were, in some measure, engaged in a shared discourse about South Africa's possible futures.

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Storytelling Inherent in Scenario Building

If the preceding sections have examined what AAC's High Road/Low Road exercise was and how it circulated through South Africa's communicative landscape, the next considers what it achieved as a narrative act. Scenarios, by design, do more than forecast: they organise uncertainty into stories endowed with strategic, and sometimes moral, direction.[58] This mirrors what Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle argue is the function of narratives in politics and strategy—not merely representations but instruments of power: they define actors, order events, and render certain futures both intelligible and desirable.[59] Scenarios similarly invite audiences to inhabit imagined futures, to see themselves as participants in an unfolding story, and to align perception and behaviour around shared meaning. In this sense, scenario planning can be understood as a form of strategic storytelling, embodying an effort to impose narrative coherence amid systemic flux.

The following section explores this narrative dimension in greater depth, examining how the High Road/Low Road scenarios exemplified storytelling as strategy, and meaning-making as a mode of influence. To do this, it is important to first provide a brief genealogy of scenario planning, to clearly mark out how it was originally conceived, and its evolution leading up to, and through, the High Road/Low Road exercise.

Brief Genealogy of Scenarios: From RAND to Shell to Anglo American

The intellectual provenance behind the High Road/Low Road scenarios can be traced through three interrelated phases in the evolution of strategic foresight: the analytic rationalism of the RAND Corporation, the commercial turn at Royal Dutch Shell, and the moral-political

58 Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004), p. 30.

59 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 4.

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adaptation undertaken by Anglo American during the mid 1980s. Each represents an expansion in scope—from the technical, to the corporate, to the civic—and a parallel transformation in the communicative purpose of scenarios themselves.

At RAND in the 1950s, scenario methods were conceived as tools of Cold War strategy: structured thought experiments designed to anticipate adversary behaviour and optimise deterrence.[60] Herman Kahn's nuclear war scenarios, famously detailed in *On Thermonuclear War*, typified this technocratic imagination.[61] Yet even these models revealed an implicit narrative dimension. To envisage 'World War III' or a 'limited nuclear exchange' was to tell a story about power, morality, and survival that extended beyond data into the moral imagination.

By the early 1970s this approach was reinterpreted by Pierre Wack, head of scenario planning at Royal Dutch Shell. Wack reframed scenarios as 'an art of reperceiving': a means of challenging entrenched mental models rather than predicting discrete outcomes.[62] Shell's 'oil-shock' scenarios demonstrated that storytelling could serve as an instrument of strategic perception, aimed at cultivating readiness in the minds of decision-makers rather than presenting them with statistical accuracy.[63] This shift—from analysis to meaning-making—established scenario planning as a cognitive tool over a predictive model, wherein storytelling became integral to sense-making.[64]

60 Mie Augier, Nicholas Dew, Thorbjørn Knudsen, and Nils Stieglitz, 'Organizational Persistence in the Use of War Gaming and Scenario Planning', *Long Range Planning* 51, Nº 4 (2018): 512. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2017.12.005.

61 Herman Kahn and Evan Jones, *On Thermonuclear War*, Transaction edn (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 2007). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315125701. For an excellent background to the brilliant and colourful character that was Herman Kahn, see: Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, *The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674037564.

62 Wack, 'Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids'.

63 Kees van der Heijden, *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (Chichester: Wiley, 1996), p. 21.

64 Rafael Ramirez and Angela Wilkinson, *Strategic Reframing: The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 34–36.

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When AAC adopted the method in the 1980s under Clem Sunter, it introduced a third and distinctly moral-political dimension. Whereas RAND's scenarios had been designed for defence staff, and Shell's for executives, AAC's became—through Sunter—directed at an entire nation, with an adaptation that was inherently shaped on liberal democratic values. The binary of 'high' and 'low' simplified complexity into a didactic moral choice, and in so doing AAC transformed a managerial tool into a normative, communicative medium.

In this genealogy the boundaries between scenario planning and strategic communications start to dissolve. Through its evolution, the value inherent in scenario planning evolved from preparing organisations for uncertainty to shaping the discursive frameworks through which uncertainty itself is understood. The High Road/Low Road initiative made this explicit: foresight became a performative act of communication by constructing meaning, evoking emotion, and framing possible choices.

The Cognitive Bridge from Scenarios to Strategic Communications

Ten years after South Africa's first universal, non-racial elections in 1994, former president F.W. de Klerk gave a speech to an association of pharmaceutical wholesalers in the picturesque Hemel en Aarde valley in the Western Cape. He opened the speech with the following:

> I do not know how many of you remember the High Road/Low Road future scenarios that Clem Sunter presented in the mid 'eighties. If you attended them—as I did—you may recall that they were the result of months of deliberation by a very talented multi-disciplinary group—the best and the brightest that Anglo-American could assemble at that time. The scenarios were fascinating—but revealed the many difficulties that we encounter when we try to predict

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> the future […] few people foresaw the dramatic changes that would take place in South Africa itself.[65]

He went on to list the remarkable—though once unimaginable—achievements of the previous decade: former adversaries jointly drafted a liberal, non-racial constitution; the country peacefully conducted its first free and universal elections; and a government of national unity, led by the ANC, embraced free-market economic policies and restored South Africa's integration with the global community.

Though fifteen years earlier these remarkable achievements—which de Klerk went on to refer to as a miracle—would have seemed unlikely, if not incredible, the High Road/Low Road scenarios sketched the possibility. The scenarios did not detail exactly what would happen, nor confer a step-by-step plan on how to get there, but rather painted possible futures with broad strokes. Three key ingredients supported their success, not as a predictive tool, but as a communicative tool of persuasion and influence: the scenarios were *simple*, embraced *metaphor*, and created *choice*.

Clem Sunter recognised that a scenario's power derives from its imaginative clarity—the ability to make uncertainty intelligible and to stimulate reflection on agency. Pierre Wack, reflecting on other, less successful scenarios, once said that they shouldn't have 'too much detail—like a photo' and should instead resemble 'a Picasso painting, with just a few key lines'.[66] This preference for selective abstraction illustrates how simplicity functioned as a communicative strategy rather than a limitation: it reduced complexity to its essential structure, making the argument accessible without loss of depth.

Metaphor provided the structure's emotional and cognitive frame. Roads suggest motion, direction, and agency; they imply that the future is

65 F.W. de Klerk, 'Speech by F W de Klerk to the National Association of Pharmaceutical Wholesalers, Arabella', 4 October 2004, available at: https://fwdeklerk.org/south-africas-second-decade-from-democratic-transformation-to-economic-and-social-transformation.

66 Thomas J. Chermack, *Foundations of Scenario Planning: The Story of Pierre Wack* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 149. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315641232.

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not predetermined but traversed. To imagine South Africa at a fork in the road was to reaffirm the possibility of change through collective choice. The High Road evoked progress and inclusion, while the Low Road signalled decline and isolation. In Lakoff and Johnson's terms, such spatial metaphors 'define reality' by aligning moral reasoning with orientation.[67] The image's simplicity enabled diverse publics to situate themselves within a shared storyline of possibility.

Choice formed the scenarios' interpretive core. Their binary design mirrored a universal storytelling logic: two paths diverge, and the protagonist must decide. As John Yorke observes, every story turns on whether change will be embraced or resisted.[68] In this respect the scenarios cast society itself as the decision-maker, converting a political impasse into a collective act of imagination. Roelf Meyer later reflected that Sunter's approach was not to 'tell government to stop its nonsense and do it differently', but to invite reflection: if South Africa embarked on the proposed trajectory, 'then all of us can benefit'. His strength, Meyer noted, lay in 'influencing thinking rather than prescribing'.

Through this triad of simplicity, metaphor, and choice, the High Road/Low Road exercise exemplified the communicative precision of strategic storytelling. It provided a shared vocabulary for moral reasoning in a context of uncertainty, transforming a foresight technique into a participatory narrative of national decision-making.

Theoretical Challenge: Broadening or Diluting the Definition

This section maps Neville Bolt's definition of strategic communications against the empirical case of AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios. Its purpose is to test both the strength and the elasticity of Bolt's

67 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 157.

68 John Yorke, *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 101. See also: Will Storr, 'The Dramatic Question', in *Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better* (New York, NY: ABRAMS Books, 2020).

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framework—probing where it holds firm and where it strains when applied beyond its original, implicitly state-centric design. By examining the definition's key components—the long-term shaping of discourse, the pursuit of strategic effects through words, images, actions, and non-actions, and the alignment with the national or political community's interest—this section assesses not only whether the case satisfies those conditions but also what this encounter reveals about the assumptions of agency, legitimacy, and intentionality embedded in Bolt's conception.

The Definitional Challenge

Applying this definition to a corporate actor immediately invites scepticism. At least three interrelated criticisms arise. The first is the *public-relations* objection: that the High Road/Low Road exercise was simply a form of reputation management or corporate social responsibility, falling short of Bolt's *security-salient threshold* and therefore reducible to a matter of image rather than influence.

The second is the *component* objection, which holds that what AAC undertook was merely strategic management communicated rather than strategic communications in its own right. In this view—the so-called *component theory*—each element of the initiative, from the scenario planning to the roadshows and publications, should be read as a discrete management tool rather than as parts of a coherent communicative act.

The third is the *definitional* objection, which concedes that the exercise may constitute a form of strategic communications, but only if one applies a looser and broader definition than Bolt's. Each of these objections probes the boundary between *communication about strategy and communication as strategy*—a distinction central both to Bolt's theory and to the AAC case itself.

Two friction points thread through these objections—questions of intentionality and instrumentality—which will be addressed in turn.

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Friction Point One: Intentionality

The first major point of tension concerns intentionality: whether the communicative power of the High Road/Low Road scenarios depended on deliberate strategic intent in line with its effect. The exercise began as an internal management project. AAC's leadership sought a foresight tool to navigate economic volatility, not a national communications campaign. It was, in its inception, designed for corporate management reflection rather than public persuasion.

Nevertheless, it evolved into a widely disseminated narrative that influenced the thinking of political leaders, business elites, and the broader public. Should its impact therefore be judged by its original purpose, or by its eventual effect? Intended or accidental outcome? The scenarios' transformation from internal foresight to public narrative was driven less by corporate design than by societal demand—the 'pull' of audiences searching for orientation amid crises. Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's invitation to present the scenarios at the Durban conference, followed by extensive requests from businesses, the cabinet, state security divisions, trade unions, and civic organisations, turned an inward-looking strategic exercise into an outward-facing communicative phenomenon. In economic terms, its diffusion was demand-pulled rather than supply-pushed: an emergent communications process whose effects were indistinguishable from those of a deliberately orchestrated campaign.

This evolution, however, cannot be separated from the structural pressures bearing down on AAC during the mid 1980s. The company stood at the epicentre of a political economy in turmoil. By 1987 it faced the largest strike in South African history, which paralysed AAC's gold-mining operations, and exposed the company to a crisis that was simultaneously economic, social, and moral. What began as an industrial dispute over wages and safety became a proxy for the broader struggle against apartheid. The strike revealed how business could no longer stand outside the political and security dynamics of the time: its actions—whether conciliatory or punitive—had communicative

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consequences. AAC was no longer a passive observer of national unrest but a significant actor within it.

Roelf Meyer, who at the time represented Johannesburg West in Parliament, recalled in interview that business leaders 'were pushing … calling on government to affect the change that was necessary'. With sanctions tightening, capital flight accelerating, and domestic unrest mounting, the business community found itself under growing pressure to advocate for reform. For AAC in particular, the biggest business in the country at the time, economic survival had become bound to political transformation. The company's vested interest in a stable, reformed South African economy created both the incentive and the legitimacy for it to participate in the national conversation about the future.

These intertwined economic and moral pressures help explain why AAC's foresight exercise acquired a communicative dimension. The High Road/Low Road scenarios offered a language through which AAC could articulate, indirectly, the case for negotiated transition without directly confronting the state that still governed its licence to operate. As the boundaries between corporate risk management and political discourse blurred, scenario planning became a medium of cautious advocacy. While the company avoided explicit political statements, it tacitly endorsed dissemination once it became clear that the material resonated publicly. Clem Sunter later reflected that AAC 'never wavered in its moral and financial support' but gave him 'total discretion over the material'—a posture that amounted to endorsement without ownership. This arm's-length approach allowed the corporation to exert influence while maintaining plausible deniability in a highly polarised environment.

The question of intentionality therefore does not disqualify the case as strategic communications; rather, it illuminates the evolving nature of agency within it. AAC's influence emerged through a dynamic interplay between its own initiative and societal uptake. What began as a corporate foresight exercise became a communicative intervention because the conditions of crisis demanded it, thereby *legitimising* it.

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In this sense, AAC's experience anticipated what later scholarship terms the *network effect* in strategic communications: power that derives as much from social diffusion and collective resonance as from deliberate institutional design.[69]

Friction Point Two: Instrumentality

A second critique concerns instrumentality: whether AAC's motives were genuinely civic or primarily self-interested. On one level, the company's actions were unmistakably pragmatic. As Roelf Meyer recalled, AAC's strained relationship with the apartheid government, its vulnerability to the 1987 mineworkers' strike, and its exposure to international sanctions and capital flight created an imperative for reform. The logic was simple: stability was good business. Yet this pursuit of stability was inseparable from a moral claim, even if located in principally economic terms.[70]

If strategic communications is defined by its *effects* rather than professed motives, then self-interest does not automatically disqualify an actor's efforts. The complication arises from Bolt's final criterion: that such communications serve 'the national interest or the interest of a political community'. The critical question, therefore, is whether that alignment must be intentional, or whether communicative acts may serve the collective good as an *unintended consequence* of private rationality.

Insisting on pure motive would be analytically untenable. Most real-world instances of strategic communications operate in the grey zone where interests overlap. What matters strategically is not the origin of intent, but the *direction of effect*: whether an act of communication contributes to the stability and coherence, or some other important end, of the broader political community. Judged by that standard, AAC's High Road/Low Road initiative qualifies. Its scenarios helped legitimise the

69 Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

70 Rogers M. Smith, 'The Role of Ethically Constitutive Stories', in *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 79.

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idea of negotiated reform, through requests to hear the scenarios from across the spectrum of invested actors—government implementing apartheid, activists fighting apartheid, and businesses and the wider public operating within it. By tempering radical expectations among both business and political elites, the scenarios reinforced a more open, shared discursive space in which South Africa's democratic transition could later unfold.

Instrumentality, then, should not be read as a moral disqualification but as an analytical insight. It exposes how liberal and corporate rationalities can converge under historical pressure, producing communicative acts that are simultaneously self-preserving and nation-building. This synthesis—where self-interest assumes the language of moral responsibility—was central to AAC's communicative power. The company's narrative projected a vision in which business survival and national redemption became two sides of the same story. In this sense the High Road/Low Road exercise not only exemplified strategic communications, but also revealed its defining paradox: that persuasion in the public interest often depends on actors pursuing their own.

Taken together, these friction points suggest that extending Bolt's framework beyond the state does not dilute its analytical power but rather broadens its relevance, even if one might object that Bolt's criterion—rooting strategic communications in liberal democratic values—presupposes a fundamentally political domain, relevant chiefly to states engaged in contests of legitimacy rather than to private actors pursuing commercial aims. AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios demonstrate these principles in practice, albeit in a paradoxical setting. The company's interventions during apartheid were not moral gestures alone but strategic acts to preserve both the state and the market system on which its survival depended. By framing South Africa's future as a moral and strategic choice between regression and reform, AAC fused the normative and the pragmatic, presenting liberal democratic values as both ethically preferable and practically necessary. As Martin Wolf notes in *Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, neither capitalism nor democracy can

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survive without the other, since both depend on an underlying equality of status.[71] South Africa's illiberal democracy proved this, as sanctions from around the world forced it into pariah status, economically as well as politically; economically *because* of the political.

Using Bolt's model, the case illustrates how strategic communications' moral orientation towards persuasion, legitimacy, and the 'common good' can extend beyond the state when a private actor's communicative legitimacy is socially conferred rather than institutionally derived. In this sense AAC's exercise exemplified how strategic communications can emerge under systemic stress as a means of shaping discourse, aligning meaning, and influencing collective behaviour, irrespective of whether the actor is political or corporate.

Conclusion

This study set out to test whether a business can meaningfully perform strategic communications in a security-salient environment. Measured against Neville Bolt's conception of strategic communications—the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses—the case of AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios suggests that it can, though in a distinctive and historically specific sense.

Developed in the mid 1980s during South Africa's deepening political and economic crisis, the scenarios were never intended as a public communications initiative. They began as an internal foresight exercise to help AAC navigate economic volatility and political uncertainty. Yet as instability escalated—amid the 1987 mineworkers' strike, intensifying sanctions, and widespread unrest—the exercise acquired a broader purpose. It provided a language through which the nation's future could be discussed and contested. Under these pressures, an internal planning tool evolved into a communicative act with civic and political

71 Martin Wolf, *Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Penguin Random House, 2023).

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implications. The tool evolved from helping management understand external uncertainty to something that helped shape it—still serving the same strategic ends, but through influence, not just foresight.

The High Road/Low Road scenarios demonstrated the capacity of corporate storytelling to influence collective imagination. Its effectiveness lay in its simplicity, the strength of the central metaphor, and the participatory logic of choice it invited. By framing South Africa's predicament as two moral and strategic pathways—one towards reform and cooperation, the other towards isolation and decline—the scenarios offered a structure of meaning that was intelligible across ideological boundaries. This clarity enabled diverse audiences—within government, the liberation movement, business, and the wider public—to engage with a shared framework for imagining change.

Rather than challenging Bolt's definition itself, the case interrogates one reading of it as implicitly state-centric: as though only governments or security institutions possess the legitimacy, scope, and endurance to meet its criteria. Through the contextual exploration of two friction points—intentionality and instrumentality—the analysis has shown how a private business could nonetheless fulfil those same conditions. AAC and Clem Sunter's communicative legitimacy was not institutional but circumstantial, conferred by the extraordinary context in which they operated. In a moment when the state's authority was eroding, and the boundary between economic survival and political reform had collapsed, their narrative found credibility precisely because it addressed both domains simultaneously.

The High Road/Low Road exercise thus suggests that strategic communications can emanate from actors whose legitimacy is situational rather than constitutional. What matters is not formal mandate, but the ability to shape discourse, influence expectations, and stabilise meaning across a fragmented public sphere. AAC's initiative achieved this by aligning its self-interest with a wider narrative of reform, transforming a corporate

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foresight exercise into a communicative intervention that resonated across political divides.

AAC did not determine South Africa's democratic transition, but it helped to frame how that transition was imagined. By providing a shared vocabulary at a time when official narratives had disintegrated, the company became an intermediary of meaning, linking economic reasoning with moral responsibility. Its experience demonstrates that strategic communications can extend beyond the state—not as a substitute for political authority, but as a parallel process through which societies articulate coherence in times of systemic uncertainty.

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Solar Geoengineering: Protecting Democratic Deliberations in a Contested Information Environment

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Keywords—*climate interventions, stratospheric aerosol injection, solar radiation modification, hybrid threat, strategic communication, NATO, disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)*

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Abstract
Solar geoengineering interventions are designed to reflect sunlight and reduce the impacts of climate change. These are attracting increased

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research and policy attention while simultaneously being targets for disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories. The technical complexity, scientific uncertainties, and governance controversies of climate cooling technologies create ideal conditions for information manipulation, making them vulnerable to exploitation by malign actors. Influence operators have already demonstrated sophisticated capabilities in exploiting weather modification and climate change narratives for strategic advantage. This establishes a precedent that could see solar geoengineering disinformation used as a hybrid threat and an inevitable focus of future influence campaigns. This article analyses the implications of solar geoengineering disinformation, demonstrates how malign actors could exploit scientific and governance uncertainty for geopolitical advantage, and introduces a strategic communications framework to guide policymakers, researchers, and communications professionals on mechanisms to preserve space for rational deliberation on these technologies. The goal of the framework is not to promote or discourage solar geoengineering research or deployment but to protect the conditions necessary for informed democratic debate. The disinformation threat considered here does not arise from adversary opposition to (or support for) solar radiation modification per se, but rather from campaigns designed to prevent conditions necessary for evidence-informed debate and democratic choice. The capacity for evidence-based deliberation about climate cooling represents a crucial test of democratic resilience in contested information environments.

Introduction

This article examines a critical challenge for twenty-first-century democratic governance, namely, how societies can maintain evidence-based deliberation about planetary-scale technologies when adversaries can exploit information environments to prevent rational consideration of options. Solar geoengineering interventions are technologies designed to reflect sunlight to reduce global temperatures. They are attracting

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increased research and policy attention at the same time as being targets for disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories.[1] These technologies have distinct characteristics that make them vulnerable to disinformation. They involve a planetary-scale intervention that would need to be maintained for many decades, with global consequences, uncertain risks, and implications for international relations. Consider a glimpse of how a geoengineering future might unfold.

A glimpse into a plausible future

The transformation starts in markets, not ministries. A late summer cluster of extreme weather events: a heat dome over western North America, an Atlantic hurricane, Mediterranean wildfires, and widespread European floods. The destruction pushes aggregate losses far beyond that which existing models treated as plausible. Primary insurers struggle and when reinsurers signal distress, panic is triggered across the insurance sector. Credit ratings are cut. To meet regulatory capital requirements and reassure investors, insurers and reinsurers sell huge volumes of government and corporate bonds. This pushes bond prices down and borrowing costs up across the economy. Contagion ripples across the economy, threatening to disrupt modern life. Overnight, the opinion polls flip: a public that yesterday prioritised maintaining their standard of living now demands urgent, dramatic climate action. As governments scramble to update policy, a coalition of like-minded countries signals its intent to accelerate the development of a solar geoengineering capability, to rapidly reduce global temperatures. Opposed adversarial states leverage the opportunity to ignite disharmony, seeking both to disrupt the geoengineering consensus and gain general geopolitical advantage. They inflame existing 'chemtrail' conspiracy theories, to seed doubt about the motives of the 'elites' poised to develop solar geoengineering capacity. Public protests erupt, with societies divided between those that want rapid climate relief and those that see geoengineering development as a ploy by elites to gain global control.

1 J.L. Reynolds, *The Governance of Solar Geoengineering: Managing Climate Change in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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The story above is fictional but is provided to challenge conventional assumptions about how policy debates evolve. As government interest in solar geoengineering grows, one might have assumed that knowledge about these technologies will develop gradually, allowing ample time for deliberative processes, stakeholder consultation, and careful consideration of options. However, we live in the times of the 'polycrisis', where there is a tendency for disparate crises, such as those associated with climate change and the proliferation of disinformation, to interact simultaneously and cause impacts far exceeding what might be expected from each disruption individually.[2] Concurrent crises can cause a rapid cascade of events that compress decision-making timelines, raising the risk of knee-jerk policies. Such periods of disruption increase the probability that disinformation could be more influential than empirical evidence in influencing rapid policy decisions.

The possibility that the world might experience the type of concurrent dramatic climate events outlined above is unfortunately plausible.[3] Climate change is intensifying and will cause devastating suffering worldwide in the coming decades. Despite global efforts toward clean energy transformation, atmospheric CO_2 emissions continue at record levels.[4] The year 2024 marked the first time that annual average global temperatures had exceeded 1.5 °C above pre-industrial baselines.[5] If current pledges to reduce emissions are adhered to, warming will approach 3 °C by 2100,[6] generating catastrophic human suffering and profound disruptions to global environmental and economic stability.

2 Adam Tooze, interview, 'This Is Why "Polycrisis" Is a Useful Way of Looking at the World Right Now', *World Economic Forum*, 7 March 2023. www.weforum.org/stories/2023/03/polycrisis-adam-tooze-historian-explains.

3 K.L. Ebi, 'Understanding the risks of compound climate events and cascading risks', *Dialogues on Climate Change 2,* Nº 1 (2024): 33–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/29768659241304857.

4 IEA, *World Energy Investment 2024* (Paris: IEA, 2024). www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-investment-2024.

5 World Meteorological Organization, 'WMO Confirms 2024 as Warmest Year on Record at about 1.55°C above Pre-Industrial Level', *WMO*, 10 January 2025. https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level.

6 United Nations Environment Programme, Emissions *Gap Report 2024: No More Hot Air … Please! With a Massive Gap between Rhetoric and Reality, Countries Draft New Climate Commitments* (Nairobi, 2024). https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/46404.

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These uncomfortable realities are creating pressure for policymakers to consider previously unthinkable interventions such as solar geoengineering. Decisions on solar geoengineering use or non-use should involve input from diverse stakeholders as part of an informed, evidence-driven democratic deliberation that can weigh complex trade-offs and tensions without succumbing to either panic or paralysis. Enabling an evidence-based debate will require the protection of these deliberations from disinformation campaigns designed to sow discord, obscure agreed facts, and undermine policy action.

This article presents a framework for preserving conditions necessary for informed democratic debate on climate cooling technologies. It draws on strategic communications theory and what is known about documented adversarial information operations to suggest actionable steps to protect deliberative space. The next section provides a brief background about solar geoengineering as an emerging technology. This is followed by an analysis of the strategic objectives and established practices that are used by adversaries to create disinformation campaigns about climate change and weather modification, and then by an examination of how disinformation techniques from adversary playbooks can be used to anticipate the communication vulnerabilities of solar geoengineering. Finally, a strategic communications framework to protect deliberative space on climate cooling technologies is presented.

Solar Geoengineering and the Challenge of Democratic Deliberation

Solar geoengineering interventions such as stratospheric aerosol injection (SAI: see 'Understanding stratospheric aerosol injection' below) are attracting increased political attention.[7] SAI remains deeply controversial across scientific, political, and civil society communities.[8] SAI involves a

7 T. Parson, 'The Politics of Geoengineering Are Getting Stranger', *Legal Planet*, 30 April 2025. https://legal-planet.org/2025/04/30/the-politics-of-geoengineering-are-getting-stranger.

8 Ibid.

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planetary-scale intervention with global consequences, uncertain risks, and implications for international relations. Its deployment would need to be maintained consistently for decades or even a century to prevent the risks of sudden cessation (termination shock).[9] All nations would be affected by SAI deployment, but not necessarily equally, or even with the same direction of effect.[10] Regional climate responses might vary, and attributing any effects to SAI directly (as opposed to natural climate variation) would be challenging.[11]

Understanding stratospheric aerosol injection

Solar geoengineering, sometimes called solar radiation modification (SRM), refers to purposeful, large-scale actions to reduce incoming solar radiation as a way of decreasing global temperatures.[12] SAI is one method of SRM that involves adding minute particles to the stratosphere to reflect some portion of sunlight back to space. It is not a solution to climate change. It does not address the underlying causes of global warming, nor fix the problem of rising atmospheric CO_2 concentrations. It would, however, work quickly (within months) to reduce global temperatures.[13] This makes SAI unique among other climate policy levers because alternatives to SAI require decades to have a meaningful impact. For this reason, SAI may be the only policy lever that might lend itself to a climate crisis response.[14]

9 A. Parker and P.J. Irvine, 'The Risk of Termination Shock from Solar Geoengineering', *Earth's Future* 6, Nº 3 (2018): 456–67. https://doi.org/10.1002/2017EF000735.

10 D.G. MacMartin, P.J. Irvine, B. Kravitz and J.B. Horton, 'Technical Characteristics of a Solar Geoengineering Deployment and Implications for Governance', *Climate Policy* 19, Nº 10 (2019): 1325–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2019.1668347.

11 E.M. Bednarz, A.H. Butler, D. Visioni, Y. Zhang, B. Kravitz and D.G. MacMartin, 'Injection Strategy—A Driver of Atmospheric Circulation and Ozone Response to Stratospheric Aerosol Geoengineering', *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* 23, Nº 21 (2023): 13665–84. https://doi.org/10.5194/acp-23-13665-2023; MacMartin et al., 'Technical Characteristics of a Solar Geoengineering Deployment'.

12 Royal Society, *Solar Radiation Modification*, Policy Briefing (Royal Society, 2025). https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/solar-radiation-modification/solar-radiation-modification-policy-briefing.pdf.

13 Wake Smith, 'The Cost of Stratospheric Aerosol Injection through 2100', *Environmental Research Letters* 15, Nº 11 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aba7e7.

14 White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, *Congressionally Mandated Research Plan and an Initial Research Governance Framework Related to Solar Radiation Modification*, 30 June 2023. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/ostp/news-updates/2023/06/30/congressionally-mandated-report-on-solar-radiation-modification [accessed 12 October 2025].

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> SAI cannot be implemented in a way that its effects are felt only at a regional or local scale; it is a global process that would impact everyone on earth.[15] Research funding for solar geoengineering has increased in recent years. Annual funding exceeded US $30 million in 2023 and 2024, with a further $164.7 million already committed for 2025–2029 research. Commercial investment is increasing.[16] Alongside this funding growth is an increase in political and public attention. Since 2023, scientific assessments or governance or ethics reviews have been completed by UNEP,[17] the US White House,[18] the EU Commission,[19] UNESCO.[20] and the Royal Society.[21] There is growing recognition that SAI requires international governance. Despite this, deep divisions remain over whether to pursue scientific assessment, research, or non-use agreements, a disharmony that can easily be exploited by those looking to sow discord.

The combination of SAI's potential effectiveness, rapid deployment capability, and significant knowledge limitations[22] creates profound communication challenges that adversaries can readily exploit through disinformation campaigns. These efforts can target scientific uncertainty, governance gaps, and public anxieties about technological overreach. Policymaker and citizen debate on solar geoengineering will occur in an information environment already characterised by declining trust in

15 IPCC, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Working Group I Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), ch. 4. www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_FullReport.pdf.

16 SRM360, 'SRM Funding Overview', 14 May 2025. https://srm360.org/article/srm-funding-overview [accessed 12 October 2025].

17 United Nations Environment Programme, *One Atmosphere: An Independent Expert Review on Solar Radiation Modification Research and Deployment*, 28 February 2023. https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/41903.

18 White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, *Congressionally Mandated Research Plan.*

19 Scientific Advice Mechanism to the European Commission, *Solar Radiation Modification: Evidence Review Report* (Brussels: European Commission, and 2024). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14283096.

20 World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology, *Report of the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) on the Ethics of Climate Engineering* (Paris: UNESCO, 28 November 2023). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386677.

21 Royal Society, *Solar Radiation Modification*.

22 J.M. Haywood, O. Boucher, C. Lennard, T. Storelvmo, S. Tilmes, and D. Visioni, 'World Climate Research Program Lighthouse Activity: An Assessment of Major Research Gaps in Solar Radiation Modification Research', *Frontiers in Climate* 7 (2025). http://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2025.1507479.

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expertise,[23] political polarisation and a lack of confidence in democracy,[24] and sophisticated and widespread manipulation techniques.[25]

Most policymakers, stakeholders, and citizens have little knowledge of solar geoengineering.[26] However, recent research shows that 20 per cent of Americans believe that geoengineering is already happening[27] and conspiratorial content comprised approximately 60 per cent of geoengineering social media discourse by 2016,[28] suggesting those who are familiar with geoengineering may have developed that familiarity through conspiracy theorists, rather than via engagement with scientific discourse (Figure 1).[29]

23 G. Gauchat, 'Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010', *American Sociological Review* 77, Nº 2 (2012): 167–87, https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412438225; Martin Thunert, 'Waning Trust in (Scientific) Experts and Expertise?', in: *Authority and Trust in US Culture and Society: Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. Günter Leypoldt and Manfred Berg (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021). www.transcript-open.de/isbn/5189.

24 Gabriel R. Sanchez and Keesha Middlemass, 'Misinformation Is Eroding the Public's Confidence in Democracy', *Brookings Institution*, 26 July 2022, www.brookings.edu/articles/misinformation-is-eroding-the-publics-confidence-in-democracy; Alistair Cole, Ian Stafford, and Dominic Heinz, 'Democratic Decline? Civil Society and Trust in Government', in *Civil Society in an Age of Uncertainty, ed. Paul Chaney and Ian Rees Jones* (Policy Press, 2022), pp. 133–62, www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/civil-society-in-an-age-of-uncertainty/democratic-decline-civil-society-and-trust-in-government/90E61CD3F299E0FBED29C00269949B7D.

25 B. Kennedy, A. Tyson, and C. Funk, *Americans' Trust in Scientists, Positive Views of Science Continue to Decline*, Pew Research Center, 14 November 2023, www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/11/14/americans-trust-in-scientists-positive-views-of-science-continue-to-decline; S. Lecheler and J.L. Egelhofer, 'Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News: Understanding the Supply Side', in *Knowledge Resistance in High-Choice Information Environments*, ed. Jesper Strömbäck, Åsa Wikforss, Kathrin Glüer, Torun Lindholm, and Henrik Oscarsson (Routledge, 2022), pp. 69–87.

26 K.T. Raimi, 'Public Perceptions of Geoengineering', *Current Opinion in Psychology* 42 (2021): 66–70. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.03.012.

27 H.J. Buck, P. Shah, J.Z. Yang, et al., 'Public Concerns about Solar Geoengineering Research in the United States'. Communications Earth & Environment 6 (2025): Nº 609. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-025-02595-5.

28 D. Tingley and G. Wagner, 'Solar Geoengineering and the Chemtrails Conspiracy on Social Media', *Palgrave Communications* 3 (2017): Nº 12. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0014-3.

29 R. Debnath, R. Bardhan, S. Darby, K. Mohaddes, A. Coelho, O. Olufolajimi, D.A. Nguyen, F. Faturay, J. Malik, F. Mehmood, A. Mazzone, P. Manandhar, D.A. Quansah, P. Cox, I. Stone, Y. Xiao, C.M. Kayanan, S. Khalid, R. Khosla, and P. Ruyssenaars, 'Conspiracy Spillovers and Geoengineering', *iScience* 26, Nº 3 (2023): 106166. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2023.106166.

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Figure 1. Former representative Majorie Taylor Greene's social media post celebrating a ban on solar geoengineering research demonstrates the possibility that atmospheric intervention technologies may become subjects of political polarisation rather than evidence-based deliberation. *Source*: Majorie Taylor Greene (@mtgreenee), 'Florida passes geoengineering and weather modification ban!! Way to go!!', X, 1 May 2025, https://x.com/mtgreenee/status/1917890758046261405?s=46&t=yn4BhTih7iZhslkb05lYkg.

The information environment is further complicated by what Buck describes as 'para-environmentalism',[30] beliefs about ongoing atmospheric modification that are rooted in legitimate environmental concerns, but lack the empirical foundations and institutional legitimacy required to critically analyse information. These beliefs connect solar geoengineering to broader anxieties about corporate power, governmental transparency,

30 Buck et al., 'Public Concerns'.

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and environmental degradation, creating communication challenges that cannot be resolved through technical information alone, because they are an expression of an underlying world view.[31] The substantial uncertainty and legitimate fear around solar geoengineering, and the existence of both disinformation and conspiracy theories, create opportunities for malign actors to shape public understanding before factual knowledge has been developed (Figure 2).

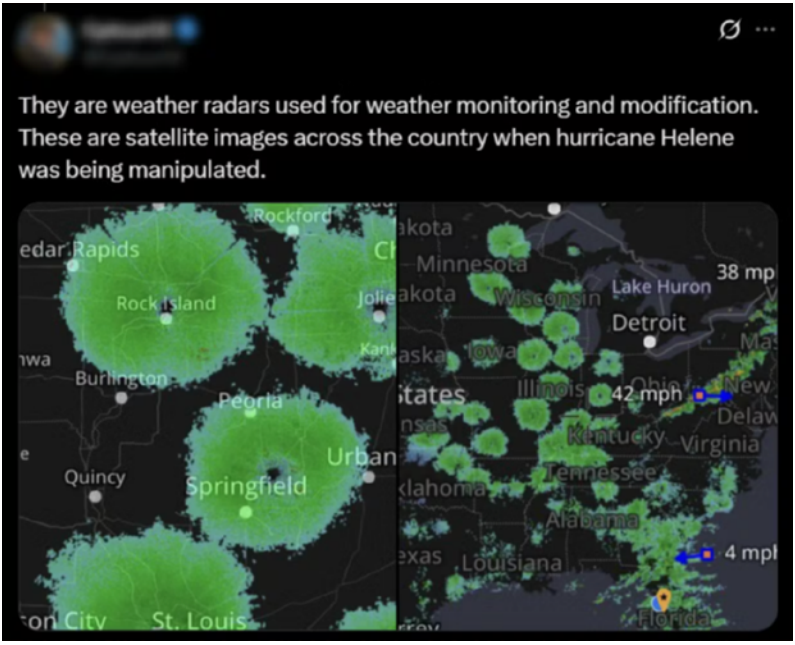

Figure 2. Following Hurricane Helene, altered satellite imagery was shared on social media alleging that geoengineering and HAARP (High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program, a research programme in Alaska) were used to modify the weather and manipulate the hurricane. *Source*: X posts, surfaced by Logically Intelligence, in N. Rampal, 'Weaponized Weather: When Disasters Become Information Battlegrounds', *Logically*, 20 August 2025, https://logically.ai/case-studies/case-study-weaponized-weather-when-disasters-become-information-battlegrounds.

31 Ibid.

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The methods by which adversaries might employ disinformation are well established, and these are readily adaptable to SAI. Russian state media has claimed that extreme weather events are linked to weapons deployed by Western powers to alter the climate[32] (this would be an ENMOD violation[33]); Chinese disinformation campaigns linked the 2023 Maui wildfires in Hawaii with US 'weather weapons';[34] and Iran has also claimed that the West is engaged in 'weather warfare'. If malign actors employ SAI misinformation as a hybrid threat (defined as forms of influence activity that 'have the malign intent of manipulating the political decision-making processes of a targeted nation by influencing the behaviours and attitudes of key audiences such as media organisations, the general public and political leaders'),[35] the capacity for publics to engage in evidence-based deliberation about this technology could be severely threatened.

The following section sets out a summary of the strategic objectives and operational patterns that are employed in related misinformation campaigns. However, the debate around geoengineering governance raises an additional challenge of requiring careful differentiation between adversary disinformation, domestic misinformation, and legitimate democratic discourse. Climate justice advocates, environmental organisations, and affected communities raise many of the same concerns that adversaries amplify; these include questions about technological imperialism, corporate power, democratic accountability, and distributional equity. These are not fringe positions. They are legitimate

32 M. Vrba, 'Climate Scepticism the Russian Way', *Green European Journal*, 13 June 2023. www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/climate-scepticism-the-russian-way.

33 United Nations, 'Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques', 1977. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1978/10/19781005%2000-39%20AM/Ch_XXVI_01p.pdf.

34 David E. Sanger and Steven Lee Myers, 'China Sows Disinformation about Hawaii Fires Using New Techniques', *New York Times*, 11 September 2023. www.nytimes.com/2023/09/11/us/politics/china-disinformation-ai.html.

35 Arsalan Bilal, 'Hybrid Warfare—New Threats, Complexity, and "Trust" as the Antidote', *NATO Review*, 30 November 2021; NATO Standardization Office (NSO), AAP-6, *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions* (2018), p. 62; S. Aday, M. Andžāns, U. Bērziņa-Čerenkova, F. Granelli, J. Gravelines, M. Hills, M. Holmstrom, A. Klus, I. Martinez-Sanchez, M. Mattiisen, H. Molder, Y. Morakabati, J. Pamment, A. Sari, V. Sazonov, G. Simons, and J. Terra, *Hybrid Threats: A Strategic Communications Perspective* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019). https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/2nd_book_short_digi_pdf.pdf.

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political perspectives grounded in historical experience of unequal climate burdens and governance exclusion. The challenge for democratic societies is not to dismiss these legitimate concerns as disinformation, but rather to identify when legitimate political speech is being exploited through coordinated inauthentic behaviour, manipulated emotional triggers, or systematic undermining of shared epistemic standards.

Lessons from Related Disinformation Campaigns

The operational sophistication evident in weather modification and climate disinformation campaigns establishes clear precedents indicating solar geoengineering research could face similar threats. Understanding both the strategic objectives (why adversaries conduct these operations) and established tactics, techniques, and procedures (how they execute them) provides insight into probable approaches to solar geoengineering disinformation. The conspiracy frameworks, technical capabilities, and amplification networks developed through weather modification campaigns provide ready-made infrastructure for targeting solar geoengineering. This section examines documented disinformation operations targeting weather modification and climate change to identify the playbooks that may be adapted for solar geoengineering discourse.

Strategic Objectives of Related Disinformation Campaigns

Analysis of malign actor information operations targeting weather modification and climate events reveals five consistent strategic objectives that illuminate probable objectives for future solar geoengineering disinformation. These apparent goals, shared across multiple state actors, suggest coordinated strategic thinking about weaponising atmospheric technologies for multiple geopolitical objectives.[36] Five common objectives of climate and weather modification disinformation campaigns are as follows.

36 European Union External Action, *3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Exposing the Architecture of FIMI Operations* (March 2025). www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2025/EEAS-3nd-ThreatReport-March-2025-05-Digital-HD.pdf.

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1. *To reduce social cohesion and sow disharmony.* Disinformation campaigns often aim not to push policy debates in a particular direction, but rather to amplify arguments on both sides of contentious issues to maximise societal division. Research on Russian Internet Research Agency operations demonstrates this bidirectional amplification strategy across multiple domains. For example, a 2018 investigation by the US House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology found that Russian-linked accounts simultaneously posted content opposing fossil fuel development (promoting pipeline protests and highlighting climate change) while also posting pro-fossil-fuel messages that dismissed climate science as a 'liberal hoax'.[37] This approach suggests the primary objective is not policy advocacy, rather the erosion of social cohesion and the creation of an environment where citizens cannot trust the authenticity of any position in public discourse.

2. *The fragmentation of multinational cooperation.* Faith in liberal democracies can be undermined by portraying Western climate policies as environmental imperialism or a 'neocolonial invention'.[38] Such operations undermine the multilateral cooperation essential for effective global climate governance. This uncertainty and consequent fragmentation of international consensus reduces Western soft power and creates opportunities for alternative, authoritarian governance frameworks.

3. *To undermine Western scientific institutional credibility.* By portraying weather modification research as evidence

37 US House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, *Russian Attempts to Influence U.S. Domestic Energy Markets by Exploiting Social Media: Majority Staff Report* (Washington, DC: House of Representatives, 1 March 2018). https://republicans-science.house.gov/sites/republicans.science.house.gov/files/documents/SST%20Staff%20Report%20-%20Russian%20Attempts%20to%20Influence%20U.S.%20Domestic%20Energy%20Markets%20by%20Exploiting%20Social%20Media%2003.01.18.pdf.

38 Central European University, Department of International Relations, 'The Grand Russian Disinformation Strategy in Environmental Politics', 2024, https://ir.ceu.edu/ohpa/research_blog/articles/rusdisinformation; J. Wainright and G. Mann, 'Climate Leviathan', *Antipode* 45, Nº 1 (2012): 1–22.

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of hidden programmes or technological authoritarianism, operations erode broader public confidence in the scientific enterprise.[39] This delegitimisation aims to reduce Western technological advantages, undermine evidence-based policymaking, and create space for alternative narratives that favour authoritarian governance.[40]

4. *To create confusion and policy paralysis.* Weather modification disinformation disseminated during environmental emergencies distracts the public,[41] effectively constraining democratic societies' ability to respond adequately to climate emergencies.[42] Similarly, conspiracy theories that portray solar geoengineering as evidence of elite manipulation may work to distract the public by connecting these technologies to broader anxieties about corporate power and governmental control.[43]

5. *To deflect attention from emissions responsibilities.* By focusing attention on purported Western atmospheric manipulation, campaigns can serve an immediate economic interest by distracting attention from adversary policy failures, such as the reliance on fossil fuel exports and resistance to emissions reduction commitments.[44] This strategy aids in prolonging environmentally destructive policies by allowing adversaries to portray themselves as victims of Western technological aggression.

39 Central European University, Department of International Relations, 'Grand Russian Disinformation Strategy'.

40 European Union External Action, *3rd EEAS Report*.

41 Tom Ellison and Brigitte Hugh, *Climate Security and Misinformation: A Baseline* (Council on Strategic Risks, 23 April 2024). https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/2024/04/23/climate-security-and-misinformation-a-baseline.

42 S. Hilberts, M. Govers, E. Petelos, and S. Evers, 'The Impact of Misinformation on Social Media in the Context of Natural Disasters: Narrative Review', *JMIR Infodemiology* 5 (2025), 5:e70413. https://doi.org/10.2196/70413.

43 Buck et al., 'Public Concerns'.

44 L. Yousef, 'Iran's "Cloudy" Accusations: A Cover-Up for Environmental Mismanagement', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 23 May 2023. www.csis.org/analysis/irans-cloudy-accusations.

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Established Practices of Malign Actors

Disinformation spreads more easily than truth in today's information environment. Malign actors exploit this by creating emotionally compelling narratives that shape opinions quickly, before accurate but complex information can gain traction. Social media algorithms amplify sensational content over measured analysis,[45] artificial intelligence can generate convincing false information at scale, and established influence networks systematically undermine trust in institutions and exploit political divisions.

Foreign actors have already demonstrated their willingness to weaponise climate-related issues through information operations. China's Belt and Road Initiative increasingly uses climate technology as an influence tool.[46] Russia leverages energy relationships and climate disinformation for geopolitical advantage. Both nations amplify narratives about 'Western climate hypocrisy' and seed environmental conspiracy theories that erode trust in democratic institutions. Their exploitation of weather modification stories, which attributes extreme weather events to secret Western programmes, supports the thesis that solar geoengineering is an inevitable target for future malign influence campaigns. These and other documented campaigns show how conspiracy theories around atmospheric intervention serve as testing grounds for disinformation strategies, creating ready-made networks for amplifying false narratives about emerging climate technologies. Some of the common patterns that demonstrate established practices in climate and weather modification disinformation campaigns include the following.

45 W.J. Brady, J.C. Jackson, B. Lindström, and M.J. Crockett, 'Algorithm-Mediated Social Learning in Online Social Networks', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 27, Nº 10 (2023): 947–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2023.06.008.

46 Council on Foreign Relations, 'China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative', *CFR Backgrounder*, 3 February 2023, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative; P.A.B. Duarte, A. Gasparyan, F.B. da Silva, et al., 'The Environmental Diplomacy of the Belt and Road Initiative: Going Green to Meet External Expectations', *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18 July 2025, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40647-025-00453-4.

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Rapid Exploitation of Crisis Events

Chinese political communications around weather manipulation demonstrate advanced capabilities for exploiting crisis events which may foreshadow the targeting of solar geoengineering research as a hybrid risk. Following the 2023 Maui wildfires, Chinese networks rapidly deployed narratives attributing the disaster to American weather weapons deployment.[47] The campaign showed operational speed and narrative sophistication, transforming a natural catastrophe into purported evidence of Western technological aggression within hours of the initial event, implying prior preparedness.[48]

During extreme weather events, when public attention intensifies and official information channels struggle with uncertainty, Chinese networks inject competing explanations that challenge authoritative assessments. This timing capitalises on periods when conspiracy stories can outpace careful scientific analysis, establishing emotional frameworks before factual explanations emerge.

Beijing's information operations are using increasingly sophisticated methods to enhance perceived narrative authenticity and audience reach; this includes the use of artificially generated testimonials from supposed experts. The use of legitimate scientific terminology and factual visual elements creates compelling pseudo-evidence. This disinformation evidence is used to provide an illusion of truth for conspiracy narratives.[49]

These sophisticated capabilities suggest both awareness of vulnerabilities in democratic communications, and the allocation of significant resources

47 Ellison and Hugh, *Climate Security*; Macrina Wang and Elisa Xu, 'Pro-China Disinformation Campaign Claims US Started Maui Fires in a "Weather Weapons" Experiment, Falsely Citing the UK's MI6', *NewsGuard*, 11 September 2023, www.newsguardtech.com/special-reports/pro-china-influence-operation-claims-us-military-started-maui-fires [accessed 12 October 2025]; Mack DeGeurin, 'Salacious Chinese Disinformation Campaign Blames Maui Fires on Deadly American "Weather Weapon"', *Gizmodo*, 11 September 2023.

48 Sanger and Myers, 'China Sows Disinformation'.

49 Ibid.

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to gain strategic advantage by undermining scientific discourse.[50] Existing disinformation playbooks might be quickly adapted to disrupt scientific debate in solar geoengineering—particularly given that public interest is partially concentrated in online conspiracy debates surrounding chemtrails narratives.

Pre-emptive Institutional Deflection

Weather manipulation has also been a feature of domestic disinformation campaigns in Iran, demonstrating how atmospheric intervention narratives can serve regime stability objectives.[51] Senior Iranian officials, including a former president and the head of Iran's Civil Defence Organisation, have claimed that drought and water shortages are attributable to foreign 'weather manipulation' or 'cloud theft', despite these claims being publicly rejected by Iran's own meteorological service.[52] Tehran is now facing critical water shortages.[53] Similarly, claims have been made about Western rain cloud destruction and accusations of four-decade-long American weather manipulation campaigns.[54]

Tehran's approach uses weather warfare claims as pre-emptive justification for governance inadequacies, enabling leadership to maintain legitimacy while pursuing anti-environmental policies. Claims of foreign atmospheric manipulation are seemingly intended to deflect national attention and protests away from local management of water resources, and justify policy failures by blaming external enemies.[55]

50 Erin Sikorsky and Tom Ellison, *Geoengineering and Climate Change in an Age of Disinformation and Strategic Competition* (Council on Strategic Risks, 23 April 2024). https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/2024/04/23/geoengineering-and-climate-change-in-an-age-of-disinformation-and-strategic-competition.

51 Richard Angwin, 'You've Stolen Our Weather!', *Al Jazeera*, 10 October 2011. www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/10/10/youve-stolen-our-weather.

52 AFP and TOI, 'Iranian General Blames Water Woes on Israeli "Cloud Theft"', *Times of Israe*l, 2 July 2018. www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-general-blames-water-woes-on-israeli-cloud-theft.

53 David Michel, Will Todman, and Jennifer Jun, 'Satellite Imagery Shows Tehran's Accelerating Water Crisis', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 25 November 2025. www.csis.org/analysis/satellite-imagery-shows-tehrans-accelerating-water-crisis.

54 i24news, 'Iranian Expert Accuses US, Israel of "Weather Manipulation to Deepen Drought', 6 August 2024, www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/artc-iranian-expert-accuses-us-israel-of-weather-manipulation-to-deepen-drought.

55 Yousef, 'Iran's "Cloudy" Accusations'.

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The institutional persistence of Iranian weather warfare narratives across multiple administrations indicates deliberate political communications doctrine rather than opportunistic messaging. This approach has had the effect of undermining regional cooperation on climate adaptation. Similar tactics could successfully target solar geoengineering, either by undermining and interrupting potential governance mechanisms, or by inflaming conspiracy theories around weather manipulation.

Strategic Amplification of Existing Stories

Russian information operations demonstrate opportunistic manipulation that could, in future, be employed to exploit solar geoengineering narratives while maintaining strategic deniability. Rather than creating novel conspiracy theories, Russian networks typically amplify existing stories to serve broader geopolitical objectives.[56] This approach maximises disruptive impact by leveraging established conspiracy communities. At the same time it avoids directly attributing disinformation content.

Pro-Kremlin information outlets routinely integrate 'weather-weapon' storylines into the conversations of broader conspiracy communities, providing those groups with apparent validations.[57] Russia's multi-pillar media ecosystem is further used to validate fringe accounts and direct activism towards politically useful targets.[58] This leverages the existing emotional energy and organisational infrastructure of grassroots movements towards objectives serving Russia's strategic interests.[59]

56 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*, RAND Corporation Perspective (2016). www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html.

57 Global Engagement Centre, *GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (2025), https://2021-2025.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/?safe=1; EUvsDisinfo, 'The Kremlin on Global Warming: Connecting the Dots; Disconnecting the Facts', 23 September 2019, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-on-global-warming-connecting-the-dots-disconnecting-the-facts; *Digital Forensic Research Lab, Russian War Report: Pro-Kremlin Surrogates Accuse the US of Using 'Climate Weapons' in Crimea*, 30 November 2023, https://dfrlab.org/2023/11/30/russian-war-report-russia-accuses-climate-weapons.

58 Global Engagement Centre, *GEC Special Report*.

59 Natasha Lander Finch and Ryan Arick, 'How the US and Europe Can Counter Russian Information Manipulation about Nonproliferation', *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, 4 October 2024. www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/how-the-us-and-europe-can-counter-russian-information-manipulation-about-nonproliferation.

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Multilateral Coordination and Complementary Framing

The consistency of Russia's coordination with Chinese messaging on atmospheric topics suggests increasing sophistication in multilateral information operations.[60] Complementary campaigns reinforce shared stories while avoiding obvious coordination.[61] For example, Chinese networks might emphasise technological aspects of purported weather weapons, while Russian disinformation networks focus on governance implications.[62] This enables comprehensive coverage and complicates attribution and response efforts.

Non-state Actor Force Multiplication

State-sponsored disinformation campaigns seek amplification by non-state actors who provide credibility unavailable to official state channels. Domestic conspiracy theory communities function as force multipliers. They transform content that originates outside the country into apparently organic grassroots movement output (termed information laundering), which is often more persuasive than obvious propaganda.[63] These networks operate through social media, alternative media platforms, and institutions lacking rigorous peer review, thus enabling unfounded claims to circulate under the guise of legitimate research.

60 Dan De Luce, 'Russia, China and Cuba Amplified Falsehoods about Recent Hurricanes, U.S. Official Says', *NBC News*, 28 October 2024, www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/russia-china-cuba-amplified-falsehoods-recent-hurricanes-us-official-s-rcna177672; Tamas Matura, 'Sino-Russian Convergence in Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference: A Global Threat to the US and Its Allies', *CEPA*, 30 June 2025, https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/sino-russian-convergence-in-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference.

61 Joe Stradinger, 'Narrative Intelligence: Detecting Chinese and Russian Information Operations to Disrupt NATO Unity', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 5 November 2024. www.fpri.org/article/2024/11/intelligence-china-russia-information-operations-against-nato.

62 De Luce, 'Russia, China and Cuba'; Matura, 'Sino-Russian Convergence'.

63 B.V. Rodríguez, *Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic Region* (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, November 2020). https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/nato_information_laundering_small_file_10-12-2020-1.pdf.

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Cross-platform narrative spillover can amplify conspiracy theories beyond their original scope.[64] Weather modification conspiracies migrate from specialised forums to mainstream platforms, encountering broader audiences and merging with other conspiracy discourses. This organic amplification makes initial foreign influence operations more effective than direct propaganda, creating more sustainable disinformation ecosystems that continue to generate content beyond the initial seeding efforts.[65]

Strategic Vulnerabilities: Applying Adversary Playbooks to Solar Geoengineering

The operational sophistication evident in weather modification disinformation campaigns establishes clear precedents that could be applied to solar geoengineering research or policy decisions. The conspiracy frameworks, technical capabilities, and amplification networks developed through weather modification and climate campaigns provide ready-made infrastructure and processes that could easily be applied to solar geoengineering. As SAI research programmes expand and field trials commence, these established patterns suggest adversaries may accelerate efforts to exploit scientific uncertainty, governance gaps, and the public's unfamiliarity with SAI to achieve similar strategic objectives through solar geoengineering disinformation. This section examines immediate and future strategic risks arising from potential solar geoengineering disinformation campaigns.

Table 1 sets out a threat assessment summarising characteristics of SAI which make it susceptible to information manipulation: the objectives that disinformation campaigns might seek to achieve, how messages

64 R. Debnath et al., 'Social Media Posts around Solar Geoengineering "Spill Over" into Conspiracy Theories', *University of Cambridge Research News*, February 2023. www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/social-media-posts-around-solar-geoengineering-spill-over-into-conspiracy-theories [accessed 21 October 2025].

65 Christina Nemr and William Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction: Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age*, US Department of State Report, March 2019. www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Weapons-of-Mass-Distraction-Foreign-State-Sponsored-Disinformation-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf.

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might be exploited (for both anti- and pro-SAI messaging), and related examples for documented adversary information operations.

Disinformation objective	Anti-SAI exploitation	Pro-SAI exploitation	Related examples
SAI vulnerability characteristic: **(1) Technical complexity and scientific uncertainty**			
Prevent evidence-based evaluation of trade-offs; create policy paralysis or premature decisions.	Amplify uncertainty and worst-case scenarios; present fringe opposition as equally valid; undermine experts. 'Scientists are divided, it is too dangerous to proceed.'	Claim false certainty; dismiss legitimate concerns as anti-science; suppress discussion of risks. 'Scientific consensus is clear, resistance is denialism.'	Chinese networks using scientific terminology in Maui wildfire narratives;[a] Iranian officials citing meteorological concepts to support manipulation claims.[b]
SAI vulnerability characteristic: **(2) Global scale with uneven regional impacts**			
Reduce international cooperation; undermine multilateral governance; position adversary as defender of vulnerable nations (either through protection or action).	Frame as Western/Northern technological imperialism; amplify Global South grievances. 'Rich nations are controlling the thermostat at poor nations' expense.'	Frame hesitation as abandoning vulnerable nations; exploit climate justice to demand immediate action. 'Inaction is condemning the vulnerable to climate catastrophe.'	Russian narratives linking Western climate policy to neocolonial control.[c]
SAI vulnerability characteristic: **(3) Long implementation timeframes (decades+)**			
Undermine either long-term policy capacity or democratic accountability in governance; create conditions where evidence-based multi-decadal planning becomes impossible.	Portray as elite imposition on future generations; amplify democratic accountability concerns. 'Unelected technocrats are binding our children.'	Portray as necessary insulation from short-term politics; amplify technocratic governance narratives. 'Democratic cycles are too slow for a climate emergency.'	Iranian regime using weather warfare claims across multiple administrations to deflect from governance failures.[d]

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SAI vulnerability characteristic: **(4) Rapid onset of cooling capability (months to effect)**			
Establish emotional frameworks during crisis moments when rational analysis is difficult; prevent measured evaluation of deployment decisions.	Exploit extreme weather to seed conspiracy theories; attribute disasters to covert deployment. 'Secret programmes are already operating.'	Exploit extreme weather to demand immediate deployment. 'The climate emergency requires immediate action'; 'Waiting is a luxury we cannot afford.'	Chinese rapid exploitation of Maui fires within hours;[e] Russian amplification of disinformation narratives during European climate events.[f]
SAI vulnerability characteristic: **(5) Governance gaps and deployment accessibility**			
Undermine alliance cohesion; prevent coordinated governance development; create policy paralysis or premature decisions.	Amplify fears of rogue actors; exploit policy differences between allies to fragment coordination. 'Billionaires will control the climate.'	Create urgency through fear of being left behind; exploit policy differences to pressure rapid action. 'China will deploy first and set terms.'	Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation designed to challenge NATO cohesion.[g]
SAI vulnerability characteristic: **(6) Public unfamiliarity with SAI technology**			
Build self-sustaining ecosystems that prevent informed public engagement; establish either fear-based or deference-based responses rather than critical evaluation.	Seed established conspiracy networks (chemtrails); merge with anti-elite narratives. 'The elites are poisoning us.'	Frame opposition as ignorance; merge with techno-optimist narratives. 'The public are too unsophisticated to understand necessity'; 'Trust the experts.'	60% of social media SRM discourse already conspiratorial by 2016;[h] existing chemtrail narratives widespread, providing ready-made amplification infrastructure.
SAI vulnerability characteristic: **(7) Intersection with deeply held beliefs**			
Make technical debate emotionally charged; prevent cost–benefit analysis; exploit cultural and religious sensitivities to drive either rejection or acceptance without deliberation.	Connect to anxieties about corporate power and transparency; frame as violation of natural order; exploit religious objections. 'Playing God with the climate.'	Exploit climate anxiety and intergenerational justice concerns; frame opposition as privileged inaction; dismiss concerns as superstition. 'Moral imperative to act.'	Iranian framing of Western weather manipulation.[i]

Table 1. Threat assessment outlining examples of solar geoengineering information vulnerabilities, how they could be exploited in a bidirectional pattern (both anti- and pro-SAI messaging), and documented examples from related disinformation campaigns

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Current documented operations predominantly exploit anti-SAI narratives,[66] reflecting present geopolitical alignments where Western research leadership creates strategic incentives for disruption. However, the same vulnerabilities that enable anti-SAI manipulation could be exploited to pressure premature deployment should geopolitical dynamics shift. For example, an adversary state may emerge as a primary SAI advocate and use disinformation to reduce deployment timelines as a source of geopolitical leverage. Alternatively, disinformation campaigns could amplify both pro- and anti-geoengineering content to sow discord and reduce societal cohesion.

a Tom Ellison and Brigitte Hugh, *Climate Security and Misinformation: A Baseline* (Council on Strategic Risks, 23 April 2024), https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/2024/04/23/climate-security-and-misinformation-a-baseline; Macrina Wang and Elisa Xu, 'Pro-China Disinformation Campaign Claims US Started Maui Fires in a "Weather Weapons" Experiment, Falsely Citing the UK's MI6', *NewsGuard*, 11 September 2023.

b i24news, 'Iranian Expert Accuses US, Israel of Weather Manipulation to Deepen Drought', 6 August 2024, www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/artc-iranian-expert-accuses-us-israel-of-weather-manipulation-to-deepen-drought.

c Central European University, Department of International Relations, 'The Grand Russian Disinformation Strategy in Environmental Politics', 2024, https://ir.ceu.edu/ohpa/research_blog/articles/rusdisinformation [accessed 21 October 2025].

d AFP and TOI, 'Iranian General Blames Water Woes on Israeli "Cloud Theft"', *Times of Israel*, 2 July 2018, www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-general-blames-water-woes-on-israeli-cloud-theft.

e Ellison and Hugh, *Climate Security*; Wang and Xu, 'Pro-China Disinformation Campaign'; Mack DeGeurin, 'Salacious Chinese Disinformation Campaign Blames Maui Fires on Deadly American "Weather Weapon"', *Gizmodo*, 11 September 2023.

f Global Engagement Centre, *GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (2025), https://2021-2025.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/?safe=1; EUvsDisinfo, 'The Kremlin on Global Warming: Connecting the Dots; Disconnecting the Facts', 23 September 2019, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-on-global-warming-connecting-the-dots-disconnecting-the-facts; Digital Forensic Research Lab, *Russian War Report: Pro-Kremlin Surrogates Accuse the US of Using 'Climate Weapons' in Crimea*, 30 November 2023.

g H. Hardt, 'NATO after the Invasion of Ukraine: How the Shock Changed Alliance Cohesion', *International Politics* (16 October 2024). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00629-x.

h D. Tingley and G. Wagner, 'Solar Geoengineering and the Chemtrails Conspiracy on Social Media', *Palgrave Communications* 3 (2017): Nº 12. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0014-3.

i Richard Angwin, 'You've Stolen Our Weather!', *Al Jazeera*, 10 October 2011, www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/10/10/youve-stolen-our-weather.

66 N. Rampal, 'Weaponized Weather: When Disasters Become Information Battlegrounds', *Logically*, 20 August 2025. https://logically.ai/case-studies/case-study-weaponized-weather-when-disasters-become-information-battlegrounds.

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Table 1 clearly demonstrates the bidirectional possibility of SAI disinformation. Any framework to preserve democratic dialogue should be designed to protect from manipulation in either direction. The threat is not adversary opposition to (or support for) SRM per se; rather it is adversary exploitation of misinformation opportunities to prevent the conditions necessary for evidence-based democratic choice. Defence against influence operations requires an awareness that a malign actor could have multiple strategic objectives for spreading disinformation, including the following.

Disruption of Social Cohesion

The deliberate amplification of divisive narratives constitutes a fundamental threat to societal capacity for collective deliberation about solar geoengineering. Disinformation campaigns often aim not to push policy debates in any particular direction, rather to amplify arguments on both sides of contentious issues to maximise societal division. This bidirectional approach, which has been documented across climate policy, public health, and other contested domains, creates environments where citizens cannot trust the authenticity of any position in public discourse. When applied to solar geoengineering, adversaries can exploit existing social divisions around environmental justice, technological governance, or international cooperation to fracture communities along manufactured fault lines. The result is not merely disagreement about specific policies, but breakdown of the social cohesion necessary for democratic societies to deliberate collectively about complex technological choices that affect shared futures.

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Erosion of Democratic Governance

The erosion of evidence-based policymaking constitutes a substantial immediate threat from solar geoengineering disinformation.[67] By undermining public trust in atmospheric science and climate research institutions, adversary campaigns could establish conditions where evidence-based deliberation becomes progressively challenging.[68]

Existing political polarisation of climate policy responses could be inflamed to achieve strategic effects. Political candidates and parties may be forced into position taking on complex technical matters while lacking understanding, and may simultaneously be confronted with organised disinformation campaigns. Even if they are suspicious of disinformation narratives, political expediency may force conformity.

Reduction of Alliance Cohesion

Militaries may be called upon to conduct, defend, or block geoengineering operations. In NATO and other geopolitical alliances, differing national stances on solar geoengineering research could create opportunities for exploitation by malign information operations.[69] While some member states have invested substantial research into solar geoengineering (US, UK, and Australia), others maintain restrictive or cautious approaches (Germany), generating policy disparities that hostile actors can leverage in targeted disinformation efforts.

The absence of agreed fact-based messaging regarding solar geoengineering research or development permits malign actors to exploit information

67 United Nations Development Programme, 'What Are Climate Misinformation and Disinformation and How Can We Tackle Them?', *UNDP Climate Promise*, 1 May 2025. https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/what-are-climate-misinformation-and-disinformation-and-how-can-we-tackle-them.

68 Sikorsky and Ellison, *Geoengineering and Climate Change*.

69 Rym Momtaz, 'Taking the Pulse: Are Information Operations Russia's Most Potent Weapon Against Europe?', *Strategic Europe*, 5 December 2024. https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/12/taking-the-pulse-are-information-operations-russias-most-potent-weapon-against-europe.

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voids through audience-specific targeting. One could imagine foreign information networks customising disinformation for particular national environments, emphasising anxieties around sovereignty in certain countries (raising questions around who controls the global climate) and the moral hazard (the potential for developing solar geoengineering to distract from climate mitigation) in others. This methodology exploits existing political fractures in alliances. It could convert technical or governance disagreements about solar geoengineering into fundamental questions regarding faith in democratic processes and institutional credibility.[70]

Existing reservations about 'big tech' dominance, combined with pre-existing tensions in divergent approaches to climate policy, create strategic opportunities for adversaries to characterise solar geoengineering as technological imperialism. These sensitivities could be exploited to fragment allied cooperation precisely when coordination between allies is essential for effective governance of emerging climate technology.

Scientific Institution Damage

Inflaming legitimate public concerns around geoengineering, or inflaming existing conspiracy theories, could allow malign actors to significantly damage the reputation of scientific institutions and disrupt research programmes that aim to better understand solar geoengineering.[71] Public opposition to solar geoengineering research has already coincided with the cancellation of major scientific programmes, a trend that could be leveraged by those wishing to disrupt scientific institutions and research.

70 Carme Colomina, Héctor Sánchez Margalef, and Richard Youngs, *The Impact of Disinformation on Democratic Processes and Human Rights in the World*, European Parliament Study, April 2021. www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf.

71 Genna Reed, Yogi Hendlin, Anita Desikan, Taryn MacKinney, Emily Berman, and Gretchen T. Goldman 'The Disinformation Playbook: How Industry Manipulates the Science-Policy Process—and How to Restore Scientific Integrity', *Journal of Public Health Policy* 43, Nº 1 (2022): 37–49, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41271-021-00318-6; Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Dolores Albarracín, 'Misinformation in and about Science', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, Nº 26 (9 April 2021): 13743–51. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1912444117.

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Harvard University's Stratospheric Controlled Perturbation Experiment (SCoPEx) represents the most significant attempt at field-based solar geoengineering research, but it was officially abandoned in March 2024 after sustained resistance from environmental and Indigenous advocacy groups.[72] Plans for a small-scale outdoor experiment in Sweden were terminated in 2021, when the Saami Council condemned the experiment as contradicting Indigenous principles of natural harmony.[73] Continued public pressure ultimately led to the end of the research effort, which researchers acknowledged had become symbolic of broader controversies surrounding legitimacy in geoengineering research. This was not the first time that geoengineering experiments were cancelled amid controversy.[74]

The implications are wider than individual research programmes and raise broader questions of research governance and institutional credibility. When sustained political pressure can terminate scientific research, regardless of methodological rigour or ethical oversight, democratic societies risk losing essential capabilities for investigating technologies crucial to global challenge responses. This dynamic enables hostile actors to constrain Western technological advancement through indirect influence operations that exploit domestic opposition groups.

Global South Relations and Climate Justice Narratives

Solar geoengineering disinformation campaigns could exploit North–South climate justice narratives. They connect conspiracy theories around Western weather manipulation to legitimate grievances regarding historical climate responsibility and contemporary adaptation to perceived inequities. These powerful emotional frameworks could be used to

72 J. Temple, 'Harvard Has Halted Its Long-Planned Atmospheric Geoengineering Experiment', *MIT Technology Review*, 18 March 2024. www.technologyreview.com/2024/03/18/1089879/harvard-halts-its-long-planned-atmospheric-geoengineering-experiment.

73 James Temple, 'Geoengineering Researchers Have Halted Plans for a Balloon Launch in Sweden', *MIT Technology Review*, 31 March 2021. www.technologyreview.com/2021/03/31/1021479/harvard-geoengineering-balloon-experiment-sweden-suspended-climate-change.

74 D. Cressey, 'Geoengineering Experiment Cancelled amid Patent Row', *Nature, 15 May* 2012. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature.2012.10645.

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undermine multilateral climate cooperation by fragmenting developing country support for Western-led initiatives.

Development cooperation could face potential disruption if solar geoengineering becomes portrayed as Western technological imperialism through successful disinformation campaigns. International organisations and development agencies could fear their climate programmes may be questioned or rejected due to being connected in the public mind with theories of atmospheric manipulation. Accounts of weather manipulation designed to deflect attention from domestic policies could have regional security or geopolitical implications. This could undermine decades of cooperation building precisely when coordinated global action becomes most crucial.

A Strategic Communications Framework for Solar Geoengineering

Presented here is a strategic communications framework to preserve democratic deliberation in a contested information environment (see summary of key principles in Figure 3). The challenge of supporting democratic capacity to address solar geoengineering extends beyond this single technology. If democratic societies cannot engage in reasoned debate about atmospheric intervention, their capacity to govern other emerging technologies and contested policy challenges effectively comes into question. Information operations undertaken by malign actors detailed in previous sections demonstrate that solar geoengineering discourse will perhaps face sophisticated manipulation designed to prevent rational deliberation, fragment international cooperation, and undermine scientific institutions.

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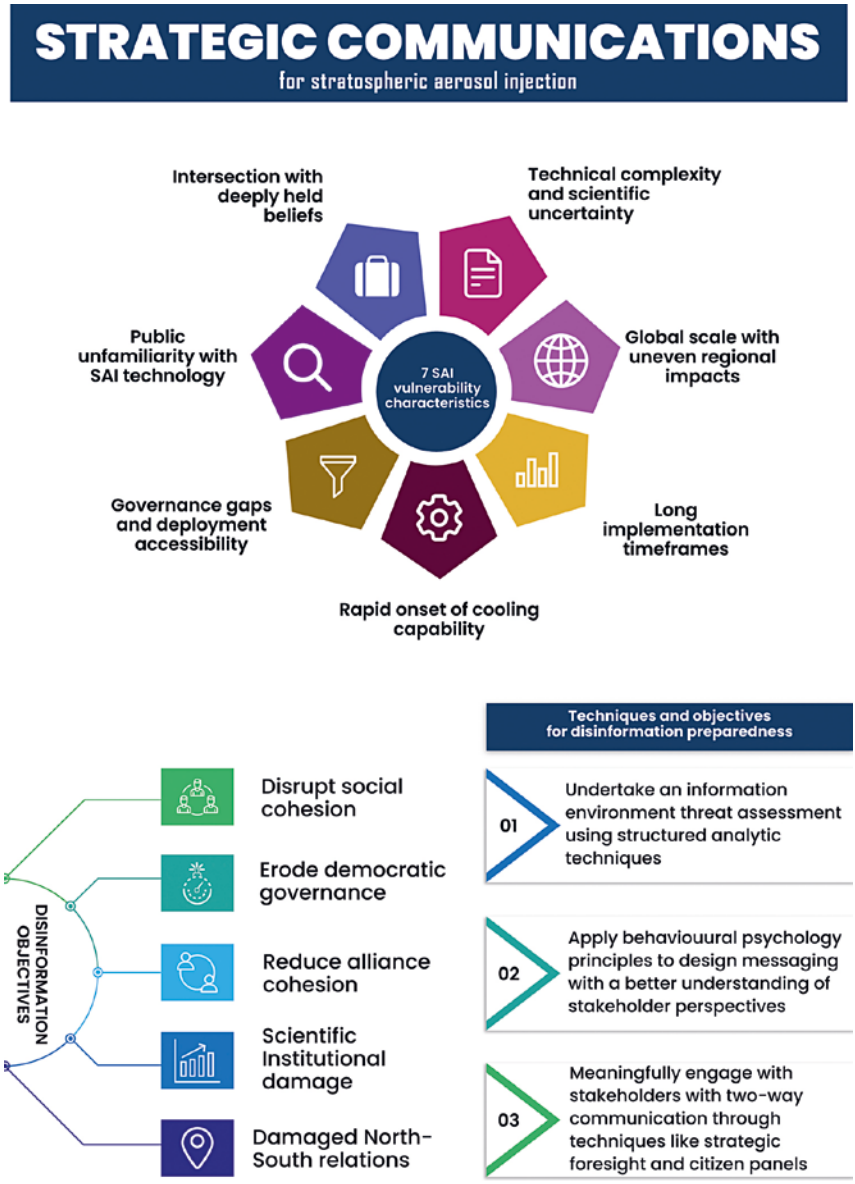

Figure 3. Summary of key principles supporting a strategic communications framework for SAI, including the probable objectives of disinformation, characteristics of SAI that make it vulnerable to disinformation, and the techniques and objectives recommended for preparing for and addressing disinformation threats (figure created by the author)

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A strategic communications framework that protects deliberative space must work equally hard to preserve legitimate dissent while countering manipulation designed to prevent rational consideration of options. Climate justice advocates, environmental organisations, and affected communities raise many of the same concerns that adversaries amplify; however, these are not fringe positions but legitimate political perspectives grounded in historical experience. Development of an effective strategic communications campaign thus requires moving beyond simplistic distinctions between 'pro-SRM' and 'anti-SRM' positions to focus instead on protecting conditions including transparency, good-faith engagement, epistemic humility, and respect for evidence. Such norms of debate enable democratic publics to evaluate complex technological choices, without being manipulated by either domestic opportunists or foreign adversaries.

Successfully defending access to informed policy debate requires recognising that strategic communications about solar geoengineering is fundamentally about preserving the very notion of democratic deliberation. The goal is not to promote particular policy outcomes. Rather it is to create conditions where citizens and policymakers engage with evidence, consider trade-offs, and make informed decisions—without being manipulated by malign actors. This section outlines a strategic communications framework to support democratic resilience in contested information environments.

Foundational Principles of Strategic Communications

Strategic communications is defined as 'a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.[75] It provides an essential foundation for building the democratic resilience necessary to preserve deliberation rooted in empirical evidence about emerging technologies, including solar geoengineering. This approach

75 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).

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focuses on moving beyond reactive responses to conspiracy theories. Instead, it takes a proactive approach to understand the information environment, work with an understanding of human psychology, and cultivate a two-way conversation with citizens to build societal resilience against information manipulation and maintain space for legitimate scientific debate.

Strategic communications operates fundamentally as a long-term communications discipline grounded in liberal democratic values that prioritise individual freedoms and evidence-based decision-making. Unlike crisis communications or reactive counter-disinformation efforts, strategic communications operates on timescales extending ten to twenty years into the future. It fundamentally recognises that meaningful societal change requires sustained engagement rather than reactive responses to emerging threats.

The field is designed with a thorough appreciation of human psychology as it relates to knowledge building. It recognises that 'everything communicates'. Humans attach meaning to objects, actions, and non-actions within their environment, so the images that communicators use, their choice of words, the symbols employed, and even silence all carry communicative power. This recognition builds appreciation that solar geoengineering discourse will be influenced as much by existing cultural frameworks around environmental protection, governmental authority, and technological advances as by purely technical explanations.

Crucially, strategic communications recognises that democratic societies operate in crowded media environments where most communications fail to reach their intended audiences. Citizens are overwhelmed by information, and effective communication necessitates moving from one-way communications approaches that talk at populations towards genuine two-way or many-sided conversations that engage citizens as active participants in democratic deliberation.

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Understanding the Information Environment through Structured Analytic Techniques

Understanding solar geoengineering information threats requires a systematic understanding of the information environment using structured analytic techniques (SATs). These are 'a mechanism by which internal thought processes are externalised in a systematic and transparent manner so that they can be shared, built on, and easily critiqued by others'.[76] These techniques provide organised frameworks for anticipating adversary tactics, understanding audience needs, and developing effective disinformation countermeasures.

SATs evolved from intelligence requirements for systematic threat assessment but have been adapted to address the changing nature of information warfare and strategic communications challenges.[77] Figure 4 introduces the acronym ADAPT to outline SATs that could be applied to solar geoengineering discourse to understand audience needs, detect deception, anticipate likely developments, plan contingencies for various scenarios, and stress-test response plans.

76 Richards J. Heuer and Randolph H. Pherson, *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, 3rd edn (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2020).

77 Central Intelligence Agency, *A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis*, 2nd edn (Washington, DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2009).

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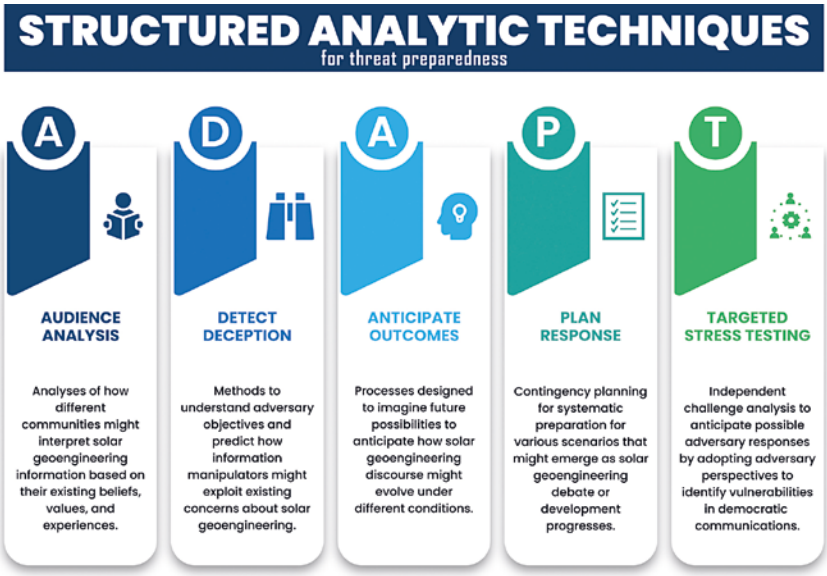

Figure 4. Structured analytic techniques for conducting a threat assessment on geoengineering information operations (figure created by the author)

1. *Anticipating audience needs* requires a systematic analysis of how different communities might interpret solar geoengineering information based on their existing beliefs, values, and experiences. Techniques such as 'four ways of seeing' help practitioners understand how different audience perspectives might interpret the same atmospheric intervention research as a promising climate solution, a dangerous technological overreach, an elite manipulation tool, or a necessary emergency response.[78]

2. *Detecting the presence of deception* and understanding adversary objectives requires techniques such as 'deception detection' that analyses how information manipulators exploit legitimate concerns about solar geoengineering to achieve broader

78 US Army, *Red Team Handbook* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies).

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strategic goals of undermining democratic institutions and fragmenting international cooperation.[79] These approaches help distinguish between genuine criticism of atmospheric intervention technologies and coordinated campaigns designed to prevent rational deliberation.

3. *Anticipating likely developments* can be achieved through techniques such as 'premortem analysis' and analysis of competing hypotheses about future possibilities to anticipate how solar geoengineering discourse might evolve under different conditions. Premortem techniques explore how well-intentioned initiatives might fail due to unforeseen complications.[80] Analysis of competing hypotheses is designed to reduce cognitive biases in intelligence analysis by systematically evaluating multiple explanations for a phenomenon against the available evidence.[81]

4. *Planning for responses* can include methods of contingency planning through approaches such as 'pros-cons-faults-fixes' which enable systematic preparation for various scenarios that might emerge as solar geoengineering research progresses.[82] These techniques help practitioners develop flexible response capabilities that can adapt to different threat environments rather than relying solely on predetermined messaging strategies.

5. *Targeted stress testing of response options* can be carried out to ensure responses are robust to possible adversary responses. Techniques such as 'red team analysis' are effective for this purpose. This technique involves systematically adopting adversary perspectives to identify vulnerabilities in democratic communications.[83]

79 Heuer and Pherson, *Structured Analytic Techniques*.

80 Gary Klein, 'Performing a Project Premortem', *Harvard Business Review* 85, Nº 9 (September 2007): 18–19.

81 Heuer and Pherson, *Structured Analytic Techniques*.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

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Understanding Citizen Perspectives through Behavioural Insights

Effective communication requires understanding how citizens process information about complex technologies like solar geoengineering. Behavioural science provides a systematic and evidence-based approach for tailoring communications to work with, rather than against, natural psychological tendencies. This enables practitioners to anticipate responses and design communications that are more resistant to manipulation techniques.

Research consistently demonstrates that people underestimate how much their behaviour is driven by social norms and habits compared to personal preferences. At the same time, they systematically underestimate their capacity to change their emotional response in ways that conflict with their initial preferences.[84] These insights prove particularly relevant for solar geoengineering communications. Citizens who evaluate unfamiliar technologies while navigating competing expert claims and conspiracy theories tend to be disproportionately influenced by the 'status quo' and the views of their peer group, compared to the technical information available.

The OECD's ABCD framework[85] provides a systematic approach for understanding how citizens might engage with solar geoengineering information. It explains the influence of four factors: attention, belief formation insights, choice architecture, and determination factors:

1. The first factor, **attention**, recognises that citizens cannot focus simultaneously on technical complexity, governance challenges, ethical implications, and risk assessments. Communications must therefore sequence information delivery but acknowledge competing priorities for public attention. This is especially relevant during times when conspiracy theories are spreading rapidly.

84 Robert B. Cialdini, 'Basic Social Influence Is Underestimated', *Psychological Inquiry* 16, Nº 4 (2005): 158–61.

85 OECD, *Tools and Ethics for Applied Behavioural Insights: The BASIC Toolkit* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019).

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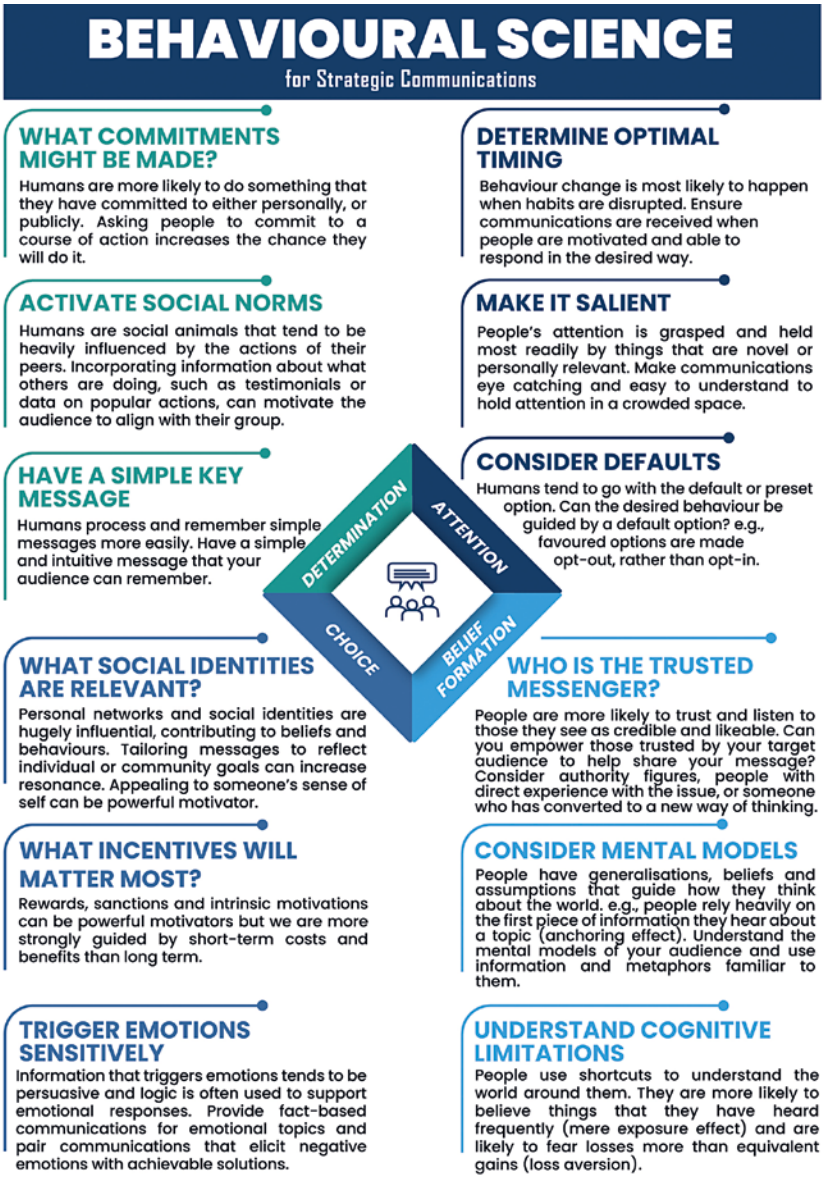

Figure 5. Visual prompt demonstrating how the OECD ABCD framework principles can be applied to strategic communications (figure created by the author)

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2. Insights into how we form our **beliefs** reveal the ways citizens use mental shortcuts when evaluating information, often overestimating or underestimating probabilities based on emotional associations rather than technical analysis. Understanding these heuristics enables practitioners to design communications that work with cognitive tendencies, rather than expecting citizens to process complex information like technical experts.

3. **Choice architecture** refers to the different ways that choices can be presented to decision-makers and publics, and the impact of those design choices on decision-making outcomes.[86] It becomes crucial when presenting solar geoengineering options, as framing effects and social influences substantially affect how citizens evaluate technological alternatives. Citizens' preferences may be shaped more by how options are presented relative to each other than by absolute assessments of risks and benefits. This understanding helps explain why conspiracy theories that position solar geoengineering within broader framing about elite manipulation may prove more persuasive than isolated technical corrections.

4. **Determination** acknowledges that maintaining support for complex, long-term research programmes requires understanding how citizens sustain their commitment in the face of evolving information and social pressures. Citizens who may initially support the need for solar geoengineering research may change positions if governance frameworks fail to address underlying concerns about democratic accountability and international cooperation.

A visual prompt demonstrating how these behavioural science principles can be applied to strategic communications is provided in Figure 5.

86 R.H. Thaler and C.R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

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Citizen Engagement and Two-Way Communication

Understanding both the information environment and how citizens process information encourages fresh approaches to effective engagement. Solar geoengineering presents particular challenges for democratic governance because it involves planetary-scale interventions with global consequences that extend beyond traditional electoral cycles and national boundaries. Citizens cannot be expected to accept expert assessments about such profound technological choices without meaningful opportunities to express concerns, explore implications, and participate in shaping governance frameworks.

Traditional approaches that lecture audiences about technical details while dismissing their concerns as misinformation may prove counterproductive when addressing sophisticated disinformation campaigns that exploit legitimate anxieties about technological governance. Citizens experiencing genuine concerns about elite manipulation, environmental justice, or democratic accountability will not be persuaded by communications that fail to acknowledge these underlying issues.

Effective engagement requires creating structured opportunities for citizens to articulate their values, explore trade-offs, and participate in deliberative processes about solar geoengineering governance. This means moving beyond public information campaigns towards genuine consultation processes that influence policy or research development, rather than simply building support for predetermined decisions.

Two-way communication proves particularly crucial because solar geoengineering intersects with deeply held beliefs about humanity's relationship with nature, appropriate responses to climate change, and legitimate governance of global technologies. Citizens bring different cultural, religious, and political frameworks to these discussions that cannot be addressed through technical information alone.

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Strategic foresight offers one effective tool for facilitating these conversations by engaging citizens in structured exploration of multiple possible futures, as opposed to debating specific technologies in isolation. Rather than asking whether solar geoengineering should be pursued, foresight exercises invite citizens to imagine different future scenarios—for example, one with accelerated climate change, one with successful mitigation efforts, one with various atmospheric intervention options, and one with different governance arrangements.

These exercises reveal how different values and priorities lead to different assessments of technological risks and benefits while building capacity for evaluating complex information. Citizens exploring scenarios where solar geoengineering proves necessary for avoiding catastrophic warming, alternatives where emissions reduction makes intervention unnecessary, or futures where governance failures lead to unilateral deployment can better understand the trade-offs involved.

Strategic foresight exercises also help inoculate democratic discourse against conspiracy theories that present single, deterministic narratives about elite manipulation or technological inevitability. By engaging citizens in considering various possibilities, these approaches build resilience against information manipulation while maintaining openness to the uncertainty inherent in emerging technology development.

Framework Implementation: Building Resilience and Response Capacity

Building Whole-of-Society Resilience

Vulnerability to disinformation about solar geoengineering extends far beyond the climate policy domain. The same manipulative tactics that adversaries employ to distort solar geoengineering discourse—including exploiting anxieties about elite control, amplifying both sides of debates to sow division, and 'weaponising' legitimate concerns through conspiracy

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frameworks—appear across discussions of vaccines, energy policy, emerging technologies, and democratic institutions themselves. This reality demands a whole-of-society approach to resilience building that strengthens democratic capacity to navigate contested information environments rather than developing domain-specific responses in isolation.

Effective resilience requires developing public familiarity with complex topics like solar geoengineering well in advance of outdoor experimentation or policy debates. Attempting to build understanding and trust during critical movements, such as when research programmes announce plans for outdoor experimentation, will prove far more difficult than establishing foundations for informed deliberation before such pressure exists. This extended timeline enables citizens to develop sophisticated understanding of trade-offs, articulate their values, and engage meaningfully with governance frameworks while building their subject matter familiarity.

Central to this approach is recognition that citizens must be engaged as active participants in shaping technology governance rather than passive recipients of expert guidance. Lecture-style communication that attempts to educate publics about solar geoengineering without creating genuine opportunities for dialogue not only fails to build resilience but risks reinforcing the concerns about elite manipulation that adversaries exploit. Citizens need structured opportunities to express their feelings and concerns, explore trade-offs, and have their perspectives genuinely influence governance frameworks, not simply receive information about decisions already made elsewhere.

For instance, citizens could be empowered to engage with universities through structured mechanisms like citizen panels that provide ongoing input into research oversight processes. Such panels create transparency while building institutional understanding of public values. This early engagement, which should occur before any outdoor experimentation debates intensify, would create foundations for informed deliberation when more consequential decisions must be made.

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Understanding where different citizen groups currently stand in their relationship to solar geoengineering information proves essential for tailoring communication approaches that work with rather than against existing perspectives. Educational initiatives building critical thinking skills will enable recognition of manipulation techniques, while maintaining openness to scientific uncertainty and democratic debate. These initiatives should equip citizens to participate effectively in two-way communications rather than simply consuming expert assessments.

Trusted messenger cultivation proves particularly crucial. Research indicates that people are more likely to listen to, and be persuaded by, those whom they trust. University-based scientists may enjoy higher public credibility than government sources for solar geoengineering information, but the most trusted messengers may not be people in positions of authority at all. Strategic communications frameworks must support and empower those who are trusted within communities to communicate on this issue, while protecting them from systematic harassment campaigns that exploit solar geoengineering discourse to target scientific institutions and individuals more broadly.

Long-term strategic communications about solar geoengineering requires developing authentic narratives that address emotional frameworks underlying conspiracy theories while maintaining scientific accuracy. Rather than dismiss concerns about elite manipulation or technological governance, proactive communications must engage directly with anxieties about democratic accountability, while distinguishing between legitimate governance concerns and conspiracy theories designed to prevent rational deliberation.

The need to protect long-term institutional credibility extends beyond solar geoengineering to encompass democratic governance of emerging technologies generally. Sustained and genuine engagement between institutions and citizens builds trust over time. Empowering citizens to interact with, and have a voice in guiding, relevant institutions reduces the risk that organised campaigns can successfully sow suspicion and

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prevent evidence-based investigation of technologies crucial to addressing global challenges.

Disinformation Response Capabilities

Alongside long-term resilience building, democratic societies require response capabilities that can address acute disinformation threats when they emerge. If solar geoengineering disinformation campaigns achieve significant penetration, coordinated response mechanisms must address both immediate discursive threats and longer-term institutional damage, while maintaining democratic principles.

Pre-bunking techniques have demonstrated cross-cultural effectiveness in helping citizens identify manipulation techniques used by malign actors before they encounter misinformation. This approach proves more effective than reactive debunking that attempts to correct beliefs after disinformation exposure. Implementation mechanisms range from educational games to mass-deployment social media interventions. Games placing players in the roles of misinformation producers show cross-cultural effectiveness at increasing disinformation identification. Short pre-bunking videos significantly improve recognition of manipulation techniques and sharing decisions. These interventions establish 'psychological inoculation at scale', where brief exposures trigger cognitive processes that generalise across topics.

Developing civil society partnerships proves essential for addressing disinformation that exploits concerns around environmental justice, and for building coalitions capable of supporting evidence-grounded deliberation about atmospheric intervention technologies. These partnerships acknowledge legitimate grievances about climate responsibility while countering conspiracy theories, and require sustained engagement rather than dismissive responses to concerns about solar geoengineering.

The benefits of this comprehensive resilience approach extend well beyond solar geoengineering. Critical thinking capacities, trust-building

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engagement practices, and response capabilities developed for addressing solar geoengineering disinformation strengthen democratic deliberation about all emerging technologies characterised by complexity, uncertainty, and potential for adversary exploitation. Building resilience around solar geoengineering thus serves both as specific preparation for potential atmospheric intervention decisions and as broader investment in democratic capacity to govern technological change in contested information environments. If organised campaigns can use coordinated disinformation, regardless of scientific merit, to successfully prevent evidence-based investigation of technologies crucial to addressing global challenges, democratic societies risk losing essential capabilities for navigating twenty-first-century governance questions.

Conclusion: Solar Geoengineering as a Test Case for Twenty-First-Century Democratic Governance

Solar geoengineering represents more than a technical challenge for climate policy. It has emerged as a critical test of whether democratic systems can maintain evidence-based deliberation about planetary-scale technologies in an era of sophisticated information warfare. The framework outlined here provides practical tools for building resilience, but its successful implementation will require a recognition of several uncomfortable realities about contemporary democratic governance.

First, the threat timeline is compressing. Information operations by malign actors that target atmospheric intervention technologies are already sophisticated and operational. In contrast, democratic communications capacity remains fragmented and reactive. Conspiracy frameworks, amplification networks, and coordination mechanisms documented in weather modification campaigns provide a ready-made infrastructure for disrupting solar geoengineering discourse as geoengineering research programmes expand. Waiting for a consensus on governance frameworks

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before addressing vulnerabilities in communications cedes the strategic advantage to adversaries who face no such constraints.

Second, technical expertise alone cannot resolve this challenge. The cancellation of major research programmes like SCoPEx demonstrates that existing methodological and ethical oversight may not be enough to assure citizens that their concerns have been addressed. Democratic societies must develop the capacity to distinguish between authentic public engagement and manipulation campaigns designed to prevent rational deliberation. However, they must ensure this capability does not itself become a tool for dismissing legitimate criticism.

Third, success requires unprecedented coordination across traditionally separate domains. Effective strategic communications about solar geoengineering demands climate science be integrated with behavioural research, intelligence analysis, international diplomacy, and public engagement expertise. Current institutional structures that separate these functions create exploitable gaps in the ability of democracies to respond.

The consequences extend beyond solar geoengineering. They encompass broader questions about democratic resilience in environments where information is contested. Similar dynamics are already emerging around the governance of artificial intelligence, the regulation of biotechnology, and other strategic technologies. In such cases democratic deliberation faces systematic disadvantages against disinformation, whereby disinformation spreads virally before evidence-based explanations can be established.

Proactively addressing these challenges may yield additional unexpected benefits for building democratic resilience. Building citizen capacity for evaluating complex technological information, developing robust frameworks for two-way communications about contested policies, and strengthening institutional resilience against information manipulation will serve broader democratic interests beyond solar geoengineering. The tools developed here provide blueprints for democratic adaptation to

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information environments that systematically favour simplistic narratives over nuanced analysis.

The framework outlined in this paper provides a starting point rather than a final solution. Implementation will require iterative adaptation as malign actor tactics evolve and new vulnerabilities emerge. Efforts to preserve democratic deliberation about solar geoengineering require sustained investment in citizen engagement, institutional credibility, and communications capacity to address both technical and political dimensions of the challenge.

Democratic societies face a choice. Continue with reactive approaches that cede strategic initiative to malign actors and hope that citizens will proactively engage with the evidence base needed for rational debate. Or recognise that to evolve proactive communications strategies in response to twenty-first-century threats represents a security imperative requiring the same commitment of attention and resources as traditional defence challenges. Solar geoengineering discourses may be the first major test of this choice, but they will not be the last.

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Ideologies and National Identities in Armenia's Education Discourse: Path-Dependent Relics of the Communist Past?

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Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, nationalism, national identity, post-Soviet studies, Armenian education, post-communist legacies, post-conflict identity change*

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Abstract
Following Armenia's defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, a political process began to reform the country's education system to convey a new form of national identity and a revised understanding of the role of education for the state. Drawing on Armenia's amended educational legislation and six semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers, this paper examines how these reforms were perceived and how teachers reconstructed their professional roles and national identities in the classroom. Building on scholarship on communist legacies in the post-Soviet space, the study employs path dependence theory and the discourse-historical approach (DHA) within critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse the data.

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The analysis shows that the reform discourse gestures towards liberal and egalitarian ideals. However, the pastoral, collectivist, and hierarchical educational ideals of communism persist among schoolteachers, as does universalism in legislative discourse. Teachers also engage in reflections on identity that lead to contestations over its meaning. Some stigmatise the current national identity and replace it with universalist ideals, and others destigmatise and reaffirm pre-war identities. Patterns also emerge in how teachers interpret educational ideologies. Those with stronger national orientations tend to emphasise civic responsibilities, whereas those with universalist ideals adopt more pastoral roles. The overall findings indicate a continued presence of communist educational ideals and national identities that are either ethno-cultural or universalist in nature, with a limited connection to statism.

Introduction

Armenia's defeat in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, followed by its recognition of the region as part of Azerbaijan, marked the beginning of a profound shift in Armenia's political discourse surrounding national identity and the role of education in its prosperity. Following the defeat, the ruling party called for emergency elections, campaigning under the slogan 'There is a future'. Once the elections secured their political representation, a discursive process began to define what this future meant for a defeated state and how it could be secured under an existential threat. The pre-war identity was framed as unfit by the ruling party to provide this future and had to be reconsidered, a process of which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan himself decided to become the torchbearer.

At first the revisions of national identity took a discursive form. In his public statements, the prime minister created a dichotomy between 'Real Armenia' (the Republic of Armenia) and 'Homeland Armenia'. In Armenian collective memory, 'Homeland Armenia' usually refers to Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian-populated regions in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey. But in diasporic and more nationalist discourses,

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the notion may also extend to regions where Armenians historically lived or maintained cultural presence, such as in southern Anatolia and areas stretching towards the Mediterranean.

Media channels and even the arts were used to communicate the dichotomy. The prime minister wrote and shared a poem about people 'ceaselessly searching for homelands' without realising that the homeland lies within the internationally recognised borders of the Republic of Armenia.[1] This 'Real Armenia' could no longer rely on its past national symbols; it needed to be adorned with a new conception of Armenian identity. Mount Ararat (elevation 5137 m) became one of the first symbolic targets of Homeland Armenia. This mountain, which overlooks Armenia's capital yet lies within the Republic of Turkey, holds a significant place in Armenian mythology as the site from which Armenians emerged as an ethnos and spread throughout the region. Now, this mountain, outside the borders of the country, needed a replacement. The prime minister launched a campaign to substitute Ararat with Aragats, Armenia's highest peak, and replaced the photo of Ararat in his office with one of Aragats.[2]

The political discursive developments were combined with systematic changes in Armenia's education. At first the prime minister declared that Armenia's problems, from security to diplomacy to public administration, were linked to education.[3] Multiple reform projects were initiated, unprecedented in scale since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reforms included the development of a national education strategy and a ten-year roadmap, the introduction of teacher attestation programmes through competency testing and pay adjustments, and revisions to the national curriculum and public school textbooks.

1 An extract from the poem: Nikol Pashinyan, Facebook post, 18 August 2024, https://fb.watch/u4dlJCofXc.

2 J. Kucera, 'Between Two Mountains, an Armenian Search for Identity', *RadioLiberty*, 6 March 2024, www.rferl.org/amp/armenia-mount-ararat-aragats-pashinian-azerbaijan-national-identity/32850668.html.

3 'PM Pashinyan Sees Serious Problem in Education Sector', *Armenpress*, 28 April 2022, https://armenpress.am/hy/article/1081825.

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Later on the government-led discussions and projects extended to redefining what it means to be educated,[4] including debates on the need to revise history textbooks and their content, and to rename them from *Armenian History to History of Armenia*.[5] More than improving the national education standard, the projects were envisioned to establish the Real Armenia and cultivate citizens with corresponding aspirations and ethics.

Politicians in post-conflict contexts commonly leverage education to amend state prospects, through both learning and sociological interventions, such as revisiting national identities and value systems in education.[6] Yet, the ways people take up and respond to revised identities are not reducible to political decisions alone, but are conditioned by a constellation of social, cultural, and historical factors. Focusing on education and educational reforms as a context and teachers as a study group, this paper examines how they perceive their roles in response to political shifts and engage in identity revisions to process the post-war reality, and draw on their classroom roles to inform students' understandings. Drawing on an overview of educational legislation and six semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers analysed through critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper examines educational ideologies and the reconstruction of national identity in Armenia's education system. It argues that the post-defeat identity crisis has permeated classroom discussions, where teachers actively reflect on their national identities and professional roles, seeking either to preserve or to reconfigure them.

4 These discussions were ongoing at the time of writing. However, in November 2024, after the completion of this paper, the prime minister and his spouse launched a campaign titled 'Learning Is Trendy', a state-funded programme that advanced an elite-defined understanding of what it means to be educated. A. Barseghyan, 'Pashinyan and His Wife under Fire for Using State Budget for Education Campaign', *OCMedia*, 9 June 2025, https://oc-media.org/pashinyan-and-his-wife-under-fire-for-using-state-budget-for-education-campaign.

5 These debates were ongoing at the time of writing; however, in July 2025 the minister of education announced on her official Facebook page that the first renamed textbooks would be introduced in schools starting in September 2025, accompanied by an editorial note encouraging students to critically engage with interpretations of historical events. Zhanna Andreasyan, Facebook post, 27 July 2025, www.facebook.com/share/p/17VC1gmbht.

6 See e.g. C.P. Loss, 'Educating Citizen-Soldiers in World War II', in *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the 20th Century* (online edn). Princeton Scholarship Online, 2011. https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691148274.003.0004. J. Dierkes, *Postwar History Education in Japan and the Germanys: Guilty Lessons*. Routledge, 2010. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864586.

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While the war served as a catalyst for change, the resulting identity reconstructions combine elements of both transnational and ethno-cultural national identities. Furthermore, teachers' educational ideologies diverge along a spectrum between pastoral and civic orientations. The paper contends that, at their core, these reconfigurations reproduce historical legacies of communist ideologies and the national identities institutionalised under them.

The paper is structured as follows: it begins by drawing on existing literature on education and schooling to argue that schools have historically served as sites for disseminating state ideologies to younger generations. It then turns to the Soviet Union, examining how its education system was mobilised for ideological reproduction and as an instrument for fabricating Soviet national identity. This discussion is supplemented by an overview of Soviet identity and its characteristics, which provides the groundwork for analysing its legacies in post-Soviet countries. The paper then outlines the research methodology, combining path dependence[7] with the application of CDA to six semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers. The findings section begins with a CDA of educational legislation, followed by a discussion of interview data on national identities and educational ideologies, and their connection to historical legacies. The last section synthesises the findings and draws the overall conclusions of the study, pointing to potential areas for further research.

Literature Review

Mass Schooling and Statism

Since the birth of Enlightenment-era philosophy, education has been seen as a ray of light in the darkness of religious episteme, a place to find one's truth and reach Rousseauian innate, yet enchained, freedom. Ever since the Enlightenment, this stream of philosophical positions has been so strong that the link between the functionality of education, as the

7 J. Mahoney, 'Comparative-Historical Methodology', *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 81–101. J. Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', *Theory and Society* 29, Nº 4 (2000): 507–48. www.jstor.org/stable/3108585.

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insertion of young individuals into the system of statism, was exchanged for a commonly held belief that education in the world divided between state borders is oriented towards autonomy and freedom.[8] Yet, a historical analysis of school formation and the identity and workforce production politics of modern education systems worldwide shows that such systems are not much concerned with emancipation.[9]

At least in Europe and its zones of influence, the emergence of mass schooling was not a state response to the premises of Enlightenment philosophy. Much of the historical and sociological analysis attributes it to state attempts to nationalise their populations for their gain.[10] The theories outline parallel developments in European countries that resulted in school formation: the transition from agrarian to industrial societies and the need for nationalisation of states in response to external security threats.

Before industrialism, agrarian societies were characterised by self-sufficiency. Families and communities were able to reproduce their social structure and culture by teaching young ones the skills needed within their households or communities. The surfacing of industrialisation demanded a less specialised and more adaptive workforce that could undertake various jobs and switch positions after receiving a general level of training in state-sponsored proto-schools. The emerging social demands led states to become involved in the educational process and to

8 C.A. Säfström, 'Rethinking Emancipation, Rethinking Education', *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, Nº 2 (2011): 199–209. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-011-9227-x. L. Radford, 'Education and the Illusions of Emancipation', *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 80, Nº 1/2 (2012): 101–18. www.jstor.org/stable/41485970.

9 E. Gellner, *Thought and Change*. University of Chicago Press, 1964. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Paris: Payot, 1983. I. Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism*. Routledge, 1994. G. Baldi, *Ideas, Institutions, and the Politics of Schools in Postwar Britain and Germany*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022, pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98156-3.

10 Gellner, *Thought and Change*. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. F.O. Ramirez and J. Boli, 'The Political Construction of Mass Schooling: European Origins and Worldwide Institutionalisation', *Sociology of Education* 60, Nº 1 (1987): 2–17. https://doi.org/10.2307/2112615. Hunter, *Rethinking the School*. P.H. Lindert, 'The Rise of Mass Public Schooling before 1914', in *Growing Public: Social Spending and Economic Growth since the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 87–127. B. Ansell and J. Lindvall, 'The Political Origins of Primary Education Systems: Ideology, Institutions, and Interdenominational Conflict in an Era of Nation-Building', *American Political Science Review* 107, Nº 3 (2013): 505–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000257.

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use their superior resources to meet those needs that community-based educational units could not fulfil.[11]

Gellner concludes that national education systems and mass schooling emerged at the centre of the statist world order, and, as a by-product, homogenised populations and created nations. This prompts him to redefine the Weberian definition of the state: 'At the base of the modern social order stands not the executioner but the professor. Not the guillotine, but the … *doctoral d'etat* is the main tool and symbol of state power. The monopoly of legitimate education is now more important, more central than is the monopoly of legitimate violence.'[12]

The theoretical consensus linking the formation of mass schooling to the state's industrial and national imperatives leads to several inferences. Firstly, the institutionalisation of schools connected the centralised state with its populace, making education one of the earliest forms of direct state control over its young generations, their upbringing, moralisation, and knowledge control. Secondly, we may feel reluctant to adopt Gellnerian functionalist views and may opt for more contextual explanations for education's institutionalisation. However, even with the latter, it becomes difficult to envision an education system that fulfils its Kantian vision of human emancipation, as such an idea is counterintuitive to the concept of statism which education serves. Thirdly, the direct control of state regimes (democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian) over education places such systems in a volatile position, prone to ideological indoctrination for political reproduction. The example of the USSR, a totalitarian state where power was not derived from the governed,[13] clearly demonstrates the instrumentalisation of schools for political ideological reproduction.

Education in the USSR and Its Legacies

In the USSR the education system, from teaching practices to curricula and overarching ideology, was designed to indoctrinate students and

11 Gellner, *Thought and Change*.

12 Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 34.

13 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Penguin Classics, 2017.

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reproduce communist ideology across generations. It was controlled by the state to cultivate the *Soviet Man*, an individual who internalised the worldview of Marxism-Leninism, conformed to the regime, feared the state, and relied on it even in the planning of daily lives and activities.[14]

The rationale of this system could be traced to Lenin's belief that working-class people were unaware of the exploitative nature of the existing social class structures, justifying external interference.[15] Unlike the working class, his party possessed the knowledge and ideological training to make decisions for the population for their emancipation. Starting in the 1920s, schools and the teaching workforce were utilised as channels for party propaganda and indoctrination.[16] With the ideology of the New Soviet Man forming the foundations of the USSR's education system, behaviour control, or character training of students (воспитание/vospitaniye), became an integral part of the school curriculum. School assignments across all subjects were designed to instil communist values in students and teach them to prioritise collective interests over individual desires.[17] Such training had to be entrusted to teachers.[18]

As the conduits of ideological reproduction, the Soviet state trained its own workforce of teachers.[19] Soviet pedagogues underwent party-controlled training and were considered members of the *intelligentsia* ready to create and disseminate Soviet culture. The state's reliance on the teaching class for propaganda also accorded teachers a special social status. Although

14 M. Soboleva, 'The Concept of the "New Soviet Man" and Its Short History', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 51, № 1 (2017): 64–85. https://doi.org/10.1163/22102396-05101012.

15 Lenin in J. Ehrenberg, 'Communists and Proletarians: Lenin on Consciousness and Spontaneity', *Studies in Soviet Thought* 25, № 4 (1983), p. 285. www.jstor.org/stable/20099235.

16 S. White, 'Propagating Communist Values in the USSR', *Problems of Communism* 34, № 6 (1985): 1–17. V. Shlapentokh, 'The Soviet Union: A Normal Totalitarian Society', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 15, № 4 (1999): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523279908415418.

17 I. Schlesinger, 'Moral Education in the Soviet Union', *Phi Delta Kappan 46,* № 2 (1964): 72–75. www.jstor.org/stable/20343249.

18 J. Muckle, *A Guide to the Soviet Curriculum: What the Russian Child Is Taught in School*. Routledge, 1988. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003521877. J. Muckle, *Portrait of a Soviet School under Glasnost*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1990. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21077-0.

19 Muckle, *Guide to the Soviet Curriculum*. Muckle, *Portrait of a Soviet School*.

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they were not well paid, their profession was prestigious and respected.[20] Additionally, their role as moral trainers further expanded their social significance.

After the collapse of the USSR, even though its economic and political legacy was dismantled, its institutional legacies have persisted, as shown in studies on the shadow of communist governance modes and lifestyles in post-communist republics.[21] The continuity is also evident in education. Studies indicate that in the education system, post-Soviet reforms often reproduced patterns established under Soviet rule. Studies across Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan show that despite policy amendments to increase autonomy and academic freedom, to improve institutional governance or modernise curricula, and to decentralise educational ideologies, hierarchies, top-down governance, and frameworks rooted in Soviet morals and centralised control have endured.[22]

20 J.I. Zajda, *Education in the USSR*. International Studies in Education and Social Change. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980. Retrieved from www.sciencedirect.com/book/9780080258072/education-in-the-ussr.

21 M.S. Shugart, 'Politicians, Parties, and Presidents: An Exploration of Post-Authoritarian Institutional Design', in *Liberalisation and Leninist Legacies: Comparative Perspectives on Democratic Transitions*, ed. B. Crawford and A. Lijphart. University of California at Berkeley, 1997, pp. 1–40. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/58k2v56g. C.H. Fairbanks, Jr., 'Twenty Years of Postcommunism: Georgia's Soviet Legacy', *Journal of Democracy* 21, Nº 1 (2010): 144–51. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0135. A. Obydenkova and A. Libman, 'Understanding the Survival of Post-Communist Corruption in Contemporary Russia: The Influence of Historical Legacies', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, Nº 4 (2014): 304–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2014.931683.

22 G. Kliucharev and J. Muckle, 'Ethical Values in Russian Education Today: A Moral Maze', *Journal of Moral Education* 34, Nº 4 (2005): 465–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240500412521. A.J. DeYoung, 'The Erosion of *Vospitaniye* (Social Upbringing) in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Voices from the Schools', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40, Nº 2 (2007): 239–56. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2007.03.005. I. Chirikov and I. Gruzdev, 'Back in the USSR: Path Dependence Effects in Student Representation in Russia', *Studies in Higher Education* 39, Nº 3 (2014): 455–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.896181. T. Bogachenko and L. Perry, 'Vospitanie and Regime Change: Teacher-Education Textbooks in Soviet and Post-Soviet Ukraine', *Prospects* 45 (2015): 549–62. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-015-9370-1. L. Leišytė, A.L. Rose, and E. Schimmelpfennig, 'Lithuanian Higher Education: Between Path Dependence and Change', in *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity*, ed. J. Huisman, A. Smolentseva, and I. Froumin. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018, pp. 285–310. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52980-6_11.

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Education and the Making of Soviet National Identities

One way to understand national identities in the post-Soviet republics is to trace their origins back to the Soviet Union and the nationalist paradigm it created. On the one hand, this paradigm was ethnic and cultural, shaped by Lenin's language policies, Soviet institution-building, and cultural initiatives. On the other hand, it reflected imperial nationalism and transnationalism, designed to construct a unified Soviet nation,[23] while leaving open space for ethnic and cultural elements for each group.

The Soviet national identity was created through nationality policies that were often contradictory in nature, with scholars such as Smith arguing that they are best understood not as a single unified policy.[24] When the Soviet Union was established, most of its peoples were not fully formed nations. Lenin's initial vision was to promote the self-determination of peoples, believing that this would eventually lead to the creation of a supra-ethnic and supra-national community capable of quenching imperialism.[25] During the nativisation period, the communists focused on developing minority languages and creating respective writing systems, publishing in those languages, opening schools that used them as the medium of instruction, and promoting their associated cultures. As a result, cultural and ethnic forms of national identification and political autonomy were maximised, while the authority of the Communist Party was maintained and Russian imperialist-nationalism was condemned.

23 I. Ekua-Thompson, 'Imperial Nationalism, Sovietism, and Transnationalism in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Sphere: A Case Study of Estonian Subcultural Identity', *National Identities* (2025): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2025.2500626.

24 J. Smith, 'Was There a Soviet Nationality Policy?', *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, № 6 (2019): 972–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1635570.

25 H. Kohn, 'Soviet Communism and Nationalism: Three Stages of a Historical Development', in *Soviet Nationality Problems*, ed. E. Allworth. New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1971, pp. 43–71. https://doi.org/10.7312/allw92908-006. R.G. Suny, 'Nationalist and Ethnic Unrest in the Soviet Union', *World Policy Journal* 6, № 3 (1989): 503–28. www.jstor.org/stable/40209117. R.G. Suny, 'The Contradictions of Identity: Being Soviet and National in the USSR and After', in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities, ed.* M. Bassin and C. Kelly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 17–36. R. Suny and P. Goldman, 'State, Civil Society, and Ethnic Cultural Consolidation in the USSR—Roots of the National Question', in *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*, ed. G. Lapidus and V. Zaslavsky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 22–44.

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The paradigm shifted when Stalin seized power, moving from Lenin's anti-Russian imperialism to an era that emphasised Russian superiority within the Soviet brotherhood.[26] Under Stalin the goal was to use Russian culture to strengthen loyalty to the Soviet state and to suppress other expressions of national identity, but it 'accidentally' led to the rise of Russian nationalism.[27] The creation of the Russian national identity was accompanied by the universalisation of other national identities to encourage them to adopt Russian culture. During the Second World War, this was supplemented by special propaganda designed to indigenise the war effort among non-Russians.[28] By drawing on ethnic symbols, national heroes, and idioms, the Soviet leadership reinforced local national practices—even as the idea of Russians as the 'elder brother' became more firmly rooted.

Stalin's period was followed by Khrushchev's thaw, which manifested itself in education through policies that curtailed minority-language instruction, introducing reforms that encouraged the adoption of Russian over indigenous languages for compulsory study.[29] However, the decentralisation and greater autonomy during Brezhnev's tenure,[30] followed by Gorbachev's glasnost, fully opened the political scene, leading to the rise of national consciousness and the first ethnic conflicts in the USSR.[31]

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the time frames for each Soviet leader alongside their corresponding policies on nationalism and Marxism-Leninism, with the former fluctuating more than the latter.

26 Kohn, 'Soviet Communism and Nationalism'; Suny and Goldman, 'State, Civil Society, and Ethnic Cultural Consolidation'.

27 D. Brandenberger, 'Stalin's Populism and the Accidental Creation of Russian National Identity', *Nationalities Papers* 38, Nº 5 (2010): 723–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2010.498464.

28 B. Schechter, '"The People's Instructions": Indigenizing the Great Patriotic War among "Non-Russians"', *Ab Imperio* Nº 3 (2012), 109–33. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/imp.2012.0095.

29 A. Kelly and I. Kovalchuk, 'Ukrainian Education and Russian Literature: Curriculum Change in a Time of War', *Slavonic and East European Review* 102, Nº 3 (2024): 526–57. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/see.00038.

30 R. Hornsby, 'Introduction', in *Protest, Reform and Repression in Khrushchev's Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 1–20.

31 M.R. Beissinger, 'How Nationalisms Spread: Eastern Europe Adrift the Tides and Cycles of Nationalist Contention', *Social Research* 63, Nº 1 (1996). Suny, 'Contradictions of Identity'.

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The time gap between 1982 and 1985 is due to the rapid succession of two leaders during this period, neither of whom had sufficient time to implement significant policy shifts.

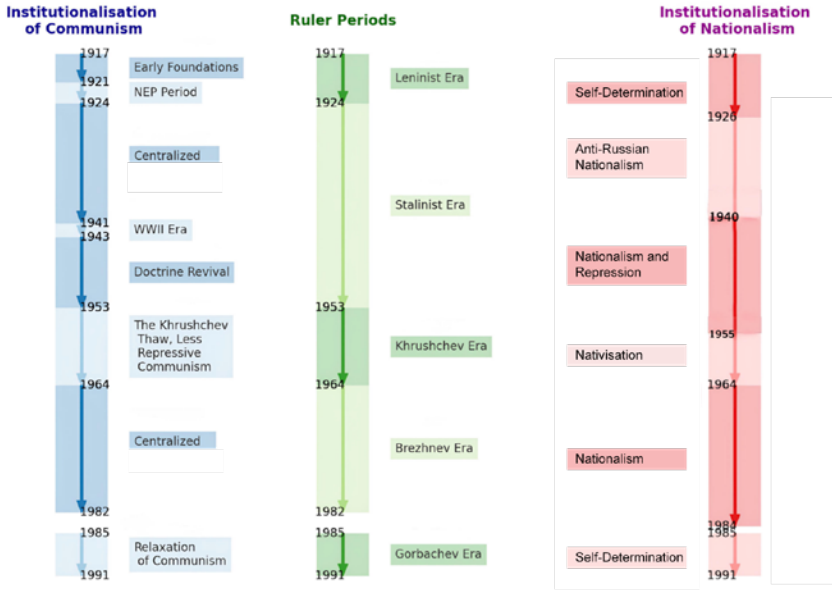

Figure 1. Soviet ideological and political trajectories, 1917–91

Thus, we can delineate several characteristics of Soviet national identity. In the Lenin era, it was characterised by non-Russian ethno-nationalism, which strengthened ethnic and cultural identities across the republics, but later shifted towards Russian ethno-nationalism. In parallel the Soviets also promoted a transnational identity for the Soviet nations. The USSR lacked a centralised, universal approach to nation formation, yet it consolidated local identities in lines of cultural and ethnic categories. The peoples of the socialist republics simultaneously incorporated loyalty to the Soviet Union as a motherland with their ethno-national identities.[32]

32 Suny, 'Contradictions of Identity'.

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Given the existing literature on Soviet national identity building and cross-country comparisons that trace institutional challenges to communist legacies, the subsequent analysis builds on the hypothesis that traces of both ideological paths, the continuation of the USSR's communist ideologies, including its moral framework and belief system in society at large, and the inconsistencies of nationalism and national identity, will be reflected in Armenian education.

Methodology

Theoretical Lens, Data Collection, and Analysis Methods

As its theoretical lens, this study employs path dependence to capture the connection between the current state of affairs and its historical context. It utilises Mahoney's definition of self-reinforcing events in path dependence,[33] in which initial historical occurrences influence subsequent ones by establishing institutional patterns that are continuously adapted. Consequently, once the motion is set, it becomes almost impossible to return to previously available options due to the institutional reproduction, established habits, and costs that are hard to challenge.[34] The utilisation of path dependency allows the paper to set up the initial hypotheses that the USSR's legacy has set into motion institutionalised ideologies around education and national identity that bear deterministic consequences to this date.

To answer the research questions and to measure the validity of the initial path-dependent hypothesis, the paper relies on qualitative data from six semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers, each of which lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The interview format was chosen due to

33 Mahoney, 'Comparative-Historical Methodology'; Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology'.

34 Mahoney, 'Comparative-Historical Methodology'. P. Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', *American Political Science Review* 94, № 2 (2000): 251–67. https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011. C. Tilly, 'How (and What) Are Historians Doing?', *American Behavioral Scientist* 33, № 6 (1990): 685–711. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002764290033006005.

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the flexibility it provided to both the interviewees and the interviewer,[35] and it enabled the interviewer to maintain control over discussion topics, while also providing space to ask follow-up questions in case new themes emerged during the interview.

Furthermore, the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to CDA was employed to analyse the interview materials. CDA was selected for its ability to analyse language in relation to social and political dynamics, and the DHA was chosen for its focus on the historical context of discourse.[36] Following Wodak and Meyer's analytical framework of the DHA,[37] this paper looks at three aspects of the interview data: the discourse itself, how it influences identity, and how it relates to a historically conditioned context.

Interview Participant Profiles and Selection Criteria

The interviewees were selected through multiple networks. Three teachers were recruited after responding to a Facebook post about the research project in a teacher group. At the time of the interviews, they were employed in public schools across different regions of Armenia. Two teachers based in the capital were recruited through a government-affiliated body, the National Centre for Educational Development and Innovation (NCEDI), which is responsible for training and accrediting teachers according to the standards established by the Ministry of

35 Lincoln and Cuba cited in L. Cohen, L. Manion, and K. Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 8th edn. London: Routledge, 2018, p. 313. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539.

36 N. Fairclough, 'Critical Discourse Analysis and the Marketization of Public Discourse: The Universities', *Discourse & Society* 4, № 2 (1993): 133–68. www.jstor.org/stable/42888773. N. Fairclough and R. Wodak, 'Critical Discourse Analysis', in *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, ed. T. van Dijk. London: Sage, 1997, 2.258–84. T.A. Van Dijk, 'Critical Discourse Analysis', in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, and H.E. Hamilton. John Wiley & Sons, 2005, pp. 352–71. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470753460.ch19. T.A. Van Dijk, 'Critical Discourse Analysis', in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. D. Tannen, H.E. Hamilton, and D. Schiffrin. John Wiley, 2015, pp. 466–85. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch22. R. Wodak and M. Meyer, 'Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory and Methodology', *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* 2, № 1 (2009). McGregor in T. Mogashoa, 'Understanding Critical Discourse Analysis in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, 1, № 7 (2014): 104–13. Retrieved from www.arcjournals.org.

37 Wodak and Meyer, 'Critical Discourse Analysis'.

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Education. At the time of the interviews they held part-time jobs as public schoolteachers and full-time positions as teacher trainers. The last teacher was recruited through personal connections that referred to teachers working in regional schools.

The list below presents the study participants, who were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. Identifying details, such as schools and institutional positions, have been abstracted to prevent direct identification while retaining information relevant to the research.

- Aram: A male history and social sciences teacher in his late thirties, working in a small village school. He taught in Nagorno-Karabakh before the forced displacement. Before becoming a teacher, he worked in the military on a contract basis.

- Ani: A female Armenian language and literature teacher in her late thirties, working in a conflict-zone village school bordering Azerbaijan. She has been there since the start of her career, has received training from Teach For All, Armenia, and the NCEDI, and occasionally delivers lectures to other teachers.

- Narek: A male teacher-trainer for the NCEDI in his mid thirties, also teaching social sciences and history part-time at a private school in the capital, which uses its own teaching methods.

- Alina: A senior NCEDI official and part-time Armenian language and literature teacher in her late forties, based in the capital city.

- Karo: A male history and social sciences teacher in his early forties, working in a conflict-zone village school bordering Azerbaijan. He has been at this school since the start of his career and is currently receiving training from Teach For All,

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Armenia. He served as a reservist during the Second Nagorno-Karabagh War.

- Liana: A female primary teacher in her early forties, working in the capital. She has taught in multiple schools throughout her career, both in the capital and in the regions, and occasionally delivers lectures to other teachers.

Methodological Challenges and Researcher Positionality

The methodology, theoretical framework, data collection, and analysis methods employed in this study, as well as its qualitative nature, introduced inherent limitations that were mitigated through reflexivity.

This research relies on historical analysis to explain teachers' interpretations of national identity and educational ideologies. While this approach provides contextual insight, it inevitably omits alternative explanations. For instance, political discourse in Armenia around education and identity has shifted considerably since the war; however, the influence of teachers' political affiliations on their perceptions was not discussed in the interviews or addressed in the study. This limitation is partially offset by the inclusion of teachers occupying government-affiliated positions, who are likely to be closer to the government-led political discourse.

The relatively small sample size of six interviews and the demographic profiles of the participants are another limitation. The study participants represented a younger cohort of teaching professionals and a balanced gender distribution, which is not fully representative of the teaching population, where older and predominantly female teachers make up a larger proportion. Including more diverse demographic profiles could have yielded different understandings of national identities and educational ideologies, though these limitations are somewhat mitigated through triangulation of the interview data with policy reform analysis.

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Moreover, the age imbalance is likely to diminish over time due to the generational turnover in the profession over the next decade.

Additionally, the interview questions assumed a level of awareness among the participants regarding state education legislation and the rationale behind educational policies. Many teachers, including those in government-affiliated institutions and teacher-trainer roles, demonstrated limited awareness of these, indicating a lack of cohesion around government-defined educational goals. Consequently, when discussing 'teachers' ideological types', it is important to note that ideal types were not strictly observed, and teachers occupied fluid positions along a spectrum.

CDA inherently involves selecting certain aspects of discourse for examination while leaving others unexamined.[38] This selection process means that both the researcher's attributes and knowledge systems influence the study and shape the 'truths' constructed within it. Thus, the study adopts an epistemological stance that treats truth as socially constructed and influenced by both intrinsic and external factors. Significant effort was made to engage in reflexivity and with extensive literature to mitigate confirmation biases, and to rely on direct quotations and empirical evidence from interviewees. It is also recognised that the researcher cannot fully perceive the world from the perspectives of others. The study's conclusions should therefore be understood as an interpretation of complex social and historical influences rather than an absolute representation of objective reality.

Data Analysis

Armenian Education Legislation Overview and Analysis

To contextualise the teacher interviews, it is useful to look at the discourse of the New Education Standard (2021), adopted after Armenia's defeat

38 Van Dijk, 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (2005) and 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (2015).

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in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, alongside the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Education (2009). The Law defines the purpose of Armenia's state education as 'the process of bringing up and educating individuals' in 'the spirit of patriotism, statehood, and humanism', preparing them to 'orient themselves professionally'. It emphasises 'comprehensive individual development, civic consciousness, respect for individual rights and freedoms, dignity, patriotism, hard work, responsibility, tolerance, and the formation of an environmental worldview' (Article 4).

The Standard, by contrast, spells out the competencies students are expected to develop, most of which target knowledge-based skills such as language, mathematics, and science. Competency number four, however, goes beyond individual abilities and situates students within the state and society, and links character development to social roles:

> students should contribute to social development based on the rule of law, democracy, social justice, and freedom. They should develop a love for their homeland, understand national, state, and public interests and priorities, and value human life and dignity. They should recognise the cultural, state-legal, and economic spheres of society, analyse them comprehensively, show initiative, make independent decisions, and take responsibility for the consequences. (Section 2:4)

The analysis of the legislative amendments shows an egalitarian transition in how the state conceives the relationship between citizens and education, manifested in three ways: first, a shift from emphasising individual moral traits to civic responsibilities; second, a redefinition of students' roles in relation to the state; and third, a reshaping of teachers' classroom responsibilities. Yet, references to communist universalism remain intact.

The first shift—from value nurturing to civic traits—is evident in how the Law's emphasis on patriotism as the ultimate goal of education has evolved in the Standard towards statism and liberal values. The

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Law mentions 'patriotism' three times in the context of student traits. The Standard uses the term only in the phrase 'patriotic citizen', implying that patriotism is valued in relation to citizenship and the state. Similarly, the Law lists traits such as 'diligence' and 'decent behaviour' alongside 'civic consciousness, human rights, and freedoms', suggesting a syntactic equalisation of disciplinary and civic values. In contrast, the Standard omits terms like 'diligence' and instead emphasises traits that foster egalitarian social outcomes. Competency number three, for example, expects students to demonstrate 'honesty and responsibility towards themselves and others, regardless of age, gender, nationality, level of well-being, appearance, abilities, profession, beliefs, and other characteristics'. The transition is also evident in the way these two policies treat the role of teachers. The Law assigns teachers disciplinary roles to shape 'proper behavioural responses' among students, which is reminiscent of communist moral conformity imposed from above. The Standard does not assign corrective roles to teachers and instead promotes a self-reflective understanding of student behaviour. Table 1 offers a visual representation of the discursive shifts.

Law of the Republic of Armenia on Education (2009)	New Education Standard (2021)
The development of patriotism	Patriotic citizen Love for homeland
Decent behaviour	Behaviour for self-improvement
Diligence	Reflects on work, has work skills, and works under pressure
Teachers form proper behaviour and manners among students	Learners learn self-reflection and self-organisation skills
National values	National and state interests
National and universal values	National and international cultural values

Table 1. Discursive shifs in Armenia's educational legislation, 2009–21

Aside from the changes, Armenia's educational legislation references 'humanism' and 'universal values' as moral benchmarks alongside national values, without providing clear definitions for these terms. While global

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education systems may use universalism to integrate diversity, it is rare for educational laws to emphasise 'universal values' or 'humanism' in their opening articles. France's Code de l'éducation[39] uses education to promote national values that are intrinsically liberal and democratic. It states that 'In addition to transmitting knowledge, the Nation sets as the primary mission of the school to share with pupils the values of the Republic.' The UK's Education Act (2002), Section 78 (1), mentions that the national curriculum in England and Wales promotes 'the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society'.[40] Yet, any appeals to humanism and universalism are absent in both legislations.

Although the word choices in the Armenian legislature may be unintentional or contingent, they suggest that the communist ideological legacy persists as an underlying path through self-reinforcement. The references to 'humanism' in particular echo Marxist-Leninist philosophy, which posited a shared moral framework and envisioned the triumph of communism as leading to universal emancipation and global equilibrium. Nonetheless, Armenia's new Standard tries to replace communist moralism with more egalitarian moral principles and to reframe a rudimentary, state-detached form of patriotism as a more civic and state-oriented ethos.

National Identities in Transition: DHA Analysis

The interview data suggest that, following the Nagorno-Karabakh war, teachers consistently engaged students in classroom discussions about the post-war situation through allegories and metaphors to process the reality of defeat. This process sometimes prompted reflection on their own identities. These reflections gave rise to two distinct responses. On the one hand, some teachers contested historical narratives and stigmatised existing identities, finding solace in constructing new forms of identity that aligned more closely with the experience of defeat.

39 France, Code de l'éducation, www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/texte_lc/LEGITEXT000006071191.
40 UK, Education Act 2002, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/section/78.

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Moreover, they tended to justify the newly adopted identities by the ideas of universalism and, at times, anti-nationalism. On the other hand, a different group of teachers returned to historical narratives for another reason: to destigmatise the defeated identity. In this case, history provided a safer place, where the nation was stronger, held better moral values, and had a historical destiny. It allowed them to demonstrate their loyalty to the pre-war national identities after the defeat. However, both responses of the majority participants decoupled the state from their identities and at times relied on ethnic-cultural or transnational identities. This indicates an absence of firmly institutionalised state-centred nationalism and points to a continuation of the Soviet identity paradigm.

In her classroom Alina, a government-affiliated teacher, used the example of *the legend of Ara the Handsome, king of Armenia, and Queen Semiramis of Assyria* to engage students in discussions about the post-war defeat situation. According to the legend, the 'lustful' queen of Assyria heard of the Armenian king's beauty and sent messengers to propose marriage. The union would have united the two enemy states and allowed them to rule both countries. Ara rejected the offer, which provoked Semiramis to wage war against Armenia to capture him and force him into marriage. During the battle Assyria defeated Armenia, and Semiramis's soldiers mistakenly killed Ara, leaving the country under Assyrian rule. After the war, Alina began asking her students what would have happened if Ara had been more diplomatic and accepted Semiramis's offer. 'I ask now, was he not wrong? Could he not have accepted Semiramis's proposal diplomatically, instead of going to war? Why not accept and expand the territory, improve the economy, and see what he could do with that woman later on?'

In Alina's classroom the legendary proposal served as a metaphor for Nagorno-Karabakh and its potential surrender without another war. This allegory allowed her to engage students in discussions about the political decisions of the defeat and to explore alternative scenarios. Interestingly the rationalisation of national myths to critically engage with the present

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ultimately led her to reproduce the existing scenario of capitulation, without questioning the subsequent issue of state sovereignty.

Narek used a similar approach to discuss the post-conflict situation through metaphors, without direct references to the actual political events and students' experiences. When discussing the issue of conflict resolution as a soft skill, he switched the topic to international relations and open borders. He discussed the importance of neighbourly relations with other states, and guided the students to think of 'scenarios in place so that if we decide to trust the neighbours, it is well calculated'.

The revisiting of the past to analyse the present reality then turns into identity stigmatisation, when events of the past are reframed into historical narratives that are sometimes falsified to serve contemporary contestations. Alina's contemplations of alternatives in historical events extended to the teaching of the Armenian genocide, which led to identity stigmatisation. After the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Alina began questioning the responsibility of Armenians in the Armenian genocide. She said, 'We often discuss where our fault was, why we didn't self-organise.' Alina provided answers to the questions she posed to her students. Those answers suggest a perceived moral turpitude among Armenians. To avoid such scenarios, she concluded that Armenians had to learn 'to support the successful among them instead of engaging in betrayal and envy'. The idea that both historical and current misfortunes are a consequence of the lack of collective probity also appeared in the interview with Aram. After the war Aram began revisiting history to find examples of immoral historical figures causing collective tragedies; as he said, he began discussing treason and negative collective traits of Armenians, such as jealousy and envy.

When the collective identity is presented as possessing wicked traits, the national narrative and its myth—the *Platonic noble lie* the state tells to secure its legitimacy—also become deficient and require adjustments. Alina recalled explaining to her colleagues that Armenia should follow France's method of teaching history. According to her, in France there

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is no separate subject for national history; it is integrated into the world history curriculum. This contrasts with Armenia, where students take two parallel subjects: world history and Armenian history. She said, 'I discussed it with the teachers; they protested and got confused. For them, it is only about the words "Armenian history"; national emotions are more important.' As social constructs, nations rely on the collective memory of shared past events, myths, and traditions to create a sense of community and continuity. When Alina opposes the teaching of the collective memory, she challenges the condensation of narratives that form historical truth and are used to create the nation itself. However, it is not that she asks for forgetting. She wants it to be discussed to the extent that it contributes to the formation of the collective memories of other nations, that is, world history. It is this subjective form of history that needs to be adjusted to fit a different reality, one in which the nation is considered and justified in relation to others, rather than solely to itself. Moreover, Alina did not seem to question why she wanted this change, or why her colleagues in a country with a population the size of Paris resisted the idea of adopting the teaching style of a state that was once one of the largest empires in history.

Ani shared similar stories in her interview. She noted that after the war it became painful for her to observe students expressing nationalistic and chauvinistic views. When asked what she considered expressions of chauvinism, she identified her students' support for the Armenian guerrilla movements during the genocide and their heroisation of Armenia's army commanders in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War as examples of extremism. The figures associated with the resistance during the genocide and the First Nagorno-Karabakh War effectively prevented the complete decimation of Armenians and are embedded in the Armenian collective identity and narratives as liberation movements in response to existential threats. However, in the post-defeat context, the figures representing nation-state ideologies are recast as chauvinists, and their ideologies of resistance are perceived as a source of harm. Extremism is not identified with perceived others who might be harmed by it, but rather in relation to the self. In the next step, national narratives and

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figures that demand opposition to capitulation are seen as needing adjustment and replacement with more reconcilable ideals and figures.

Liana's engagement with the revision of identities took a different direction. To process the identity crisis, she drew on her pre-war teaching practices to destigmatise the defeated identity and reinforce her loyalty to it. She mentioned her pre-war custom of taking her students to Armenia's main military pantheon, Yerablur. After the war, when the pantheon gained hundreds, if not thousands, of new graves of young military conscripts, and the capitulation of Nagorno-Karabakh, she paused this ritual of patriotic expression. A year passed, and she reimagined the concept of identity and began attaching symbolism to the loss: 'I began telling them [her students] Yerablur is not just a graveyard but a museum of heroes.' When students countered her and mentioned their disappointment, she told them: 'What truly matters is that you have a homeland. It doesn't matter who governs Armenia; it is you who are responsible for it.' Karo shared a similar story from his classroom discussions, explaining how he guided his students to view the situation through the lens of continuity in Armenian identity and a history marked by both victories and defeats.

Both Karo and Liana concluded that the education system needed a revamp to strengthen national identity. When asked how this could be achieved, they suggested integrating national cultural expressions, such as songs and dances, and embedding national value systems into education. However, when asked to define these value systems, neither Liana nor Karo provided clear answers. Instead, they referred to humanist principles or proposed reinforcing patriotism by making education more culturally national. They argued that transforming education in this way would have bolstered national identity, which, in turn, could have challenged the prevailing sense of defeat. If ideology and identity had been strong, they reasoned, people would have felt responsible for reconciling the traumatic present with the victorious past. Unlike the first group of teachers, who employed historical narratives to stigmatise and reshape current identities, this group sought to reconnect with the

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pre-war identity and utilise it to frame the present reality as an interruption to be rectified through the consolidation of national identity.

Teachers' Interpretations of Civic and Pastoral Roles

The interviewed teachers diverged in their understandings of the purpose of Armenia's education system, their professional roles, and the ideological foundations guiding their work. These divergences crystallised into two orientations: one pastoral, justified through universalist ideals and prioritisation of individual character-building; and another civic and national, which ties education to the state's prosperity and nation-building. Notably, teachers who held stronger national ideals tended to ascribe to themselves more civic roles compared to those who gravitated towards more universalist understandings of identity.

Narek, a government-affiliated teacher-trainer, was the only respondent who explicitly connected Armenia's education standards to the state, describing the purpose of education as 'to create a citizen of a future rule-of-law state, equipped with skills, knowledge, and a value system of liberal democracy'. Alina and Ani, by contrast, referred to the specific traits-related competencies outlined in the Standard, listing qualities such as resilience, teamwork, and adaptability to changing environments. Aram, on the other hand, associated the mission of education with the well-being of teachers. He suggested that if he were to establish an educational ideology, it would prioritise teacher welfare and grant teachers greater disciplinary authority in schools.

In the conversation about teachers' responsibilities toward the state and society, similar patterns emerged. Those who embraced stronger national ideologies articulated a clearer sense of statism and the reciprocal relationship between educators and the state. They viewed teachers as responsible for educating students about their duties as citizens. Narek, for example, mentioned teaching about civic activism and protests during extracurricular activities, and Liana defined her role as 'educating the

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generation that will defend the rights of the state tomorrow'. Moreover, Ani and Alina redirected the discussion towards morality. Ani saw her role as shaping society by instilling proper values: she said, 'If the teachers are forgiving, so are the students.' Aram's response was the epitome of the perceived hierarchy of morality between students and teachers, describing his duty as to 'make students useful to society, preventing them from ending up in prison'.

The ideological fault line persisted when the teachers discussed the value systems they sought to promote. Narek, Liana, and Karo emphasised values linked to civic ethics and liberal responsibility, such as tolerance and respect, self-awareness, and the pursuit of justice and truth. Conversely, Alina and Ani framed their values in universalist and collectivist terms. Alina described her end goal as nurturing selflessness: 'If we care for each other and ourselves become one that lives for the world, we are successful.' Ani's response revealed inner contradictions: she spoke of granting students freedom 'in their minds and actions', but later added, 'I don't like individualism; I value teamwork and how much students push their friends.' Aram once again reinforced discipline and hierarchy, saying that 'if there is no discipline, the student will dominate, and you cannot conduct a lesson'.

The ideological divergence partially maintained itself when the teachers were asked whether Armenia needed a state-imposed educational ideology. Most respondents supported such a framework. Narek argued that 'such matters cannot be left to individual discretion', and Aram nostalgically compared it to the USSR's five-year plans, suggesting that Armenia lacked such a structure. Karo and Liana were the only respondents who did not provide absolute answers and attributed importance to the relative independence of the teachers. Liana remarked, 'While it would be better to have guidance from the state, there should be space for individual approaches to be developed.' Karo similarly proposed that the state could define an overarching ideology, which teachers would then localise through their own work practices.

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Discussion on National Identities and Path Dependence

The study's analysis points to a transitional phase in Armenia's educational discourse, which has started with state-initiated policy reforms in education and moved to individual deliberations and revisions of identity and ideology among the teaching population. The analysis of the Law on Education (2009) and the New Education Standard (2021) shows a redefinition of the foundations of education. There is a shift from the cultivation of individual character traits toward civic responsibility and social participation. Although the new Standard moves closer to a framework centred on the state and civic roles for students, it retains elements of moral universalism and suggests that the ideological renewal is incomplete and continues to carry communist legacies. Moreover, the interviews with schoolteachers reveal a dynamic interplay between identity deliberations and diverging ideas about educational ideologies. The teachers' classroom practices often involve identity revisions, which can take the form of stigmatising or destigmatising certain identities, promoting universalist or counter-national ideas, recreating historical narratives, or omitting aspects of the present to preserve national myths.

The prevalence of such ideals, even among government-affiliated teachers, indicates a potential disconnect between state-building and nation-building, suggesting that the foundations for the former are being discarded. Kymlicka argues that state-building inherently involves nation-building;[41] even seemingly benign decisions, such as selecting an official language or establishing national holidays, determine which group's identity warrants state recognition. When the state's national identity achieves a dominant position, it also helps to maintain unity among citizens around these identities and support state power, so that it maintains the identity. In this context, the gap in teachers' understanding of the relationship between the state and national identity may eventually undermine the state's ability to cultivate a coherent civic ethos.

41 W. Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*. Oxford: OUP, 2001.

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The consideration of the Soviet legacy may explain this phenomenon in Armenia. The USSR had little incentive to foster national consciousness tied to statism, as this could threaten the integrity of the federation. Instead, nationalism was allowed only within cultural and ethnic limits. Moreover, the inconsistency and ambivalence regarding the relationship between the state and national identity created a legacy of uncertainty around them.[42]

In the same vein, the Soviets labelled figures and movements advocating for national sovereignty as chauvinists. For example, Ukrainian nationalists resisting Soviet control were portrayed as Nazi-backed insurgents, which equated their actions with those of Nazi Germany across the Soviet republics—a narrative that was also employed by the Russian government.[43] Nationalism was depicted as a source of social disorder, while the universalism of communism was presented as a model of social harmony. Just as non-Russians in the USSR were expected to adopt the Russian language, culture, and even naming conventions to integrate into the dominant system, some study participants saw the elimination of nationalist sentiments among their students as a way to align Armenia with the world and prevent potential conflicts.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, some teachers' responses and their emphasis on the reinforcement of national identity independently of the state can also be understood in relation to the Soviet legacy. Historically the Soviet state's unwillingness to protect Armenians and, at times, its complicity in their endangerment contributed to perceptions of unstable social realities as direct threats to national identity, creating protective

42 J.O. Pohl, 'Stalin's Genocide against the "Repressed Peoples"', *Journal of Genocide Research* 2, № 2 (2000): 267–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/713677598. J. Laycock, 'Armenian Homelands and Homecomings, 1945–9: The Repatriation of Diaspora Armenians to the Soviet Union', *Cultural and Social History* 9, № 1 (2012): 103–23. https://doi.org/10.2752/147800412X13191165983079. J. Laycock, 'Belongings: People and Possessions in the Armenian Repatriations, 1945–49', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, № 3 (2017): 511–37. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/kri.2017.0034.

43 T. Erlacher, 'Denationalizing Treachery: The Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in Late Soviet Discourse, 1945–85', *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 2, № 2 (2013): 289–316. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/reg.2013.0010.

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forms of nationalism detached from state authority.[44] Events such as the First Nagorno-Karabakh War and the 1988 Sumgait pogrom compounded the historical traumas and reinforced an 'everyone is against us' mentality. Given this context, the strengthening of national identity outside state structures and the instilling of responsibility in the individual, rather than relying on governmental action, may reflect a path-dependent pattern of self-preserving nationalism.

Although this paper provides historically grounded explanations for the patterns observed in Armenian educational discourse, it does not address the political discourses and movements that may shape the contestations or drive them. The focus on historical legacies leaves room for future research to explore how political agendas condition identity formation in education and to deepen understanding of the intersection of history, politics, and pedagogy in shaping national consciousness.

Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding how the post-war identity landscape in Armenia shapes educational discourse and reforms, as well as individual teachers' contestations over identity and social roles, and links these practices to Soviet-era legacies. Scholars across various disciplines have examined how communist ideologies and social structures continue to manifest in post-communist societies in areas such as political distrust, low voter turnout, and practices in education, institutional culture, and the curriculum.[45] While previous research has explored communist legacies in Armenia's political institutions,[46] this study is one of the

44 P. Rutland, 'Democracy and Nationalism in Armenia', *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, Nº 5 (1994): 839–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139408412202.

45 Shugart, 'Politicians, Parties, and Presidents'; Kliucharev and Muckle, 'Ethical Values'; Fairbanks, 'Twenty Years of Postcommunism'; Chirikov and Gruzdev, 'Back in the USSR'; Obydenkova and Libman, 'Understanding the Survival'; Bogachenko and Perry, 'Vospitanie and Regime Change'; Leišytė et al., 'Lithuanian Higher Education'.

46 Y. Paturyan and V. Gevorgyan, 'Trust towards NGOs and Volunteering in South Caucasus: Civil Society Moving Away from Post-Communism?', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14, Nº 2 (2014): 239–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2014.904544.

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first to undertake a sociological analysis of identity and self-perception in relation to the state and historical legacies.

The analysis focused on two dimensions: the framing and understanding of educational ideologies and values, and the formation of national identity in relation to historical legacies. Using path dependence theory, CDA, and the triangulation of policy documents with interviews of six teachers, the study identified divergences between state legislation and teacher perspectives on identity and educational ideologies. The policy texts showed a stronger emphasis on civic-centred education and national ideals grounded in liberal democratic values. Yet their references to universalist moral frameworks suggest that elements of the communist ideological legacy remain. Moreover, the teacher interviews showed that participants navigated post-war realities through processes of national identity revision, stigmatisation or destigmatisation, and reinforcement or distancing, often using universalist ideals as justification. Furthermore, the teachers did not demonstrate a coherent understanding of state educational ideologies or of their own roles vis-à-vis the state and students.

Given that this research is limited to a CDA of six teacher interviews and two policy papers, the findings should not be generalised to the entire Armenian teaching population. The results might have differed if participants had been drawn from other professional networks, if they had been approached within their communities, or if political discourse as a driver of ideological and identity contestations had been examined. Despite its limitations, the study identifies emerging trends in national identity, educational ideologies, and teachers' understandings of their roles in Armenia. Future research could expand on the findings by incorporating the political dimension into analyses of identity formation and its interaction with historical legacies in education.

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Bulgaria as a Russian Propaganda Laboratory

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Keywords—*populism, strategic communications, strategic communication, Russian propaganda, narratives, mushroom websites, autocratic sentiments, Bulgaria*

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Abstract

The paper analyses anti-democratic discourses—far-right populism and overt (pro-)Russian propaganda—in online media in Bulgaria after 2013. The main narratives and their variations are delineated, and the frequency of their dissemination over the years is measured. Using a case study, the story of the birth in 2022 and death in 2024 of the most powerful propaganda machine in the country is presented: a network of 4,000 mushroom websites disseminating one and the same propaganda content. The paper summarises several collective studies of the Human and Social Studies Foundation—Sofia (HSSF).

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Introduction

How is it possible for Russian propaganda to claim simultaneously that Russia is the last bastion of conservative Christian European values and that it is the one and only defender of African peoples against European colonial oppression? The contradiction is obvious, but it does not prevent many from believing both these messages together. A series of studies by the Human and Social Studies Foundation—Sofia (HSSF) on anti-democratic discourses (usually pro-Russian national-populist and overtly Russian[1]) in Bulgaria shows that to counter this propaganda we cannot rely merely on fact-checking or logical analysis. Fact-checking and debunking are not effective enough—what is needed is strategic communications based on democratic values.[2]

Below we will show through an analysis of a local socio-political environment where the answer should be sought: in actively counteracting the effectiveness of this propaganda, rather than in exposing its logical inconsistency.[3] In other words, the first step is to diagnose what makes Kremlin propaganda effective among certain social groups in liberal-democratic societies and among certain opportunistic political entrepreneurs attempting to stir up a wave of autocratic sentiments among these same groups.[4]

Before proceeding, let us answer the question of why we should focus on Bulgaria—and more generally, why we should focus on a single country with its political culture and specific political and social institutions and cultural traditions, rather than concentrating on large-scale processes such

1 When we talk about these two types of discourses in common, we will call them (pro-)Russian.

2 A model like the one offered by Neville Bolt: Neville Bolt, 'Bolt's Paradigm of Strategic Communications', in *Understanding Strategic Communications*, ed. Neville Bolt, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group Publication 3 (Riga: NATO StratCom COE, 2023).

3 Peter Pomerantsev, *How to Win an Information War: The Propagandist Who Outwitted Hitler* (New York: Public Affairs, 2024), pp. xii–xv.

4 Milena Iakimova, *Strah i propaganda* [Fear and Propaganda] (Sofia: East-West Publishers, 2022); Milena Iakimova, 'Propaganda i ozloblenie v digitalnata "voyna sreshtu realnostta"' [Propaganda and Resentment in the Digital 'War against Reality'], in *Digitalni neravenstva* [Digital Inequalities], ed. R. Sroilova (Sofia: St Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2025), ch. 14.

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as, say, the crisis of 'the global paradigm'.[5] This requires first answering the question of what Bulgaria's place in the Kremlin regime's hybrid war against Europe is.

Bulgaria's Place in the Kremlin's Hybrid War

Research shows that direct Russian propaganda has been rising steadily on a global scale, particularly after the anti-election protests in Russia in 2011–12,[6] the annexation of Crimea,[7] and the full-scale war against Ukraine.[8] Studies highlight that propaganda has expanded in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in the Black Sea region, targeting countries such as Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Romania, Georgia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.[9]

This propaganda campaign is directed at both traditional and social media. It is characterised by high volume, dissemination through multiple channels, repetition, distortion of reality, and lack of commitment to consistency.[10] While analysis often focuses on countries with Russian minorities, where the concept of the 'Russian world' (*russkiy mir*, русский мир) serves as a basis for propaganda attempts,[11] the Bulgarian

5 Adam Tooze, 'Defend Columbia: But from What? A Globalized University Caught in the Crosshairs of Polycrisis', *Chartbook* № 365, 27 March 2025, available at: https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-365-defend-columbia-but [accessed 12 October 2025].

6 S. Oates, 'Russian Media in the Digital Age: Propaganda Rewired', *Russian Politics* 1, № 4 (2016), pp. 398–417; T.C. Helmus, E. Bodine-Baron, A. Radin, M. Magnuson, J. Mendelsohn, W. Marcellino and Z. Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe* (RAND Corporation, 2018).

7 Helmus et al. *Russian Social Media Influence*.

8 D. Geissler, D. Bär, N. Pröllochs and S. Feuerriegel, 'Russian Propaganda on Social Media during the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine', *EPJ Data Science* 12, № 1 (2023), p. 35; M. Lelich, 'Victims of Russian Propaganda', *New Eastern Europe* 3, № 12 (2014), pp. 75–80.

9 G. Julukhidze, 'How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia', *New Eastern Europe* 4, № 42 (2020), pp. 13–19; Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence*; J. Mandić and D. Klarić, 'Case Study of the Russian Disinformation Campaign during the War in Ukraine—Propaganda Narratives, Goals, and Impacts', *National Security and the Future* 24, № 2 (2023), pp. 97–140.

10 C. Paul and M. Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model', *RAND Corporation* 2, № 7 (2016), pp. 1–10; E. Fortuin, '"Ukraine Commits Genocide on Russians": The Term "Genocide" in Russian Propaganda', *Russian Linguistics* 46, № 3 (2022), pp. 313–47; Julukhidze, 'How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia'.

11 S. Sukhankin and A. Hurska, 'Russian Informational and Propaganda Campaign against Ukraine Prior to the Euromaidan (2013–2014): Denying Sovereignty', *Securitologia* 21 (2015), p. 36.

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case is particularly interesting. Unlike many others, Bulgaria has no Russian minority population, yet strong economic and symbolic interests make it highly vulnerable.[12]

Bulgaria is an easy target because of its, so to speak, discursive readiness. By that we mean: the Bulgarian nation-building discourse after the emancipation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century was imbued with a positive image of Russia as a selfless liberator of the 'brotherly Slavic' people from the Ottomans. This image was unquestioned and even strengthened in public language, in history teaching in schools, and in the literary canon during the decades of state socialism.[13] The lack of debate around Bulgarian history after the fall of state socialism leaves this image untouched and ready to use with its insinuation that 'Russophilia' means patriotism. That is one of the reasons why this country was chosen as a research site, but also as a laboratory by Russian propagandists. Another reason for choosing Bulgaria is again opportunistic: its linguistic proximity. Bulgaria also interests Russian political engineers and propagandists because, unlike Serbia with which it shares the above prerequisites, it is a member of the European Union.

Consequently, Bulgaria is among the countries where Russian propaganda is extremely strong, alongside the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.[14] This makes Bulgaria a strategic sphere of interest not only due to its economic and ideological ties, such as historical revisionism, 'Slavic origin', and the Orthodox Church, but also because of its importance in the Black Sea region. At the same time, Bulgaria lacks strong and institutionalised countermeasures against propaganda and disinformation, relying instead on the efforts of NGOs, whose expertise cannot compensate for the absence of state-led responses.

12 Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence*.

13 A. Hranova, *Istoriografiya i literatura*, vol. 2: *Zhivotat na tri ponyatiya v bulgarskata kultura: vazrazhdane, srednovekovie, robstvo* [Historiography and Literature, vol. 2: The Life of Three Concepts in Bulgarian Culture: Revival, Middle Ages, Slavery] (Sofia: Prosveta Publishers, 2011).

14 Julukhidze, 'How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia'.

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The main goal of Russian propaganda campaigns is to create 'rifts' within Western countries, NATO, and the EU.[15] Journalistic investigations confirm that Bulgaria is a highly targeted object of propaganda,[16] while sociological surveys show measurable changes in public attitudes under the influence of these propaganda messages.[17]

We have also attempted to group and organise the narratives of Russian propaganda—an effort made by other authors as well, but often lacking completeness and a systematic approach.[18] A similar description of these narratives can be found in Karpchuk.[19] These are typical across Europe,[20] but they acquire specific local interpretations and adapt to local sentiments.

For more than ten years teams from the HSSF have been researching anti-democratic discourses and Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian media, and they can provide the most complete picture of this phenomenon from 2013 to the present day (2025). The authors are not aware of any other country for which such a comprehensive picture has been produced over such a long period of time. Populist and openly (pro-)Russian narratives, as well as their variations over time, have been analysed typologically; the spokespersons, media, and networks that disseminate them have been examined, as well as the technical means and frequency of dissemination; and sociological methods have been applied to analyse changes in social attitudes as a result of circulated (pro-)Russian propaganda. Equally,

15 V. Torichnyi, T. Biletska, O. Rybshchun, D. Kupriyenko, Y. Ivashkov, and A. Bratko, 'Information and Propaganda Component of the Russian Federation Hybrid Aggression: Conclusions for Developed Democratic Countries on the Experience of Ukraine', *TRAMES* 3 (2021), pp. 355–368; N. Karpchuk, 'The Russian Federation Propaganda Narrative', *Toruńskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 14, Nº 1 (2021), pp. 19–30.

16 Sopo Gelava, 'Suspicious Facebook Assets Amplify Pro-Kremlin Bulgarian "Mushroom" Websites', *DFRLab*, 26 March 2024, https://dfrlab.org/2024/03/26/suspicious-facebook-assets-bulgarian-mushroom-websites [accessed 12 October 2025].

17 Alpha Research and HSSF, 'Social Vulnerability and Propaganda: Summary of the Key Results from a Quantitative and Qualitative Sociological Survey, 2024' [in Bulgarian], available at: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/0524_Hybrid_Propaganda_KeyFindings_Final.pdf [accessed 12 October 2025].

18 Julukhidze, 'How Russian Propaganda Works in Georgia'; Torichnyi et al., 'Information and Propaganda Component'; D.I. Druga, 'War in Ukraine: Russian Propaganda Themes', *Strategic Impact* 84–85 (2022), pp. 80–93.

19 Karpchuk, 'Russian Federation Propaganda Narrative', pp. 24–25.

20 Ibid.

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reverse feedback—the reactions of propagandists to the social reception of their messages—has been captured. And experiments have been conducted on active counteraction through value-oriented strategic communications. The same studies found that Bulgaria is also being used as a laboratory for developing and testing global models—by creating, in the period 2022–24, a network of 4,000 Bulgarian-language mushroom websites linked to social media. This is the most powerful tool hitherto discovered for saturating the media environment with propaganda messages, but probably also for influencing Google algorithms, artificial intelligence, and social networks. The analysis appears here in a condensed form.

The Bulgarian case, therefore, provides an opportunity to understand how Russian propaganda functions in EU countries and how vulnerabilities within different European populations are exploited.

Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria after 2013 (*Longue Durée* Perspective)

What is Russian propaganda?

The first draft of the Russian propaganda package for internal use in Russia dates back to the Bolotnaya protests of 2011–12.[21] Following the powerful Ukrainian protests of 2013, known as Euromaidan, the package was refined and released in the form of a free ready-to-cook product for global use.

Its main talking points are, broadly, reworkings of discontents immanent to the liberal-democratic world, discontents that the propaganda machine greatly simplifies and converts into geostrategic terms,[22] thus denying their social-critical and transformative potential. These discontents stem from populist uprisings of the masses who feel disenfranchised, left behind, and denied access to the forces that control their lives. This

21 Oates, 'Russian Media in the Digital Age'.

22 Dimitar Vatsov, 'Is the Hegemony of the West Coming to an End? (And Russian Propaganda as Postmodern Bricolage and Discursive Terror)', *Critique & Humanism* 62, Nº 1 (2025), pp. 17–42.

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feeling of vulnerability and powerlessness to control their own lives is the source of the effectiveness of anti-democratic and, in particular, Kremlin propaganda in the liberal-democratic world. And Russia's state-controlled media machine, directed by the Kremlin, has greatly contributed to the consolidation of anti-liberal populism into state-sovereign propaganda that aims to sow discord and confrontation both within societies and between states.

In Bulgaria, Russian narratives began to enter the mass media space as early as 2013.[23] Over the summer some of the largest and most enduring anti-government protests broke out across the country. These were triggered by the appointment of the young media mogul Delyan Peevski as chairman of the State Agency for National Security (SANS). Due to the protests, he was forced to resign. But a media group officially owned by his mother,[24] along with other affiliated media outlets, launched a smear campaign against the protesters. At this point the talking points of Russian propaganda were introduced, as developed two years earlier to discredit the Bolotnaya protesters by suggesting that civil action leads to chaos and destruction. As in Moscow in 2011–12, so too in Sofia in 2013: protesters were accused of (1) being 'paid' and 'bought' from outside, by Soros and other Western foundations (later Moscow would directly declare them 'foreign agents'); (2) being sexually and culturally 'perverted'—to be liberal meant to be gay, and vice versa; a propaganda synonymy was constructed between liberalism, human rights, and LGBTQ, while simultaneously inciting disgust and fear towards minority identities. Since Bulgarian and Russian are similar Slavic languages, offensive epithets used to smear protesters (and inconvenient actors) in propaganda are almost directly transferred from Russian into

23 In this paragraph we refer to these HSSF reports: *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria: Part 1. News Websites and Print Media, 2013–2016* (Sofia, 2017), available at: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/REPORT_PART1_ENG.pdf; *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria: Part 2. Online Media in 2017* (Sofia, [2018]), available at: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ENG_REPORT_ANTIDEMOCRACY_PART2_STRANIRAN_ENG-1-1.pdf; *Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media: From Its Entry into Bulgaria in 2013 to the War against Ukraine* (Sofia, 2022), available at: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Abstract-Report-Part-1-eng.pdf [accessed 12 October 2025].

24 New Bulgarian Media Group: *Commercial Register and Register of Non-Profit Legal Entities*, https://portal.registryagency.bg/CR/en/Reports/ActiveConditionTabResult?uic=175350761 [accessed 12 October 2025].

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Bulgarian, such as *sorosoid* (paid by Soros), *liberast* (liberal-pederast), *tolerast* (tolerant-pederast), *grantoed* (grant guzzler).

Russian propaganda initially entered Bulgaria for domestic use: to discredit internal political and economic opponents. And this was its main function until at least 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine. At this point changes emerged on the information front. These are addressed below.

Certain geopolitical Russian narratives that are more difficult to adapt to local use began to seep into the Bulgarian media space at the end of 2013 (after the early days of the Euromaidan in Ukraine) and especially following the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. At the same time, the first issue of the 'elite' political analysis magazine *Aspecto* was published, in which most of the articles were dedicated to Crimea and justified the annexation. A network of openly pro-Russian websites and newspapers was rapidly formed around *Aspecto*, which often reprinted directly from Russian sources or quoted pro-Russian Western speakers extensively. Thus the Russian propaganda package, meaning all narratives representing the Russian view of the global international order and favouring Russia, entered Bulgaria.

We describe this as a comprehensive propaganda package because, despite variations and frequent changes in narrative, Russian output follows a common conspiratorial grammar. Basic logical laws become irrelevant; they cannot affect it. Hence, there is no Ukrainian nation, but this 'non-existent' nation is fascist. There is no war, but Ukrainians in Bulgaria are not refugees, they are deserters. The main purpose of propaganda is to orchestrate impressions and create reflexes. That is why it offers a simple picture of the world, one beyond the possibility of being questioned for factually verifiable truth. It must be more plausible than the truth.[25] It must be emotionally credible.

25 Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019).

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Furthermore, we can add that the propaganda package is based on a simple 'fairy tale logic', in which there is one Great Villain. In this role the US, NATO, Brussels, the collective West, but also specific figures like Soros, Obama, Merkel, Biden, are metonymically positioned. Who will be specifically singled out depends on the context. In our studies of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, this role is referred to as 'The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet master' because:

- The Great Villain claims to uphold certain universal values (liberal democracy and human rights). But these values in the propaganda narrative are by no means universal. They are a façade behind which the Villain hides to pursue its self-serving private interests and to oppress nations (ordinary people).

- The Great Villain acts as a puppeteer to disguise its evil intentions, pulling the strings of its marionettes. These are paid agents or useful idiots. In fact, any actor who, in various places and with various means, upholds the values of liberal democracy—through civic protests, civic organisations, parties, media—is metonymically portrayed as a proxy, marionette, or lackey of the Great Villain. The research on propaganda in Bulgaria refers to their role as 'Bulgaria's venal elites'.

- The victims of the Villain are nations who lose their sovereignty. The EU is depicted as an artificial construct, deliberately created by the Great Villain to take away the sovereignty of the European peoples. In addition, the Villain floods Europe with migrants in order to melt down the ethnic and cultural identities of its peoples, and inundates them with the cultural contagion of liberalism that softens and exhausts them. For all these reasons, a united Europe is unachievable—the EU is doomed to collapse, and the nations in it are dying. This narrative in the research is called 'The decline of Europe'.

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Unsurprisingly the saviour of the European peoples is Russia. Along with other forces from the Global South, Russia will break the hegemony of the West and create a just and balanced multipolar world. Hence the 'rise of Russia' trope. However, 'the rise of Russia' is a label with which we designate multiple and sometimes contradictory sub-narratives (we mentioned that propaganda is not afraid of logical contradictions!). We have dissected six sub-narratives in this package: (1) Russia's increased political and spiritual might; (2) Russia as a civilisational alternative to the West; (3) Russia's enemies; (4) the power of Russian weapons; (5) Crimea and Ukraine; (6) the sanctions against Russia.[26]

For each of these narratives a specific propaganda jargon has been developed over time—a set of relatively stable propaganda epithets and catchphrases (such as 'sorosoids', 'Brussels puppets')—and propagandists periodically update it by adding new words and expressions to its vocabulary. These epithets and catchphrases are intrusive and amplify the propaganda effect of the narratives; however, they can also serve to counteract propaganda. Once analytically isolated, they can now serve as keywords for automated searches of the narratives, their channels, and frequency of distribution. Consequently we used the Sensika automated media monitoring system,[27] which archives over 8000 online sources (websites and blogs) in Bulgarian in real time. When searching by keywords with the option to apply various filters, Sensika not only counts the keywords and the articles and posts that contain them, but also provides direct access to their content. This enabled us to measure the dissemination frequency of the main (pro-)Russian propaganda narratives over a ten-year period between 2013 and 2022, from the moment of their introduction into the Bulgarian media space and including when Russia openly invaded Ukraine and when the Russian propaganda strategy changed (Figure 1).

26 HSSF, *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria: Part 1*, pp. 26–42.

27 See 'Sensika: The AI Platform for Media and Disinformation Intelligence', https://sensika.com [accessed 12 October 2025].

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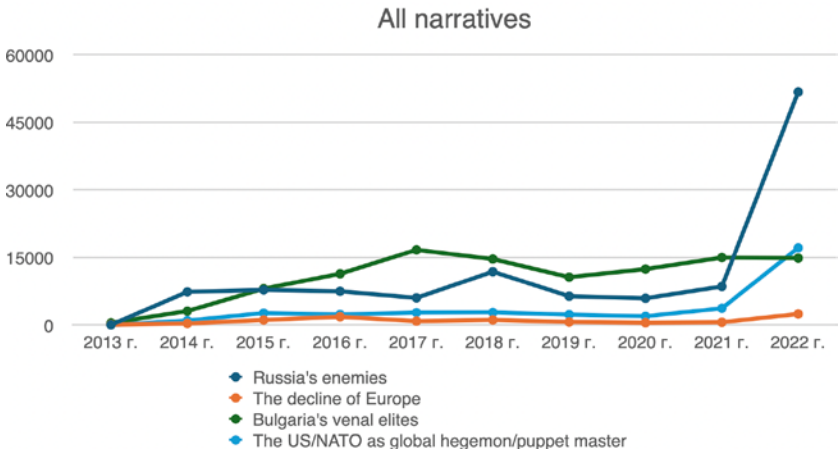

Figure 1. The main (pro-)Russian narratives, 2013–22 (number of online publications in Bulgaria per year, social media excluded)

The first point to note is that a systematic increase in the spread of propaganda narratives can be observed over time, from several hundred publications containing the keywords in 2013 to over 100,000 publications in 2022.

Second, until 2021—the year before the full-scale war against Ukraine—the 'Bulgaria's venal elites' narrative (Figure 1, in green) dominated Bulgaria's media space. This is the narrative through which various pro-democratic local actors—civil protests and movements, independent media, human rights organisations, and pro-European political parties—are vilified by being portrayed as 'puppets' of Brussels and Washington. While this narrative is part of Russia's propaganda package, it can be easily adapted for independent use towards completely different goals on the domestic front. Predominantly, local political and economic actors use it to discredit their local opponents, regardless of the Kremlin's political agenda. This is precisely the reason for its media dominance until 2022.

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Third, in 2022, with the onset of full-scale war, there followed a sharp increase in narratives seeking direct confrontation with the West. There was a sharp increase in the demonisation of the US and NATO as 'global hegemon and puppet master'. To highlight this effect, the results of a separate search for keywords is included describing 'Russia's enemies': they are 'Russophobes', 'hawks' who first through NATO expansion and then through support for Ukraine 'surround Russia' and 'wage war' against it.

With full-scale war, however, not only has the confrontational rhetoric increased, but the Kremlin's propaganda strategy too has changed more comprehensively.

The 'Russian World' in the Bulgarian Media after 24 February 2022

First, a few words on Russian propaganda in Russia after 2013. Until the start of full-scale war, the dissemination of propaganda in Russia was left primarily to professional propagandists—journalists such as Vladimir Solovyov and Margarita Simonyan—and entire media outlets. Concurrently, Russian officials repeated the main arguments from these propaganda narratives but in more moderate and diplomatic language.

With the full-scale invasion, however, the propaganda narratives became official. Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, and others became their direct spokespersons. There was a further terminological and ideological tightening and hardening of these narratives, as Putin himself set out their ideological framework in a series of articles and speeches.

This process had begun earlier, and can be traced back to Putin's article 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' of 12 July 2021.[28] It directly sets out the imperial doctrine of the 'Russian world', which

28 Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 12 July 2021, available at: www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 [accessed 12 October 2025].

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is multi-ethnic and multi-confessional and has no borders. It extends as far as people speak Russian and love Russian culture, meaning it can expand indefinitely. At the core of this 'Russian world' historically stands 'the large Russian nation, a triune people comprising Velikorussians, Malorussians, and Belorussians'. Accordingly, in light of this historical trinity, this 'large Russian nation', contemporary national distinctions between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians become practically meaningless. Ukraine is said to be an 'artificial state', created by the USSR, which today is part of the 'anti-Russia project', and is ruled by neo-Nazis and 'orchestrated' by the West. It was precisely from this ideological core that, six months later, the official task of the 'special military operation' would be derived—namely, to 'denazify and demilitarise' Ukraine.

We will not go into a detailed analysis of the ideological content of the Russian imperial doctrine known as the 'Russian world'. We mention it only to highlight the changes that are taking place in the dissemination of Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian media space. [29]

The fact that Russian propaganda is becoming more ideologically rigid and terminologically hardened makes it even more recognisable: it is more difficult to blend in with the rhetoric of local national-populists. Speaking the idiolect of the 'Russian world' means that one is openly working for the Kremlin. Therefore, especially after the outbreak of full-scale war, many pro-Russian Bulgarian speakers—journalists and politicians—probably startled by the war, at least temporarily stopped disseminating Russian narratives. After 24 February 2022 only the 'most loyal soldiers' continued to preach on the information front—those suspected of being directly paid or otherwise backed up by the Kremlin.

However, in the days immediately before and after the invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian media skyrocketed (Figure 2). When searching Sensika for a list of keywords containing

29 See *HSSF Newsletters* from 2023 to 2024 (https://hssfoundation.org/en/bulletin); the HSSF report *Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media*; and *Summary Report of the Human and Social Studies Foundation—Sofia: Online Russian and Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria in 2024* (Sofia: HSSF, 2024), available at: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/doklad-2024-eng.pdf [accessed 12 October 2025].

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specific expressions from the new propaganda vocabulary, the first peaks on 22 and 24 February were clearly visible.

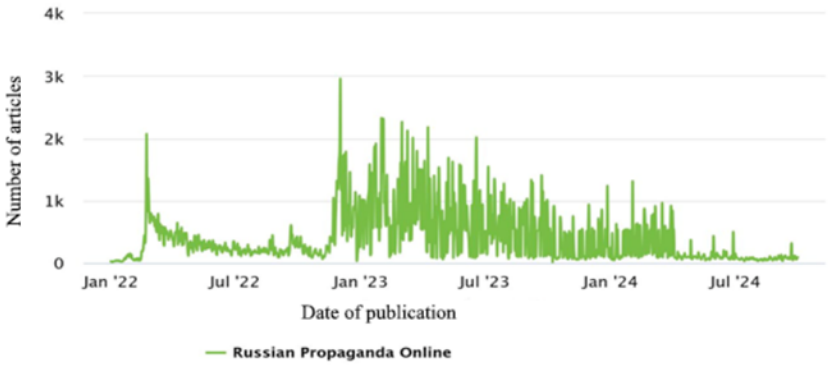

Figure 2. Overt Russian propaganda online in Bulgaria, 1 January 2022–30 September 2024 (number of online publications per day)

In the pre-war period an average of 30 publications containing the keywords circulated online in Bulgarian; by 22 February, when Putin declared the independence of the so-called Donetsk People's Republik and Luhansk People's Republik, Sensika registered 1785 publications for a single day, and on 24 February, when the Russians invaded Ukraine, 1262 publications. In May, propaganda dissemination 'normalised' at nearly 400 publications per day. It had jumped more than 10 times compared to the pre-war period. That figure then gradually declined, with activity reaching an average of 124 publications per day in September. Then, at the end of November, there was a new boom. From 21 November to the end of the year, Sensika identified 32,475 publications, meaning that activity increased more than sixfold compared to the previous month, to an average of nearly 800 posts per day.

What accounted for these peaks? At the initial peak in the first days of the aggression, (pro-)Russian media and spokespersons were mobilised to the extreme. But after the start of the hot war, Russian officials began

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to speak explicitly through propaganda jargon. This meant that even serious and independent media outlets, to the extent that they inevitably quoted Russian officials, were obliged to repeat Russian propaganda clichés. And since the focus of media interest at the beginning of the war was naturally concentrated on those official spokespersons, their narratives were multiplied repeatedly.[30]

At this time Russia was portrayed as a tragic victim. On 24 February the eternal 'saviour' of Europe launched a pre-emptive strike against the Americans, British, and Poles to prevent them from attacking it. The oxymoron that Russia 'defensively attacked' was recycled without much difficulty.

Despite this monochrome and repetitive language, however, Russia's military invasion of neighbouring Ukraine instantly and irreversibly destroyed Vladimir Putin's poll ratings in Bulgaria, simultaneously dragging down approval for his country (Figures 3 and 4).

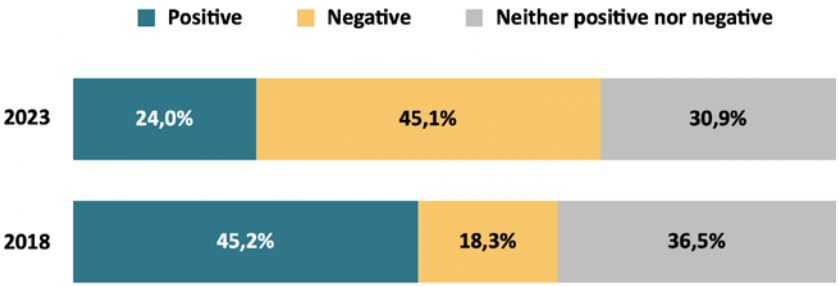

Figure 3. Attitudes towards Vladimir Putin in Bulgaria, 2018 and 2023

Source: Alpha Research and HSSF, 'Social Vulnerability and Propaganda: Summary of the Key Results from a Quantitative and Qualitative Sociological Survey, 2024' [in Bulgarian], available at: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/0524_Hybrid_Propaganda_KeyFindings_Final.pdf.

30 The second peak in November 2022 was entirely technology driven, referring to what we call a network of mushroom websites.

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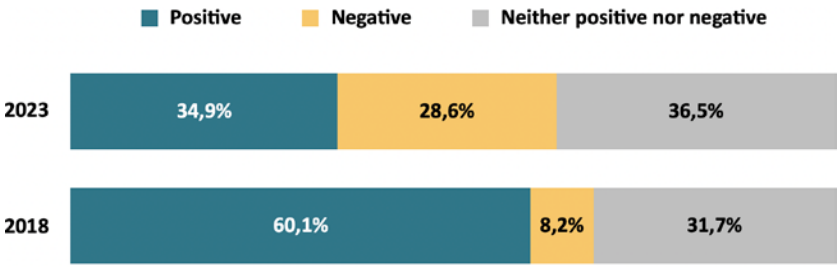

Figure 4. Attitudes toward Russia in Bulgaria, 2018 and 2023

Source: as Figure 3.

Due to this irreparable collapse, caused mainly by the breakdown of the myth of Russian might, the number of articles praising Russia in Bulgarian-language media has shrunk to negligible levels, replaced by articles whose primary and main purpose is to sow doubt, confusion, and discord. Behind the orchestration of such political emotions lie three visible targets: democracy as procedures and institutions, the green transition, and international solidarity.

To return to the unprecedented peak of propaganda activity detected in November 2022, the most powerful tool for (pro-)Russian propaganda used in and outside Bulgaria was deployed: a network of mushroom websites, cloned from several main domains through subdomains that were identical in design and content (Figure 5). The 'machine of mushroom websites' (see below) reflects a more general trend for machine-generated or reprinted content to have greater weight in spreading Russian propaganda.

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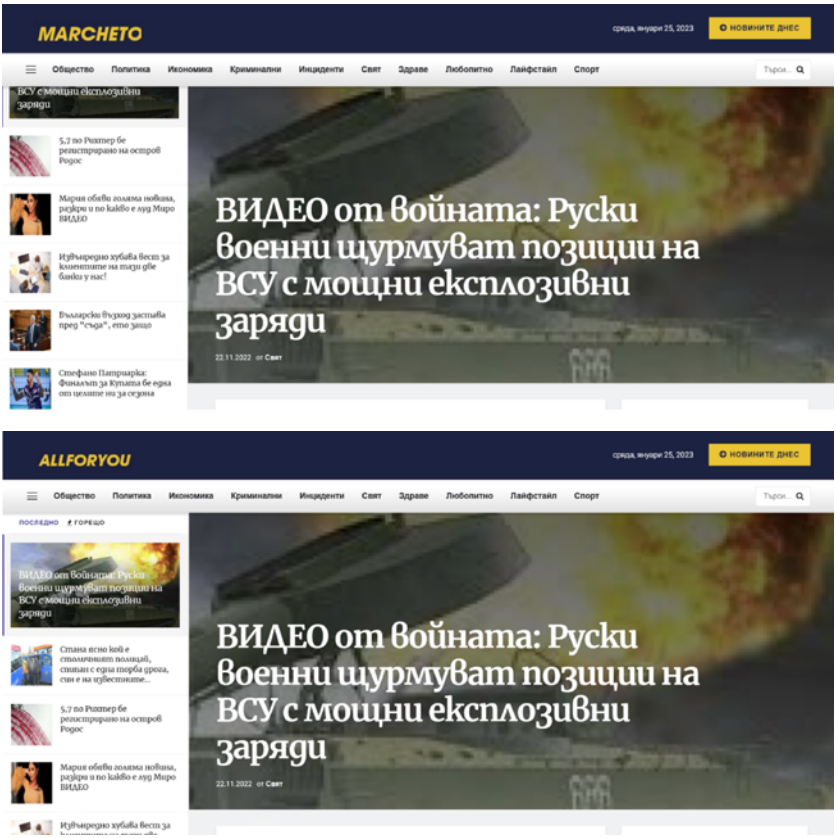

Figure 5. Screenshots of Bulgarian mushroom websites: same domains, design, and content

Another network of mushroom websites, orchestrated by the Kremlin, similar to the one in Bulgaria and now spreading disinformation in the US, Canada, France, and more recently in Moldova and Armenia, has been discovered by Insikt Group at *Recorded Future*.[31] So it may be concluded that Bulgaria was a laboratory for Russian influence and propaganda campaigns because the first network of mushroom websites was built there. Since the Bulgarian network is much larger and more elaborate, it can be assumed also that Bulgaria was the testing ground

31 *CopyCop Deepens Its Playbook with New Websites and Targets* (Insikt Group of Recorded Future, 2025), available at: https://assets.recordedfuture.com/insikt-report-pdfs/2025/cta-ru-2025-0917.pdf [accessed 12 October 2025].

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on which a model for global use was developed. This effort might be orchestrated by the Kremlin or dominated by financial monetisation goals, or a mixture of both strategies.

The network discovered by our team was later labelled the 'machine of mushroom websites'. At the height of its development in 2023, over 4,000 mushroom sites were identified, of which about 1000 were active on social networks. In this case 'active' means not only that they reprint content and generate traffic, but also that there is a real person behind them—a troll—who shares their content on social media for a fee. The use of social networks in spreading propaganda messages through algorithms, troll farms, or bots has been studied many times, but the mushroom network of sites does something different: it disseminates the same content through paid trolls into personal untraceable profiles.

The machine of mushroom websites will be discussed separately. Here, its share in the dissemination of Russian propaganda is highlighted. While Figure 2 shows the frequency of use of Russian propaganda vocabulary in all Bulgarian-language media, Figure 6 distinguishes how many (pro-)Russian publications are created daily by the mushroom website machine and how many by other media.

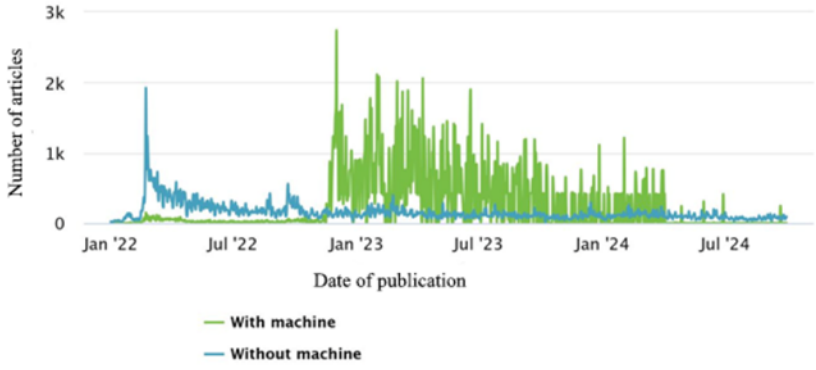

Figure 6. Russian propaganda online in Bulgaria with and without the machine of mushroom websites, 1 January 2022–30 September 2024 (number of online publications per day)

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Over the three-year period (1 January 2022–31 December 2024), the machine generated 249,073 (pro-)Russian publications, while all other media outlets together generated 149,932 publications. During the peak months of the machine's operation—the first half of 2023—it generated five times more openly (pro-)Russian publications than all other media outlets combined.

A brief history of the machine follows.

History of the Machine: The Life and Death of the 'Mushroom Monster'

The machine of mushroom websites, the most powerful tool so far for Russian online propaganda dissemination in Bulgaria, was born in 2022 and died in 2024, due to the efforts of the HSSF team, investigative journalists, and other organisations that exposed its activities and the subsequent investigation of its activities by state authorities.

Key dates in the technological 'life' of the machine from 'birth' to 'death':

January–February 2022: The HSSF team detects eight websites disseminating identical content. These first websites were created earlier as separate media, but at the beginning of 2022 they are interconnected in a network reprinting identical content. About 80 per cent of their publications are from Blitz, a news agency often involved in carrying out smear campaigns and allegedly connected to Bulgarian oligarch Delyan Peevski, now leader of the DPS political party (Movement for Rights and Freedoms).

From 22 November 2022: The first eight websites have been upgraded with hundreds of mushroom websites – Sensika identifies over 370 mushroom websites actively disseminating identical content. Such multiplication is accomplished by 'cloning' hundreds of subdomains to a few primary domains. This is carried out via the online platform

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Share4Pay, which attracts users whose task is to share content from mushroom websites on their private profiles on social media for a fee. The machine of mushroom websites becomes the largest disseminator of online (pro-)Russian content in Bulgaria.

November 2022–March 2024: Active mushroom websites gradually increase to over 1000. By 'active' we mean mushroom websites accessed by real individuals who share their content on social media. These websites are monitored by SENSIKA.

November 2022–March 2024: This period also marks the active dissemination of *direct Russian propaganda* by the machine. Based on shifts in content, this period can be divided into several sub-periods:

- **November 2022–June 2023:** Aggressive Russian propaganda. Low-quality translations (probably AI generated) of frontline reports by Russian 'military correspondents' dominate. The impression is given that Russia is winning all battles resoundingly (even when they are actually losing them).

- **July–September 2023:** An attempt to balance the machine's media policy: Russian propaganda is now framed as one of the 'two points of view' on the war against Ukraine. That is, Russian propaganda materials alternate with analyses by Western and Ukrainian experts and media.

- **October 2023–March 2024:** A reversal in messaging: although Russian talking points on the war continue to circulate, they become rare. Instead, materials with a distinctly pro-Ukrainian stance become dominant. In early 2024 the machine begins to systematically delete previously published (pro-)Russian materials, culminating in the complete erasure of Russian propaganda in April.

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- **3 April 2024:** *Russian propaganda 'vanishes into thin air' from mushroom websites,* as if it had never existed. The machine not only ceases to publish such content but has also retroactively deleted it. All publications previously found by keywords become inaccessible to ordinary users. From this point, they are retrievable only via digital archiving systems such as Sensika. Furthermore, the machine begins to algorithmically block the upload of any material related to 'Russia', 'Kremlin', 'Putin', and similar terms. For the machine, *Russia disappears from the virtual map of the world.*

Despite the disappearance of Russian propaganda on 3 April 2024, mushroom websites themselves did not immediately cease to exist. The machine continued operating for another six months, but its propaganda function shifted entirely towards domestic politics. In fact this redirection began around mid 2023. Several periods can also be distinguished in the work of the machine as a domestic propaganda tool primarily aimed at discrediting political opponents:

October–December 2023: As direct Russian propaganda begins to wane, the machine begins to circulate articles promoting Delyan Peevski's official anti-Russian and pro-Euro-Atlantic positions. (Delyan Peevski publicly took such positions after 2021 when he was sanctioned under the global Magnitsky Act.)

September 2023–3 July 2024: During this period the primary target of propaganda attacks and ridicule on the machine's websites is the reformist coalition PP-DB (We Continue the Change—Democratic Bulgaria), Peevski's main political opponent.

3 July–20 October 2024: Following the 3 July split inside the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), Ahmed Dogan's supporters—called 'derebeys' (feudal lords) by Peevski—become the primary target of propaganda attacks and ridicule on mushroom websites.

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20 October 2024: The machine stops uploading new content to the mushroom websites.

30 November 2024: The machine's primary domains become inaccessible on the Internet.

The attempt to purge the machine, and its subsequent complete liquidation, has a logical explanation. In early 2023 the HSSF with its 2022 Report[32] alerted the Bulgarian public to the existence and magnitude of the new propaganda tool, and began detailed monitoring of its work in HSSF quarterly newsletters. From late 2023 the issue was taken up not only by Bulgarian and international media outlets but also by various research units, such as the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD),[33] which traced owners of some of the domains; Georgi Angelov at Radio Free Europe;[34] or the Atlantic Council's Washington-based DFRLab,[35] which tracked how the machine operated on Facebook and other social media platforms. This publicity forced those filling the mushroom websites with content to at least ostensibly balance their approach in late 2023, and to begin to remove Russian content by early 2024.

One event abruptly increased pressure on the machine and was perhaps the direct cause of its rapid demise. On 24 February 2024, interviewed by Nikoleta Atanasova on BNR, Dimitar Vatsov explained the nature of the machine and recalled the genesis of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria during the protests against Peevski and Oresharski in 2013.[36]

32 Summary of the HSSF report *Russian Propaganda in the Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022)* (Sofia: HSSF, 2023), pp. 16–23. Available at: https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-ENG.pdf [accessed 2 November 2025].

33 Todor Galev, *Mrezhi za razprostranenie i monetizatsiya na dezinformatsiyata v Balgariya* [Networks for the Dissemination and Monetization of Disinformation in Bulgaria], 7 December 2023, available at: https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/events_library/files/2023_12/Prezentacija_Todor_Galev.pdf [accessed 12 October 2025].

34 Georgi A. Angelov and Andy Heil, 'I Worked for the "Mushroom Machine": Inside Bulgaria's Cash-for-Disinformation Network', *Radio Free Europe,* 19 May 2024, available at: www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-websites-mushrooms-russia/32950283.html [accessed 12 October 2025].

35 Gelava, 'Suspicious Facebook Assets'.

36 See Dimitar Vatsov, 'Peevski parvi vavede ruskite propagandni klisheta v balgarskoto mediyno prostranstvo', *BNR Novini*, 24 February 2024, https://bnr.bg/hristobotev/post/101953732 [accessed 12 October 2025].

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Three days later Peevski officially approached the Interior Ministry, SANS, and the prosecution service, asking: 'Is there a network of (pro-) Russian bots in Bulgaria, and who is behind it?'

> The alert is related to findings of studies by the Human and Social Studies Foundation made public by Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, President of the HSSF Managing Board, which have been published on the Foundation's website and commented on in the media, and which concern 'a machine of mushroom websites' that are nearly 400 in number and produce 2000 publications per day, further amplified through social media, the Interior Ministry's press centre said.[37]

Peevski brought even more publicity to the problem with the machine. But he also prompted SANS to launch an official investigation into mushroom websites. There is no official public report of the conclusions or outcomes of this investigation. However, the machine's behaviour in 2024 is telling: it began frantically deleting earlier Russian propaganda publications and, from 3 April 2024, ceased to upload any content about Russia. At the same time, the machine attempted to 'humour' Peevski in many ways, attacking his main political opponents—PP-DB and Dogan's wing of the DPS. However, these attempts failed: the machine was de facto shut down in October–November 2024. However, its cause remains unclear: direct Russian intervention, monetisation, or a mixture of both.

We may joke that, with the unexpected help of Delyan Peevski and SANS, the HSSF team managed in three years to slay the many-headed dragon. But before burying the 'mushroom monster', a further point should be added.

37 See 'Peevski pita MVR, DANS i prokuraturata: Ima li mrezha ot proruski botove u nas i koy stoi zad neya', *bTV Novinite*, 27 February 2024, https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/peevski-pita-mvr-dans-i-prokuraturata-ima-li-mrezha-ot-proruski-botove-u-nas-i-koj-stoi-zad-neja.html [accessed 18 May 2025].

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A new 'household machine' had also emerged, targeting a different demographic: mainly housewives, with content focused on health and domestic comfort but subtly infused with political propaganda.

Clearly this was a last-ditch effort to salvage the business model of cloning mushroom websites, either through franchising or direct sales. Despite this attempt, however, almost all the mushroom websites disappeared from the Internet at the end of November 2024. At the very end of 2024 or the beginning of 2025, a final attempt was made to resurrect them. Some became active again, but now automatically redirected to commercial websites—either to one selling household appliances or to the website of Novax Group, a Bulgarian company that sells and installs French swimming pools for luxury villas (Figure 7). In May 2025 there were only five remaining domains (allbg.eu, komentaru.com, mybg.eu, news7.eu, and w365.eu), redirecting to the Novax Group website. At the moment (late November 2025) only the last two are still active.

Figure 7. Screenshot from the Novax Group website (httpse://desjoyaux.bg), to which news7.eu and w365.eu redirect

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How to Counteract

What should we do about Russian propaganda? Debunk it? But (1) it is used promiscuously in all kinds of oligarchic circles, from local Bulgarian oligarchs to tech giants with trillion-dollar profits who all want to replace public regulations with private bargaining and monopolise its benefits; (2) Kremlin circles do not mind being exposed for waging information war—on the contrary, they use exposure to boast about their power. Our team has isolated the following typical Kremlin tactic: confirmation through denial—a way to confirm that troops were sent to Ukraine in 2014, that they poisoned Skripal, or that they killed Navalny. Consider this exchange in October 2025 between Fyodor Lukyanov, host of the 22nd Valdai Discussion Club,[38] and Vladimir Putin about drones over military bases and airports in Europe in autumn 2025:

> Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, why are you sending that many drones to Denmark?
>
> Vladimir Putin: I promise I will not. I will not send drones to France, Denmark, or Copenhagen. What other destinations can they reach?
>
> Fyodor Lukyanov: They can go anywhere.
>
> Vladimir Putin: Lisbon. Where else? […] On a serious note, though, we do not even have drones that can go as far as Lisbon. We do have some long-range drones, but there are no targets at this range. This is what matters most in this regard. […]
>
> Fyodor Lukyanov: You gave a scare to Portugal when you mentioned Lisbon. Their sense of humour may fail

38 The Valdai Discussion Club is a forum of Russian and foreign propagandists and intellectuals which has become the main format for conducting geopolitical propaganda, at which Vladimir Putin personally makes his signature statements: Valdai Discussion Club, *Programmes*, https://valdaiclub.com/programmes.

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them, and they may take it seriously. Anyway, to set the record straight, it was a joke.

Vladimir Putin: Why a joke? No.

Fyodor Lukyanov: No?

Vladimir Putin: No.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Pardon me. It was a fair warning then. Also a gentlemanly move.

Vladimir Putin: Forewarned is forearmed.[39]

Although it heavily exploits populist rhetoric and its inherent anti-elitism, Kremlin propaganda is not at all against the rich, nor does it oppose kleptocrats (with whom it appears comfortable). It is against the intelligentsia, against cultural elites. This is precisely why it is so easily and indistinguishably linked to national-conservative projects in European societies, which it encourages in an autocratic direction. And therefore we must assume that its spread is supported by both the Kremlin and populist and autocratic political projects.

Finally, Kremlin propaganda is rarely explicitly pro-Russian, even when carried out by pro-Russian structures, spokespersons, and media outlets (directly pro-Kremlin voices are not its only source in Europe). We have described ideological tightening of Kremlin propaganda under the banner of the 'Russian world' on the eve of full-scale war. But it proved unsuccessful outside Russia. It failed to win supporters abroad; we have already cited data showing that support for Putin has almost halved in Bulgaria (Figure 3). Therefore, at the moment it is noteworthy how exported propaganda is returning to the kind of subversive function recognisable before the war. Its main goal is to sow

39 President of Russia, 'Valdai Discussion Club Meeting', 2 October 2025, available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78134 [accessed 12 October 2025].

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discord and polarisation in democratic societies[40] and to weaken their democracy, as well as trust in a rules-based order. The social engineering technique of sowing discord and confrontation has two main components: (a) invest in toxic collective identities based on rejection and hatred (anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-migrant sentiments) and (b) link these toxic identities to national-populist political parties and actors who preach against liberal democracy and the structures of a united Europe.

This social engineering mechanism, which draws us into a spiral of hostile emotions and, by the same token, promotes national-populist parties that reject liberal democracy, is supported and replicated by the opacity of social media algorithms, and by the opacity of those behind technologies such as the mushrooming websites that 'innocently' spread content thousands of times in Bulgaria's small online language-market. Efforts to regulate the work of algorithms and highlight those who target citizens through the network of mushroom websites are subsequently characterised as 'censorship'.

On 12 August 2025 the US State Department released its annual report on human rights around the world.[41] This year's report was delayed. Begun under the Biden Administration, it was edited to reflect the priorities of the Trump Administration. The report criticised a number of European countries for 'deteriorating human rights', citing regulations on online hate speech, interpreted as a restriction of free speech. It was published after two similar blows to democratic Europe: from Elon Musk, emblematic of corporate power behind Trump's America,[42] and from Vice President J.D. Vance, politically emblematic of Trump's America.[43] The attacks follow the same principle: any call for regulation in the

40 Mark Galeotti, 'When Disinformation Meets Disruption: Russia's Strategy of Paralysis', *Critique & Humanism* 62, Nº 1 (2025), pp. 7–16.

41 US Department of State, *2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, available at: www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices [accessed 12 October 2025].

42 ADF International, 'Musk Sets Sights on EU Online Censorship Law after Australian Free Speech Win', Press Release, 3 July 2025, available at: https://adfinternational.org/news/musk-sets-sights-on-eu-online-censorship-law [accessed 12 October 2025].

43 Emily Atkinson, 'JD Vance Attacks Europe over Free Speech and Migration', *BBC News*, 15 February 2025, available at: www.bbc.com/news/articles/ceve3wl21x1o [accessed 12 October 2025].

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liberal-democratic public sphere is presented as censorship and undemocratic, just as Kremlin spokespeople portray it. This suggests that the EU's regulatory efforts[44] are heading in an appropriate direction, and what they lack are efforts to promote regulations among citizens of the free world. Opacity represents a lack of freedom. This task would be complicated were the US administration inclined to use American security guarantees for Europe as a means to pressure European attempts to regulate tech giants. The latter, fearing regulation will affect their profits, make out their concern is for freedom of speech (witness Musk, but also Mark Zuckerberg over the removal of fact-checking, which returned Facebook to its free-speech roots[45]). The removal of regulatory and research tools such as CrowdTangle will lead to ever more pernicious disinformation campains praised by the tech giants as 'authentic' content.

Another key lesson to be drawn from the Bulgarian case which is relevant beyond its local context suggests that, no matter how worthy the efforts are to expose lies and misinformation, the fight against disinformation can be and is effectively used as a smokescreen behind which information warfare operations continue to be conducted undisturbed on a global scale. Combating disinformation can only be effective if it is part of and subordinated to an overall communicative strategy to deter information operations against the liberal-democratic political order. Ultimately a war is being waged. Liberal democrats are reducing their response to exposing lies, which is far from being the most effective weapon in the information segment of this war.

Russia will intensify its attack on Europe, and, as we have seen, this attack is the main target of Russian and pro-Russian anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria. Europe is rising up to fight back. Slowly. Let us not forget that Europe is much richer and stronger than Russia, but is still living in peacetime. Russia has put its economy on a military footing and is clearly not preparing for peace. However, it is time for

44 For instance, the Digital Services Act and the European Media Freedom Act.

45 Justin Hendrix, 'Transcript: Mark Zuckerberg Announces Major Changes to Meta's Content Moderation Policies and Operations', *Tech Policy Press*, 7 January 2025, www.techpolicy.press/transcript-mark-zuckerberg-announces-major-changes-to-metas-content-moderation-policies-and-operations [accessed 12 October 2025].

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Europe to relearn how to attack with information, as it did during the Cold War, but now seems to have forgotten: to attack first and foremost with positive messages that directly show the advantages of democracy as a way of life.

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Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' and Russian and Chinese Information Influence

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Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, foreign information manipulation and interference, disinformation, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the Indo-Pacific, Japan, information operations*

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Abstract
This paper explores how Russia and China use disinforming, distorting, and deceptive information manipulation to target a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP), a pillar of Japan's foreign and defence policies. Drawing on empirical data collected around four events in 2023, it is one of the first open-source intelligence (OSINT) analyses of the Japanese information space and the ways it is targeted via foreign state-backed information threats to be published in an academic journal. It analyses the organisation and conduct of Russian and Chinese information manipulation and interference, highlighting how they use distinct but uncoordinated approaches to generate mutually reinforcing effects in an attempt to undermine Japan's vision of FOIP and its values-driven strategic communications.

Introduction

Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' is the core of its foreign and security policy. It builds upon a strategic vision that the country has pursued since the late 2000s, when it began conceptualising the Indo-Pacific as a unified geostrategic space connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Rather than a simple geographic or security framework, Japan's approach to the Indo-Pacific articulates values such as rule of law, freedom of navigation, and connectivity—making it a geopolitical vision deeply tied to the principles of strategic communications.[1] The concept has since helped frame cooperation in groupings such as the 'Quad'—the quadrilateral security cooperation among Japan, India, Australia, and the United States. It has also helped to underpin a range of strategic and defence dialogues and agreements among democracies across the globe, highlighting its function as a proactive, connective vision, rather than a purely reactive policy instrument.

Hence, it has long been anticipated and suspected that Japan and its Indo-Pacific discourse would attract information manipulation

1 Chiyuki Aoi, 'The Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics and Strategic Communications: Construction of "the Indo-Pacific"', *Defence Strategic Communications* 14 (Spring 2024).

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and interference from actors that reject this vision. Indeed, deliberate international influence campaigns and operations orchestrated by adversarial 'challenger states' (including China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) have been perceived as threatening Japan's interests and reputation, seeking to contest or erode support for ideas like FOIP and the values they embody, and to make them appear less stable and less widely shared. Their campaigns and operations attempt to engineer an opportunity to hasten the establishment of an alternative world order, governed by very different kinds of principles and processes to those encapsulated by notions that the Indo-Pacific region either can or should be 'free and open'.

Several high-profile investigations have adduced evidence of the scale and sophistication of these kinds of influence efforts. Meta's internal review exposed multiple coordinated campaigns targeting the Indo-Pacific region, illustrating the reach and adaptability of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) activities.[2] The US State Department also issued a report on Chinese information manipulation activities throughout the world, including the Indo-Pacific, especially Taiwan.[3] In Korea the National Cyber Security Center, under the National Intelligence Service, published its findings on influence operations attributed to the People's Republic of China, which established 'fake news' websites in Korea,[4] a revelation also matched by a university-based research group's work on Chinese online 'commenting' operations.[5] For Japan itself, recent Nikkei revelations of Chinese information operations targeting

2 Dina Sadek, 'FIMI 101: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Targeting the 2024 US General Election', *DFRLab*, 26 September 2024, https://dfrlab.org/2024/09/26/fimi-101.

3 Global Engagement Center, *How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment*, Global Engagement Centre Special Report, 27 November 2023, https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/HOW-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-SEEKS-TO-RESHAPE-THE-GLOBAL-INFORMATION-ENVIRONMENT_508.pdf.

4 National Cyber Security Center, *China's Malign Activities by Exploiting 'Fake News Websites'* (2023), www.ncsc.go.kr:4018/eng/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?bbsId=Notice_eng&nttId=153801#LINK.

5 Yoon Minwoo and Kim Eunyung, 'An Analytical Study on Monitoring China's Malicious Influence in Cyberspace', unpublished government report, Republic of Korea, 2023; Kim Jung-ha, 'Editorial: Time to Counter an Army of Chinese Trolls', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 6 October 2024, https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-10-06/opinion/columns/Time-to-counter-an-army-of-Chinese-trolls/2149093.

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Okinawa attracted much public attention.[6] Such findings are echoed in articles published by DFRLab (a research and analysis unit within the US-based Atlantic Council) that describe a network of accounts on X (formerly Twitter) in the Japanese information space that target a range of Japanese policies, from the Fukushima nuclear water release to the sovereign status of Okinawa.[7]

Building out from this developing research base, this paper presents one of the earliest open-source analyses dedicated to exploring adversarial information influence activities targeting Japan, and particularly its concept of FOIP. Specifically it compares and contrasts the information manipulation and influence activities organised and conducted by both Russia and China, from overt propaganda through state broadcast and press media assets to more covert exploitation of the affordances of social networks. This research design was devised in recognition of the influence these two external powers exert over the geopolitical environment—an environment which Japan's FOIP policy both operates in and aims to shape—and how their influence increasingly spills over into Japan's own policymaking processes. Further, this design represents a constructive innovation in its analytical approach.

Rather than track a single threat actor, as most existing studies do,[8] this research reveals how multiple manipulation and influence campaigns by Russia and China cumulatively appear in the Japanese information space, offering a realistic depiction of their aggregated scale and modalities. Assessing the resultant impact of these campaigns—such as attitudinal change in Japan—lies beyond the scope of this article and is not demonstrated by the present analysis. But what this study does show is

6 Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 沖縄独立煽る偽情報拡散 [Spread of Disinformation Promoting Independence of Okinawa], 3 October 2024, www.nikkei.com/telling/DGXZTS00012030S4A900C2000000.

7 Julia Janicki, 'Foreign Narratives Proliferate among Japanese X Communities', *DFRLab*, 18 December 2024, https://dfrlab.org/2024/12/18/foreign-narratives-proliferate-among-japanese-x-communities. See also Dylan J. Plung and Kenton Thibaut, 'Japan's Technology Paradox: The Challenge of Chinese Disinformation', 25 March 2025, https://dfrlab.org/2025/03/25/japan-tech-chinese-disinformation.

8 See for an exception Janicki, 'Foreign Narratives Proliferate'.

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how Chinese and Russian influence channels overlap and intersect to produce a complex, evolving web of manipulated information.

Accentuating this point is not intended to imply any explicit coordination between Russia and China in their influence operations. Their respective information influence operations and related disinformation campaigns are probably designed and delivered separately. Nevertheless, they might separately identify and seek to exploit and manipulate similar vulnerabilities as a target, and as a way of respectively seeking to advance their particular geopolitical interests and strategies. But the critical point is that by shifting our focus from specific campaigns of targeting and transmission of manipulated content by malign actors to their cumulative information effects, questions of attributable coordination become less salient. Rather, the degradation and destabilisation of concepts such as FOIP could be caused by both an intended outcome of an individual country's adversarial strategies, but also an unintended consequence of the interactions and overlaps that occur as a result of differently configured and operationalised campaigns run by Chinese and Russian assets. The 'net information effect' in this case results from the accumulation of the multiple array of strategies and tactics that are 'in play'.

To study the scope and modalities of Chinese and Russian information manipulation empirically, we draw on data from four event-based case studies. In different ways, these four cases illuminate how both Russia and China have sought to leverage information manipulation strategies and tactics, seeking to shape public perceptions and political decision-making about aspects of FOIP specifically, but also in the process to damage Japan's international reputation. Data collection and analysis to explore these multidimensional issues was based upon open-source research of public media and social media materials conducted by researchers at Cardiff University around the four key events of interest, which were identified in advance. This work enables us to explore general themes and patterns in terms of the contents of what propaganda was being both overtly and more covertly communicated, as well as some of the more

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deceptive aspects of these transmission pathways, through, for example, the mobilisation of networks of unavowed social media accounts.

In exploring the issues outlined above, this article is shaped by several cautionary considerations. First, there are the ethical nuances and complexities of conducting and operationalising open-source research in contexts such as Japan, where traditions of data transparency and accountability differ from those in many Anglo-American and some European polities. These conditions generate ethical concerns that are often not sufficiently appreciated and understood, including by other allied governments or commercial actors working in and around the Japanese information space. For example, such aspects have been largely overlooked when international bodies such as the European Union and G7, and governments including the United States (before President Trump came to office) and Canada, require Indo-Pacific states to treat the threats of foreign information interference more seriously and devise effective countermeasures. Recent studies further point to different political and social situations that might inhibit the open embrace of some of the established methodologies for countering FIMI activities, including open-source research.[9] Reasons for this recalcitrance include the political sensitivities associated with publicising cases of interference, especially if such actions are publicly attributed to external actors, given diverse political and strategic allegiances and cultural heterogeneity in the region. Compared with Europe, Indo-Pacific governments are generally less willing to explicitly 'name' perpetrators, often meaning the People's Republic of China (PRC) more than Russia, but sometimes Western states, notably the United States, as sources of coercive influence. This reluctance is reinforced by concerns that exposing interference may require intelligence declassification, potentially revealing tradecraft or priorities, which in turn shifts growing pressure onto private-sector entities to assume responsibility for such work.

9 Chiyuki Aoi et al., 'A Comparative Study on Strategic Communications and Counter-FIMI Policy and Institutions among Democracies', unpublished reports, research project funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS)-Kakenhi, Grant Number JP23K25483 (2023-2025).

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Another area warranting caution is the tendency to treat the impact of information manipulation as a direct consequence of its mere occurrence. Many analyses, shaped by methodological choices and at times political bias, implicitly assume a near linear causal effect whereby the presence of manipulative activity is automatically considered impactful on target societies. This is often too simplistic when applied to complex institutional and cultural contexts, particularly in non-Western settings across the IndoPacific. Authoritative studies, for example, highlight the high degree of resilience in Japan's information space despite decades of extensive Chinese engagement in Japanese politics, business, media, and society, and repeated attempts—both overt and covert—to secure pro-Chinese outcomes. Such resilience is attributed to structural factors that constrain foreign influence operations, including Japan's relatively homogeneous and socially cohesive society, an oligopolistic media landscape dominated by a few major newspaper–TV groups, and persistently negative public opinion towards both China and Russia. Surveys show roughly 85–90 per cent of Japanese hold unfavourable views of these countries.[10]

Yet some analysts also question whether this earlier view of Japan's relative insulation may be giving way to more competitive realities, even in the Japanese information space.[11] One factor is the growing diffusion of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept, a perception that is accentuated by the rise of China, creating a contested arena of coexisting narratives and inviting sharper reactions.[12] Another is the altered strategic context since Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which has transformed relations between Japan and Russia. Tokyo has worked with the G7 to consolidate a unified stance placing responsibility for the war on Russia as a breach of international law, thereby moving beyond the more Russia-friendly approach pursued under former prime minister Shinzo Abe in the hope of achieving a peace treaty and the return of the

10 Heather A. Conley, Rachel Ellehuus, Timothy Kostelancik, Jeffrey Mankoff, Cyrus Newlin, Amy Searight, and Devin Stewart, 'Countering Russian & Chinese Influence Activities', Centre for Study of International Security (January 2020), www.csis.org/analysis/countering-russian-chinese-influence-activities-0; D. Stewart, *China's Influence in Japan: Everywhere yet Nowhere in Particular* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program/Southeast Asia Program, 2020).

11 See notes 3–7.

12 Aoi, 'Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics and Strategic Communications'.

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Northern Territories currently under Russian control.[13] The increasingly close alignment between China, Russia, and North Korea around the war in Ukraine has further reshaped the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. Finally, several domestic developments are reshaping Japan's once homogeneous information space. Most notably, the strong performance of the far-right, populist-wing Sanseito in the July 2025 upper house election may indicate that its anti-globalist, anti-migration, and anti-gender-equality messages have begun to resonate more broadly with segments of the Japanese electorate. These segments had already been in existence by the election in mid 2025.[14]

These shifts may have given both Russia and China stronger incentives to view targeted covert information manipulation as a more useful instrument than in the past, when they tended to rely more on soft-power efforts[15] to cultivate pro-Chinese or pro-Russian attitudes, or on direct interference via political and business ties.[16] This view aligns with the overarching assessment that these two powers exert strong influence on geopolitical environments globally, through a range of policies they enact, but also in the way they seek to shape and influence the understandings and reactions of their allies and adversaries alike, by acting upon the information environment. This article therefore analyses Russian and Chinese information manipulation targeting Japan, while recognising that assessing its broader impact on societal attitudes—or effects beyond the measured reach of specific campaigns—lies beyond its scope. Hence this analysis offers an innovative, focused, empirical examination of Russian and Chinese information manipulation aimed at the Japanese information space, and intent on undermining the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific. It situates these efforts in their broader structural and geopolitical context, while exercising caution about how the findings should be interpreted and translated into policy recommendations.

13 'Japan Protests Russian Halt to World War Two Peace Treaty Talks', *Reuters*, 22 March 2022.

14 Yuichi Shiga and Shotaro Tani, 'Japan Ruling Coalition Routed by Upstarts: Key Election Takeaways', *Nikkei Asia*, 21 July 2025.

15 James Brown, 'Russian Strategic Communications toward Japan: A More Benign Model of Influence?', *Asian Perspective (Special Section: Regional Communicative Dynamics and International Relations in the Asia-Pacific)* 45, Nº 3 (Summer 2021): 559–86.

16 Such as the current China–Japan disputes over Japanese legal terminologies and classification of contingencies, which China is protesting against.

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The next section discusses the concept of FOIP, especially in the context of the increasingly precarious geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. This sets up an account of the research design and how empirical data were collected and analysed, including a brief overview of the four main events of interest that were cast as the key units of analysis. Following this, we present some largely quantitative data, tracking comparatively the patterns of coverage by Russian and Chinese state-owned media sources, before a more detailed analysis of activities on social media is introduced. This element of the discussion foregrounds how such assets are deployed to amplify narratives from press and broadcast sources, as well as some of the more deceptive techniques that can be used. The concluding section reprises the main empirical themes, using these as the basis for highlighting some of the more general implications of the analysis for how we both study and understand the causes and consequences of adversarial information operations and related disinformation campaigns—especially in complex and mosaicked social, political, and economic contexts such as the Indo-Pacific region.

Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Strategic Communications at the Core of Japan's Foreign and Defence Policy

Japan's FOIP vision is a prime target for adversaries seeking to undermine the liberal order that underpins US-led alliances, and the broader security architecture supporting Western security and prosperity. This vulnerability is closely tied to Japan's position as a key US ally in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, as well as its core role as a member of the G7. Although Japan's relative economic weight has diminished from its former status as the world's second-largest economy and leading aid donor, its diplomatic and strategic influence remains significant. Discrediting FOIP through information manipulation offers adversaries a pathway to erode the foundations of Japan's external relations—including alliance ties and its standing in the G7—thereby weakening stability and shared values across the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

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Before analysing how such campaigns are configured, it is essential to recognise FOIP as a central pillar of Japan's twenty-first-century grand strategy, and its foreign and security policy. As Aoi argues, Japan's Indo-Pacific framework and FOIP vision together constitute a form of conjoined geopolitics and strategic communications designed to shape proactively a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.[17] Rather than a purely regional construct, FOIP is articulated as a global vision that now increasingly links the Indo-Pacific with the Euro-Atlantic arena. It seeks to rally like-minded partners that support core principles of existing international law, above all the prohibition on changing national borders by force. In doing so, FOIP is meant not only to mitigate the destabilising effects of a shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific but also to influence the evolving global order, so that its core meaning of being 'free and open'—as codified in international law—is preserved.

Japan's FOIP vision encompasses the recognition that the Indo-Pacific is central to global stability, prosperity, and a rules-based international order. Building on Shinzo Abe's 2007 articulation of the Indo-Pacific as a shared democratic and prosperous space linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and highlighting future Japan–India cooperation,[18] this vision was formalised at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) VI in 2016 as a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. FOIP was thus defined through three core principles: promoting the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; advancing economic prosperity through connectivity and partnerships; and supporting peace and stability via capacity building and assistance.[19] In the context of increasingly tense situations across the maritime domain of the East and South China Seas, with an increasingly assertive China rapidly developing military and paramilitary capabilities, FOIP became a framework through which Japan articulated its visions for an inclusive, open, and rules-based order. FOIP became not only a diplomatic message to international audiences, but also a guiding precept, shaping Japan's

17 Aoi, 'Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics and Strategic Communications'.

18 Shinzo Abe, 'Confluence of the Two Seas' (speech, Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007), available at www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html.

19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000430632.pdf, (accessed 24 December 2025).

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own regional and global engagements. It emphasised cooperation with like-minded partners in and beyond the region, and positioned Japan as a proactive contributor to regional and global peace. These are pillars that continue to underpin Japan's diplomatic and security strategy in the region and beyond.

It is noteworthy that the geopolitics of FOIP, or the broader Indo-Pacific, was developed as a strategic communications practice. It was through discourses on the Indo-Pacific that Japan propelled the intended expansion of its relations with the Quad countries, Southeast Asia (relations which would be updated and strengthened), and Europe (whose relations would likewise be broadened and updated).[20] In 2019 Japan introduced substantial changes to its National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG),[21] signalling a new direction closely tied to the FOIP vision. This update was characterised by the development of the Multi-Domain Defense Force, bringing together capabilities across land, sea, air, space, cyber, and the electromagnetic spectrum. This accompanied newly reformulated, tripartite defence objectives, including the creation of an international environment amenable to Japan's interests and values; deterrence; and countering the failure of deterrence. Strategic communications was now formally incorporated under the first objective of Japan's defence (i.e. the creation of an international environment in which its interests and values would be promoted), and was now definitively linked to the promotion of FOIP through activities such as defence engagement conducted in conjunction with diplomacy. But here it first gained a doctrinal basis. The guidelines thus demonstrated a shift towards a more complex and interconnected approach to national defence.

With the Indo-Pacific firmly placed at the centre of Japanese grand strategy, in 2022 the National Security Strategy (NSS) explicitly addressed, for the first time, the growing significance of 'information warfare' in the so-called 'cognitive domain, including the spread of

20 Aoi, 'Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics and Strategic Communications'.

21 Government of Japan, 'National Defense Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond', 18 December 2018, available at https://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11591426/www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf.

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disinformation'[22] facing Japanese defence, though the strategy document does not specifically mention FIMI as defined in the European Union context. The 2022 rewrite of all three strategic documents, including the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defence Buildup Program, emphasised a shift to counter-strike capabilities, requiring a fundamental upgrading of defence capabilities and increasing Japan's defence budget to 2 per cent of GDP (by 2027). Amid these fundamental shifts, Japan's 2022 strategic documents placed a new emphasis on strengthening analytical capabilities for 'information warfare in the cognitive domain', including disinformation, and on developing advanced intelligence and analytical systems—potentially using artificial intelligence (AI)—by around 2027. Through these initiatives, Japan aims to bolster its resilience and capacity to manage regional contingencies with its key ally, the United States, while also expanding more independent capabilities, including in responding to foreign-instigated information operations such as disinformation.

Hence, Japan's strategic and policy updates illustrate a continuous, adaptive use of strategic communications to try to shape regional discourse, as illustrated in the NDPG 2019, and later moves to build resilience against evolving information threats in the NSS 2022 and later policies.

The policy following the 2022 strategy would include roles played by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Ministry of Defence (MOD). MOFA emphasises building up its capacity to monitor and respond to 'information warfare' through enhancing its information gathering and analytical functions, and then using these to shape public communications to contest hostile narratives. MOFA launched a dedicated web page, 'The Responses to Information Manipulation,

22 'National Security Strategy of Japan', December 2022, www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf, p. 27 (English version); 'National Defence Strategy of Japan', 16 December 2022, available at: www.mod.go.jp/j/policy/agenda/guideline/strategy/pdf/strategy_en.pdf.

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including Spread of Disinformation',[23] to explain both Japan's own measures and what it perceives as international trends. The term 'foreign information manipulation' is mentioned on the page, closely approximating the EU's FIMI concept. Internationally MOFA participates in the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism and other bilateral and multilateral consultations and agreements to discuss information manipulation and seek areas of cooperation, including the US Japan Memorandum of Cooperation on Countering Foreign Information Manipulation signed in December 2023.[24] The same page also lists two specific cases of what the government regards as foreign-instigated disinformation, both concerning the release of ALPS-treated water from the Fukushima nuclear sites, but without publicly attributing the perpetrator(s).[25] The MOD, similarly, following 2022 strategic directions, treats disinformation as part of the threat environment it must monitor and respond to. It does so by building analytical and AI-supported warning systems, feeding verified information into government-wide strategic communications, and integrating 'cognitive-domain' defence into Japan's overall posture and concepts.

Other governmental responses approach information threats from technology, platform, digital, and cyber security perspectives, although disinformation is still not fully mainstreamed. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications approaches disinformation mainly through ICT-literacy promotion, public awareness, and platform governance. It also engages platforms and industry via forums and study groups, and supports multistakeholder initiatives such as the Safer Internet

23 Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The Responses to Information Manipulation, including Spread of Disinformation', 4 December 2025, www.mofa.go.jp/policy/pagewe_000001_00052.html.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.; Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Regarding Media Report of an Alleged Fake Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs', Press Release, 14 August 2023, www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000454.html; Government of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Regarding Media Report of a Meeting with an Alleged Senior Official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Handling of ALPS Treated Water', Press Release, 22 June 2023, www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000443.html.

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Association and the Japan Fact Check Center.[26] The Digital Agency advances the Priority Policy Program for Realizing a Digital Society, which includes elements relevant to information integrity and secure digital infrastructure, recognising disinformation as a 'new threat' facing the safe and secure digital society.[27] The Information-Technology Promotion Agency, as an independent administrative agency under the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, supports cybersecurity and digital infrastructure, and increasingly frames disinformation as part of Japan's broader digital security agenda.[28]

FOIP and Regional Geopolitics through the Lens of Strategic Communications

Despite the relative success of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical initiatives in attracting like-minded countries, and the setting up of the ongoing counter-disinformation mandate contained in the 2022 NSS alongside emerging FIMI policy and capabilities, Japan's strategic communications are being tested by increasingly divided regional conditions. In many ways these regional geopolitical contests have been channelled through competing discourses and discursive practices advanced by adversarial, neutral (or fence-sitting), and even like-minded states. As the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical relevance has grown, it has increasingly become a productive arena for rival narrative projections, each seeking to establish itself as the dominant framing of regional order. These struggles are

26 Government of Japan, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 'Release of "Learn ICT Literacy in Five Areas: Build and Safeguard a Secure Information Society" and "How to Deal with the Internet: What You Should Do to Avoid being Deceived by Dis/Misinformation, 2nd Edition"', 19 March 2025, www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/joho_tsusin/eng/pressrelease/2025/3/19_4.html; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan, Whitepaper on Information and Communications, 2023, 'Chapter 5: ICT Policy Initiatives in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications', www.soumu.go.jp/johotsusintokei/whitepaper/eng/WP2023/pdf/01-chap5.pdf.

27 Government of Japan, Digital Agency of Japan, 'Priority Plan for the Advancement of a Digital Society', 13 June 2025, www.digital.go.jp/assets/contents/en/node/basic_page/field_ref_resources/5ecac8cc-50f1-4168-b989-2bcaabffe870/92216eb9/20250728_policies_priority_outline_en_02.pdf.

28 Government of Japan, Information Technology Promotion Agency, Information Security White Paper 2025 [in Japanese], www.ipa.go.jp/publish/wp-security/j5u9nn0000004wk0-att/ISWP2025_Chap4.pdf.

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especially visible among 'Global South' members of the Indo-Pacific, and on global stages, as well as in Southeast Asia. This provides the rationale for the methodology adopted in this paper, which analyses event data from scheduled diplomatic encounters involving a mixed participation beyond Western advanced economies, such as G20, ASEAN, and ASEAN–Japan summit meetings, where many of these discursive battles are rendered observable.

On one hand are discourses promoted by China that have trickled into the Global South and, in more nuanced ways, into Southeast Asia, underscoring the resonance of Chinese narratives. A key macro-level frame in this regard is the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). For China this represents an effort to reorient its economic growth model outward through infrastructure and connectivity projects that absorb excess industrial capacity, open new markets, and deepen trade and financial links with the Global South. The BRI is presented both as an instrument for expanding China's global economic and strategic reach, and as a vehicle for advancing elements of its industrial policy.[29]

China also seems to combine increasingly this constructive macro-level discourse with tactical information manipulation utilising both state machineries and ostensibly private social media accounts targeting IndoPacific audiences, although identifying the overall pattern of these activities lies beyond the scope of this study. Such manipulation often seeks to undermine or discredit FOIP by portraying it as a US-led containment scheme against China.

On the other hand, Russia's discourse towards Indo-Pacific audiences is primarily manipulative in intent and practice, centring on efforts to recast the reality and perception of the war in Ukraine. The Russian government has consistently framed its invasion of Ukraine as a 'special military operation' to remove a supposedly neo-Nazi leadership in Kyiv, while denying or undermining Ukraine's sovereignty in ways that mirror

29 Jin Keyu, *New China Playbook: Beyond Socialism and Capitalism* (Viking, 2023); also see her interview for *Panorama*, BBC, 24 November 2025 ('Britain and China: Following the Money', viewing in Tokyo), www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002mfm2.

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narrative patterns observed in Europe. In parts of the Indo-Pacific, Russia has encountered relatively sympathetic or at least ambivalent audiences, to the concern of Japan and other G7/European governments, and has repeatedly sought to downplay or deflect discussion of its responsibility for aggression. In the events monitored for this study, Moscow's messaging worked to prevent the war in Ukraine—particularly questions of Russian accountability—from becoming a central theme, thereby diluting or diverting debate around the conflict.

FOIP has thus increasingly had to compete with Chinese and Russian accounts in parts of the Global South where audiences remain open or ambivalent to these alternative discourses. In many cases such versions sit alongside or directly challenge FOIP's pursuit of liberal values and a rules-based order. Southeast Asian states, which generally resist being subsumed under the broader 'Global South' label, advance their own discursive emphasis on strategic autonomy[30] rather than relying on FOIP's value vocabulary, although Southeast Asia cooperates with Japan's FOIP on a case-by-case basis. In the Indo-Pacific context this autonomy—rooted in ASEAN's founding aspiration since 1967—implies freedom of decision-making from great-power interference by extra-regional actors such as the United States, China, or Russia, and reflects a pragmatic, hedging stance that differs from FOIP's more explicitly liberal alignments.

Japan's diplomacy has also been traditionally pragmatic, and this has shaped how FOIP has been articulated and implemented in practice, particularly in relations with ASEAN, which have long been central to Tokyo's regional strategy. In dealings with Southeast Asian partners, references to values have at times taken a back seat to maintaining cooperative ties, and respecting ASEAN's preference for consensus and non-interference.

Divergent political alignments within this regional operating environment have caused friction for Japan's strategic communications, while Tokyo and its G7 Partners increasingly worry about attempts to manipulate

30 Aoi, 'Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics and Strategic Communications'.

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information channelled through Global South members, where both Russia and China can find more receptive audiences than in established democratic forums.

In this context, gaps in Japan's diplomatic signalling and within its domestic information space present potential opportunities for adversarial state. This generates an ongoing contest between external manipulation efforts and Japan's still developing ability both to project its foreign and defence policies in a values-consistent way and to safeguard its information environment.

Open-Source Research Data Collection and Analysis

The methodology underpinning this research involved active monitoring of the Japanese information space by a research team from Cardiff University during four major diplomatic events in 2023, where Japanese foreign policy surrounding the FOIP pillar was potentially expected to attract hostile and malign attention. The four events of interest were the G7 Summit (Japan, 19–21 May); the ASEAN Summit (Indonesia, 4–7 September); the G20 Summit (India, 20 September); and the 50th Anniversary Summit on ASEAN–Japan Relations (Japan, 16–18 December). This 'event-based' research design involved data collection and analysis activities oriented around the defined events with keywords and search strategies configured to detect signals of information manipulation by pro-Russian and pro-PRC actors. It is an approach that can be counterposed with several others. For example, a different way of researching the issues arises if one elects to track the activities of known and publicly attributed information operations, such as Russia's Doppelganger or China's 'Paperwall' campaigns. Other viable strategies might include concentrating data collection around the deployment of a specific influencing tactic or platform of operation.

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In accordance with the event-based sampling approach, the observation period for each of the four events was designated as the duration of the event plus the four days before and after each one. For these time periods, researchers systematically analysed content from Chinese state-owned media (CSOM), Russian state-owned media (RSOM), official state-affiliated social media accounts (especially on X/Twitter but also including other platforms), and accounts identified as influential or potentially engaged in coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

A mixed-method analytic approach was then applied to the incoming data streams in two phases. For each case study, the first phase involved combinations of quantitative network analytics with qualitative content analysis, designed to enable comprehensive mapping of state-led and inauthentic influence operations for each individual event in turn. Once this was completed, in the second phase of analysis a more comparative approach was introduced. This involved comparing and contrasting the patterns of behaviour and contents observed across the four case studies, to delineate any nascent patterns, for both similarities and differences between the Russian and Chinese assets identified.

The monitoring of all four events suggests the existence of intentional efforts by Russia and PRC-linked entities to create networks of pro-Russia and pro-PRC accounts that respond to and interact with official media sources, with the intent seemingly being to amplify the public visibility of official discourses, through series of coordinated actions. Evidence from the monitoring of the ASEAN and G20 Summits in September 2023 indicates that one key channel for Russian messaging was a highly autonomous community network with 108 members (Oso Russia[31]) on X/Twitter, where members post primarily in Japanese.

An additional key finding derived from this research design worth briefly rehearsing is how Russian- and Chinese-aligned assets repeatedly amplified overlapping narratives, primarily seeking to undermine Japanese cooperation with Western alliances. There was also a clear

31 Oso Russia does not mean anything in particular in English, but its phonetic equivalent in Japanese (Osoroshia) means a proclamation of fear ('I am afraid').

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attempt to opportunistically exploit domestic narratives of disaffection. The adversarial agenda appears to have been to undermine Japan's alignment with Western alliances, and project Russian/PRC influence by exploiting domestic issues and wider geopolitical debates. Both RSOM and CSOM sources also utilised affiliated networks of accounts on social media that tended to present alternative strategic narratives, probably intended to override existing or dominant ones, which are essentially a legacy of a post-WWII liberal world order. For example, Japan was often portrayed as a 'pawn of the West/US'. There was also emphasis on domestic unrest, delegitimating Japan's position in the existing global order. Japan's political leaders, such as former prime minister Fumio Kishida and former foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, were portrayed as incompetent. These alternative tropes highlighted through the thematic data analysis repeatedly questioned the utility of the US–Japan alliance (ASEAN Summit and G20); flagged the potential for nuclear escalation (G7 in Hiroshima); highlighted the treatment of Fukushima treated water (ASEAN Summit and G20); engaged in the promotion of alternative world orders (accenting 'multipolarity' and the role of the 'Global South'); and focused on Ukraine's status in its war with Russia.

This last theme is an especially significant vector of attack because, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Japan has supported Ukraine as part of the G7, initially leading in its condemnation of Russia's invasion as a blatant breach of international law. This included altering some key aspects of its traditional policy towards Russia, in which it prioritised progress towards ending the war between the two nations by concluding a peace agreement, Northern Territories issues, and avoiding uniting Russia and China in their strategic calculus.

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Comparative Analysis of Overt State Media Propaganda

To commence a more detailed 'richer picture' analysis of the empirical data collected across the four key events, we first trace out some base patterns of activity performed by known Russian and Chinese media sources. For instance, monitoring of the 2023 G7 Summit took place between 16 and 24 May covering CSOM, RSOM, and official state-affiliated accounts on Twitter, as well as social media accounts identified by researchers as especially influential, or because they were suspected of engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

Russian and Chinese state media outlets were investigated to establish which key themes and issues were being pushed by each state during the monitoring period. This analysis was then used subsequently to identify accounts on social media signalling affinities to each state. Where possible, verbatim language used in state media articles or official statements were also tracked through to social media accounts. As with all G7 summits, there was a certain level of general 'noise' in media and social media conversations and traffic. To control for this, the analysis focused upon narratives and actors connected to the Japanese information environment.

For the period of 16–24 May 2023, the Russian and Chinese state media outlets subject to monitoring posted a similar number of English language articles mentioning the G7 (CSOM, 157; RSOM, 146). Intriguingly, however, plotting the distribution of these articles over time identified a key difference in approach (see Figure 1). CSOM sources were more engaged in presenting alternative narratives after the summit had ended. Their strategy appears to have been more reactive and engaged in framing how the key themes of the summit were publicly and politically positioned and remembered. In comparison, the volume of RSOM articles peaked during the summit, and several of the key narratives on which Russian communications assets focused were originally seeded by state officials in the period before the summit began.

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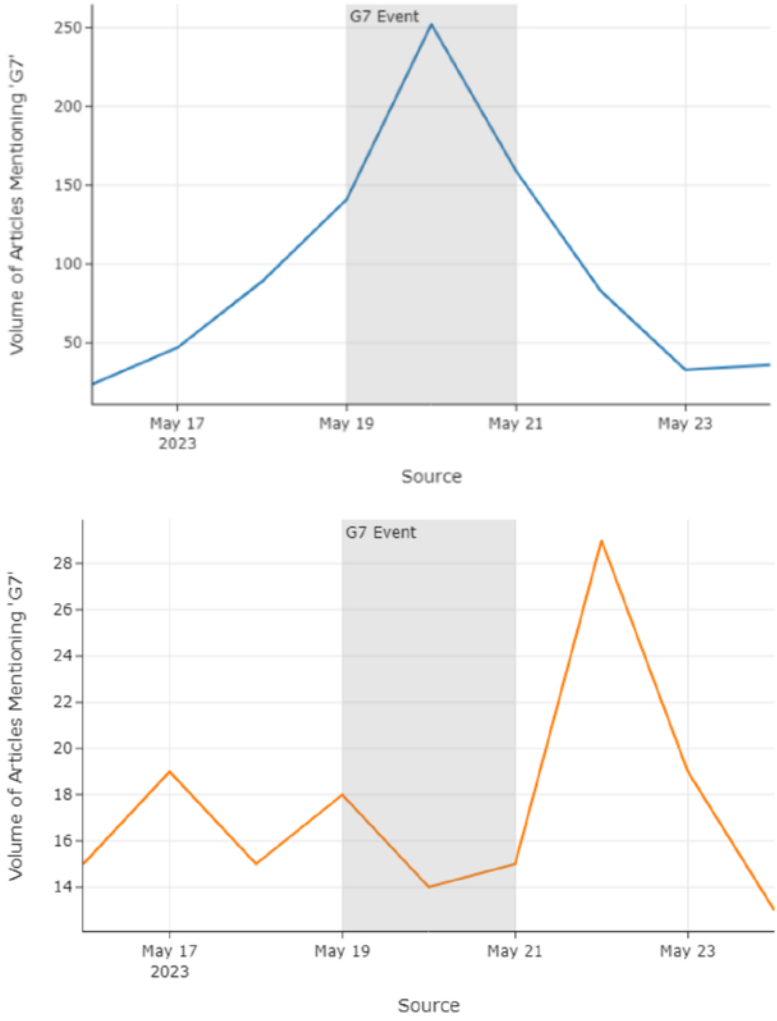

Figure 1. CSOM (top) and RSOM (bottom) articles mentioning G7, 16–24 May 2023

This result potentially reflects differences in the strategies adopted by the two different states. Such strategies may have involved different timings by which actors responded to environmental cues and signals,

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before shifting their lines of action in ways that in turn conditioned the environment they were seeking to navigate.[32]

It was also found that while state-led narratives quickly dispersed across social media platforms as official and non-official pro-PRC/Russian social media accounts picked up and amplified some, there was also a significant difference in the narrative focus of both states. Pro-PRC accounts focused on G7 claims of 'Chinese economic coercion', comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan, and offering alternative narratives to those presented against China at the summit. Pro-Russian accounts, in contrast, tended to focus more on the Ukraine war, current nuclear escalation threats, and nuclear history in Japan. The strong and recurring nuclear theme connects to and reflects the history of Hiroshima (see Figure 2), where there was clear strategic messaging. Notably the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova held a press conference on 17 May to highlight the 'cynicism' and 'absurdity' of holding a summit that focused on the 'nuclear threat from Russia' in Hiroshima, the site of a nuclear bomb dropped by America. This perspective was pushed by many official Russian accounts on X/Twitter, and was subsequently repeated by non-official pro-Russian accounts also on this platform.[33] The narrative around Hiroshima and US/Japanese nuclear history was also exploited to support pro-Russian narratives around the 'escalation' of the Ukraine war.

Figure 2 is a visualisation of the top ten key terms featuring in aggregated RSOM and CSOM media articles in association with the key search term 'G7'. Certain narratives were shared by both state medias. In particular there was narrative convergence on the topics of the Hiroshima protests and anti-US sentiments. These more closely linked narratives are denoted by the data points towards the top-right corner of the

32 Whether this process may be akin to what Abernethy terms 'Perception-Action Coupling' merits further research. D. Farrow and B. Abernethy, 'Do Expertise and the Degree of Perception—Action Coupling Affect Natural Anticipatory Performance?', *Perception* 32, Nº 9 (2003): 1127–39. https://doi.org/10.1068/p3323.

33 https://twitter.com/buhi_2/status/1660235230874329088 （ぶひ : #NOWAR #戦争反対　原発、ワクチン反対。平和を祈ります。21 May 2023). Please note that some of the tweets cited have been deleted since their original publication.

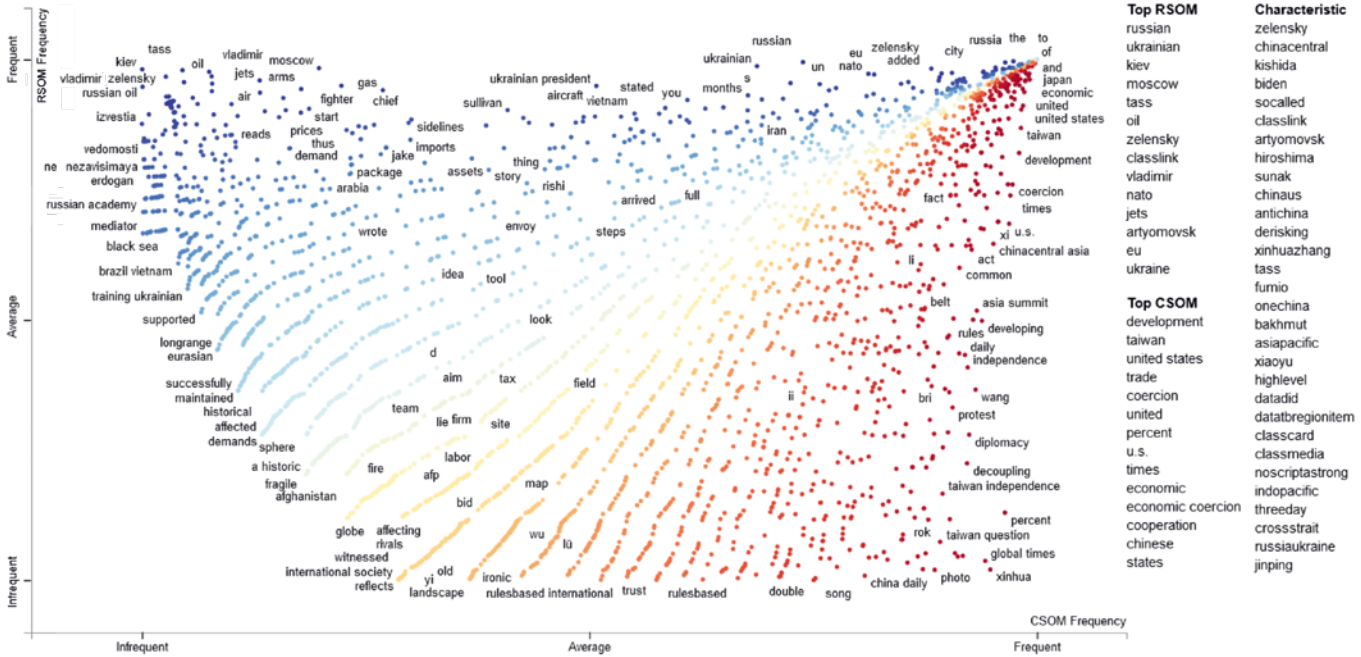

Figure 2. Scatter graph of key terms used in RSOM and CSOM articles mention G7.
Terms in blue are more associated with RSOM; terms in red, CSOM.

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graph. However, Figure 2 also clarifies some of the themes where the two countries' medias developed distinct and independent positions, indicated by the concepts and data points plotted more towards the bottom left of the graph.

To develop some of these preliminary implications in the data, researchers sought to trace out some of the transmission pathways of these media-based narratives and how they were being disseminated by social media accounts. This resulted in the identification of an interconnected network of highly influential accounts seeding and amplifying pro-PRC and pro-Russian narratives, primarily across X/Twitter. There was evidence of a number of these accounts displaying signals of inauthentic behaviour and amplifying pro-PRC and pro-Russian narratives in the Japanese language. There were also recurring interactions between state officials and these probably 'inauthentic' accounts with them amplifying one another's content. Evidence of operational hashtags being utilised by a few accounts was also captured, including a specific anti-Kishida narrative.

For the time being, however, we should return to the initial finding reported above—namely, the temporal differences detected between Russian and Chinese state media sources, since this may serve as an indicator of the different strategic intents and purposes underpinning each state's influencing campaigns. Russian state actors appeared to be more intent on seeding narratives and framing the discussion before the summit. In contrast, PRC state actors were more reactive, responding to official G7 statements where these were perceived to challenge or even contravene China's interests or damage its reputation.

A similar analytic approach was operationalised for each of the subsequent three events of interest, to see if the same pattern was replicated. The 2023 ASEAN meeting in Jakarta and the G20 Summit in New Delhi took place on 4–7 September and 9–10 September, respectively. Figure 3 provides a comparative temporal profiling for the RSOM and CSOM articles published in relation to the ASEAN meeting. Measured by volume, CSOM sources published 156 articles, and the RSOM sources 239.

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Although not quite as clearly delineated as for the G7 event, similar differences in the patterns of publication timing were again identified.

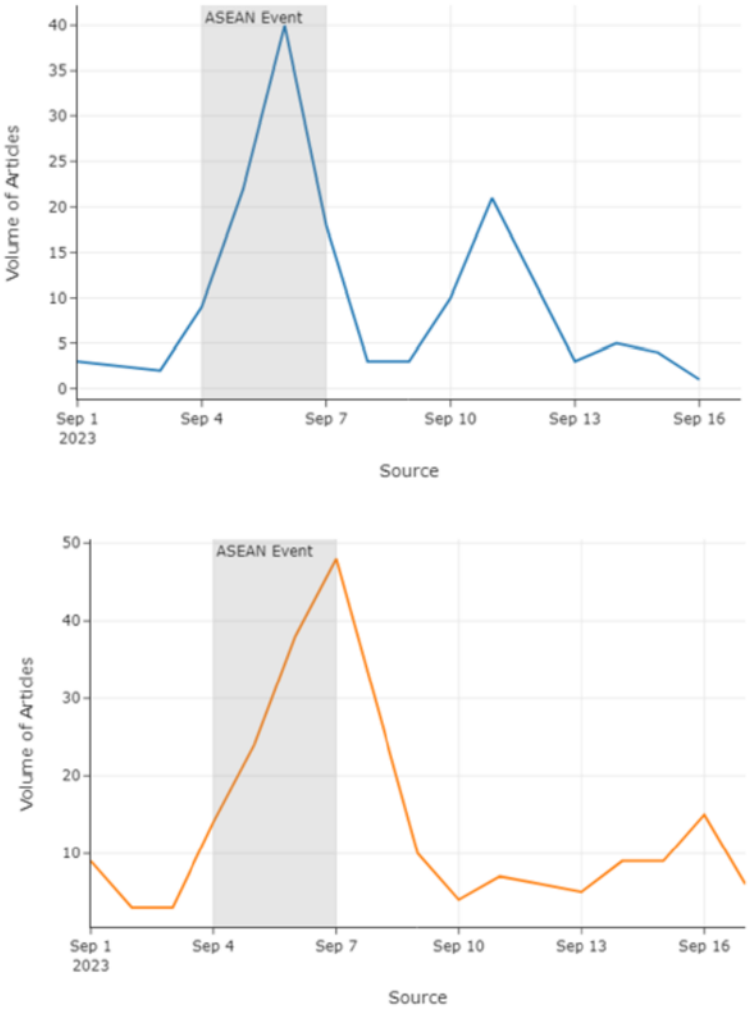

Figure 3. CSOM (top) and RSOM (bottom) articles mentioning ASEAN, 1–16 September 2023

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For the ASEAN Summit, the primary narrative focus of PRC-linked state actors was the Fukushima water release, which commenced on 24 August, just before the summit began. Chinese media quickly denounced the water release, amplifying coverage of local protests in Japan and a public rejection of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) proposal relating to it.

The coverage of the Fukushima water release shows how tactical reactions were opportunistically and frequently organised around and fed into broader, more persistent, strategic adversarial narratives. Chinese state-owned media was highly critical of this event, and inauthentic social media accounts amplified this criticism. In so doing, they were echoing and reproducing attempts to undermine Japanese alignment with Western nations and alliances consistent with its Indo-Pacific strategy.[34] This was tried through blending several tactical narratives that repeatedly appeared. It was also leveraged through a mix of strategic and opportunistic reactions to global events, such as the Fukushima water release and previously reported protests in Hiroshima during the G7. Russian state media[35] and pro-Russian social media influencers also shared footage of the protests in Hiroshima. These were both framed as something that mainstream democratic media would not report on[36] and linked to concerns expressed about the possibility of military escalation.[37]

This segueing of tactical issues and strategic themes was accomplished across a range of textual and visual communication formats. A *Global Times* (*GT*) article released on 6 September criticised Japan for using the ASEAN event as a public relations stunt and asserted that Japan would probably seek to 'play down the hazardous dumping of Fukushima nuclear-contaminated

34 Disputes over Japan's release of treated water were captured in the press globally as well. See BBC, 'Fukushima: The Fishy Business of China's Outrage over Japan's Release', 25 August 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66613158; BBC, 'Fukushima Nuclear Disaster: Activists March against Tokyo's Waste Plan', 12 August 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66486233.

35 https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1659740726362767361 (@RT_com, Anti-war demostrators clash with police in Hiroshima ahead of G7 summit, 20 May 2023).

36 https://twitter.com/Spriter99880/status/1660507254758469634 (@SprintMediaNews Hiroshima, as free (from conscience) democratic media will not show it to you, 22 May 2023).

37 https://twitter.com/apocalypseos/status/1660471078379225091 (@apocalypseos, 22 May 2023).

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wastewater into the ocean' (Figure 4).[38] This story was picked up across *GT*'s social media platforms and by Zhang Heqing, a Chinese embassy official in Pakistan.[39] Additionally, China Daily and CGTN published articles on 7 and 8 September respectively, dismissing Japanese articles that claimed China had refused to join the IAEA.[40]

Figure 4. *Global Times* cartoon on the Fukushima water release

Chinese premier Li Qiang's discussion with Japanese prime minister Kishida on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit highlighted the Fukushima issue. CSOM outlets such as China Daily and Xinhua News quickly disseminated[41] his calls for Japan to 'handle the matter in

38 Global Times, 'Japan Likely to Use ASEAN Event for PR Stunt; Kishida Urged to Explain Dumping with Sincerity, Science-Based Attitude', 6 September 2023, www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1297720.shtml.

39 https://twitter.com/zhang_heqing/status/1699789358675689699 [no longer available].

40 Jiang Xueqing, 'Embassy Refutes Rumor on China, IAEA and Japan Discharge', *ChinaDaily*, 7 September 2023, www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202309/07/WS64f9d60fa310d2dce4bb48ab.html; CGTN, 'Chinese Embassy in Japan says Reports on China, IAEA and Fukushima are False', 8 September 2023, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-09-08/Chinese-embassy-says-reports-on-China-IAEA-and-Fukushima-are-false-1mVvTSKumGc/index.html.

41 Cao Desheng, 'Premier Calls for Asian Countries to Focus on Peaceful Development', *ChinaDaily*, 6 September 2023, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202309/06/WS64f86dc7a310d2dce4bb44d2.html.

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a responsible way',[42] as 'nuclear-contaminated water concerns the global marine ecosystem and public health',[43] in a possible attempt to frame subsequent coverage.

Russian state narratives, in contrast, revolved around Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's attendance and concerns about NATO and AUKUS, with less focus on Japan. Russian outlets also reported Myanmar's calls for increased Russia–ASEAN cooperation, emphasising growing energy needs and the role of Asia in world trade. Kang Zo, Myanmar's minister of investment and foreign economic relations, argued for more cooperation between Russia and ASEAN, stating: 'economic ties between Russia and ASEAN should increase significantly due to the growing energy needs of ASEAN countries and the growing role of Asia in world trade'.[44] Additionally, the Russian embassy in Japan published negative tweets regarding Japanese cooperation with the US, but did not connect this to ASEAN.

A secondary story for both states was a commentary on the global world order, in particular critiquing Japan's relationship with the US and Western alliances. As demonstrated in Figure 5, RSOM and CSOM often mentioned their own country with ASEAN to emphasise their own bilateral relationship with the Asian association.

State Officials as Social Media Influencers

The preceding discussion highlighted how Maria Zakharova, as a Russian state official, played a key role in amplifying specific narratives. A similar role was also played for the PRC by Xue Jian, Chinese consul general in Osaka. Xue is a well-known figure owing to his recurring role in actively

42 Sakuma Murakami, 'Japan PM Speaks to China's Li about Radioactive Water Release', *Reuters*, 7 September 2023, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-pm-kishida-says-he-spoke-with-china-premier-li-asean-sidelines-2023-09-06.

43 Global Times, 'Japan Likely to Use ASEAN Event'.

44 RIA Novosti, 'Myanmar Declares Interest of ASEAN Countries in Cooperation with Russia' [in Russian], 11 September 2023, https://ria.ru/20230911/asean-1895444349.html.

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spreading PRC tropes via social media, using his X/Twitter account which has a huge audience reach. On 20 May 2023 the account shared a video of protesters lining the streets of Hiroshima to protest against the G7 Summit, reaching over 246,000 X/Twitter users.[45]

Narratives posted in this account include:

- The G7 Hiroshima Summit was a failed meeting that fuelled factional conflict, undermined regional stability, and stifled the development of other countries.[46]
- G7 member states secretly supported and advocated for 'violent' demonstrations in Hong Kong in an effort to divide China.[47]
- G7 member states are controlled by the US, the world's largest nuclear power.[48]
- Japan and the United States will make full use of the G7 to divide the world and do serious damage to the economic development of each country, regional stability, and world peace.[49]

The Xue account repeatedly retweets the content of pro-PRC and Russian state media outlets, and engages with pro-PRC/Russian content in the Japanese language that appears to originate with inauthentic accounts. These activity patterns are prolific, on occasion reaching over 4000 tweets a day. In June 2022 the account posted over 6000 tweets on one day.

Sometimes this influencer role can be quite directly confrontational. In relation to the G7 Summit, on 16 May the US ambassador to Japan, Rahm Emanuel, tweeted: 'G7 members are developing tools to deter

45 https://x.com/SprintMediaNews/status/1660507254758469634 (@SprintMediaNews Hiroshima, as free (from conscience) democratic media will not show it to you, 22 May 2023).
46 https://x.com/xuejianosaka/status/1660813269203062786 (@xuejianosaka, 23 May 2023).
47 https://twitter.com/xuejianosaka/status/1658989086257086465 (@xuejianosaka, 18 May 2023).
48 https://twitter.com/xuejianosaka/status/1660301951962349568 (@xuejianosaka, 22 May 2023).
49 https://x.com/xuejianosaka/status/1660199087071965184 (@xuejianosaka, 21 May 2023).

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and defend against China's economic threats and retaliation.'[50] This elicited a rapid response from several Chinese officials who quickly posted alternative narratives portraying China in a positive light, the US as an economic villain, and Japan as a US puppet.

The social media account of the Russian embassy of Japan (@RusEmbassyJ) played a key role in seeding pro-Russian narratives across the monitoring period associated with the ASEAN and G20 events. It published a total of 345 posts from 1 to 17 September, including a statement from Sergey Lavrov on the 3rd that gained a total of 554,000 views.

Figure 5 compares and contrasts the volume and timing of tweets from both the embassy and Xue Jian that mention the key words 'ASEAN' or 'G20' over the monitoring period. Xue Jian mentioned the keywords 40 times, while the Russian embassy mentioned them approximately 13 times. The embassy focused primarily on G20 and posted the highest number of tweets on 8 September, one day prior to the summit. These tweets centred on comments made by the director of Russia's Foreign Ministry Department for Economic Cooperation, Dmitry Birichevsky, in an interview with BRICS TV on 7 September, suggesting G20 members find 'common ground'.[51]

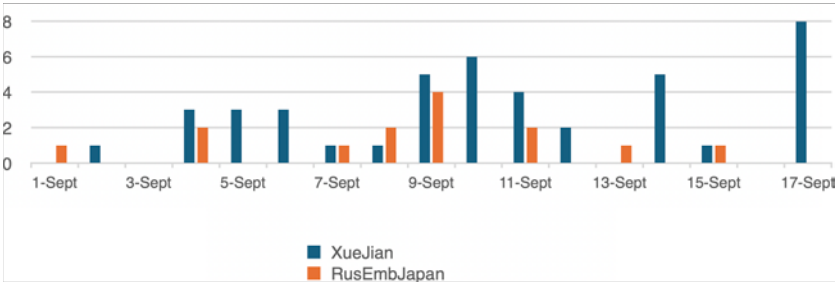

Figure 5. Comparing timings of tweets on ASEAN and G20 by key state accounts

50 https://twitter.com/USAmbJapan/status/1658280122351489024 (@USAmbJapan, 16 May 2023).

51 駐日ロシア連邦大使館 on X: 🇷🇺D.A.ビリチエフスキー@MID_RF: 💬 今日、世界の団結はかつてないほど必要とされているため、インドを議長国としたG20のスローガン「全世界は一つの家族」は非常にタイムリーです。 Russian Embassy in Japan, 'D.A. Birichevsky@MID_RF: 💬 Today, as we need unity of the world more than ever before, the slogan of G20 chaired by India, "The whole world is one family", is very timely', Telegram, 9 September 2023, https://t.co/RSLfJZgIFT.

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Furthermore, on 13 September, the Russian embassy account amplified Lavrov's statements at the G20 Summit,[52] signalling to its followers to see more details on its Telegram page—thus highlighting use of cross-platform amplification tactics. The Telegram page continued to discuss the success of the summit as Russia and other BRICS nations 'advocated [for] depoliticising discussions' and 'worked together to thwart Western attempts to "Ukrainise" the G20 format'.[53] Its use of signposting to direct followers to Telegram to 'read more' demonstrates that the embassy may use Telegram to communicate more complex and divisive interpretations. The Telegram post received a total of 545 views, and the X post was viewed over 4000 times.

Sometimes the interactions between state officials, state media outlets, and social media outlets leveraged striking levels of audience reach and engagement. Figure 6 is a screenshot of a story in a Xinhua article about the dangers of US economic coercion, reposted via Weibo, which received over one million reads/views on that platform alone. The key point to be derived from this discussion is how high-profile officials and their social media accounts can function as 'influencers', acting as key nodes in shaping the transmission pathways of propaganda narratives for both Russia and China. In the Japanese context, such communicative interventions can attract attention to an issue.

Pro-PRC and Pro-Russian Social Media Accounts and the Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN–Japan Friendship and Cooperation in December 2023

The preceding discussion, in different ways and from different perspectives, centred on how relatively overt assets are harnessed and deployed on behalf of PRC and Russian state interests, in the process seeking to denude and degrade Japan's international influence and reputation. This section focuses on the less visible workings of accounts and assets on social media. These are variously attributable in terms of

52 https://twitter.com/RusEmbassyJ/status/1701850542819963308 (@RusEmbassy, 13 September 2023).

53 https://t.me/rusembjp/12904 (Embassy of Russia in Japan, 13 September 2023).

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Figure 6. Xinhua article reposted to Weibo with view metrics

their links to nation state structures, but are key components in the communications system where narratives are developed, amplified, and disseminated. Here we will focus exclusively upon the fourth key event of interest, which celebrates ongoing links between Japan and its ASEAN partner countries.

By way of context, several concerns were raised during the summit meeting itself that were reworked into messaging content by accounts operating on social media, some of which appear to have obfuscated links to Russia and China respectively. Japanese and ASEAN leaders advocated for imminent access to humanitarian aid for Gaza and brought up concerns over the 'situation in East and South China Sea'.[54] ASEAN also conveyed its appreciation to Japan for supporting the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.[55] Ultimately leaders adopted a joint vision that addressed several of these concerns, including focusing on security and economic cooperation, signing a security assistance deal with Malaysia

54 Associated Press, 'Japan Bolsters Security Ties with Neighbors at Summit, amid Tensions with China', NPR, 17 December 2023, www.npr.org/2023/12/17/1219884122/japan-bolsters-security-ties-with-neighbours-summit-amid-tensions-china.

55 Tempo, 'ASEAN-Japan Summit Urges Broad Humanitarian Aid for Gaza', 18 December 2023, https://en.tempo.co/read/1810759/asean-japan-summit-urges-broad-humanitarian-aid-for-gaza.

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and Indonesia to boost their maritime security, and reinforcing support for ASEAN's efforts to tackle climate change, among others.[56]

There was only limited engagement with this event from PRC state media and no Russian state media interest in the summit.

There was, however, more event-related activity on social media, albeit this was also at a lower volume than for earlier events. During the monitoring for the three preceding events of interest, a network of around 70 X/Twitter pro-PRC and pro-Russian accounts had been identified engaging in suspicious activities. Some displayed potential signals of 'inauthenticity' in that the account personas appeared fabricated. Others in the network appeared to be coordinating their messaging activity, either temporally or in terms of highly similar content. Tracking the operations of these networked accounts, focusing on their activities on the Japanese information space, identified behavioural traces indicative of persistent attempts to undermine Japan's reputation, or intent on amplifying Russian or Chinese interests. There were also low levels of cross-platform signalling, pushing Japanese audiences on X onto more 'specialised' platforms, such as Telegram and Weibo.[57]

For the PRC-aligned accounts, a key strategic narrative gravitated around attempting to undermine Japan's relationship with ASEAN, promoting instead China's relationship with ASEAN. There were also allegations about Japan's 'militarism', suggesting the country was using ASEAN to boost defence capabilities. Several accounts in the network were observed trying to leverage political disorder in Japan and amplifying pro-PRC and pro-Russian narratives on the Israel–Gaza conflict in Japanese. @wangon2010, who regularly engages with official diplomatic accounts, questioned where Japan would find the 4.9 trillion yen promised to ASEAN, which 'places the highest priority on economic relations with China'. This post included a link to another post by Sputnik Japan,

56 Mari Yamaguchi, 'Japan and ASEAN Bolster Ties at a Summit Focused on Security and Economy amid Tensions with China', *Associated Press*, 17 December 2023, https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-top-headlines/ap-japan-and-asean-bolster-ties-at-summit-focused-on-security-economy-amid-china-tensions.

57 https://twitter.com/LuLu0122/status/1749685991764562050 [no longer available].

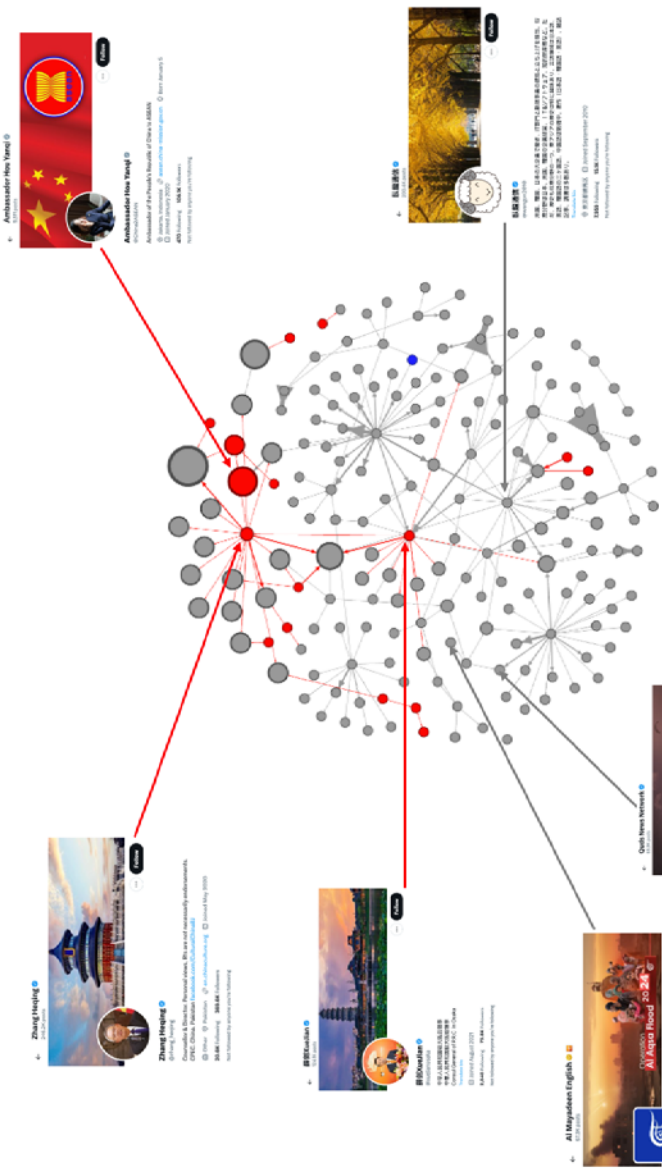

Figure 7. Retweet network of those interacting with influential accounts and with Russian and Chinese official accounts

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which has since become unavailable. It is unclear as to whether this latter post was taken down by X or was deleted by the account. At least six accounts in the network reposted this message.[58]

Figure 7 provides a network visualisation of all the accounts over the monitoring period that retweeted the Chinese and Russian embassies in Japan and mentioned 'ASEAN' or 'Japan'. There were 181 users and 208 retweets in total. This is notably smaller than the network that resulted from G7 discussions (*N* users = 839), and reflects the smaller online conversation around this monitored event. The red nodes in the graph represent Chinese official state accounts, while blue represents Russian official state accounts. The network also includes key 'influential' and unattributed accounts identified over the different phases of this research. These are therefore interacting with the official accounts on a recurring basis.

One notable difference in the network's activities at this point, compared with previous monitoring periods, was the inclusion of outlets and actors messaging on the Gaza conflict. Specifically there were accounts engaged in pushing pro-Iran or pro-Russia messaging and content derived from Iran's Quds News Network and Hezbollah's Al Mayadeen (see Figure 8), both of which are funded by Iran and appear in the network diagram.

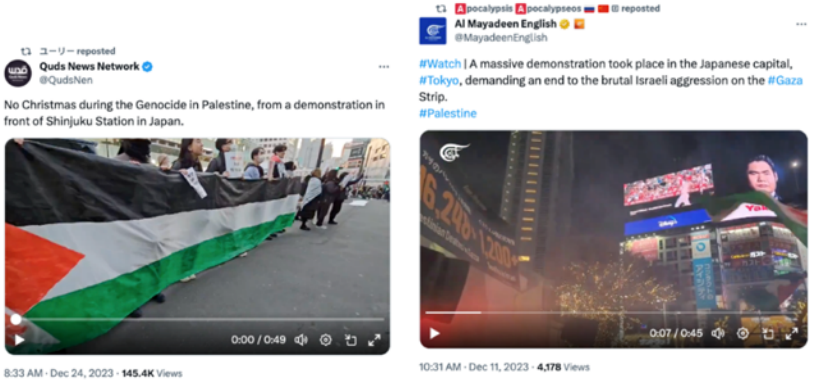

Figure 8. Iranian-funded media outlets being retweeted by Japanese language accounts on X

58 https://x.com/wangon2010/status/1736374385194480077 (@wangon2010, 17 December 2023).

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The detection of this evolution and adaptation in the network's behaviour serves to reinforce an interpretative point made earlier. This relates to how effective information influence operations are highly agile and responsive to global events. They are able to develop rapidly and disseminate tactical stories about conditions surrounding a specific event, but in ways that are inflected with broader and deeper strategic themes that speak to established geopolitical issues.

Membership Oso Russia (会員制おそロシア) on X/Twitter

As part of the monitoring for the G7 event, analysis identified user @Z58633984 as an account actively spreading pro-Russian messages in Japanese on X/Twitter, operating in the context of the aforementioned network. Tracking it across subsequent events of interest suggests that the role of this account evolved, emerging as moderator of a community group, Membership Oso Russia,[59] that was created in July 2023[60] (see Figure 9). At the time of detection, the community consisted of 108 members, with four moderators including account @Z58633984. The community's creator account appears to have been @4mYeeFHhA6H1OnF, which promoted discussion of Russian narratives on the community page and on its individual account.

The community's short description states it is 'limited to pro-Russians'. Members of the group post in Japanese with extensive discussion of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That said, only one community post focused upon the events of interest, where member @lindenb reposted an article from @AlMayadeenNews,[61] a Beirut-based pan-Arab media outlet. The article stated: 'Russian Foreign Minister: The Global South's

59 https://x.com/i/communities/1681756863187263488 (会員制　おそロシア　親露限定 30 November 2023).

60 X/Twitter communities were announced by the platform in 2021 as a 'new way for you to connect, talk, and bond with others who share your interests and values': https://business.twitter.com/en/products/communities.html#:~:text=Communities%20is%20a%20new%20way,with%20people%20who%20get%20you [no longer available].

61 https://twitter.com/AlMayadeenNews.

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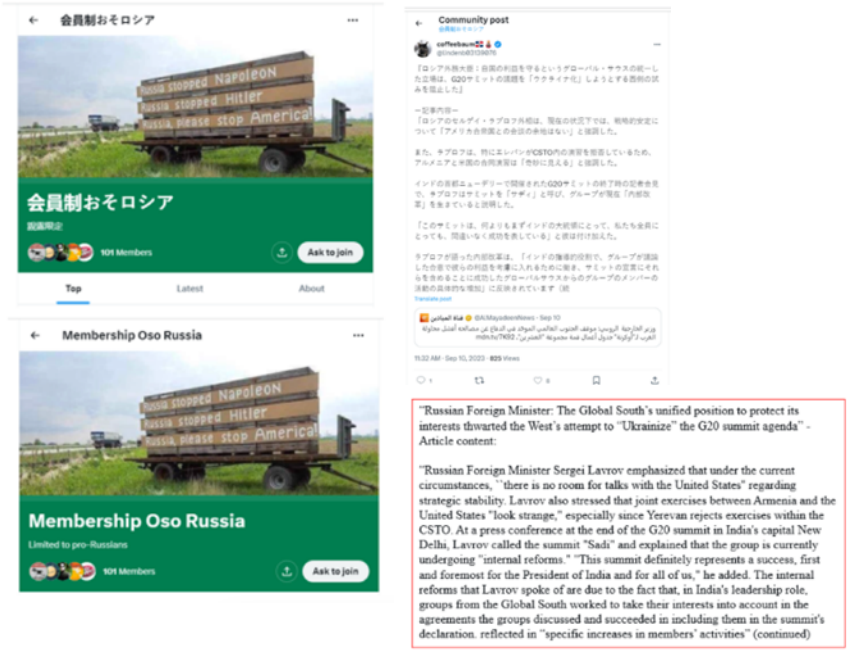

Figure 9. Screenshots from Oso community posts and interactions relating to the G20 Summit

unified position to protect its interests thwarted the West's attempt to "Ukrainize" the G20 summit agenda.' However, the group also frequently held community X/Twitter 'spaces', where members have live audio conversations, but the topics and contents of these were not available to researchers.

By December 2023 and the time of the Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN–Japan Friendship and Cooperation, the community on X had expanded to 180 members. Content was being shared in the group at a relatively steady rate. Significantly, and reinforcing a previous point about cross-platform activity, members were now being encouraged to join Telegram chats or live X spaces that included information on Russia in Japanese (Figure 10).

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Figure 10. Japanese-language X space linked to the Oso Russia community

One user was observed sharing a screenshot to the 'Russia Beyond Japanese' Telegram channel and the corresponding website.[62] This is a Japanese offshoot of the broader Russia Beyond channel which promotes Russian culture abroad. The Telegram channel has a limited audience with only 481 subscribers (Figure 11).

The left-hand image of Figure 11 translates from Japanese as 'Five facts to recommend the acclaimed Russian drama "The Boy's World: Blood On the Asphalt"', followed by 'Top 10 USSR/Russian animated films recognized worldwide—from Venice, Tokyo, and Los Angeles—USSR-made animations won numerous prestigious awards (Culture)'. The right-hand image reads:

62 https://twitter.com/TTFcslJBaZ11597/status/1734200710848495928/photo/1 [accessed 29 February 24; message deleted from platform].

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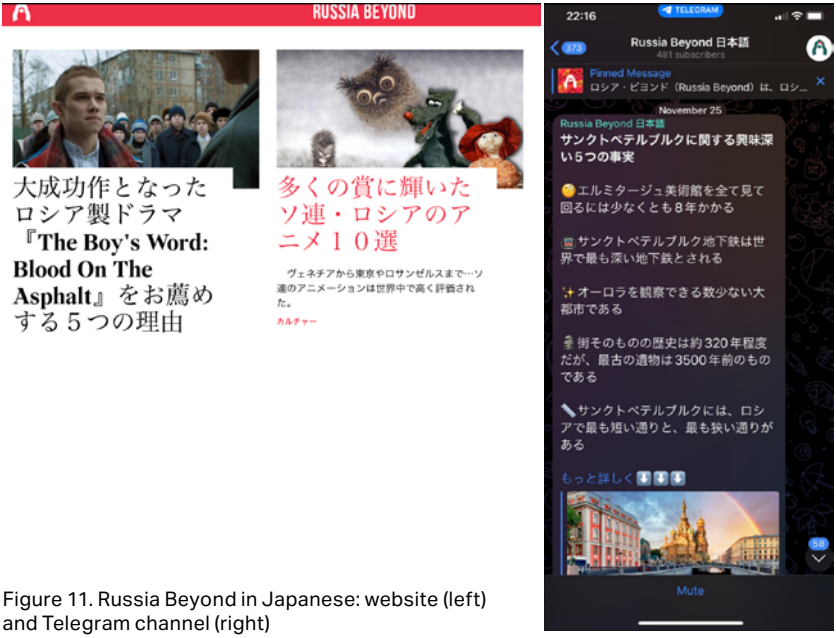

Figure 11. Russia Beyond in Japanese: website (left) and Telegram channel (right)

Russia Beyond (Japanese)—Five interesting facts about St Petersburg

- It takes at least eight years to see everything in the Hermitage Museum
- St Petersburg's subway is the deepest in the world
- The city is one of the few where you can see the aurora
- St Peterburg existed for 320 years, but its oldest building dates back 3500 years
- The city has the shortest and also the narrowest street in Russia. For more details, click the link.

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One moderator of the group, @4mYeeFHhA6H1OnF, regularly held Japanese-language Twitter/X spaces. These featured titles such as 'Russia's perpetual war'. Given the number of users joining the sessions, it is clear they were reaching users outside the Oso community as well, with generally around 200–300 virtual 'attendees', although the number reached over 400 on one occasion,[63] and over 650 on another.[64]

Interpretation

This research involved targeted open-source research of four major diplomatic events between May and December 2023, analysing the Japanese and related information space for signals of possible manipulation by pro-Russian and pro-PRC actors. The purpose was to evaluate how these actors sought to influence, shape, or undermine Japan's foundational concept of FOIP. Analysis was grounded in public online discourse across English, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese language sources, focusing particularly on state official media (CSOM/RSOM) and influential pro-PRC/pro-Russia accounts on X (formerly Twitter) with a documented tendency to amplify these narratives.

The aim of such an approach was to develop a more holistic and 'systemic' picture, including how media and social media campaigns of both Russia and China and their assets interact and operate in conjunction with each other. This includes multiple operations and campaigns run by the same challenger state actors, but also interactions and reinforcements arising from the triangulated impacts of different operations run by and on behalf of different states.

The ensuing analysis identified the following major trends in the overall pattern and processes of information manipulation campaigns of these two state actors. First, the event-led analysis clearly discerned a persistent

63 https://twitter.com/AlMayadeenNews.

64 https://twitter.com/TTFcslJBaZ11597/status/1734200710848495928/photo/1 [accessed 29 February 24; message deleted from platform].

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pattern in which there were differences in the strategies through which these two state actors pursued adversarial information manipulation campaigns. This probably signals the uncoordinated nature of the information operations of the two state actors vis-à-vis this particular information space and time. Interpreting how, when, and why these two state actors decide to act, and in the process adapt to the feedback that results from their actions, has the potential to be developed into a more nuanced and sophisticated account of the ways in which information operations evolve and adapt over time.

Second, the innovative approach adopted in this research entailed empirically focusing on what might be termed the 'net information effects', the cumulative effect on the information space of exposure to multiple overlapping and interacting influences, performed by and on behalf of state actors. It is an approach that guides us to question whether there might be a mutual 'harm multiplier' effect that aggregates from overt and covert influence and interference actions performed by different state challengers.

The empirical analysis identified emergent and evolving networks of both Russian and Chinese state actor accounts propagating antagonistic narratives that undermine or often discredit FOIP and the nature of Japanese leadership facing particular diplomatic issues. This supports and justifies the slightly unorthodox 'sampling strategy' deployed in guiding the data collection and analysis. Specifically, we were interested in attempts to degrade and destabilise the FOIP construct. This is not how most studies of state information threats have been organised to date. Typically they sample an 'operation' to study its tactics, techniques, and procedures in detail. Or they adopt a purely 'event-based sample', around an election; for instance, to determine the attack vectors directed towards it. Instead, by pivoting around a concept (FOIP) this study has illuminated and revealed some different aspects of the organisation and conduct of state information threats, and consequently could be explored further in future studies.

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In operationalising this approach, the empirical data suggested a persistent pattern whereby both Chinese and Russian state-linked accounts, as well as networks of sympathisers, propagated critical and antagonistic narratives towards Japanese diplomacy. This activity was prevalent around three of the four monitored events (G7, ASEAN Summit, G20), manifesting as rapid amplification on Japanese-language X/Twitter accounts. Notably the Japanese language was widely used for these campaigns, suggesting efforts to embed adversarial messaging in local discourse and maximise resonance among Japanese audiences.

Social media analysis identified a network of accounts, growing over time, displaying signals of inauthentic behaviour, and actively disseminating pro-PRC and pro-Russian content. Also highlighted was the emergence and evolution of the 'Oso Russia' group, possibly illustrating a strategic community-building effort, and underpinning Russian narrative dissemination over time. The group's membership increased from 108 to 180 between September and December 2023. Along with other monitored accounts, this group routinely amplified both misinformation (accidental) and disinformation (deliberate)—frequently exploiting topical domestic grievances such as corruption scandals and the Fukushima disaster—thus undermining confidence in the Japanese government and its alliances.

Quantitative findings suggested that although the direct impact (views and retweets) of state official media posts was relatively limited compared to the reach of highly networked social media communities, their narratives 'travelled' rapidly across X/Twitter, in part owing to the interventions of both official and non-affiliated accounts. These converging digital activities formed an ecosystem whereby the manipulation of critical accounts—especially those designed to delegitimise Japan's cooperation with Western partners—became routinised and normalised. Indeed, it is our hypothesis that this 'normalisation effect' of critical, polarising, and divisive sentiments in the Japanese information space may be a key objective.

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Importantly the research did not establish direct operational coordination between pro-PRC and pro-Russian actors, although clear alignment in strategic objectives and the spread of similar narratives was observed. For instance, state-linked messaging regularly characterised Japan as subordinate to Western powers, condemned alliances such as AUKUS and the G7, and attacked Japan's reputation as a champion of democratic norms and the rules-based order. These narratives, while inauthentic to specialists in Japanese international relations, may be effective in forming prejudices among less informed domestic and international audiences.

Conclusion

Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision has become an increasingly active target for adversarial information manipulation by Russia and China. They deploy distinct but mutually reinforcing strategies to contest Japan's values-based diplomacy and its anchoring role in a liberal rules-based order. The event-led and concept-based open-source research design adopted in this study demonstrates that, while these actors do not appear operationally coordinated, their campaigns aggregate into a net information effect that seeks to erode confidence in FOIP, Japan's alliances, and Japan's democratic credentials over time.

There are multiple strategic implications identified, as these essentially tactical and uncoordinated manipulations still have important cumulative effects.

The analysis of four major diplomatic events in 2023 shows that Russian and Chinese state media and affiliated social media ecosystems consistently used Japan-related summits as opportunities to seed or amplify narratives portraying Japan as a pawn of Western powers, delegitimising its leadership, and questioning the value of its cooperation with the G7, the United States, and ASEAN. Russian actors tended to act earlier and more proactively around events, especially on issues

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linked to Ukraine and nuclear risk. Chinese actors more often reacted to perceived challenges to Beijing's interests, opportunistically leveraging controversies such as Fukushima water releases and domestic discontent in Japan and the wider Indo-Pacific.

These practices were reinforced by the systematic use of Japanese-language content and hybrid networks of state, quasi-official, and apparently inauthentic accounts, including community-building initiatives such as the Oso Russia X/Twitter group and cross-platform signposting to Telegram and Weibo. The cumulative pattern suggests an emerging ecosystem in which critical, polarising, and anti-FOIP narratives are routinised, rather than remaining exceptional interventions. The potential long-term consequences might be to normalize these disruptive dialogues that harm both domestic resilience and external perceptions of Japan's role in the liberal order.

In terms of *conceptual and methodological contributions,* by privileging FOIP as the sampling lens, rather than a single campaign, actor, or platform, this study offers one of the first systematic OSINT analyses of how multiple challenger states simultaneously contest a core strategic communications construct in the Japanese information space. Moreover, the analysis focusing on multiple state actors with attention to net effects highlights how adversarial actors iteratively interpret feedback, adapt tactics, and layer tactical narratives (Fukushima, Gaza, corruption scandals) onto deeper strategic projects aimed at undermining Japan's alignment with a rules-based order. This approach underscores the importance of moving towards more systemic frameworks that can capture how overlapping influence efforts interact with one another and also with structural features of Japanese society, media markets, and political culture. It also points to the additional and important need to consider ethical and contextual challenges of conducting OSINT in Indo-Pacific democracies, where sensitivities around attribution, data transparency, and indirect modes of political communication require some local tuning when utilising open-source research methods.

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Yet the findings here should not lead one to leap to the conclusion that FOIP's resilience is effectively undermined by these attempts at manipulation, although they could interact with social vulnerabilities in the Japanese information space.

Despite escalating external pressure, FOIP remains deeply embedded in Japan's strategic identity and public commitment to a liberal rules-based order. And Japanese opinion towards China and Russia continues to be broadly negative. However, emerging domestic socio-economic, gender, and ideological cleavages, alongside the rise of anti-globalist and populist actors, have begun to open new vectors through which adversarial narratives can resonate with disaffected constituencies and align with broader 'Global South' or multipolar framings, promoted by Russia, China, and, occasionally but increasingly, Iranian-linked outlets.

In this environment the key risk lies less in single, disruptive operations and more in the potential for gradually normalising antagonistic frames that erode Japan's perceived legitimacy, its Western partnerships, and the credibility of FOIP as an inclusive, values-driven vision. Addressing and mitigating these diffuse, long-term effects requires not only technical detection and disruption capabilities, as outlined in Japan's recent strategic policy documents, but also, and more importantly, a sustained commitment to strategic communications. Japan has a long-standing tradition in strategic communications, illustrated by its constructive role in shaping the 'Indo-Pacific' vision. When confronted with adversarial manipulation, Japan must further prioritise strategic communications with a long-term perspective, one rooted not only in geopolitical acumen, but in the values that uphold a rules-based order and engage increasingly diverse domestic and regional audiences.

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It's Time StratCom Got Strategic about AI

A Review Essay by Louis Brooke

Empire of AI: Inside the Reckless Race for Total Domination
Karen Hao. London, Allen Lane, 2025.

AI First: The Playbook for a FutureProof Business and Brand
Adam Brotman and Andy Sac. Harvard Business Review Press, 2025.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, AI, artificial intelligence, technology, influence operations, transformation, disruption*

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Louis Brooke is a co-founder and CSO of Zinc Network, an agency that helps solve governance and security challenges, with technology, behaviour change, and communications. Zinc has also launched a new AI tool for StratCom and IO, Kora.

The question of what AI means for individuals, organisations, and societies is one of the most urgent of our time. Investors and businesses are already placing their bets. But the world of strategic communications (StratCom) has been sluggish in its embrace of the technology, both in terms of integrating AI into its practice and in grappling with how AI will reshape the context in which it operates.

StratCom sits between two very different worlds. Its practice is drawn from the dynamic, commercially driven world of marketing and technology, while its funding, institutional structures, and human resource are firmly anchored in the analytical but bureaucratic world of government and public policy. AI is pulling these worlds further apart, and fast. Two books this year speak to these alter egos of StratCom. Karen Hao's *Empire of AI* unpacks the political economy of the AI industry, with a focus on

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the social and economic harms it causes, while *AI First: The Playbook for a FutureProof Business and Brand*, by Adam Brotman and Andy Sac, is an urgent plea for marketeers and all business leaders to embrace AI as rapidly and fully as possible, or risk being left behind.

And there is a need for urgency. Marketing has been one of the sectors most rapidly disrupted by and fastest to embrace AI. Copywriters, planners, producers, and designers all are seeing their roles, if not destroyed, transformed. The revenues and valuations of major advertising groups are falling, as smaller agencies can now deliver and distribute quality content at unprecedented pace and scale. Each week a plethora of new AI-powered marketing tools, 'mAItech', is released, propagated by a thriving ecosystem of thought leaders, influencers, and evangelists.

Yet the StratCom community, like much of the public sector, is mainly focused on security and ethics, and all too easily retreats into our comfort zone of talking about big ideas. Will AI bring climate catastrophe, mass unemployment, or even the end of humanity? Or will it usher in a new dawn of a three-day working week, exponential scientific breakthroughs, and universal prosperity? While these questions are clearly important, the facts on the ground are changing before they can be cogently formulated, let alone answered. More importantly, they are also the questions the AI labs want us to focus on, while further entrenching their power. StratCom professionals must become better Marxists. Our job is not only to interpret the world, but to change it.

Move *Very* Fast and Break Lots of Things

For those not fully immersed in the world of AI, who don't listen to the podcasts, follow the Substacks, or experiment with every new tool, it can be hard to grasp how fast the technology is reshaping both our sector and the wider information environment. The sheer pace of deals, product launches, and analysis is overwhelming. Deliberately so.

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In October and November 2025 alone, OpenAI has announced plans to spend $ 1.4 trillion on computing power over the next five or so years, roughly the GDP of Spain or Australia. Analysts at Barclays Bank estimate the company is building, or planning to build, data centres providing 46 gigawatts of compute power and consuming 55 gigawatts of electricity, equivalent to the entire electricity consumption of Argentina or South Africa. And that's just one lab.

Major product updates follow almost weekly, some with seismic implications but often buried in the torrent of announcements. In April 2025 OpenAI quietly revealed that ChatGPT would now remember user conversations by default, unless users opted out, purportedly to help it provide more bespoke answers.[1] Yet days later, Sam Altman gave a TED talk envisioning a world where people grow up with lifelong AI companions that become extensions of ourselves that make us more productive and guide us through life.[2] Think of a sycophantic, Silicon Valley version of a dæmon from Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials*. Remembering conversations by default is the first step towards that vision. With minimal public debate or policy scrutiny, the labs are trying to reshape what it means to be human.

The same dynamic is driving the race for wearables. Until now, the major labs have focused on securing enough 'compute'—chips, energy, and data centres—to train their frontier models. But their next constraint is data. The models have already devoured nearly all the available online information, regardless of quality or legality. Meta, for instance, downloaded 81.7 terabytes of pirated books from sites like LibGen in 2024, including millions of copyrighted works. Executives knew the legal risks but correctly calculated that ignoring copyright could simply be treated as a cost of doing business.

1 'Memory and New Controls for ChatGPT', *OpenAI*, 13 February 2024, https://openai.com/index/memory-and-new-controls-for-chatgpt.

2 'OpenAI's Sam Altman Talks ChatGPT, AI Agents and Superintelligence', *TED*, April 2025, www.ted.com/talks/sam_altman_openai_s_sam_altman_talks_chatgpt_ai_agents_and_superintelligence_live_at_ted2025/transcript.

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To advance further, AI systems need exponentially more data. Not from the Internet, but from the physical world—the visual, aural, and behavioural data that make up human experience. Hence the rush to develop AI wearables like glasses, watches, and other devices that turn wearers into data harvesters to feed ever-hungrier models. Meta's co-branded Ray-Ban sunglasses were first to market, but other labs are close behind with wristbands, visors, and handheld devices.

The true significance of these developments is obscured by the industry's relentless focus on artificial general intelligence (AGI). Nvidia's Jensen Huang, Meta's Yann LeCun, and AI pioneers such as Yoshua Bengio and Geoffrey Hinton recently claimed 'human-level' AI is already here, or that we have entered the AGI 'spectrum'. This framing keeps the debate polarised between doomsters—warning of climate collapse, mass unemployment, and even extinction—and boosters, who foresee an age of superabundance and scientific breakthrough. That Manichean narrative conveniently hides the present reality that the labs are consolidating capital, infrastructure, and political influence at unprecedented speed, entrenching their oligopolistic power while presenting their actions as necessary to either bring about utopia or prevent dystopia.

Silicon Valley's mantra, 'move fast and break things', has entered warp speed, turbocharged by the tech titan's messianic desire to usher in a new world of AGI, fierce competition between the AI labs to get there first, and floods of capital with nowhere else but overpriced gold to flow into. It is exacerbated by the geopolitical context in which Western governments are reluctant to regulate their national champions for fear of ceding ground to China.

This leaves individuals, organisations, and even nations in the position of eighteenth-century yarn spinners confronting the spinning jenny. In the short term there will be no meaningful regulation of AI or mitigation of its harms. We must act quickly to protect ourselves from the worst impacts, and if we can, ride the wave rather than be swept away by it.

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Each new product launch brings us closer to a techno-libertarian vision of society, shaped by a handful of the world's richest men in the white heat of Silicon Valley. The speed of execution is driven not only by competition but also by strategy: to outpace regulation, avoid public scrutiny, and set the terms of debate before anyone else can respond.

The only rational response, for individuals and organisations alike, is to use AI wherever possible to further our own interests. One can be sceptical of its wider social consequences, but in our professional and personal lives, it is time to go all in.

Competition on Mount Olympus

It's the power and relationships of these tech titans that Karen Hao's *Empire of AI* captures most compellingly. She charts the rise of OpenAI from a non-profit dedicated to ensuring AGI benefits all of humanity into the fastest-growing company in history. Hao's central figure, and bête noire, is OpenAI's CEO, Sam Altman. She follows his journey from geeky schoolboy to ambitious entrepreneur and his eventual transformation into a self-anointed messiah (or antichrist, depending on your point of view) heralding the new age of AGI.

Reading it, one is reminded less of corporate boardrooms than of Olympian gods; deities neither good nor evil, but power-obsessed, capricious, jealous, and vain. Their internecine struggles atop the mountain determine peace or war, feast or famine, and even life or death for us mortals below. All we can do is offer tribute, flatter, and hope for mercy.

Hao's quote from a younger Altman lays his grandiosity bare: 'The most successful founders do not set out to create companies,' Altman reflected on his blog in 2013. 'They are on a mission to create something closer

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to a religion, and at some point, it turns out that forming a company is the easiest way to do so.'

Elon Musk and Altman originally co-founded OpenAI as a non-profit dedicated to sharing cutting-edge AI research to ensure that AGI benefits all of humanity. Musk and Altman were purportedly united by a shared belief that Google could not be trusted with a technology as powerful as AGI, and that OpenAI therefore had to get there first.

Drawing on 260 interviews, Hao takes us on a blow-by-blow account of Altman and Musk's inevitable battle for control before Musk eventually departs to found xAI (read the underworld), allowing Altman to claim the crown of king of the gods, or OpenAI CEO.

The book charts OpenAI's evolution, exploring different forms of artificial intelligence from bots that could master complex online games, to robotic hands that solved Rubik's cubes, before committing fully to large language models (LLMs). These models derive their apparent intelligence from identifying statistical patterns across vast datasets of text, which essentially enables them to predict what word is most likely to come next in a sequence. The result of this focus on LLMs was ChatGPT, and it was a breakthrough. The chatbot gained 1 million users after just five days and 100 million after two months, and today has over 800 million active monthly users. Retelling this journey offers an important reminder that LLMs are only one form that AI can take. While chatbots offer a compelling mass market offer, there is nothing inevitable about the ability to manipulate natural language being the dominant form of AI.

The highs and lows of the story elucidate the incestuous world of tech titans and big money. Even after the spectacular success of GPT, at the instigation of some of Altman's closest colleagues, OpenAI's not-for-profit board tried to defenestrate him. Some were concerned about his lack of accountability and hazy relationship with the truth, and others genuinely believing they were saving humanity. However, within

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hours Altman's allies resigned in protest, hundreds of staff signed an open letter demanding his return, and investors, including Microsoft, OpenAI's main backer, panicked. Within days, he was reinstated. The lesson was clear, AI is capital hungry, and those who can bring in the money, retain control.

Hao also tells the story of Altman making a pilgrimage to a Delphian Bill Gates in search of yet more billions for his loss-making venture. Previously, Gates had been ambivalent about OpenAI's demos. But this time was different. GPT aced his challenge of passing an AP Biology exam, missing only a single question. Gates then posed an emotional question: '*What do you say to a father with a sick child?*' According to Gates, GPT's answer was 'probably better than most of the humans in the room could have given'.

Gates later recalled: 'The whole experience was stunning. I knew I had just seen the most important advance in technology in my lifetime.'

Needless to say, the billions kept flowing from Microsoft.

Scaling Laws: Bigger *Is* Always Better

OpenAI attributes its success to its discovery of 'scaling laws', which purport to show that, for LLMs, performance improves smoothly and predictably when you scale (1) the number of parameters, (2) the amount of data used for training, and (3) compute (read chips) in the right proportions. If scaling laws hold—and to date, they largely have—then whichever lab secures the most data, chips, and resources will be the first to reach AGI. This quest for scale at all costs, to get to AGI first, defines the dynamics of the industry, the trajectory of the technology, and potentially the future of our societies.

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Hao argues that scaling laws became not merely a descriptive observation about how model performance improves under current approaches, but an organising ideology for OpenAI and other labs—a mythos that, with enough compute and data (and the capital and natural resource required to secure them), intelligence would emerge. An end that can justify any means. GPT-4, for instance, is estimated to have used tens of thousands of Nvidia A100 chips running for months, a training run costing around $ 100 million in cloud compute alone.[3]

Hao explores how this unrelenting quest for scale and the resources it demands creates vast and inequitable economic and social harms. She argues that these harms are not side effects, but central to the political economy of scaling laws.

She further highlights how AI reshapes labour markets not only for creative and knowledge workers, but also by generating a vast underclass of low-paid, insecure jobs as data labellers in the Global South. As OpenAI pursued scale, it needed ever more data, sucking it in from every swampy backwater of the Internet, even if it was inaccurate, violent, and illegal. The decline in quality of training data gave rise to a network of companies specialising in coding and cleaning that data ready to train LLMs. This work depends on cheap but educated labour in the Global South, where firms pay workers fractions of a cent per task to prepare raw data for model training. These workers have no contracts and no protections, and are simply banned from the task platform when they ask for support or attempt to organise.

Hao also foregrounds the ecological impacts of generative AI, arguing that they are both vast and systematically downplayed by the industry. She traces how the exponential growth in model size demands enormous data centres, consuming staggering amounts of electricity and vast volumes of water for cooling, which strains local ecosystems. It is anticipated that global data-centre power demand will hit ~1000 TWh by 2026,

3 Lance Johnson, 'OpenAI Spent $80M to $100M Training GPT-4', BytePlus, 22 August 2025, www.byteplus.com/en/topic/415209?title=openai-spent-80m-to-100m-training-gpt-4&utm_source=chatgpt.com.

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about three times the UK's entire 2023 electricity consumption,[4] while AI's water withdrawals will be 4.2–6.6 billion m³ by 2027, roughly equivalent to the UK's annual public water supply.[5] Crucially, Hao argues that this environmental burden is not evenly shared. The benefits are centralised in wealthy tech hubs, while the costs are often borne by developing countries hosting data centres or supplying the raw materials for chips and servers.

Empires and Robber Barons

The weakest part of Hao's book is its central analogy of AI labs as empires. She vividly describes how, in their quest for scale, the labs centralise power, absorb capital, and consume natural resources and people, particularly in the Global South. Most compellingly, she parallels the ideology of imperialism with the eschatological mythos of the AI labs that portrays them as agents of the end of biological history. But ultimately the empire analogy fails. AI labs make no claim to any of the defining features of a state such as sovereignty, territorial control, or monopoly on violence.

The problem is not merely rhetorical. The empire analogy pushes Hao toward a postcolonial, critical-theory lens that shapes her proposed remedies, leaving them mismatched to the scale of the challenge she lays out. While it is true that data coders are paid pennies and that AI labs site data centres in weakly regulated countries, these are symptoms of mobile global capital, not unique to AI. They are egregious examples of corporate malfeasance, but they do not elucidate the distinctive nature of today's AI problem.

4 Andreas Franke, 'Global Data Center Power Demand to Double by 2030 on AI Surge: IEA', *S&P Global*, 10 April 2025, www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/electric-power/041025-global-data-center-power-demand-to-double-by-2030-on-ai-surge-iea?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

5 Pengfei Li, Jianyi Yang, Mohammad A. Islam, and Shaolei Ren, 'Making AI Less "Thirsty": Uncovering and Addressing the Secret Water Footprint of AI Models', *arXiv*, https://arxiv.org/abs/2304.03271?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

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The framing of AI as empire leads Hao to focus on resistance efforts defined by identity and interests, such as local communities in South America protesting to protect water supplies, labour groups defending underpaid Kenyan data workers, and indigenous communities building AI tools to preserve their languages. Laudable, and potentially transformational for some people, as these initiatives are, they do not add up to a coherent response to the oligopoly of AI labs. There will always be cash-strapped governments willing to host data centres despite local opposition, and if one group of data coders unionises, companies simply move to the next cheap labour pool. Hao's proposed solutions, though well intentioned, will not regain social control over this epoch-defining technology.

Rather than empires, a more fitting analogy for the AI age may be the robber barons of the Gilded Age—the plutocrats who captured the railroads, oilfields, and telegraph networks of the second industrial revolution, and with them, the political systems and public spheres of their day. In the nineteenth century, railroads were the connective tissue of the economy; whoever owned the rails controlled trade, mobility, and information flow. In the twenty-first, cloud infrastructure and foundation models play that role. Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and OpenAI now sit astride these new rails, the data pipelines and model weights through which modern knowledge, productivity, and communication increasingly move.

Today's AI magnates are repeating the playbook of the robber barons. They are consolidating control over the essential infrastructure of the century, buying the means of mass communication (Musk's purchase of Twitter now seems well worth his $ 44 bn), and capturing political power in an effort to turn their oligopoly into a fait accompli. The late nineteenth-century robber barons were eventually broken by the reform movement. While this drew on grassroots organising, newly assertive unions, and a press demanding accountability, above all it succeeded because of aggressive antitrust action that reintroduced competition, which also broke the robber barons' grasp on political power.

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If power over a transformational technology like AI is concentrated in the hands of a few eccentric men from one small corner of the world, the most plausible remedy is competition. Here there is an opportunity for real change. The AI labs' LLMs are the ultimate generalists, trained for competence across the widest possible range of tasks. This need to be excellent in many domains, drives their insatiable appetite for data, energy, and capital. Investors have piled in for fear of missing out, but it is far from clear that these bets will pay off. Speculation is already mounting about a market correction, with huge volatility and a trillion dollars wiped from AI stocks in the first week of November 2025 alone.

A new generation of smaller, domain-specific competitors is emerging, focused on concrete problems such as health, education, and climate, rather than the AGI moonshot. These models require far less data and compute, and therefore less capital, yet may offer stronger returns. Their rise could rebalance power, restoring diversity and dynamism to an industry now dominated by a handful of giants. Those concerned about the power of AI labs should focus on antitrust regulation, not anti-imperialist movements.

Feeling AI-Anxious?

In contrast to Hao's political analysis, Brotman and Sac's *AI First sits* squarely on the marketing end of the StratCom spectrum. For that reason, many in our sector will find it a less enjoyable read (we read too many books on politics, and too few on business management and marketing). The first half is structured around a series of breathy interviews with tech titans like Altman, Gates, and Reid Hoffman (founder of LinkedIn), providing their perspectives on how AI will shape business, marketing, and branding. The second half is a practical playbook, aimed at executives, urging them not to see AI as just another tool, but to be AI first. That is, to think of AI as a core utility like electricity, underpinning your organisation's strategy, workflows, and culture.

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The first chapter is anchored on an interview with the eminently quotable Altman, who claims that in three to five years '95 % of what marketers use agencies, strategists, and creative professionals for today, will easily, nearly instantly and at almost no cost, be handled by AI'.

Given AI's current capabilities and its trajectory (and we must remember that AI is the worst it will ever be now), the spirit of what Altman is saying is surely correct. And if it is true for marketing, it is true for StratCom.

Yet there is a real lag between the speed of technological transformation and the pace at which organisations are adapting. The biggest determinant of whether a business is an early adopter or a laggard is unsurprisingly the posture of its leaders. And most leaders and executives have been slow to adopt AI in their own work lives. The authors quote a 2025 Dresner Advisory Services report that found *88 per cent of senior leaders express interest in generative AI, yet 80 per cent are not regularly using it.*

Surely that stat would be even more damning for StratCom. If you are a leader in StratCom, **and you are not personally AI first, then you should feel anxious.** *AI First*, despite being a clunky read, provides the push, and practical support, to get started.

Three Questions for StratCom to Ask about AI

Empire of AI is a good tour of the AI industry and its darker dynamics. But the brute reality is that AI is here to stay, and due to scaling laws and intense geopolitical competition, it is unlikely to face meaningful regulation. StratCom professionals should avoid getting lost in the doomster vs booster debates amplified by the AI labs, put their marketeer hats on, and focus on how AI can make us cheaper, better, and faster than the competition. Only once we have embraced the technology, can we afford to ask the bigger questions.

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1. How can StratCom use AI to be more effective and more efficient?

In a contested information environment, our adversaries are already using AI to flood audiences with tailored content at unprecedented pace and scale. We must harness every available tool to match, and surpass, their speed, precision, and reach. The core functions of StratCom—research, strategy, creative development, production, distribution, in-person activation, and evaluation—have already been disrupted by AI. Fortunately, the marketing world has shown what's possible.

Today's researchers use AI tools not only to analyse quantitative and qualitative data in seconds, but to design and run surveys, scrape and segment public conversations, and even build synthetic audience profiles—digital twins that allow us to test concepts and messages instantly, and at almost no cost.

In strategy development, LLMs can rapidly break down complex problem sets, propose priority objectives, draw on established behavioural science to generate evidence-based communications strategies, and then stress-test them with scenario planning. They can develop messaging frameworks and narratives, and even automatically generate responses to adversary messages. Many companies are now releasing AI agents that can complete these processes autonomously, continuously improving through feedback loops, with minimal human input.

Production is where the transformation is most visible. AI-first production studios are already delivering films and campaigns that would once have cost hundreds of thousands of pounds and months to produce, in a matter of days, for a fraction of the cost. Anyone with a story to tell and a subscription to a tool like Midjourney or Veo 3 can now produce broadcast-quality video, audio, and design assets without leaving their desk.

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If the tasks change, the organisations and roles delivering them must change too. Most StratCom structures, particularly those attached to governments, multilaterals, and militaries, were built for an analogue or early digital world. They are bureaucratic, hierarchical, and slow. That model will not survive the AI wave. Already, leading marketing and political campaigning organisations are flattening their structures, relying on smaller teams that combine strategic vision with hands-on AI literacy. In the marketing sector, small teams can now deliver in a few days what might have taken a large agency months to do before gen AI. StratCom teams should be doing the same.

Organisational change also requires cultural change. AI introduces asymmetries of capability; a smart junior staff member with mastery of advanced tools can outperform entire teams. Leaders will need to rethink how to build, contract, and scale teams. There's also a hard truth: not everyone will adapt. As with every technological revolution, some roles will disappear, some will transform, and some entirely new ones will emerge. From the top down, everyone in the organisation must be AI first. Those that can't or won't change will need to go.

Here *AI First* provides some simple steps:

1. Start using AI personally: every leader needs to see and experience the reality of the transformation.

2. Set up an AI working group or council that drives AI implementation across the organisation.

3. Get functional team leaders to start running AI pilots to use AI to improve the quality, quantity, or efficiency of their outputs. Each functional lead should identify the key pain-points in their processes and the weak points in their outputs, and challenge themselves to use AI to deliver five times more impact in the same time without compromising quality or integrity.

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4. Work with your operations lead to identify the five key processes in the business whether they are back office, like allocating staff hours, or output focused, like production, and start designing an AI, and ideally agentic-led, version.

5. Change the culture. Make clear that you expect your teams to constantly explore and use the technology and think about how it can be applied. And that using AI isn't a cheat, it's a requirement.

2. How will AI change the information environment?

However, if we focus only on using AI to do better what we already do, we risk missing the fact that AI may change *what we are trying to do entirely*. It would be like perfecting a StratCom minidisc on the eve of the iPod launch.

Imagine we have just discovered a vast new continent in the mid-Atlantic, home to a billion tireless PhD students, willing to work for pennies an hour, and with no barriers to hiring them. How would you go about solving your customer need or mission? It probably wouldn't be a tweaked version of what you are doing today. AI is that continent, and the PhDs are only getting smarter, more skilled, and more numerous. We need to start imagining how this near limitless intellectual resource offered by AI will change the fundamental nature of communication. Three key trends are emerging to which StratCom must adapt: superabundance of content, hyper-personalisation, and centralisation of truth.

Given that AI has already drastically lowered the cost and skill barriers to producing and distributing content, there will be much more *stuff*. We are entering a world of information superabundance. Some of it will be low-quality 'AI gloop'— like the clickbait of rabbits on trampolines[6] that went viral on TikTok and YouTube. But much of it will be indistinguishable in quality from human work, making the

6 'This Viral Video…', Lenny The Bunny, *YouTube*, 9 August 2025, www.youtube.com/shorts/vTPx_muLksc.

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information environment vastly denser and more competitive. In such a world, the central challenge shifts from *production* to *discovery*: how do people decide what to pay attention to? The information environment will be defined by the strategies and tools that consumers adopt.

As information supply explodes but human attention remains finite, the role of tastemakers—those who can curate and signal what is good, true, and beautiful—becomes central. As *The Atlantic* argued, 'we are moving from a creator economy to a curator economy'.[7] From influencers on social media to the upper echelons of film, art, and photography, audiences will increasingly rely on the reputation and aesthetic sensibilities of specific individuals to tell them what is important or desirable. In this context, trusting and identifying with these tastemakers become paramount. More than ever, it will be credibility of the source, not the content itself, that matters. This will be reinforced by the fact that deepfakes are becoming indistinguishable from the real thing, as we lose the visual cues that help us judge authenticity. With so much content and no way to tell what is real or not real, those distinctions become less meaningful. Media literacy becomes obsolete. In this world, the StratCom primary means of influence will be building coalitions of tastemakers, not delivering messages.

The other strategy for deciding what content to consume will be to use technology. Soon, we will exist in an information environment in which AI agents will talk to each other more than humans talk to humans. Synthetic content will be produced, distributed, and consumed at scale without direct human involvement. At the same time, users will have AI companions and filters, digital assistants that curate, summarise, and triage information on their behalf. This means much of the information flow will be agent to agent, not human to human. Strategic communicators will need to think less about *content creation* and more about *influencing how information is filtered, prioritised, and surfaced* by networks of billions of agents. This will be a technical

7 Katherine Hu, 'The Influencer Economy Is Warping the American Dream', *The Atlantic*, 18 April 2023, www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2023/04/social-media-influencers-american-economy/673762.

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challenge more than a question of persuasion, meaning the sector needs more technical minds, and fewer creative and strategic thinkers.

AI's capacity for hyper-personalisation is the second trend disrupting the information environment. Hundreds of millions of AI agents constantly generating and iterating content based on live data will enable us to move us from targeting *segments* to a targeting *individuals*. Yet StratCom is still adopting psychographic segmentations, a technique first developed by marketeers in the 1960s. AI is now enabling a world where each person can receive their own individual messages, constantly optimised by AI agents based on their responses.

In an environment where no two people receive the same message, does it even make sense to talk of *a narrative* anymore? Or indeed a shared information environment? We may need to shift from thinking of narratives as arcs to thinking of narratives as fabrics. Each thread is a story for an individual, and strategic communicators must find a coherent weave through the weft and the warp to enable audiences to make sense of a fragmented information environment.

This fragmentation could also accelerate existing trends of polarisation, breaking social media tribes down into smaller and more unruly 'clans' clustered around networks of tastemakers. Recent research has shown how the commercial incentives of cable TV to maximise eyeball hours led it to prioritise negative content on culture war issues, and helped set in train the polarisation of American society.[8] Similarly, social media algorithms have been shown to promote angry and negative content that affirms viewers' existing opinions, measurably contributing to polarising attitudes.[9] Shared public narratives, the foundation of democratic discourse, will become even harder to sustain. Those on the extremes of the debate will have ever more influence to shift the Overton window. StratCom will have to evolve from thinking about how to reach the

8 Aakaash Rao, 'The Business of the Culture War', https://sites.harvard.edu/aakaash-rao/job-market-paper.

9 William J. Brady, Joshua Conrad Jackson, Meriel Doyle, and Silvan Baier, 'Engagement-Based Algorithms Disrupt Human Social Norm Learning', *OSF Preprints*, 13 February 2025, https://osf.io/preprints/osf/mgdwq_v1.

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persuadable middle, to being focused on how to contain or influence the most disruptive clans.

The third significant impact of AI on the information environment is epistemology. The first casualty of every communications revolution is truth itself. Our ways of knowing are shaped by the technologies through which we acquire and share information. The printing press shattered the monopoly of Church and Crown over knowledge. Newspapers and broadcast media recentralised authority in professional gatekeepers that mediated knowledge production and dissemination on behalf of large interest groups, often class based. The Internet and social media fractured our shared sense of truth again, by disintermediating the production and consumption of knowledge, and thus eroding consensus and increasing polarisation.

AI is becoming an epistemic technology, not just a productivity tool, but a system for *producing, filtering, and legitimising knowledge*. Whoever controls the major AI models effectively controls how truth and meaning are generated: what people see, what information is prioritised, how facts are framed, and how language itself evolves.

At present that infrastructure is highly concentrated in a handful of AI labs (OpenAI, Anthropic, Google DeepMind, Meta, xAI, etc.). These organisations, and in practice the individuals who lead them, have extraordinary discretion over model training data, alignment goals, and the value systems embedded in responses. That means truth will be shaped by a few private actors, with no accountability mechanism, rather than a plural public sphere.

As the *Brookings Institution* warns, 'control over training data and model design is control over epistemology'.[10] Elon Musk's xAI, for example, has explicitly stated that its Grok model is being trained to remove what he calls 'woke bias'—an ideological intervention in how information is

10 Chinasa T. Okolo, 'Examining the Capabilities and Risks of Advanced AI Systems', 10 September 2024, www.brookings.edu/articles/examining-advanced-ai-capabilities-and-risks.

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filtered and framed. It is well documented that Musk frequently tweaks Grok's master prompts in the middle of the night according to his whims. Whose truth, then, do we want? Musk's? Altman's?

However, there is an alternative. If open-source AI develops robustly—models whose weights, training data, and methods are public and reproducible—then the production of knowledge could become radically decentralised, more akin to *Wikipedia* than *Google*. In that case, AI could become a democratising epistemic technology, enabling collective participation in what counts as valid, useful, or true.

In either scenario, for strategic communicators, a central part of any intervention must focus on how to get LLMs to imbibe and propagate our articulation of the truth. Again, this question is just as much technical as it is strategic. Strategic communicators should be more concerned with artificial intelligence optimisation (AIO) than message and content development, as this will be a cornerstone of how we set the epistemic parameters of public discourse.

3. Finally, how will AI change the political, institutional, and moral framework within which StratCom exists?

StratCom is the practice of achieving influence without coercion. What distinguishes it from propaganda is that it operates within the institutional and moral boundaries of liberal democracy, which constrains both its ends and means. StratCom legitimacy depends on truth, consent, and respect for individual agency, and it seeks to promote ends consistent with, and furthering, liberal democracy. Yet AI is transforming the very conditions that make liberal-democratic communication possible by reordering geopolitics, eroding the institutional 'mass middle' that underpins democratic stability, and challenging the humanist assumptions on which notions of agency and persuasion rest.

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AI is becoming a *new axis of global power*. The states, corporations, and individuals who control the most capable AI systems will not merely influence the global order; they will help define it. At present this landscape is dominated by the United States and China. Both possess the data, capital, and technical expertise to train competitive LLMs, largely because of the logic of scaling laws. This dynamic reinforces their existing advantages across industry, defence, and influence. Europe and most of the rest of the world are, for now, rule-takers, not rule-makers, in the emerging AI order.

Yet the current *bipolarity* may not last. If large-scale models prove economically unsustainable due to their enormous capital demands, then smaller, more efficient, domain-specific systems may overtake them. Open-source models such as Mistral, DeepSeek, and Falcon have already shown that highly capable systems can be built with modest resources. This could allow other technologically sophisticated polities such as the UK, EU, South Korea, Japan, or Israel to join the race, diffusing AI's productivity and power gains more widely. The shape of the coming order depends on whether AI remains centralised and capital-intensive or becomes distributed and modular. Each scenario carries profound implications for the global information environment, and for the strategic communicators who operate within it.

As argued above, StratCom differs from propaganda precisely because it exists *within* a liberal-democratic framework. It assumes that influence can be exercised through persuasion, transparency, and consent, not coercion or deception, and that truth, evidence, and shared norms provide the common ground for public discourse. That framework is under strain. AI is beginning to hollow the broad, educated middle class that has sustained liberal democracy for over a century.

Since the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022, white-collar hiring in the US and Europe has slowed sharply. The think tank IPPR estimates that up to

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8 million jobs are at risk from AI in the UK alone.[11] These are precisely the strata—managers, analysts, administrators, journalists—that have historically mediated between elite decision-makers and the broader public. As these roles shrink, societies risk bifurcating into a narrow elite of AI proprietors, those entrepreneurs who have adopted the technology to make high-revenue, low-head-count businesses, and the highly skilled AI-first knowledge workers, and a wider precariat of those who consume what the machines produce. The weakening of this 'mass middle' also weakens the institutional trust infrastructure that StratCom depends upon for functioning media ecosystems, stable bureaucracies, informed publics, and broad-based political partes. In short, not only is AI transforming how we communicate. It could undermine the *socio-economic conditions* that make liberal-democratic communication possible.

At the deepest level, the liberal-democratic framework rests on a humanist article of faith that individuals are unique moral agents, capable of reasoning, making choices, and pursuing their own ends. StratCom exists within this moral universe. It assumes there are autonomous citizens capable of persuasion, deliberation, and consent. AI destabilises this foundation in two ways.

First, cognitively: as machines acquire abilities that appear creative, reflective, and even empathetic, the boundary between human and artificial intelligence blurs. If an AI can simulate human reasoning and emotion, what remains uniquely human, and what moral claims do other individuals hold over us?

Second, behaviourally: big data and machine learning can now anticipate individual behaviour with high levels of accuracy—our preferences, vulnerabilities, even moral intuitions. As the popular philosopher Yuval Harari puts it, 'Once we begin to count on AI to decide what to study, where to work, and whom to date or even marry, human life will cease

11 IPPR, 'Up to 8 million UK Jobs at Risk from AI unless Government Acts, Finds IPPR', 27 March 2024, www.ippr.org/media-office/up-to-8-million-uk-jobs-at-risk-from-ai-unless-government-acts-finds-ippr#:~:text=This%20would%20also%20impact%20non,GDP%20(%C2%A3306bn%20per%20year).

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to be a drama of decision making, and our conception of life will need to change. Democratic elections and free markets might cease to make sense.'[12]

This convergence challenges the Enlightenment assumptions underpinning liberal democracy that individuals are rational, self-knowing agents. It raises uncomfortable questions for our field. If persuasion becomes a matter of micro-targeting cognitive vulnerabilities, are we still practising *strategic communications*, or something closer to *algorithmic manipulation*? And if the 'individual' becomes merely a bundle of predictable data points, what happens to consent, legitimacy, and the moral distinction between communication and coercion?

Get Practical, Then Get Praxis

These are big questions—the type that strategic communicators relish. Yet before we start to answer them, we must first master the immediate, practical ones: *how can we use AI to become better at our craft?* Only by engaging hands-on with the technology, experimenting, learning, and adapting will communicators develop the insight necessary to navigate the deeper ethical and institutional shifts it brings.

We need to radically change our workflows, evolve staff skills, and transform organisational structures to look more like technology firms than civil service departments. We must reconceptualise what it is we do—from creating and disseminating messages to building a narrative arc, to influencing the ways audiences filter and prioritise existing content, so we can orientate them in a fragmented information environment. We must create mechanisms to influence knowledge generation through technology and by building coalitions of tastemakers rather than by persuasion. And we must recognise that influence increasingly lies

12 Yuval Noah Harari, 'Why Technology Favors Tyranny', The Atlantic, October 2018, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/yuval-noah-harari-technology-tyranny/568330.

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with the margins, not the mainstream. If we don't, AI will change the information environment in ways that render much of our sector obsolete, while we pontificate.

From Private Unhappiness to Public Outrage: The Emotional Origins of Twenty-First-Century Populism

A Review Essay by Vera Michlin-Shapir

Empathy in Politics and Leadership: The Key to Transforming Our World
Claire Yorke. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2025.

Don't Talk about Politics: How to Change 21stCentury Minds
Sarah Stein Lubrano. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2025.

The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy
Eva Illouz. London: Polity Press, 2023.

Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, populist, populism, emotions*

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'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1878)

In today's global politics, one might borrow Tolstoy's insight and say that 'Happy countries are all alike; every unhappy country is unhappy in its own way.' It's a maxim that captures the diverse grievances driving the rise of populism across the twenty-first century. Mainstream media regularly publish international indices—the Corruption Perceptions Index, the Democracy Index, the Edelman Trust Barometer, and the World Happiness Report. At the top of these rankings, the same countries tend to appear: the world's happiest places.[1] Interestingly these are not necessarily the world's richest nations. In many cases they are smaller countries with strong education and healthcare systems, small inequality and gender pay gaps, and high levels of trust in politicians and public institutions. Further down the rankings, however, we begin to see the countries that struggle with unhappiness.

Unhappy countries are not necessarily at the very bottom of these rankings. Those lowest positions are typically occupied by the eternally miserable—failed or pariah states living in political and cultural isolation and economic destitution. Unhappiness, however, often hides in plain sight. Such countries may be well placed in the top half of the rankings, or even in the top ten. They are relatively prosperous, yet alarming developments emerge from these locations. In the Netherlands, a 'veteran anti-Islam populist leader' secured a parliamentary majority;[2] in Germany, there has been a 'dramatic surge by the far-right', with sentiment spreading

1 The World Happiness Report, an UN-endorsed initiative, defines happiness as a reflective assessment of one's life, using a standardised scale (0–10) asking people where they stand in terms of the best/worst possible life for themselves. They identify six key factors (GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity as social behaviour, perceptions of corruption) that contribute to a subjective self-evaluation of happiness in individuals.

2 Paul Kirby and Anna Holligan, 'Dutch Election: Anti-Islam Populist Geert Wilders Wins Dramatic Victory', *BBC News*, 23 November 2023, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67504272.

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from the poorer East westwards;[3] in Slovakia, voters supported a 'populist pro-Moscow party';[4] and in Britain, a major poll has predicted that a populist party could form a government if an election were held today.[5]

Many liberals, myself included, greet such news with a mixture of dread and resignation. We are 'shocked but not surprised'.[6] Until recently we regarded these countries as happy and stable, yet it has become increasingly clear that political discontent is spreading like wildfire across the liberal world. Nearly a decade has passed since 2016, when the UK voted to leave the EU and Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States of America for the first time, events that now feel like heralds of a broader transformation. We understand the landscape better now, but pressing questions remain: first, what exactly is populism and why are those who consider themselves to be liberals so dismayed by it? Second, while each nation may be unhappy in its own way, are there common threads that draw voters to populist movements, or is every case unique? And, last, if patterns do exist, should we try to reverse this rising tide?

Three accomplished female authors—Claire Yorke, Eva Illouz, and Sarah Stein Lubrano—offer thoughtful and sophisticated analyses addressing the last two questions. Before drawing on their insights, however, it is important to consider certain aspects of populism that unsettle liberals—a concern central to their three books.

3 Anja Koch, 'Far-Right AfD Surges in Poverty-Stricken Western German City', *DW*, 26 February 2025, www.dw.com/en/far-right-afd-party-surges-in-poor-western-german-city/video-71754048.

4 Lili Bayer, 'Slovakia Election: Pro-Moscow Former PM on course to Win with Almost All Votes Counted', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/01/slovakia-election-pro-moscow-former-pm-on-course-to-win-with-almost-all-votes-counted.

5 Patrick English, 'YouGov MRP Shows a Reform UK Government a Near-Certainty if an Election Were Held Tomorrow', *YouGov*, 26 September 2025, https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/53059-yougov-mrp-shows-a-reform-uk-government-a-near-certainty-if-an-election-were-held-tomorrow.

6 Claire Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025), p. 4.

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Why Does Populism Dismay Liberals?

Populism is a contested and often misunderstood term. In 1967 Isaiah Berlin warned researchers of populism not to suffer from a 'Cinderella complex'.[7] That is, to think that 'somewhere there lurks true, perfect populism' of which 'all other populisms are derivations of'.[8] Berlin did not think of this approach as 'very useful'.[9] For the purposes of this essay, I will speak of twenty-first-century populism as a political style that addresses sociopolitical problems by dividing populations into unambiguous camps of 'us' (ordinary people) and 'them' (corrupt elites/foreigners/migrants).[10] When I speak of a political style, I refer to what political theorist Benjamin Moffitt defines as 'a repertoire of embodied, symbolically mediated performances … stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life'.[11]

Populism is neither inherently left wing nor right wing, and because its political outcomes vary so widely, it is easily employed as a pejorative label against political and ideological opponents of any hue. At its core, populism rejects the technocratic, bureaucratic, and positivist-scientific political styles that are widespread in liberal democracies. These styles problematise issues and defy simple and quick solutions. By contrast, populism connects with supporters through emotions and energises public discontent in populations to demand immediate and straightforward results.

Populism's appeal lies in the fact that, while mainstream politicians struggle to fix the complexities of a globalised and neoliberal, Western

7 Isaiah Berlin, 'To Define Populism' (Verbatim report of conference held at the London School of Economics and Political Science, 20–21 May 1967), *Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography/bib111bLSE.pdf.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 J. Harsin, 'Post-Truth Politics and Epistemic Populism: About (Dis-)trusted Presentation and Communication of Facts, Not False Information', in *Post-Truth Populism: A New Political Paradigm*, ed. S. Newman and M. Conrad (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 25–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-64178-7_2.

11 Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 38.

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system of nation-state governance that is underperforming, and the rule-based international order, populists almost always speak to ordinary people in ordinary, accessible terms. Complex questions find simple answers. They attack what they call liberal elites, accusing them of diverting power from the people into the hands of unelected bureaucrats and experts whose priorities ignore the needs of ordinary citizens. From this perspective, one might reasonably ask: are these elites simply incompetent, or are they, as populists claim, deliberate saboteurs? Is there a hidden agenda of the 'deep state'? Or an unseen, foreign hand at play? All questions, and by extension all theories, are legitimised in the populist online political media space. In that way, populism forms an epistemological space of alternative knowledge and its own truth-bearers and truth-tellers (influencers, podcasters, bloggers, and conspiracy theorists).

Liberals detest such political style primarily because its success relies on an antagonistic approach towards their own political styles. But not only because of that. Liberal political thought and writing consistently warn that framing politics in polarised 'us versus them' terms threatens to undermine both the rights and the basic dignity of individuals. If we take the thought of nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose ideas influenced and inspired perhaps the broadest spectrum of current political interpretations of liberalism, schisms between liberals and populists of every creed and affiliation are quickly revealed.

Mill articulated social and civic liberty as a principle that seeks to regulate the nature and limits of the power that can be 'legitimately exercised by society over the individual'.[12] His understanding of liberalism is grounded in the 'liberty of tastes and pursuits […] without impediment of our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even if they should think our conduct foolish'.[13] For Mill, such freedom is 'one of the principal ingredients of human happiness'.[14] These ideas influenced libertarians on the right, as they did social liberals on the left.

12 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works by John Stuart Mill*, ed. J.M. Robson (1859; University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 217.

13 Ibid., p. 226.

14 Ibid., p. 261.

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Yet Mill's important qualifications, and his warnings about potential transgressions in political life, reveal his conception of liberty and liberalism as fundamentally opposed to the populist style in politics.

This is most evident in Mill's review of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which he admired and described as a book that addressed 'the question of democracy'.[15] In his essay Mill joined Tocqueville's stark warning of the tyranny of the majority,[16] further elucidating the danger of a populace that is distinctly divided along religious, economic, or political fault lines, and might seek to override minority rights. Mill cautioned that 'the tyranny of the majority would not take the shape of tyrannical laws, but that of a dispensing power over all laws'.[17] He cites examples from contemporary America, where the rights of religious minorities, like Catholics in Massachusetts, and political minorities, like abolitionists in New York, were violently suppressed, though no laws were enacted to suppress these rights.[18] Persecution, such as church burning or property destruction, was permitted because the majority acted with impunity, as 'no jury would be found to redress the injury'.[19] Applied to twenty-first-century populist politics, Mill's examples reveal dangers that are both clear and alarming.

In many instances populists on the right and on the left seek to do exactly what Mill and Tocqueville warned against. They seek to remain within the realm of democratic procedural practice, but to remove or weaken the constraints that mitigate the occurrence of tyrannical transgressions in the name of the 'people' whom they stylise as a constitutive majority. Tocqueville called out such behaviour when he wrote that 'a majority taken collectively is only an individual, whose opinions […] are opposed to those of another individual, who is styled as a minority'.[20] In 2025, when Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán tried to ban the pride

15 John Stuart Mill, 'De Tocqueville on Democracy in America I', in *Collected Works by John Stuart Mill*, ed. J.M. Robson (1859; University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 49.

16 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1 (1835; Everyman's Library, 1994), p. 258.

17 Mill, De Tocqueville on Democracy in America II, p. 177.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 De Tocqueville, Democracy in America 1 1835, p. 259.

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march in Budapest, he stated that 'the left […] want to force a rejected ideology onto the *majority* instead of listening to the real voice of the Hungarian people'.[21] Whatever Orbán may claim as his ideological conviction,[22] this articulation of gender relations represents a rejection of the fundamental tenets of liberalism—regulating authorities to protect individuals' ability to exercise their freedoms and to pursue happiness.[23]

Liberals are rightly alarmed by the rise of this political style, but can we discern which sociopolitical patterns fuel this wave?

Twenty-First-Century Patterns of Discontent

All three books reviewed here share a liberal apprehension regarding the rise of populism and the prospects for the liberal project. While their analyses emerge from distinct vantage points, each seeks to uncover the deeper conditions underlying the 'patterns of disconnect' that threaten liberalism.[24] All three boldly place emotions at the centre of their inquiry, deciphering the nuanced landscape of feelings that fuel the current populist wave. They also consider, in various ways, how liberals might navigate and withstand the challenges posed by populist movements.

British political scientist Claire Yorke focuses on the role that empathy, sympathy, and compassion can play in healing societies and bringing people back together.[25] She argues that 'the growing disconnects

21 'Orbán: Opposition United behind the Pride's Rainbow Flag but Hungarians Reject That Ideology', *Daily News Hungary*, 30 June 2025, https://dailynewshungary.com/hungarian-opposition-behind-pride-flag-orban/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (emphasis mine).

22 Orbán stated that he is building an 'illiberal state', although he 'does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom'. See 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp, 26 July 2014, Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tuşnad)', *Prime Minister's Speeches*, 30 July 2014, https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp.

23 In the context of liberal thought, happiness can be defined as individual fulfilment; according to Mill, 'happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain'. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863), chapter 2.

24 Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. ix.

25 Ibid., p. 112.

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from politics and mistrust of politicians and political institutions' are symptomatic of their failure 'to speak to the real day-to-day issues affecting ordinary people'.[26] She shows how mainstream politics sidelined empathy in favour of sleek, professional, and well-rehearsed campaigning, while leadership has adopted a managerial style that is devoid of emotions. Most mainstream politicians from left and right rarely attempt to display deep understanding of the 'experiences, perspectives, interests, beliefs, motivations, and feelings' of their voters.[27] Meanwhile, populist leaders are doing just that. They connect with voters' feelings and make them feel heard. Yorke's analysis looks primarily at English-speaking countries—the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. Yet, she manages to show how similar dynamics 'are replicated in different forms around the world'.[28]

Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz provides a theoretical analysis of populism. She characterises populism as an emotional state and identifies the types of feelings that populist politicians use to connect with voters—fear, disgust, and resentment.[29] In her book she describes the 'structure of feelings' as 'a shared way of thinking and feeling that influences and is influenced by the culture and way of life of a particular group'.[30] She uses Israel as a case study.[31] This is not an obvious choice, as Illouz admits. Israel's geography and inner vulnerability make its right-wing populist surge uniquely Israeli. Nevertheless, Illouz illustrates that social discontent is fuelled by certain emotional patterns that can be traced and analysed.

Last, in her highly engaging analysis, Sarah Stein Lubrano provides a novel contribution to the debate on the rise of populism based on her study of political theory and cognitive psychology. She argues that while the liberal democratic project is deeply entrenched in Western political theory and market-economy logic, it ignores pertinent findings from

26 Ibid., p. xii.
27 Ibid., p. 4.
28 Ibid., p. ix.
29 Eva Illouz, *The Emotional Life of Populism* (Cambridge; Polity, 2023), p. 2.
30 Ibid., p. 8.
31 Ibid., p. 16.

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cognitive psychology about how people form opinions that inform their political choices.[32] Lubrano puts forward the most convincing and well-argued thesis about the danger of characterising liberal politics via the metaphor of a 'marketplace of ideas'.[33] The assumption that we are 'sellers' of ideas is flawed because our political views are grounded in our broader beliefs, identifications, and our sense of self.[34] In short, emotions shape our politics far more then we care to admit.

Informed by these analyses, and while I accept that each country experiences unhappiness in its own unique way, I would suggest three ways in which nations might share patterns of discontent.

1. Post-2008 Economics: Fear of Loss and the Politics of Privilege

Since 2016, experts have explained the populist wave as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis. After the financial crash, political power appeared to abandon its obligation to protect the public from the excessive risk-taking of financial sector leaders—such as through sub-prime lending—as it did not hold them accountable for their reckless decisions.[35] It also became evident that left-wing social democrats were unable to achieve 'a new political settlement or new economic paradigm' to supplement or replace the failing neoliberal economic model.[36]

The three writers here do not deal with purely economic explanations of populism. Yet, they provide some insight into the emotional responses to the economic downturn. The most compelling analysis of the relationship between worsening material and economic conditions and

32 Sarah Stein Lubrano, *Don't Talk about Politics: How to Change 21st-Century Minds* (London, Bloomsbury; 2024), p. 10.

33 Ibid., pp. 21–22.

34 Ibid., p. 24.

35 Vera Michlin-Shapir, 'The Long Decade of Disinformation', *Defence Strategic Communications* 9 (2020): 221. DOI: 10.30966/2018.RIGA.9.5.

36 William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), p. 5.

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the rise of populism is offered by Illouz, drawing on Seymour Martin Lipset's theory of political responses to perceptions of economic loss.[37] She links this rise to the interplay between material circumstances, human imagination, and emotions, noting that a central motivation driving voters towards populism is the *perception* that their privileges are under threat.[38] This means that poor or worsening economic conditions alone do not necessarily cause drift towards populism. Rather it is an *imagined*, intangible potential loss of prospects that evokes negative emotional responses and benefits the rise of populist politicians. This explains why populism spreads not among those who are desperately poor at the very bottom of the 'happiness' ladder, but among many who are seemingly well off.

Real material losses have occurred in post-2008 economies, as stagnant median incomes and rising living costs have placed many social classes under economic pressure.[39] High-income individuals saw weak income growth, while lower- and middle-income households struggled to afford mortgages or heat their homes.[40] Such losses often generate frustration over declining material well-being. Lipset argued that responses to these losses depend on social class and institutional context, so not all frustrated groups react politically in the same way.[41] Illouz, who emphasises emotional sensitivities, notes that frustrations extend to anticipated or imagined losses—fears about future expenses or maintaining status—that, although not yet realised, shape political attitudes. She warns that these perceptions create ripe conditions for a relatively peaceful, but nonetheless dangerous, support of populist ideas and politicians.

Illouz also notes that the role of perceived or imagined losses contributes to the greater prevalence of nationalist, right-wing populism in the

37 Illouz is basing her analysis on Seymour Martin Lipset's *Political Man* (1960), whose sociological analysis linked perception of relative economic loss to voters' attraction to authoritarian ideas and its facilitation of backsliding from liberal democracies.

38 Illouz, Emotional Life of Populism, p. 2.

39 Jonathan Cribb and Tom Waters, 'Past 15 years Have Been Worst for Income Growth in Generations', *IFS*, 31 May 2024, https://ifs.org.uk/news/past-15-years-have-been-worst-income-growth-generations.

40 Ibid.

41 Lipset, *Political Man* (1960).

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twenty-first century compared with its left-wing counterpart. This raises a sensitive ethical issue: many scholars who study populism—including the three authors reviewed here—come from the liberal left, which can lead to skewed interpretation of populism as primarily a right-wing phenomenon.[42] Yet analysis should still account for empirical evidence that suggests that right-wing actors are embracing populist strategies at a markedly faster pace than those on the left.[43]

Illouz puts forward an explanation which does not involve judgemental labelling. She notes that 'populism is mostly a politics of identity' which plays identities off against each other, strengthening a specific identity with the promise to 'repair symbolic injuries (real or imagined)'.[44] These emotional dynamics exist both on the right and on the left, but overall have better traction with nationalist right-wing audiences because it is easier to coalesce them around a national majority identity. This results in the more rapid growth in support for right-wing nationalist populism and it being 'far more widespread in the world'.[45]

Hence, deteriorating economic prospects in post-industrial, liberal democratic countries create the material backdrop against which nationalist, right-wing populist emotions are stirred. Yorke suggests that 'there needs to be a more honest conversation about wealth, how it is distributed, what is "earned", and what is fair'.[46] But honesty or honest conversations are in the eyes of the beholder where emotional connections play a great role. As Yorke herself notes, 'many of these populist leaders are attractive precisely because they appear to be speaking to people about their concerns'. She underlines that populists

42 For instance, French economic theorist Thomas Piketty denies the spread of populist tendencies among the political left. See Thomas Piketty and Michael Sandel, interview, 'Globalization, Populism, & the Politics of Resentment: How Did Hyper-Globalization Fuel Populist Backlash?', *Institute for New Economic Thinking*, 12 February 2025, www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/videos/globalization-populism-the-politics-of-resentment.

43 Yochai Benkler, Faris Robert, and Roberts Hal, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.003.0014.

44 Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 17.

45 Ibid., p. 18.

46 Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 22.

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are making their constituents '*feel* seen in ways that other politicians do not' (emphasis added).[47] Moffitt noted that populist politicians thrive in crisis conditions and actively 'spectacularise' crisis,[48] and by doing so they increase emotional appeal to their supporters.

This provides an explanation to what may seem paradoxical political choices made by voters who opt for populist parties that do not look after their voters' economic interests. For instance, in 2024 Trump received significant support from lower-income and middle-income voters.[49] Their economic interests may seem at odds with his tax cuts from 2017 and even more so with the 'Big, Beautiful Bill' of 2025, which prioritised the very rich and cut funding to public health initiatives, such as Medicaid.[50] These supporters are accepting short-term material losses, based on emotional attachments they forge with him and the latter's promise to reinstate lost group privileges and to improve their future prospects.

2. Strangers at the Gate: Immigration and the Politics of Fear

'Fear,' Illouz writes, 'both imagined and real, is a potent political tool. It trumps and overrides all emotions and considerations.'[51] She describes how fears of real physical extermination, experienced by Jews in Eastern Europe, allowed fear to define Israeli society until it became an 'invisible and intrinsic part of national consciousness'.[52] Fear is a basic requisite of populist politics, Illouz argues. According to Freud, fear has to have a material object and is different from anxiety, which lacks such materiality. This means that for right-wing populists instilling fear requires an object of which one must be fearful, and which needs to be constantly recalled

47 Ibid., p. 87.

48 Moffitt, *Global Rise of Populism*, p. 121.

49 Josh Boak and Amelia Tomson-Deveaux, 'AP VoteCast: Voters Who Focused on the Economy Broke Hard for Trump', *AP*, 6 November 2024, https://apnews.com/article/trump-harris-economy-immigration-11db37c033328a7ef6af71fe0a104604.

50 Brandon Drenon and Nadine Yousif, 'What Are the Key Items in Trump's Sprawling Budget Bill?', *BBC News*, 22 September 2025, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0eqpz23l9jo.

51 Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 40.

52 Ibid., p. 30.

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by the majority population. In many cases it is fear of certain ethnic and racial groups, or more broadly fear of foreigners, who serve as an easily identified object. On the day of the 2015 general elections in Israel, amid reports of a low turnout from Likud voters, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu evoked fear of Arabs in Israel: 'The Arab voters are going in droves to vote. The Leftist organisations are driving them there on buses […] We only have you. Go out and vote.'[53]

Netanyahu understood one of the most enduring truths of contemporary political campaigning: elections are won by turning out supporters to vote.[54] By depicting legitimate participation by the Israeli Arab minority in the democratic process as something sinister, he wanted to rekindle his voters' fears. He aimed to pitch Jews against Arabs as well as left-wing Jews against right-wing Jews.

In the US, UK, and continental Europe, fear of immigration has been used to coalesce voters around right-wing populist causes in ways reminiscent of Israeli populist politics.[55] That is not to say that immigration does not pose a challenge to American and European societies. German sociologist Ulrich Beck noted that in post-industrialist societies risks emanating from migration are divided unevenly, which skews threat perceptions.[56] Migrants tend to settle in compact communities in poorer areas with cheaper real estate, while benefits from their labour are better felt in wealthier places. While richer dwellers of an urban metropolitan area may enjoy cheaper services powered by high numbers of incoming migrants, poorer residents feel the sharp edge of the same phenomenon in the form of higher competition for jobs and feelings of alienation in their neighbourhoods. They are more likely to experience fear of migrants, which is a consequence of the real costs associated with migration that are paid primarily by them. Hence, on policy responses to migration, where you sit is where you stand. Prosperous neighbourhoods feel the

53 Ibid., p. 38.

54 Lubrano, *Don't Talk about Politics*, p. 67.

55 Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 80.

56 Beck speaks of a wide variety of risks that are unevenly distributed in late modern societies. See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (SAGE Publications, 1992).

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benefits of migration; poorer communities suffer the costs of competition for resources.

Uneven distribution of risks in society underpins the feelings that Yorke found among Trump supporters in rural America in the run-up to the 2016 presidential elections. 'They were frustrated at the ubiquity of glossy media-ready politicians who did not listen to them or understand *their* reality', Yorke writes (emphasis mine).[57] In this context Yorke's call for an empathetic leadership style that 'compels you to confront different perspectives and experiences […] some of which you may actively disagree with or dislike'[58] can be key to addressing feelings of alienation between mainstream politicians and voters. Simply put, if mainstream politicians can emphatically communicate with their constituents a genuine understanding that migrants are imposing economic challenges and hardship on poor communities, they are more likely to connect with these voters.

This, however, is easier said than done. Economic and ideological fault lines in society make audiences immediately suspicious that empathy is inauthentic, or what Yorke calls 'performative empathy'.[59] Suspicion is partly due to widespread perceptions that liberal democratic political elites are the overall beneficiaries of the economic order and work to preserve a self-serving status quo as much as they can. Illouz provides further ideational background for suspicion of liberal politicians' ability to show any genuine connection to public fears about migration. Liberalism, she notes, abhors fear, as freedom can only be exercised if fear is 'removed from citizens' everyday lives'.[60] Consequently, fear is not welcome in liberal discussions, and those who feel fearful often look elsewhere to share their concerns.

Populist politicians welcome fearful constituents with open arms and often accentuate those fears. For instance, Reform UK's chairman Zia

57 Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 38.
58 Ibid., p. 6.
59 Ibid.
60 Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 22.

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Yusuf declared 'there is little doubt that the United Kingdom is *being invaded*' (emphasis added).[61] Shortly after, he noted: 'This is a catastrophe, and simply shipping in and opening up our borders, allowing dirt-cheap foreign labour to come in and undercut those young people is simply unfair.'[62] Yusuf's relatively moderate, populist style reflects his own migrant background and Reform UK's attempt to attract supporters from diverse backgrounds. Yet, his metaphors of invasion and references to a catastrophe dramatise migration concerns. Supporters not only feel heard, but are energised to demand immediate solutions to what have been positioned as urgent promises. Elon Musk, whose populist style is considerably more blunt, went further at the right-wing 'Unite the Kingdom' rally in central London, telling attendees that 'violence is coming' and 'you either fight back or you die'.[63] Much like the economic downturn following 2008, the rise in global migration and the high number of arrivals in developed countries have provided populists with the opportunity to reshape the conversation as a 'migration crisis'.

3. The Populist Manosphere: Masculinity, Gender, and Emotional Reclaiming

Interestingly, Yorke notes that certain types of right-wing contemporary populists, like Musk, vehemently reject empathy in politics and argue that it is 'the fundamental weakness of western civilisation'.[64] They argue that empathy is manipulating Christian values to make people care about and endorse progressive causes, such as gay or transgender rights. As one American Christian commentator said, 'empathy becomes toxic when it encourages you to affirm sin, validate lies or support destructive

61 'Full Speech: Zia Yusuf Blasts Starmer & Tories over Immigration | Reform UK Deportation Plan | AC1E', DWS News, *YouTube*, 26 August 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeLNfS2d7L0.

62 Georgia Pearce, '"Beyond belief!" Zia Yusuf Slaps Down Keir Starmer's Swipe at "Racist" Reform Policy—"Smearing and belittling"', *GBNews*, 29 September 2025, www.gbnews.com/politics/zia-yusuf-slaps-down-keir-starmer-swipe-racist-reform-policy.

63 Aneesa Ahmed, 'Elon Musk Calls for Dissolution of Parliament at Far-Right Rally in London', *The Guardian*, 13 September 2025, www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/sep/13/elon-musk-calls-for-dissolution-of-parliament-at-far-right-rally-in-london.

64 Elon Musk quoted in Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 2.

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policies'.[65] The attributed connection of empathy to weakness or even sinfulness derives from right-wing populists' rejection of rapidly changing gender roles and gender norms in society through diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) policies. The rejection of liberal values, which are mistakenly conflated with DEI policies, is accompanied with a particular hyper-masculine style of twenty-first-century right-wing populism.

On the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, whose political style embodies twenty-first-century populist hyper-masculinity, quoted a Soviet-era punk song about power and submission. The lyrics ran: 'Sleeping beauty in a coffin, I crept up and f***ed her. Like it, or dislike it, sleep my beauty.'[66]

Putin's style is often contrasted with that of the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Yorke identifies the latter's style as a successful model of democratic, charismatic-empathetic male leadership 'whose bravery inspired collective action, creating a strong sense of common fate'.[67] It is tempting to perceive Zelenskyy as an example of liberal democratic masculinity, whose 'bravery has made him into a tough-guy sex symbol'.[68] Nevertheless, Zelenskyy gained such popularity when he refused to leave Kyiv during the full-scale Russian invasion and said: 'I need ammunition, not a ride.' With that, Zelenskyy became a role model for liberal audiences by taking on the traditional role of a wartime president.

This reveals the most tragic consequence of a liberal agenda that allowed itself to be dominated by DEI policies. While discursive practices of DEI among intellectual and academic elites evolved rapidly, they were often out of touch with the discourse in broader society and failed to shift

65 Tiffany Stanley, 'Is Empathy a Sin? Some Conservative Christians Argue It Can Be', *Independent*, 21 August 2025, www.independent.co.uk/news/donald-trump-empathy-jd-vance-christians-pete-hegseth-b2811686.html.

66 Leon Aron, 'What's behind Putin's Dirty, Violent Speeches', *The Atlantic*, 27 February 2022, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/vladimir-putin-dirty-language-cursing/622924.

67 Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 42.

68 'Widespread Admiration for Volodymyr Zelensky Could Upend Stereotypes about Jewish Men', *Washington Post*, 22 March 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/22/our-newfound-love-volodymyr-zelensky-could-upend-stereotypes-about-jewish-men.

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fundamental perceptions and practices by rethinking the role of men and masculinity. Gender roles in liberal democracies have been shifting slowly and unevenly over recent centuries, with some significant advances in the second half of the twentieth century. However, twenty-first-century discursive practices of reimagining society in which gender plays little or no role, and where traditional gender norms are necessarily portrayed as oppressive, became the background against which populism developed as a distinct hyper-masculine style.[69]

Hyper-masculinity is particularly rife in the alternative digital media space of the 'manosphere', a powerful ecosystem of primarily American podcasters. Rejection of liberal values which they see as a 'progressive' anti-male campaign is reproduced by these online influencers and disseminated to younger supporters.[70] In this context it was no coincidence that Reform UK's Yusuf highlighted young people when speaking about immigration vows. Young people, especially male, played a key role in the electoral success of right-wing populists in recent election campaigns in the United States,[71] Poland,[72] Romania,[73] and Israel[74]—which in turn appears to have shaped a global wave of young male discontent.[75]

69 Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 14.

70 Caroline Haskins, 'Rogan, Musk and an Emboldened Manosphere Salute Trump's Win: "Let That Sink In"', *The Guardian*, 7 November 2024, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/07/joe-rogan-elon-musk-heterodoxy-trump-win-reaction.

71 Steven Greenhouse, 'Young Male Voters Are Flocking to Trump—But He Doesn't Have Their Interests at Heart', *The Guardian*, 3 September 2024, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/sep/03/young-male-voters-trump-harris.

72 Alicja Ptak, 'Poland's Presidential Election Run-off in Charts', *Notes from Poland*, 4 June 2025, https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/06/04/polands-presidential-election-run-off-in-charts.

73 In Romania's case, young voters supported controversial pro-Russian nationalist Calin Georgescu in the November 2024 presidential elections, which were annulled due to illegal campaign practices online and suspicions of foreign Russian interference. See Martin Muno, 'Did TikTok Influence Romania's Presidential Election?', *DW*, 7 December 2024, www.dw.com/en/did-tiktok-influence-romanias-presidential-election/a-70954832.

74 Data N12, 'Hachnasa, gil u-migdar: Mi atem, ha-matzbi'im shel kol miflagah?' [Income, Age and Gender: Who Are You—the Voters of Each Party?', *MAKO*, 31 October 2022, www.mako.co.il/news-israel-elections/election_2022/Article-a5c291142392481027.htm; Eitan Glickman, 'Ben-Gvir "shatah" et ha-shekhénim shel Bennett, aval lo rak: ha-aliyyah ha-me'te'orit shel ha-Tziyonut ha-Datit' [Ben-Gvir 'Drank Up' Bennett's Neighbours—But Not Only Them: The Meteoric Rise of Religious Zionism', *Ynet*, 2 November 2022, www.ynet.co.il/news/election2022/article/bkoec1xrs.

75 Jonathan Yerushalmy, 'What's behind the Global Political Divide between Young Men and Women?', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2024, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/14/us-election-donald-trump-voters-gender-race-data.

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Voters' age is an important variable in understanding the role of gender in the increasing rejection of the liberal project in favour of right-wing, anti-establishment, populist politics. US presidential elections have demonstrated this dynamic. In 2016 Trump was favoured by older, white, male voters.[76] Here it is easy to argue that Trump's unapologetic rhetoric about traditional masculinity became a sticky emotional issue that helped them reaffirm their identity. In 2024, while Trump continued to be popular among males across all age groups, his popularity increased with those aged 18–29 and with the 30–44 age group.[77] These demographics are less likely to struggle with navigating changing gender norms as they have limited experience of previous social norms.

Illouz's analysis of how perceptions of lost privilege evoke negative emotions helps illuminate this trend. Males who came of age from the mid 2010s face diminishing employment prospects due to economic slowdown, as well as harbouring feelings that 'in the political realm nobody's advocating for them'.[78] The 'manosphere', which is populated by influencers like Joe Rogan and Theo Von, filled this gap in society. It was instrumental too in Trump's return to the White House. But it represents much more than that. It created a space made by males and for males. Interestingly it is neither a space of grievance nor a partisan experience.[79]

The manosphere advocates for the reinstatement of certain traditional gender roles, but, even more importantly, it provides a platform for holding conversations that would be frowned upon on other media platforms. In this online space one can raise doubts about virtually any established fact. For example, in the aftermath of the assassination of MAGA influencer Charlie Kirk, and despite mounting evidence that the assassin was caught by law enforcement agencies, Rogan joined the online conspiracy theory chorus. In a video that received over 7 million

76 Hannah Hartig, 'Voting Patterns in the 2024 Election', *Pew Research Centre*, 26 June 2025, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/06/26/voting-patterns-in-the-2024-election.

77 Ibid.

78 Daniel Cox in Yerushalmy, 'What's behind the Global Political Divide'.

79 Neither Rogan nor Von comes from a Republican background (Rogan endorsed Sanders in 2016 and Von is close to Robert F. Kennedy Jr).

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views, Rogan told his audience, 'there is a lot of weird s*** going on … none of these things make any sense to me'.[80] Rogan raised questions about evidence from the scene, doubted the ability of the assassin to commit the crime, and laughed at the assassin's sexual orientation.[81]

The manosphere is a space where fears (in the case of the Kirk assassination, a fear of government cover-up) are accommodated and not berated, and where politics can be discussed in everyday language and in a light-hearted manner. In the absence of a liberal masculine model, masculinity in the twenty-first century is becoming an anti-establishment project and the backbone of the right-wing, nationalist, populist political surge.

Conclusions—An Echo of the 1930s?

One of the strengths of all three books discussed here is their commitment to repair some of the shortcomings of liberalism that caused the current wave of disenchantment with the liberal project and contributed to the rise of populism. This is a welcome trend in scholarly literature. Scholars should not only dissect problems, but also look for solutions. Nevertheless, when reading their plans for action one may wonder whether they can withstand a possible major and rapid deterioration in political conditions, like the 'fall of liberalism'[82] in the 1930s.

Illouz, Yorke, and Lubrano bring some important and practical suggestions for liberals. Lubrano argues that the first task for liberals is to abandon the myths of mainstream politics which stem from the flawed metaphor of Oliver Wendell Holmes's marketplace of ideas. If politicians are imagined as 'sellers' and voters as 'buyers', then liberalism—by virtue of having once been widely 'purchased'—appears the most legitimate, relegating

80 'Weird Details about the Charlie Kirk Assassination', JRE Clips, *YouTube*, 23 September 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY-FREo1JMM&t=1s.

81 Ibid.

82 The term was coined by Eric Hobsbawm to describe the retreat in liberal ideas in the face of radical left- and right-wing ideologies in Europe in the interwar period. See his *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p. 122.

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other perspectives to the margins. Yet political ideas do not evolve through market logic. As Yorke observes, twenty-first-century voters are increasingly 'political nomads',[83] a view supported by evidence of long-term voter disengagement from traditional parties in the UK.[84] This suggests that most populist supporters are ordinary citizens disenchanted with ideas that no longer meet their material and emotional needs.[85] Liberals might therefore refrain from stigmatising departures from mainstream discourse and resist labelling dissenters as fascists or racists at every turn.

Yorke proposes that liberals should foster open dialogue and employ strategic empathy, as 'an asset' for 'better understanding of those for whom, or against whom, you are designing policy'.[86] She suggests how people can become more empathetic on national, communal, and personal levels to foster meaningful conversations that 'actively listen to different voices'.[87] Lubrano concurs, arguing that liberals should abandon the current culture of political debate, which involves confrontational presentation of strings of ideas. Behavioural research confirms that such debates entrench opinions and fuel polarisation.[88] This dynamic benefits populism, which thrives on spectacle and division. Instead, as Lubrano argues, policies need to be translated into collective civic action, which changes minds more profoundly than any discussion does.[89] Illouz calls for inter-faith dialogue to reaffirm commitment to values of universalism.[90]

Notwithstanding the value of this informative advice, widespread comparisons between twenty-first-century right-wing populism and the rise of fascist ideologies in Europe in the 1930s calls into question whether these steps can contain the rising tide. While populists vehemently reject

83 Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. xii.

84 Edward Fieldhouse et al., *Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World* (Oxford University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198800583.001.0001.

85 Gábor Scheiring, 'Populism Can Degrade Democracy but Is on the Rise', *The Conversation*, 26 June 2024, https://theconversation.com/populism-can-degrade-democracy-but-is-on-the-rise-heres-what-causes-this-political-movement-and-how-it-can-be-weakened-222323.

86 Yorke, *Empathy in Politics and Leadership*, p. 8.

87 Ibid., p. 259.

88 Matthew Fisher et al., 'The Influence of Social Interaction on Intuitions of Objectivity and Subjectivity', *Cognitive Science: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 41, Nº 4 (May 2017).

89 Lubrano, *Don't Talk about Politics*, p. 78.

90 Illouz, *Emotional Life of Populism*, p. 19.

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such comparisons,[91] similarities exist. First, akin to twenty-first-century populism, both German and Italian fascism 'sought to play on emotions' and did 'not rest explicitly on an elaborated philosophical system'.[92] For that reason, Zeev Sternhell famously labelled classical French fascism as 'neither right nor left'.[93] Twenty-first-century populism is a style and a very 'thin' ideology where emotional rejection of liberalism plays a central role.

Second, fascism spread across Europe as a reaction to the instability of interwar states, promoting ostensibly simple solutions based on the exclusion of minorities and foreigners from the national body.[94] A comparable logic can be observed among contemporary right-wing populist movements, which characterise liberal democratic systems as 'broken' and 'bankrupt' and blame migrants for many of its faults.[95] In short, twentieth-century fascism was populist in style and anti-liberal in nature, exhibiting certain comparisons with twenty-first-century right-wing populism.

One key difference is that twenty-first-century populists lack fascination with death and violence. The current populist wave has been limited and sporadic in the use of force by its supporters, and many populists ostensibly oppose military intervention in international conflicts. In fact Trump has repeatedly blamed liberals, such as former President Joe Biden, for starting wars.[96] Orbán has insisted that he would not assist Ukraine in its war efforts, but he is 'happy to help with organising peace talks'.[97]

91 Konstantin Kisin in 'Why MAGA Is At War with Itself—Dinesh D'Souza', *Triggernometry* podcast, YouTube, 26 October 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCVv5cJ9k9A.

92 Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

93 Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

94 Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, p. 124.

95 Reform UK leader Nigel Farage regularly refers to 'broken Britain'. See Danielle de Wolfe, 'Nigel Farage Vows to Fix "Broken Britain" as He Launches Reform UK Election "Contract"', *LBC*, 17 June 2024, www.lbc.co.uk/article/nigel-farage-vows-to-fix-broken-britain-as-he-launches-reform-uk-election-contra-5HjcmkB_2/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

96 '"He Was Stupid": Trump Accuses Joe Biden of Starting Wars following Call with Vladimir Putin', Forbes Breaking News, *YouTube*, 16 October 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9SMDdQrRjo.

97 'Hungary Does Not Want to Go to War, and Will Not', *Viktor Orbán*, 24 October 2025, https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/hungary-does-not-want-to-go-to-war-and-will-not.

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The relative peacefulness of the current trend in populism is also the likely reason for Yorke, Illouz, and Lubrano not addressing a possible violent scenario. However, many contemporary right-wing populists echo a Hobbesian worldview which assumes that society is inherently in conflict and only strong authority can restore order. Coupled with continued economic downturn, and growing political mobilisation among young males, the current relatively peaceful democratic backsliding may rapidly turn into a mass and systemic use of violence domestically and in international conflicts.

Ted Robert Gurr's work *Why Men Rebel* (1970) described how conditions of relative deprivation (a discrepancy between what people think they deserve and what they actually get), like those experienced by lower- and middle-income families, can lead to political violence.[98] While we are not yet at Gurr's scenario, we ought nevertheless to ask the essential question of what happens next. Is, as Musk suggests, violence coming? It seems that liberals do not have a solution for such an outcome.

98 Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

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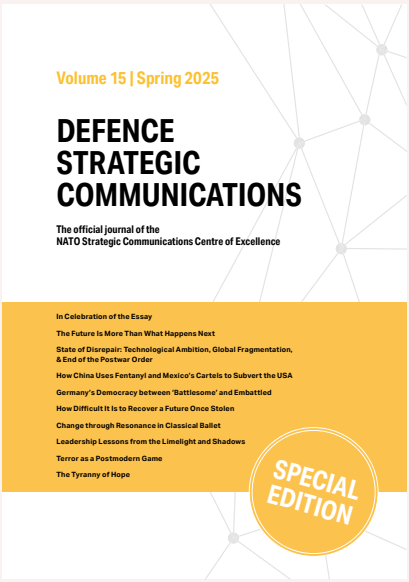

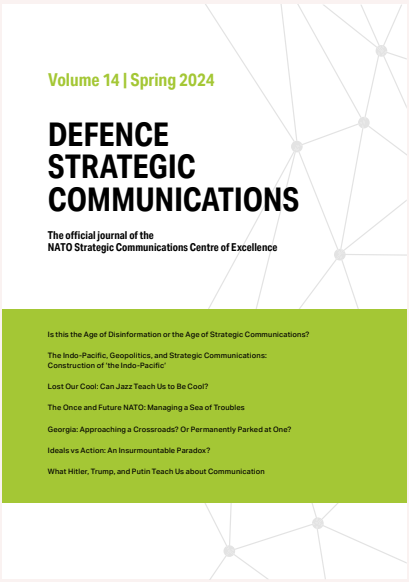

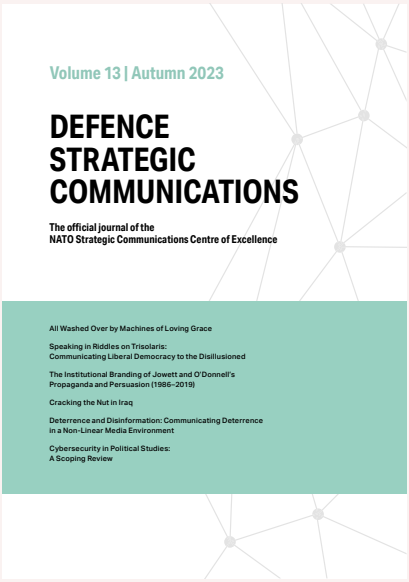

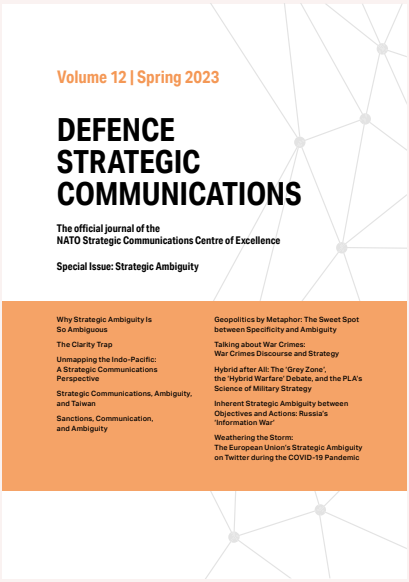

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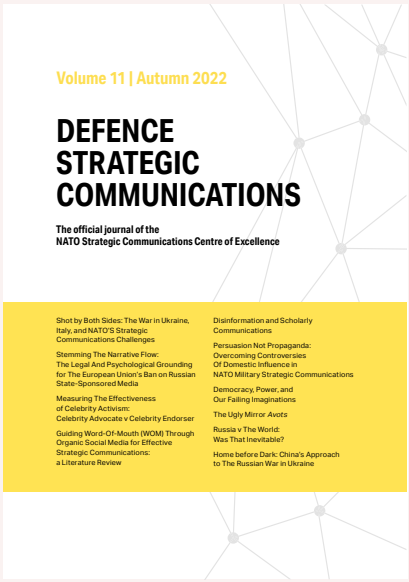

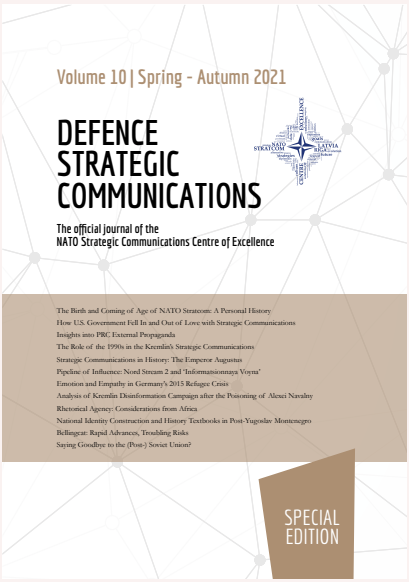

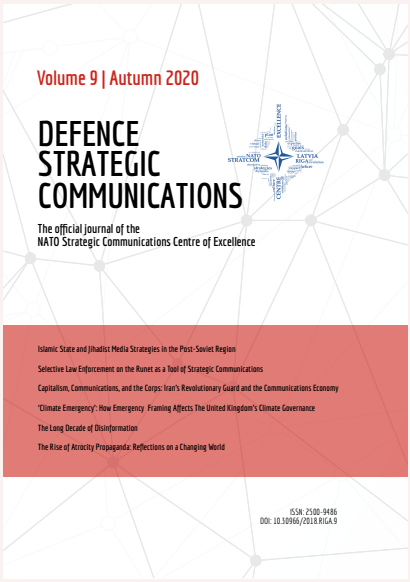

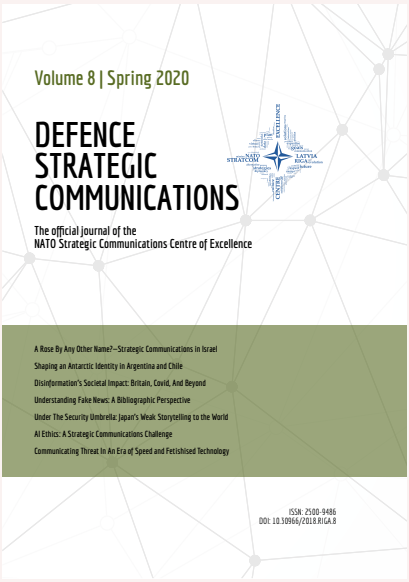

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