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NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence



The Birth and Coming of Age of NATO Stratcom: A Personal History
How U.S. Government Fell In and Out of Love with Strategic Communications
Insights into PRC External Propaganda
The Role of the 1990s in the Kremlin's Strategic Communications
Strategic Communications in History: The Emperor Augustus
Pipeline of Influence: Nord Stream 2 and 'Informatsionnaya Voyna'
Emotion and Empathy in Germany's 2015 Refugee Crisis
Analysis of Kremlin Disinformation Campaign after the Poisoning of Alexei Navalny
Rhetorical Agency: Considerations from Africa
National Identity Construction and History Textbooks in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro
Bellingcat: Rapid Advances, Troubling Risks
Saying Goodbye to the (Post-) Soviet Union?

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

I am delighted to welcome the publication of the tenth volume of Defence Strategic Communications. Since it was established in 2015, this peer reviewed journal has already made a significant contribution to the way we interpret and practice communications in contemporary politics and geopolitics. Its eclectic blend of articles and review essays engages with the very foundations of a rapidly developing field of inquiry while encouraging innovative thought. Consequently, it continues to enrich the research offering of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and promises to build towards a long and influential future. I would like to thank our many authors for their generous insights. And I trust our readers will enjoy this celebratory issue.

Jānis Sārts
Director
NATO Strategic Communications
Centre of Excellence, Riga

FOREWORD

The year was 1665. The self-styled Sun King, Louis XIV radiated splendour from the throne of France. And King Charles II, having recently restored the monarchy following a bitter civil war, now ruled over England as the ‘merry monarch’. The European Enlightenment was gathering pace. The publishing world was flourishing.

Two new scientific journals had made their appearance that year: the *Journal des Sçavans* on the 5th January, in the French language, and courtesy of its founder M. Denis de Sallo. Another, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, was published in English on the 6th March. M de Sallo was by no means defensive towards the newcomer—eight items had graced his twelve pages and subsequently been praised in translation by readers in Germany and Italy.¹ These contributions ranged across topics such as a book review of the works of 5th century writers Vitensis and Tapsensis; a review of a new lens that could observe Saturn and Jupiter; a review of a republished book on sneezing; the posthumous publication of two treatises of Descartes; and extracts from a letter written in Oxford on the subject of Siamese twins featuring their autopsy. Readers, urged M. de Sallo, should be able to enjoy book reviews, obituaries of celebrated figures, physics and chemistry experiments, discoveries in the arts and sciences that included observations of the skies, no less of meteors, and anatomical discoveries on animals. And nothing, wrote *l’Imprimeur au lecteur*, should occur in Europe that might excite the curiosity of men of letters but be absent from this journal.²

Philosophical Transactions, by contrast, far from being a pale imitation, boasted a treasure trove of learned articles. The list of contents read:

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¹ Roger P. McCutcheon, “The “Journal Des Scavans” and “Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society””, *Studies in Philology* Volume 21 N° 4 (University of North Carolina Press, Oct. 1924): 626-628.

² *Le Journal des sçavans*, (1665), *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, (accessed 5 January 2022).

‘1. An Accompt of the Improvement of Optick Glasses; 2. Observations made in England on a dark Spot in one of the Belts of Jupiter; 3. Experimental History of Cold; 4. A Monstrous Calf; 5. Lead Ore in Germany, used for Essays; 6. Hungarian Balm; 7. Pendulum Watches at Sea.’(sic). While only one book was summarised.³

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the emergence of journals which in step with institutions such as the Académie Royale des Sciences in Paris (founded in December 1666) or the Royal Society in London (with its royal charter granted in 1662) would begin to define what was acceptable scientific and academic discourse. However, it has been noted that when journals first appeared in the 17th century, they resembled far more closely, in design and even by ill repute, newspapers and gazettes. Their appeal was to the broader Republic of Letters in Europe and the Americas. Original scientific research, by contrast, would be presented at learned societies in the form of delivered lectures, providing the substance for written papers and articles. The tension that emerged between the commercialisation of ideas in published journals and the desire of these learned societies to preserve knowledge for a more scrutinising readership is captured in the remarks of a French physicist in 1817. Journals should be ‘grand academic collections where the slow, but continual progress of the human mind are deposited, and which are destined to last as long as there is civilisation on earth’.⁴ But for all the resistance to journals slicing knowledge into digestible portions at the risk of distorting human understanding of the world, or presenting scientific discoveries as momentous events rather than the rewards of patient inquiry and process, the 19th century would make its peace with the journal form as many learned institutions embraced the marketplace only to produce their own. Many thinkers, such as Charles Darwin, would go further and come to concentrate their published work on periodicals rather than books. But by the end of the century ‘it was widely acknowledged that a career and reputation in science depended

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³ McCutcheon, “The “Journal Des Scavans” and “Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society”, p. 267.

⁴ Alex Csiszar, *The Scientific Journal: Authorship and the Politics of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

largely on one's unpaid contributions to various kinds of periodicals'.⁵ The journal had become a medium of choice and one that would soon be woven into peer recognition if not the promotion structure in the careers of would-be scholars.

Strategic communicators like to cite the maxim 'perception becomes reality': what people choose to be true is usually more telling than the objective facts on display which might contradict that new truth. Form and content can be at odds. Appearance can frame the way we approach the subject matter. Unsurprisingly, people do judge books by their cover. Reflecting on form (what a journal should look like) and content (what it should say) is timely, particularly in the consumer marketplace of the 21st century. For a nascent field such as strategic communications, actively promoted by governments, at the same time taught in universities, yet still striving to define what it is and how it should be taught, it is equally relevant. Any new field looking to establish itself as a serious body of thought will seek approval from its peers in the academy. Scholars of strategic communications can already find themselves under suspicion for allowing practitioners to overly instrumentalise the field in pursuit of their trade without investing sufficient self-critique. Nor will they wish to be seen as simply extending propaganda studies or even to appear as an adjunct to marketing and advertising, but instead as something innovative and distinct. The tension emerges when practitioners—politicians and their media agencies—who breathed life into this new way of communicating politics in recent times, are less inclined to immerse themselves in what they consider the indirect ways of academic language when describing ideas. And where establishing scholarly genealogy is less pressing than applying the lessons of the past to achieve better outcomes pitched against the ticking clock of global events. Nevertheless at its heart, this field rises or falls by its ability to innovate, to test new models, develop fresh insights, and create new theories. Praxis depends on the cycle of iteration between practitioners and theorists.

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⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

That for so long there should have been no single format, no set protocols, nor even ways of verifying or peer reviewing journals is barely surprising. The scientific journal as a literary form had centuries to weather the test of time and win scholarly approbation before establishing a recognisable appearance underpinned by sets of rules. Centuries passed before they would appear in the more recognisable form that characterised the world of academic publishing in 2015. It was in that year—a full three and half centuries later—that *Defence Strategic Communications* would make its debut. Supported by NATO but granted editorial independence in its home at the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, it set out to stimulate intellectual inquiry and create academic research agendas around the emergent field of strategic communications. Free dissemination of its content was a further priority, countering the trend in academic publishing to restrict access via subscription and pay-walls. 2022 sees the publication of its tenth volume, a milestone to be celebrated in the scholarly world where most titles are owned by commercial publishing houses save for a few independents which live from hand to mouth to stave off premature demise.

Since I became editor of *Defence Strategic Communications* nine volumes and six years ago, we have pursued a policy of combining peer reviewed academic articles and review essays (less book review, more authorial think-piece exemplified by the New York Review of Books). This 10th Jubiläum volume is an extended edition including twice our usual tally of contributions. The journal has carried numerous articles and review essays, each edition introduced by my reflections on an aspect of the primary debates in this still nascent field. Journals must inevitably continue to evolve. Ours faces particular challenges: strategic communications has only recently emerged as a distinct field of academic inquiry (this volume dedicates more than one article to charting its development); it is driven publicly by the pursuit of politics and geopolitical events. Its protagonists are statesmen, politicians, policymakers, diplomats, soldiers, and professional communicators. Abstract theorising—the stuff of the university—may be considered a nice-to-have, not must-have when seen from the perspective of those caught up in dynamic events, all too

often unforeseen and unintended. Yet intellectual frameworks and the genealogy of ideas, with their ability to illuminate why we should or should not undertake certain actions, matter. Ways of seeing or the angle of entry into a question matter too. The art critic John Berger observed that, 'Each evening we *see* the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation never quite fits the sight'.⁶ So too does perspective matter. Our own is but one in a world of many other points of view. And these determine whether people whose attention we would like to engage, choose (since they have a choice) to listen to what we have to say, or not. Never mind the even loftier ambition of presuming to change their way of thinking and behaving as a strategic objective and strategic effect. If strategic communications is about the long-term shifting and shaping of those discourses that would offer societies a better life, then it follows that deep thought should be the *sine qua non* to judicious action.

Earlier I mentioned those who favoured an appreciation of research framed by what the French historian Fernand Braudel called the *longue durée*. Tensions identified in previous centuries nevertheless endure. The impatience of policymakers can grow with prolonged periods of research. Two years of the Covid virus and its mutations have brought to light frustrations felt around the time it takes to conduct rigorous scientific research. Understandable when each day of delay costs lives and human suffering. Pressures from governments and pharmaceutical companies have encouraged some scientists to publicise their judgements prematurely while short-circuiting peer review processes against a background of already unusually short periods for data capture. Yet such impatience can be misplaced.

Blending articles with essays, *Defence Strategic Communications* attempts to complement longer, analytical discourses with faster turn-around commentary. Consequently, this 10th volume highlights some important questions. Strategic communications remains an area of practice short on conceptual foundations, often borrowing intuitively from the fields

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⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London; New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 7, emphases in original.

of international relations, strategic theory, communications studies, and latterly the psychology of behavioural change. To delimit this emergent field is to neglect history, political philosophy, and what the literary and visual arts can teach us. To focus on what can be instantly instrumentalised is to reduce human behaviour to a manual of predictability. People are both complex and diverse. Military incursions into Iraq and Afghanistan have shown the likelihood of mission creep and subsequent message creep when the time and space of other lives are not explored with sensitivity. A lack of granular insight into both the concerns and traditions of other peoples' lives inevitably calls for a more audience-centric approach to this field; to put it another way, a greater cultural awareness. Consequently, today we find ourselves reverse engineering conceptual foundations into the architecture of this young discipline. And many of these conversations take place in working groups in NATO where pluralist thinking is encouraged, better to inform the requirement to standardise operational language and doctrine across 30 member states.

Deep excavation is nevertheless overdue. It should have been carried out decades ago, reaching well beyond the need to define terms. Today we belatedly seek to locate strategic communications in such thinkers as those of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s and 30s. There social constructivists and symbolic interactionists discussed how human beings attach meaning to everything they experience in the world outside their bodies and why those meanings and ideas that flow from them come to endure over centuries, determining how successive generations seek to change that world. Louis Menand looked at the School's precursors⁷ whose thinking would set the foundations for much of its theorising:

"They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools - like forks and knives and microchips - that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals but by groups of individuals - that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not

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⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles S. Pierce, and John Dewey

develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability'.⁸

Today's archaeological dig has gone deeper, calling up thorny discussions about what is power, and how persuasion and coercion speak to each other when strategic communicators exert influence in a contested environment. 'How did strategic communications appear in tandem with geopolitical changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries?' is as pertinent a question as 'Was there strategic communications before strategic communications?'. These are difficult questions. Theories and concepts do not emerge in isolation from the empirical world.

The shift from bipolar geopolitics of the Cold War with its proxy wars, civil wars, and independence struggles to a period of turbulence in the 1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union for which Mary Kaldor controversially supplied the lens of *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, marked the desire for politics to speak in a different way to a changing environment which we were ill-equipped to understand. The apparent shift to a faith-driven, ideological threat from Islamic militancy, replacing class-based competition that had characterised most of the 20th century, ushered in an era of counter-insurgency (COIN)—a hybrid form of political and military engagement with communities caught up in conflict. It employed 'hearts and minds' persuasive techniques more familiar to the world of aid and development to combat 'small wars'. Strategic communications in so many of its tenets became its voice, only for Western patience with COIN to run out in the heat and dust of Iraq and Afghanistan. The drift from counter-insurgency to counter-terrorism with its unequivocal message of search and destroy accompanied the retreat of Islamic State/ISIS from embryonic state to scattered insurgency movement. But by the second decade of the new century, the

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⁸ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, (London: Flamingo, 2002), pp xi-xii

re-assertiveness of Russia and particularly of an economically resurgent and militarily expansionist China would herald a return to Great Power politics.

Hence ‘what is strategic communications?’ remains a contested question, not only because its context continues to change but so too does the focus of its attention. And it will and for the sake of intellectual self-critique should continue to do so. While at root this field is about the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies, at the same time, it projects foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences. Strategic effects are achieved using words, images, actions, and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community. That is one statist understanding of the term. Yet recognising the need to identify target audiences before communicating with them pulls against the desire to create a single, universal definition—one size does not fit all. Meanwhile not only states engage in strategic communications. Equally, it is practiced in times of war and peace, and in the shades of grey with which we have become familiar in this century. What makes the insertion of ‘strategic’ relevant to communications is not necessarily consistent with a state military interpretation. For communicators, something is strategic when it focuses on the long term; competes in a dynamic environment; and sets out to achieve discernible and pre-identified effects from an actual, not idealised starting-point. Strategy therefore speaks to the idea that communicators navigate, manoeuvre, and negotiate a path through the frictions of a contested media space. All the while they are sympathetic to the broader, ontological concept of existing in an information environment—the different ways in which human beings read and process their understanding of the world around them.

My definition above leans perhaps excessively towards considering this field through *how* strategic communications attempts to achieve its aims. Unlike the essentialist view of the Terminology Working Group in Riga where we argue it *is* ‘a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve

objectives in a contested environment’.⁹ Meanwhile for NATO doctrine writers ‘the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (IO) and Psychological Operations as appropriate in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims’ first agreed in 2009, emerges from an institutional sensitivity and remains a point around which NATO thinking continues to build consensus inside the alliance.¹⁰

At the same time, what something *is* should be weighed in the context of how that something came into being. *Defence Strategic Communications* seeks to capture its genealogy critically—so no mere chronology—across the milestones of the last three decades which mark out what has made strategic communications distinctive. Indeed, what separates it from what had passed before in neighbouring fields of political marketing or propaganda—the former a Johnny-come-lately to commercial marketeers intent on commoditising everything in our lives; the latter with its fiercely contested academic meaning, and the fears Western democrats share of being tarnished by the horrors from its 20th century brush.

For strategic communications to turn into successful praxis, a careful balance must be nurtured between those who think about what it is, and those who wrestle with how to apply it, whatever it might be. This symbiosis should derive from a true open-mindedness, removing a distrust that still often clouds the relationship between thinker and doer, between theorist and practitioner. *Defence Strategic Communications* journal has sought to bridge these unproductive divides among its readers; just as it attempts to assemble a picture from the continuities and discontinuities of the past.

Nothing comes from nothing. Form and content are symbiotic too. And they are more important than might first appear. Scholars consume journal articles with barely a sideways glance at the literary form that hosts them. Over time the idea has evolved that a rigid format exerts

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⁹ Neville Bolt & Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, June 2019), p. 46.

¹⁰ NATO, PO (2009) 0141, 29 September 2009

discipline shaped around a menu of strict wordcount, referencing and footnoting, template, and peer review; all should hold the author to account. Exploring a mode of expression and writing style within tight protocols may bring discipline of thought and expression to the author—which resonates with many producers in the creative arts—but can be alienating to anyone other than die-hard readers. Directness, drama, and imaginative exploration are prized assets so often absent while meaning itself may be obscured; I recall a conversation with a government National Security Adviser who confessed to having read only five books and no academic articles during a three-year tenure in office. The risk is one of a community speaking to itself in a discrete language and referencing debates that can appear self-serving. Publishing in academic journals too is tied into a system of career promotion inside universities. Practitioners' tastes, by contrast, may lead to cursory reading and hasty judgements: working models are demanded, not theories. Their futures are influenced by their ability to deliver objectives and measurable effects in the outside world: it's a different career path and reward structure.

This was the task *Defence Strategic Communications* set itself: How to live up to academic protocols and speak to its dedicated constituency of scholars while appealing to its community of practitioners and policy makers versed in the economic style of policy writing. Over recent years this journal has attempted to appeal across divides. An eclectic commissioning policy, blending the academic offering with review essays usually drawn from practitioners, has been complemented by the use of photographs and illustrations to support both literary forms. Mixing conceptual pieces with historical, and regional with thematic, has pushed at the limits of expectations, attempting to stimulate fresh debates. In pursuit of asking 'What is strategic communications', this current volume includes a cluster of conceptual articles that survey the question from different perspectives. To this end, we choose to break format once again.

Mark Laity was instrumental in developing strategic communications at SHAPE/NATO as its first Head of Communications. He was invited to break customary journal rules for this volume. Indeed, to reflect

on the milestones across two decades of NATO's road to establishing both the concept and discipline of this new field inside the world's biggest, politico-military defence alliance. What follows in this *special essay* is a collection of key moments and turning points; more a personal memoir, an inside story. Nevertheless, for all the emotion invested in its writing, Laity draws a chronology which will serve future scholars and practitioners as an archive on which to build further research. Yet it is neither review essay nor academic article, free to express its own view while still cataloguing the rise of NATO StratCom, frequently against the forces of resistance. Consistent with Laity's earlier career as a BBC defence correspondent, this contribution is unequivocal, critical, and sincere. It will inevitably invite its critics. Both author and journal welcome the conversation to come.

Clustered around this central question 'What is strategic communications' are three more articles, each engaging with the scholarly and policy literature. One from Jente Althuis catalogues the important documents and reports that accompany Washington's brief flirtation with the new terminology before its eventual slide into the confusion of institutional turf wars. It too provides a useful chronicle and resource for future scholars to reference. In another article, Aurelio Insisa captures the way Chinese scholars writing in the Chinese language have closely monitored and debated the emergence of this new field in the West over the last decade and a half. How should it be transposed into Beijing's way of signalling its foreign and security policies, if at all? And what might be the implications for how the Chinese Communist Party should speak to its own domestic population: in May of 2021, China's President Xi spoke publicly for the first time of 'strategic communications with Chinese characteristics'.

Ofer Fridman investigates Vladimir Putin's conservatism that only mirrors that of a nation he has ruled over for 25 years. He argues that Russia's reluctance in recent years to innovate politically is steered by a deliberate, intuitive understanding on the part of its leader. Far from manipulating and imposing a new memory of the Russian state from above, Fridman's thesis controversially proposes that Putin has practiced

his own version of strategic communications developed around a set of strategic narratives. These draw on the trauma of Russia's 1990s set against its deeply held value system—and the way Putin's storytelling has played into both.

To remind ourselves that history stretches before living memory, that the *longue durée* is a better measure of how to understand trends in developments that shape our lives, television producer Zenia Duell examines the reign of the Roman general Octavian who would become the Emperor Augustus. The author is searching for similarities in how today we conceptualise strategic communications and how the Roman poets Virgil, Ovid, and Horace used verse not only to celebrate the reputation of the emperor but to disseminate a set of values, if not his 'new world order'.

Germany finds the spotlight in this volume in two articles. Vera Michlin-Shapir analyses debates around the controversial gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, its relevance even more poignant with heightened tensions in the current Ukraine crisis. The gas pipeline connecting western Russia to Germany and running beneath the Baltic Sea has recently become a focus of Western threats of sanctions against Moscow aimed at preventing an escalation of conflict in Ukraine and Russian military invasion. Ruth Shepherd, meanwhile, marks the end of Chancellor Angela Merkel's career, inquiring whether her controversial policy of welcoming into the country over one million refugees from Syria in 2015 may yet be her greatest legacy. Examining the role of emotion and empathy, she charts how Merkel's road to an empathetic policy grew out of her own background as well as the not so distant memory of the country's own history, before being further sharpened by her uncomfortable encounter on national television with a young refugee. The author argues that deep-held, moral convictions of political leaders can still exert a dramatic effect in a world all too often determined by Realpolitik.

Diyana Dobрева and Nora Jansen put the case of Alexei Navalny under the microscope. The Russian opposition politician, now imprisoned in the country following his return and survival from an attempt to

poison him, prompted an extensive disinformation campaign by Russian state-owned media outlets against him. The authors survey a number of outlets—Ria Novosti, TASS, Russia Today Deutsch, and Sputnik Deutsch—through five lenses, namely audience, behaviour, content, dynamics, and effect. Their empirical research leads them to conclude that disinformation tactics were employed ‘to debunk evidence, to deny responsibility, to discredit opponents, and to distract domestic and international audiences’.

Rhetoric and agency are concepts Klaus Kotzé sees as central to strategic communications. As a theorist of rhetoric, he is keen to show how agency and power are exercised between discourse partners. Whenever individuals seek to communicate with one another, different types of relationship emerge, questioning who is exerting power and control over whom. Agency, however, is conceived from the perspective of the communicator. Yet the act of persuasion relies on the audience not only having the capacity but also the desire to participate in any act of strategic communications. Which, according to Kotzé, raises important questions for African states as they seek to increase their voice in the global discourse theatre.

A growing national identity crisis in the Balkan state of Montenegro has prompted United Nations consultant Jovana Vuletić to consider how official history has been constructed in successive state-building projects. Comparing six different editions of history textbooks produced for primary schoolchildren and which appeared in 1997, 2001, and 2008, she charts the freeing of a Montenegrin national self-awareness from its Yugoslav past. Her investigation reinforces the role of constructing collective memory and the storytelling of national myths as central tenets in the way we understand strategic communications.

Two review essays conclude this special volume. Tony Esmond, a former police detective, now open source investigator, looks into the progress of the open source intelligence gathering agency Bellingcat. He finds a story of dramatic success, but one which raises serious questions around ethical and legal red lines that should separate police and journalistic

investigation from the practice of political activism. Inside the more relaxed conventions of the review essay, Vera Michlin-Shapir brings us full circle to where this Foreword began. Experimenting not so much with form and content on this occasion but foregrounding the author's perspective in the historian's trade, she follows in the tradition of Tony Judt. He saw history writing as *opinionated*—‘a word that has acquired undeservedly pejorative connotations’. Michlin-Shapir's reflections on the (Post-) Soviet Union, she admits, can be only a ‘personal interpretation’ rooted in her Ukrainian birth and Jewish family background, and not ‘a strictly academic or intellectual endeavour’. Authorial confession shapes her thinking. Subsequently, these characteristics colour the way she considers three new books that speak to the Soviet legacy. They lead her to ask when and where observers ‘can finally say goodbye to Soviet history and write a non-Soviet story about what is happening to people and lands that were once part of the Soviet empire’.

As *Defence Strategic Communications* journal looks ahead to a period of transition where small wars and counterinsurgency associated with conflict in Afghanistan are giving way to a return to Great Power politics with its struggle between regional, even global hegemony, our commitment holds firm. The journal will continue to showcase intellectual debate that both enlightens readers around the world and shapes the field of strategic communications as a research-informed praxis. Our desire to evolve the relationship between content and form should always be sensitive to changing reading habits without becoming a slave to consumer whim. After all, the journal format over nearly four centuries has absorbed repeated iterations. *Willkommenskultur* too may yet come to have more than one interpretation as we encourage authors from the most diverse backgrounds, national and professional, to contribute to these pages. We thank all our writers and peer reviewers who have generously supported us over the years of this journal's life. And we are always mindful of our readers, and grateful for their expressions of enthusiasm.

Dr Neville Bolt
Editor-in-Chief

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THE BIRTH AND COMING OF AGE OF NATO STRATCOM: A PERSONAL HISTORY

Mark Laity

Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, StratCom, NATO, SHAPE, Ukraine, Afghanistan*

About the Author

A former BBC Defence Correspondent, Mark Laity was a key figure in the development of StratCom within NATO and the first Director of the Communications Division in SHAPE, retiring in 2020. He is an Associate Fellow at the King's Centre for Strategic Communications and for his work in StratCom received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of York.

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Perilous is perhaps too strong a word for an endeavour that did not involve actually getting shot at, although some metaphorical backstabbing was an occupational hazard, and it could be a career killer. Nevertheless, Machiavelli's quote is largely apt. His work *The Prince*—often seen as a textbook for cynical and cunning manipulation, hence Machiavellian—was in fact a world-weary body of advice to a young prince on the realities of rule. As such his warning about the perils of 'change management' is an all too accurate description of the project that has been bringing Strategic Communications (StratCom) into the heart of NATO.

The final approval of a military StratCom policy, MC0628, in 2017 marked the key turning point, the culmination of a 10-year debate, where special interests, turf fights, principles, traditional thinking, old habits, and new challenges had clashed over what StratCom was, should be, how it should be done, and even whether it should exist. Some even wanted the term dispensed with altogether.

And while the internal battle raged, externally the information world kept changing and our adversaries continued to move forward. Of course, one of those adversaries was, and is, the Taliban. The Alliance experience in Afghanistan was a driver for NATO StratCom, and our recent defeat makes it all the more important we learn some lessons. I also reflect that the time and effort wasted on internal arguments with those who failed to adapt to the new realities could have been focussed so much better on fighting the real enemy.

This is a personal history of that project; it is infused with a degree of passion and even anger as I wish we could and should have done better in that fight. Some may challenge my views, but it is also an authoritative version, for when it comes to NATO StratCom, I was there in the beginning and involved in virtually everything that would follow. Other articles I have written focus more on the external aspects of StratCom, but here I look more at its internal development, and struggles over policy, doctrine, and structures.

At the outset I should acknowledge there is nothing new about highlighting that the power of communication has always been critical for the military. As Napoleon is often quoted as saying, ‘Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.’ He was also far from the first to realise that.

In the same way, communications and information in various forms—Public Affairs and Psychological Operations—have always been a part of NATO, but StratCom represented a step change in both the art of influence and in its importance. Every technical information revolution, the Gutenberg press, the telegraph, radio, television, represented a step change that saw communication become ever more important within our societies. In our time the internet supercharged that process with a further step change that has changed the nature of the relationship between ruler and ruled, and also democratised information technology, making it a tool for everyone.

That historical context is important because StratCom should be seen not just as another technological development or fancy phrase but as a reflection of and response to the fact we are now in the Information Age. Getting NATO—communication practitioners as well as leaders—to take on board its full implications has been at the heart of the StratCom endeavour: truly a new order of things. So, the focus of this work is on the story up to the point at which the organisation as a whole firmly realised the need for change and started moving to implement this new order of things. It remains a work in progress and the story continues.

Inevitably, there is something arbitrary about identifying such a start point. But clearly for StratCom that point was NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan, more specifically 2006 when the Afghan mission moved from peace support to counter-insurgency.

Until then there had been straws in the wind, notably the Kosovo conflict, but not enough to really change things. Kosovo revealed the failings of NATO public affairs, but its extent was to a large degree hidden by the brilliant performance of Jamie Shea, the then NATO Spokesman.

Nevertheless, the chaotic nature of NATO HQ's Office of Public Information was up to a point addressed. However, it is not to downplay the reforms that followed to say they were focussed on doing public affairs better rather than on changing the nature of the game. The same applied to the more limited changes made to military communication.

A number of the mini-crises that followed both validated the reforms that had been made and left those of us involved with an uneasy sense of their fragility, if truly stress-tested. And when it came to Afghanistan, so it would prove.

NATO's initial entry into Afghanistan, taking leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from August 2003, was a little bumpy but overall went well. It was aided because NATO was at first taking over the then easy parts of the country to the North and West. It was when the Alliance moved into the restive South, soon to be the site of an active insurgency, that the wheels started to come off the wagon.

However, one event just before then proved to be a major storm warning. The worldwide protests and riots over the 2005 publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper led to an assault in 2006 on the NATO base in Maimana in Northern Afghanistan. A demonstration turned violent, and the Norwegian base was nearly overrun. In the light of the later conflict, it looks minor, but at the time, it was seen as a major issue at the highest level.

The key point here was that NATO's handling of it was woeful. Slow passage of information, confusion between the political and military sides of the Alliance, little coordination, and mixed, albeit often helpful messaging. Everyone tried, but everyone failed. Never again, said the then-Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer who felt NATO HQ, which was meant to be in charge, had nevertheless been let down.

One consequence was that, at the Secretary General's request, I was taken in May 2006 from my SHAPE job as Chief of Public Affairs and sent to Afghanistan. The Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe

(SHAPE) is the strategic military HQ that commands all NATO military operations. My role in Afghanistan though was not with SHAPE but NATO HQ, the political HQ that gives SHAPE its orders. I would be the NATO spokesman and media adviser to the ISAF commander but working direct to NATO rather than having to go through the multi-layered military chain of command. It was a reprise in many ways of a role I had already performed in 2001 in what is now North Macedonia.

That role too had been a crisis response to a breakdown in the Public Affairs effort following the death of a British soldier, which after that tragedy threatened to undermine NATO's Operation Essential Harvest at a critical time.¹ I had already been sent from my post as Deputy Spokesman at NATO HQ to be an adviser to the Macedonian president but was moved across to be a NATO spokesman and adviser to the operational commander.

In both instances it suggested that, whatever the qualities of individuals, the system as it stood was simply not up to handling a major crisis at either the operational or strategic level. Whenever placed under stress, it broke.

A DIFFICULT BIRTH

Now in 2006 the Alliance's communicators were about to face the biggest challenge in NATO's history, and one in which the information element was central to success. For, on the one hand we had to maintain support over the long haul from NATO nations with varying and often lukewarm viewpoints, while on the other we needed to gain and maintain the support of Afghans who both distrusted and often dislike foreigners. Force alone was not going to win this one.

NATO had led ISAF, a grouping of NATO & non-NATO nations, since 2003. Initially ISAF's mandate had been restricted to securing Kabul, enabling a stable space for the new Afghan national government;

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¹ Operation Essential Harvest was the ultimately highly successful NATO mission to oversee the disarming of an insurgent force as part of an overall peace deal.

it was effectively a peace support mission, where weapons were more for self-defence than for active combat.

However, over the next few years it had expanded to commanding the international forces in the north and west, then also fairly peaceful areas, but in 2006 it was slated to take over, first, the south, and then the east. The south was more restive; it had been the heartland of the Taleban and increasingly there were worrying indications of rising violence. ISAF was still seen as a peace support mission, but it was accepted the task ahead was more challenging—just how much more was not then realised.

The military headquarters appointed to command as this expansion took place was from the British-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corp (ARRC), which deployed from May 2006 until February 2007 as ISAF 9, the ninth HQ to command the ISAF mission since it was launched in 2001. I had been involved in their build up and can state they were commendably aware of the information Line of Effort (LoE). In some ways they were also ahead of the game in that their communicators were part of a Joint Effects (JE) branch, which meant they saw the information effort as integrated with other more traditional military effects such as direct combat.

At the same time JE was really a variation on the Operations branch—in military organisation known as J3—and the communicators were too far down the chain of command, making them subordinate to too many others. To succeed the communicators needed their own place at the top table, not to rely on others speaking for them. I had already forced the ARRC to ‘go NATO’ and have their Chief Public Affairs Officer (CPAO) report direct to the commander, so that was already progress. Nevertheless, the ARRC had at least grasped the importance of information and its need to integrate as a part of the overall effort.

From the standpoint of 2021, this may seem obvious. But it was not so common in 2006 when—whatever was claimed to the contrary—communicators were mostly an afterthought, called in later to explain (or explain away) what had previously been decided without involving them.

So, the ARRC was better prepared than most but what happened was still a shock. Given the primary purpose of this article, there is not the space here to describe fully what happened, but we quickly realised we were on the back foot.

It started with a disconnect between our narrative and the reality. The assumption and associated message was that ISAF was in a robust Peace Support mission, when the reality was we were entering a full-blown counter-insurgency (COIN)—a quite different and more dangerous beast that our publics and politicians were not ready for.

We also had a gap in our Information Environment Assessment (IEA)—we really lacked knowledge of our audiences on the ground. The regional information set-ups were also poorly connected to us, often limited, and working to their nations' frequently differing priorities. The linkages between the differing communication disciplines were weak, as were our links to other parts of the international communities' communication effort, while within the ARRC our own resources and expertise were limited.

All this ignored the weak Afghan government communications effort. Within the main urban areas this mattered less as the anti-Taliban attitudes were strong, but in the countryside where attitudes were more mixed it was vital. The end result was that Taliban were driving the narrative on the ground. At the same time our own home audiences' support for the ISAF mission was vulnerable, often driven by stories over which we had little influence.

We quickly realised that, in a counter-insurgency with its complex information environment, our traditional military-orientated focus and structure was simply not cutting it. The buzzword, or phrase, of the time was the 'comprehensive approach', a blending of military and civilian lines of effort. Frankly, this rarely happened in practice for all the public nods towards it. Many nations fought shy of using the COIN term—it was too like acknowledging we were in a war. Ironically, as effective COIN also blends military and civilian lines of effort, the overlap

with the politically more acceptable ‘comprehensive approach’ term is considerable.

Of note, the contemporary focus on so-called ‘hybrid conflict’, a broad mix of activities ranging from combat to disinformation, not only overlooks the fact it is not really so new, but that counter-insurgency is inherently a form of ‘hybrid’ conflict. There is much to learn from COIN history.

The ARRC has always been a thinking institution, so instead of battering on, we analysed the dilemma among the communicators. What we came up with includes many of the core elements that eventually characterised MC0628 (Military Committee 0628), which is the guiding Military Policy document for StratCom within NATO’s military.

It is sometimes galling to think that we might have advanced the StratCom project by several years to make the Ukraine crisis of 2014 a place where a fully formed StratCom might have actually made its mark, instead of it being merely the final catalyst for its full introduction. Of that, more later.

Back then in 2006 we had whiteboarded the problem, and a photograph was taken of the outcome. I still have it and if anything marks the beginning of StratCom in NATO that is it.

For the rest of our tour, we tried to apply the thinking; I believe with some success, although it must be recognised ISAF 9 was just one of many actors, military and civilian, and often not the most powerful. Thus, a number of initiatives were launched:

- The existing military Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) group, although nominally part of ISAF, operated separately and was therefore dragged into cooperation, rather than remaining an independent actor.
- ISAF set up a new section, focussing on cultural issues and including communicators, to work with traditional Afghan actors, such as tribal elders and mullahs.

- ISAF led on creating a working group to coordinate international communicators such as national embassies and the UN.
- StratCom was made one of the core elements within the so-called Policy Action Group (PAG), a new joint international/Afghan group, to try to set priorities and simplify implementation of over-all strategy. I myself was an adviser to the Afghan government's information minister, highlighting the attempt to work more closely with the Afghan government.

ISAF's communications record is mixed to say the least, but ISAF 9, in 2006–7, did better than most, and even more importantly laying some foundations for future developments.

FROM KABUL TO MONS

All the same, by the time I returned I knew as communicators we were not fit for the communication fight. Our structures divided not united; our policies, doctrines, and processes tended to marginalise communications both within the disciplines and from the wider headquarters. Our training was woeful, with good people too often thrown into operations, to learn on the job, trying to pick up skills unrelated to the common experience of these military officers.

Concepts such as strategic narrative were little appreciated, our ability to understand cultures and how to speak to them even less so. The requirement for information effects (the StratCom term was still relatively novel within the military) could vary wildly from being a belated afterthought to having unrealistic expectations of quickly influencing unpalatable effects on the ground—what some wearily called 'sprinkling more information fairy dust'. Having learnt painfully on the job, that team of communicators would leave at the end of its tour for the next, new team to start the cycle all over again.

All of this was played out tour after tour in ISAF and played its part in the disappointments that followed and in the current outcome. Some significant progress at times showed what could be done.

ISAF had its good periods and they always coincided with effective StratCom as a part of the success. StratCom could not do it on its own, but it was an essential part of any successful team. But any success was never translated into a steady march forward. The lessons were observed more than applied, and when applied the process was too episodic and never sustained.

When challenged about the level of effort put into policy, doctrine, and structures, rather than supposedly just dealing with the here and now, I have always replied that an agreed policy, doctrine, and structures were like the foundations of a house. Improvised answers to the immediate problem never lasted past a change of personnel.

At the Political/Military and Strategic levels, as well as on the ground, there was no disagreement over NATO having a serious communications problem. There was, however, no agreement on what to do about it. But with Afghanistan being far and away the biggest game in town, changes at all organisational levels focused on helping NATO improve there. Until Russia's aggression in Ukraine, ISAF would remain a major driver and testing ground for StratCom development.

Another factor played in at this point. When I went to Kabul, I had been SHAPE's Chief of Public Affairs, but within a few months of my return in spring 2007, I would become SHAPE's Chief Strategic Communications (CSC), the first specifically StratCom named position anywhere in NATO's structure. The circumstances of the post's creation were distinctly messy, more improvised than planned, while the job requirement was at first more than a little vague. Regardless of the nature of the start, the timing was right. StratCom now had a formal champion, certainly for the military level and, given the close links with NATO HQ in Brussels, also an advocate at the political/military level.

As Chief StratCom, my first significant task, alongside communication-related colleagues in SHAPE, Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCB), the International Military Staff (IMS), and NATO Public Diplomacy Division (PDD), was to help develop a communications strategy for Afghanistan.

Called the ‘Action Plan on NATO’s Strategic Communications’ it was really misnamed as noted in a Command Group Point Paper of July 2007, ‘While labelled as a StratCom document it would be more accurately seen as an Action Plan on PI (Public Information) Resourcing’. It was also noted that it was nevertheless valuable, and while its specific proposals mainly focused on public affairs it also called, in broad terms, for more coordination and capacity building, and a 21st century communication capability.

So, for all its limitations, it remains an important document. It nibbled away at the edges of StratCom—placing civilian/military joint planning at a higher, more strategic level, and highlighting the need for more resources, and deep cooperation with the Afghan government. Its omissions also showed how much needed to be done, including its separating planning from policy, no awareness of Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), and focus on tactical actions that would have been better delegated to those on the ground.

It also took far, far too long. An original draft produced in mid-April 2007 was only finally approved in late autumn. Neither in the longer-term did many of the requirements for better training and resourcing actually happen. The paper was better than the outcome. Plus ça change.

Still, it was a start.

Meantime, StratCom’s supporters were also trying to put more flesh on the bones of NATO StratCom, born as it was in such an improvised manner. Virtually everyone accepted there was a problem, but was StratCom the answer, and indeed what was StratCom?

DEBATING WHAT WAS STRATCOM

At SHAPE, initially on a temporary basis, I was supported by a single PSYOPS officer, moved from the existing 2-person PSYOPS cell, and a British RAF Regiment officer who moved over after some internal changes in SHAPE made him redundant from his original job. Their excellence and enthusiasm were a boon, but a small acorn from which

to grow the oak tree, mighty or not. Elsewhere the status quo was still a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) reporting direct to the commander. The PAO was detached from PSYOPS and InfoOps sections that were mostly tiny and largely impotent in the bowels of J3 Operations. Any coordination and synergy were nominal. Effectively the communication effort was stovepiped.

So, we faced an acknowledged but ill-defined problem, the extent and nature of which was debated: no policy, no doctrine, no structure, and significant resistance from some communicators and operators up and down the chain of command who wanted to stick to the old ways.

NATO Headquarters, under a previous Secretary General, Lord Robertson (1999–2003), had responded to the information conundrum at the political level by creating the Public Diplomacy Division—ramming together the previous Office of Information with the Scientific Affairs Division. It was a distinctly pragmatic approach driven by internal politics, that nevertheless elevated information from a lowly office to the status of a division. The pragmatism extended to its internal organisation, and the coordination the division was intended to manage had often been circumscribed by the personalities of those involved.

Such issues meant building StratCom in NATO has always had two Lines of Effort: Internally, where development involved a degree of campaigning within NATO and its nations to institute change; externally, fighting to prove StratCom could make a difference in using information to achieve NATO's objectives. Demonstrating such effects was ultimately more important because facing up to the external challenge is in the end what matters.

Sometimes though, NATO's internal opponents of StratCom seemed to regard StratCom as a bigger threat than its external opponents. Such internal rivalries are common to most large institutions and this kind of turf fight was a danger I tried to ensure StratCom's advocates did not fall prey to. You could not ignore the internal debate, but our best argument had always been to demonstrate how implementing StratCom could help

the whole organisation succeed. It was a balance, as developing the mindset and creating the structures, policies, and systems needed to integrate a new capability into the NATO system was both necessary and time-consuming.

Notable here is the way NATO StratCom's development was so often driven from the middle rather than the top. Firstly, in terms of both rank and position within the chain of command, and secondly by operational experience rather than the strategic level or theories. Thus, the primary effort at the time and subsequently came not from senior generals or civil servants at NATO HQ, but people like myself (a civilian equivalent to a brigadier), and colonels and majors or civilian equivalents. This reflected the reality that, although StratCom was acknowledged as an issue needing high level attention, getting focus and time was hard. Given this, the level of progress achieved is all the more noteworthy and, according to your viewpoint, praiseworthy.

At the same time, it was NATO corps-level military headquarters returning from ISAF who were most open to change. It was not just the ARRC. Notably 1 German Netherlands Corp (1GNC) under the innovative and inspiring leadership of Lt Gen Ton Van Loon. He, using his Afghan experience, was an early adopter in creating a Communication and Engagement Division in 1GNC.

The general indication of high-level support was forthcoming, but it was often vague, sometimes contradictory and lacking sufficiently specific Direction & Guidance (D&G). This reflected uncertainties over the StratCom concept and debates within nations. It was an easy buzzword and much used to cover anything information related. However, those lower down were left to fight it out, not on the basis of clear direction but their more personal viewpoints. This had its upsides and downsides—it gave room for innovative thinking and personal initiative, but it could also reduce the debate to a dogfight over turf.

At SHAPE, noting the slow and meandering pace of the NATO HQ debate, we decided to utilise the considerable authorities held by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in his role as commander

of ACO (Allied Command Operations), NATO's senior operational command, to move forward with proposals on structures and principles to reflect the new Chief StratCom role. A November 2007 Point Paper to SACEUR, that I drafted and was approved, summarised the previous months' work: 'COS (Chief of Staff) directed that CSC develop Strategic Communications (StratCom) policies and plans coordinated with ACT and NATO, and within ACO with Public Affairs (PA), InfoOps and PsyOps.'

It continued: 'Strategic Communications is a new concept for NATO, and the subject of an evolving debate outside the alliance. Although the phrase is commonly used, what is meant by it varies widely, and often it is a catch-all phrase for anything related to an information campaign. However, there is no agreed definition within NATO and a formal attempt to create one is liable to meet resistance from some nations. The post has no equivalent in any other NATO military or civil headquarters. In effect SHAPE is developing the function from a standing start.'

Moreover, the paper argued: 'There is wide acceptance of the importance of StratCom to NATO and the need to handle it in a different and far more effective manner, but not yet agreement on the best way ahead. The task therefore is to produce flexible, innovative working methods and structures alongside fresh ways of thinking that challenge existing approaches. However, given the problem is here and now we need to both address current problems and work out long-term solutions. This will require simultaneous planning and conceptual thinking for the future and a degree of improvisation for today's challenges.'

Looking back from 2021, this still seems a reasonable assessment of the 2007 state of play.

NATO HQ's response had been distinctly mixed. Noting nations were still undecided, some senior figures in PDD (in a June 2007 exchange) wanted to wait until nations had agreed a definition and concept 'before creating any new structures at the strategic command level'. Another ventured: 'I don't think SHAPE is the right place to lead this process.'

I replied that SACEUR was operating within his authorities and that the problem was already critical. We needed to lead not delay, actively propose solutions, not wait for them to emerge. We worked on the principle to keep going until SACEUR or SHAPE Chief of Staff told us to stop.

Alongside work on Afghanistan, we drafted new proposals and structures to give StratCom oversight over the entire communication effort. We briefed widely, and in June 2007 produced 'What is StratCom: An informal guide'. It proposed a NATO military definition: 'To advance the interests, aims and objectives of NATO through the co-ordinated and appropriate use of public diplomacy, public information, information operations and psychological operations.'

By November an early structure was in place within SHAPE involving the small StratCom cell and a high-level StratCom Policy Group and Working Group involving senior staff from other parts of the HQ. Cooperation with other operators within SHAPE was advancing. Absence of authority to actually direct action was the weakness. So, the post relied on cooperation and persuasion. If all this seems SHAPE orientated, it is because at this stage the focus of StratCom development was at SHAPE and there was no equivalent above or below. We were if you like, something of a test bed, as well as leading the way.

With me having deployed to ISAF once more in February 2008, the team continued to work on development as best we could. My second tour revalidated the lessons of the first. Once again good people were let down by poor training, resources, and systems. It further highlighted traditional ways of working were no longer good enough, and even more, without a sustained, systemic change, every rotation into ISAF would reset the clock to close to zero on lessons learned. I returned in the summer even more convinced that we needed to accelerate the hard graft of creating structures, policies, doctrine, and training if we were to produce a sustainable model for effective business rather than rely on individual brilliance or initiative to overcome a poor system.

However, on my return, I sensed the tide was turning. None of the problems had gone away but there was increasing support at different levels for the StratCom project. More communicators were supportive or open-minded along with a wider realisation that urgent change was needed in a transforming information environment. At NATO HQ, the nations were still debating what StratCom was, but whatever it was they wanted some of it.

Once again, SHAPE was in the lead, and once again in order to move forward it utilised SACEUR's broad authorities over NATO's military structure and operations. NATO documents have different levels of authority. A NATO Policy for instance is the top level, having been agreed by nations and is effectively an order applied across and within the Alliance. It is not obligatory for use in national forces operating independently outside NATO structures or operations, but the fact it is still signed off by them all, means it has significant weight and influence. It is therefore also often applied in nations' own policies and activities.

However, given the relatively immature debate at that time, a NATO StratCom policy agreed by all was highly unlikely. However, while a StratCom policy required both NATO HQ and NATO nation sign-off, a SACEUR approved 'directive' did not. Its authority was limited to NATO military headquarters and NATO-led operations; still, that was certainly a significant start.

Having received command group support and sign-off, throughout 2008 we had been drafting a directive that was to become ACO 95-2 on Strategic Communications. The process was complex in that its contents had to account for the existing high-level NATO nation-approved policies on PA, InfoOps, and PSYOPS, which to some degree constrained how forward-looking it could be, making it a waypoint and not a destination. Regardless of its limits, in the absence of any high-level NATO documents on StratCom, any document with SACEUR's authority giving direction would be a big step forward to achieving sustained progress.

As in the previous year, some officials at higher HQ were unhappy, saying we were jumping the gun and should wait for NATO HQ and the nations to give more D&G. However, confident we were operating within the limits of SACEUR's authorities and not exceeding them, we pressed on. ACO 95-2 was released on 15 September 2008, and NATO's military now had some clear direction on applying StratCom.

Others were beginning to move as well. Later that month, General Jim Mattis, Supreme Allied Command Transformation (SACT) in the US, responded to a letter from SACEUR on StratCom capability in Afghanistan. He itemised the practical steps ACT and ACO were taking immediately and with longer-term efforts consistent with 95-2—namely, training, experimentation, and capability development. ACO and ACT were moving.

At NATO HQ, the International Military Staff (IMS), supports the Military Committee that advises the North Atlantic Council, NATO's supreme decision-making body. The IMS was supportive in principle but cautious and worried about blowback from some nations. On NATO's political side, some senior PDD staff argued some nations' resistance to ACO 95-2 could derail StratCom altogether at all levels. PDD wanted an immediate review of 95-2, which really meant withdrawal and rewriting. This also reflected their resentment at not being in the lead and at being pushed from below. Such a review would have effectively stopped any movement on StratCom for months, probably years.

However, highlighting the diversity of the debate, one senior PDD staffer wrote, 'This is an excellent paper, outstandingly well crafted, and presenting a highly articulate and compelling vision of the role of strategic communications within ACO and, by inference, within the NATO context as a whole.'

In hindsight, that is a perhaps generous assessment but indicates the vestigial state of the debate at the time. SHAPE held its ground. The senior PDD official suggested ACO 95-2 as a basis for NATO HQ and that the military move forward together. And so it proved.

Furthermore, the first version of ACO 95-2 identified almost all the issues that have continued to be central to NATO's StratCom efforts and development. It noted the transformed information environment, and the increase in importance of information; it was perhaps most radical in stating, 'Such is the importance in mission success that, on occasion, policies and actions will even need to be adapted in response to the imperatives of Strategic Communication.' In effect, saying StratCom requirements should sometimes be in the lead was heady stuff.

It also was blunt in stating StratCom was meant to contribute to Alliance success, directly confronting the issue of 'inform v influence', which has been at the heart of repeated discussions, especially in the PA community. NATO StratCom should be ethical and embody NATO's values. Yet it was not intended as an information service but rather to help NATO succeed.

That meant embracing discourses around behaviour and narrative: 'Sustainable support for any institution or campaign is founded on both logic and instinct. NATO/ACO therefore needs to ensure that, firstly, it has a narrative that resonates with its audiences, and, secondly, its operations and actions are consistent with that narrative.'

It further laid out guidance on structure and coordination, requiring new approaches and better integration between communicators and across headquarters. Importantly, having cheekily recommended a StratCom definition for NATO, it offered a military one, 'In concert with other military actions and following NATO political guidance, to advance ACO's aims and operations through the co-ordinated, appropriate use of Public Affairs and Information Operations, in co-operation with the Public Diplomacy Division.' It was hardly inspiring, but it said all that needed to be said for future development.

ACO 95-2 achieved a broader purpose: to catalyse progress at the wider NATO level. Those who objected to SHAPE getting ahead of NATO, saying it might derail the process, were wrong. In fact, the reverse happened. The tide was already beginning to turn with nations like the US pushing it more and more, wanting the vague desire for improvement to

be translated into something solid. ACO 95-2 accelerated that, boosting the demand for a NATO HQ policy. It broke the StratCom logjam.

Senior NATO officials who were directly involved told me that the development of and discussions around 95-2 had forced PDD to develop its own policy. One of those in the lead, initially reluctantly, in creating the NATO policy put it bluntly, saying that if there had been no 95-2 there would have been no NATO policy, adding, 'It's your fault.'

SHAPE was certainly keen to see a NATO policy, working closely with NATO HQ as they developed the NATO policy, and many elements of 95-2 were included in the NATO policy. By this time, a small cadre of PDD staff was as keen on StratCom as the SHAPE team. Consequently, the Strasbourg/Kehl NATO Summit of April 2009 delivered a significant boost when its final declaration included, 'Strategic Communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives'.²

Remember, at this stage, at the NATO political level there was still no NATO policy, definition, or even agreement on what StratCom was! Significantly, this was the first time the StratCom word had been used at the highest level and so retrospectively validated the earlier release of 95-2 and our driving on to put flesh on the bones of NATO StratCom.

Finally, seven months after NATO's Heads of State and Government had declared StratCom to be integral to the Alliance, on 29 September 2009, PO(2009)0141—NATO Strategic Communications Policy—was passed. NATO actually had a policy. As a policy it was sketchy, but pragmatically it was all the market could bear at that point. Critically, it had a workable definition, 'The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities—Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (InfoOps) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate—in support of Alliance policies, operations, and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims.'

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2 Article 16. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52837.htm

It codified that the communication disciplines fell under the StratCom umbrella. Furthermore, that the purpose of StratCom was to ‘advance NATO’s aims’. Interestingly, that critical last dimension—emphasising StratCom was there to achieve an effect to help NATO succeed—was literally added only on the day the document was sent to the Secretary General and the nations for approval. Two staffers, one from NATO, the other from SHAPE, combined to achieve its insertion. Until then the definition effectively said that communicators needed to coordinate, but not why and to what purpose.

Given the often robust ‘inform v influence’ debate within the information community, this was a critical addition, fundamentally identifying the purpose of StratCom within the institution. Had it not been added, subsequent StratCom development would have been very different; the difficulty of having a policy agreed by NATO nations is nothing compared to the difficulty of having it changed once agreed. That the now dated 2009 policy is still extant tells its own story.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

We now had a definition, policy, military directive, and, for our key mission, a plan. I have focused extensively on these early efforts because they set the direction of travel for all that followed. It could so easily have gone in a different direction or not happened at all.

Initial success had prompted a growing team of StratCom supporters to coalesce, not just in NATO HQ and SHAPE but beyond, in other headquarters and nations. There were now three broad Lines of Effort (LoE): First, to spread the word and grow the community, engaging practitioners and operators who could use StratCom to help them succeed; second, to develop capability and implement newly agreed yet still aspirational policies; third, to demonstrate continually results on the ground, primarily in Afghanistan, and so help build credibility.

The first LoE was often the toughest because you needed support in order to advance the other two. It not only involved breaking down institutional barriers but changing mindsets and strongly held views. Sometimes these

were glorified turf fights, but they were also debates over ethics and purpose. The more traditionalist public affairs officers in particular were sensitive to being involved in what they feared was propaganda, PSYOPS or ‘influence’. Amidst the self-interest of those who were content with the current system (see Machiavelli) there were also valid debates to be had. If NATO does not live up to its values, it is nothing.

So, outreach was critical and to that end SHAPE launched an annual conference to involve all security-related communicators, whether civil or military, NATO or NATO nation, PA, InfoOps or PSYOPS. Extraordinarily such a broad-based conference was new with, for instance, PA and PSYOPs holding their own exclusive meetings. It reflected a separation within the disciplines that bred misunderstandings, differences, and perpetuated staying in stovepipes. The first such conference in 2008 had 38 attendees for 1 day; by 2019 what had become the NATO Information and Communicators Conference (NICC), attracted nearly 400, and was now a ‘must attend’.

The second LoE, to develop capability, was very much supported by the outreach as NATO StratCom authorities to make things happen were still weak. The implementation of the policies was still pretty much optional, needing the nations to supply resources, notably enough trained personnel, while different NATO headquarters sometimes seemed to regard NATO policies and ACO directives as suggestions rather than D&G. Ultimately, in 2011 the NATO Military Committee agreed the NATO Strategic Communications Military Capability Implementation Plan (CIP), laying the way ahead for StratCom development.

The third Line of Effort, to deliver effects on the ground, was still primarily Afghan focussed. Supporting ISAF still took up the bulk of our time and remained a proving ground for StratCom ideas and activities. It was ISAF that led to another key and enduring StratCom development—the StratCom Framework.

It was part of the response to ISAF’s worst crisis in 2008/9. Over much of this period the Taliban were making significant ground, both politically

and militarily, and both ISAF and the Afghan government's credibility was falling with a growing crisis of trust and support, internationally and within Afghanistan. Part of that response was the replacement of the then ISAF commander with General Stan McChrystal. At the same time, the alarmed US and NATO governments were ordering an urgent review and new plan to deal with the crisis.

The so-called McChrystal Plan was wide-ranging, including large force increases, and was also unusual in the way McChrystal sought inputs from actors outside the usual circle. It also had a substantial StratCom section, which was well-integrated into the overall plan. In a SHAPE StratCom briefing to McChrystal the state of play was summed up: Afghan support for ISAF was positive but declining; international support for ISAF amounted to unenthusiastic tolerance; there were capacity and coordination issues at all StratCom levels; and the Taleban lacked positive support, but their information campaign was having a significant negative impact on both ISAF and the Afghan government. One conclusion was that there was confusion as to why ISAF/NATO was there.

In his report to the nations, McChrystal was blunt, warning of the risk of defeat, calling for a change of approach as well as more resources and noting early in his summary, 'Further, a perception that our resolve is uncertain makes Afghans reluctant to align with us against the insurgents.'

There were also multiple references to the contest of wills; while adversaries needed to be influenced by ISAF's actions on the ground, the conflict was 'a war of ideas and perceptions'. Strategic Communications received its own annex, stating, 'The information domain is a battlespace...StratCom makes a vital contribution to the overall effort, and more specifically, to the operational centre of gravity: The continued support of the Afghan population.'

NATO and its nations, having had a brutal reality check, accepted the plan, and committed to providing substantial extra resources, the majority American, in what was generally known as 'the surge'. The major caveat that caused huge dismay in the international community within

Afghanistan was Obama's announcement of a time limit on the surge, with the extra troops being withdrawn a few years down the line. The general consensus was that the positive news of the extra commitment was undermined by the deadline indicating a lack of sustained resolve for the reasons highlighted above by McChrystal.

But, regardless, we had to make the best of it. For NATO's communicators the challenge was to translate this broad, strategic intent into communication guidance supporting all levels and all nations—and at speed. Drawing on existing best practice within the various disciplines and the fresher StratCom thinking, we produced the first StratCom Framework.

The intent was to produce a 'golden thread' linking the political/military intent with the tactical level implementers to help them in simple terms understand the overarching aim. For me it was consciously a form of StratCom 'Mission Command'.

Mission Command is a military term and reflects a philosophy of command that gives top-level intent but leaves how that intent is translated into action to the man or woman on the ground. As such it emphasises getting the whole team to understand what is wanted but empowering them to decide how best to do it. It assumes delegation of authority driven by an awareness that in large operations you have many actors who need to be involved at many levels, so micromanagement or tight control is impractical creating friction, inflexibility, and slowness.

Frameworks encapsulate much of what good StratCom is about—clarity of aim, coupled with well-trained staff empowered to find the best way to achieve the aim. Notably, the framework template was created in a couple of days by a couple of people, and the first operational framework for ISAF in little more time. Once again, urgent necessity was the mother of invention. That first framework, as with others that followed, was developed in close alignment with and to support the overall strategy. That initial template has stood the test of time and is still basically in use and incorporated into core documents.

This is not the place to go into the details of frameworks, but their importance is considerable because they put in place the core element of a StratCom process. Processes are often looked down upon but in organisations of any size the alternative to consistent, effective process is chaos. The framework reflects many of the key principles of StratCom and provides an easily understood template giving essential guidance to practitioners and operators at all levels.

Throughout the military staff system, standardised staff work is seen as essential to produce a base of common understanding and working practices among soldiers of widely varying knowledge and training at different levels and circumstances.

Frameworks also proved hugely useful in increasing StratCom coordination with nations. A framework was exactly that, a framework not a fully formed plan. And that broad approach made it easier to create a common start point for nations to develop their own plans—more harmonised with NATO but still adapted and tailored to their national needs.

In ISAF terms, this co-operative and co-ordinated approach perhaps reached its peak in a StratCom conference in Dubai in 2011. There leading communicators from ISAF contributors and the Afghan government met and went through a NATO draft line by line to produce a common framework to take back to their nations. National leaderships were not tied to it, but it was still a strong base for common action, and many did or at least adapted it. At the same time, every level of NATO & ISAF's military was working to the same document.

For all ISAF's failings I would argue the period immediately following the McChrystal plan was one of the high points, and over this period StratCom was at its most coherent in that the strategy, narrative, and communications effort were the most aligned and effective.

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO UKRAINE

So, with the Dubai conference we could say we were working to an at least partly shared understanding of StratCom, using a common framework, coordinated across nations, militaries, and civilian structures, integrating messaging and activities intended to influence events towards a strategic goal set at the highest level. The outcomes may not have matched the aspirations, but the direction of travel was at least coherent.

But in the years that followed those first StratCom Frameworks, the SHAPE Directive, and the new NATO StratCom Policy, we also saw the continuing stresses and strains both within nations and within the communication community as we tried to take the project forward.

The biggest objections to StratCom came from the PA community for a number of reasons. Partly they objected to anything that might reduce their direct access to the commander. PA policy stated the Chief PAO worked direct to the commander, an unusual and much prized benefit giving relatively junior officers routine access to the most senior officer in the headquarters.

Evolving StratCom policy gave the Chief StratCom the same direct access along with other special advisers, such as the Legal Adviser. PAOs feared grouping the communication disciplines within a StratCom body would restrict their access.

Additionally, many PAOs disagreed with working closely with PSYOPS, saying their relationships with the media would be undermined by a closer association with PSYOPs as they were regarded by the media as manipulators and propagandists.

This went to the heart of the debate about ‘influence v inform’. The most conservative PAs said they were purely passers on of information and had no role in trying to influence audiences, and this essentially neutral position was the basis of their relationship with journalists.

The ‘inform v influence’ issue is in many respects at the philosophical core of what StratCom is about. Are we part of the wider Alliance team,

contributing to desired outcomes as directed by NATO's leadership, or are we a glorified information agency? It was not so long ago that we had Public Information Officers and there was an animated debate about even changing it to Public Affairs.

I regard the 'inform v influence' argument as an intellectual rabbit hole. All information influences and imagining we can inform without influencing is a cop-out. Trying to draw some unsustainable line between informing and influencing avoids the far more taxing issue of what I regard as 'ethical influencing'—working in that grey zone of trying to influence without sliding into manipulation or distortion.

So, during the long journey to today's StratCom the primary opposition came from PAOs, especially from the US and, to a significant but lesser degree, from Germany. That phase of the StratCom struggle lasted until the Russian aggression in Crimea precipitated the next stage in its evolution. It would be tedious to go through them all, so I have chosen one incident as emblematic of the issues—the so-called George Little letter of November 2012.

As noted above the StratCom debate within US defence was intense, involving issues of principle, policy, and a lot of good old-fashioned turf fighting. To continue the quote from Machiavelli at the head of this work, 'the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.' Behavioural psychologists routinely note people fight harder to keep what they have than to get something new, or as Machiavelli put it, 'whenever those who are hostile have the opportunity to attack they do it like partisans, whilst the others defend lukewarmly.'

In 2012 George Little was Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and in a one-page memorandum on 28 November 2012 he attempted to kill StratCom. Noting StratCom was intended to synchronise communication efforts across the DoD, he claimed experience had shown it added staffing layers and blurred responsibilities, causing confusion. He concluded by saying the term Strategic Communications

would henceforth be replaced by ‘communication synchronization’, mostly to be carried out by Public Affairs using working groups and steering groups and with no additional staffing.

Little had limited background in communications and his memo was poorly drafted, of arguable authority, and, ironically, was more of a PA coup d’état than an example of the synchronised communication he espoused. American colleagues told me of celebrations among US PA officers, especially those who advised Little, at having ‘killed’ StratCom. Also of note, the memo had been preceded by leaks to the US media about how bad StratCom was—for all PA’s distrust of PSYOPS, they are on occasion happy to use PSYOPS’ methods to defend their interests.

Given the US leadership role within NATO, the memo was something of a bombshell, provoking immediate and widespread questions about what it meant for us. NATO’s movement and momentum on StratCom were considerable but the foundations were not yet hardened and so progress was not irreversible. Unsurprisingly, StratCom sceptics seized upon it. Some senior and influential communicators indicated it raised serious questions about NATO’s direction of travel, suggesting that we could not afford to diverge very far from the US, so might need to think about rowing back.

I and others reacted quickly to head off any momentum being built towards a new narrative of changing the direction of travel for NATO StratCom. The day after it came out, I sent out an email to the communication community saying, ‘We should not understate the impact this will have on perceptions, and so we must be prepared to argue our case vigorously and cogently.’

I acknowledged that in the US, ‘...the whole StratCom issue did become bound up in turf fights and rice bowls’ but that, ‘I do not see this as a criticism per se of StratCom as a concept, process or discipline but as a defeat of a section of US defence communicators in a bureaucratic dogfight.’

Analysing the memo’s direction, I argued, ‘What DoD has done, apart from coining a distinctly unmemorable new phrase, is go back to the old

ways, which begs the question of why they adopted StratCom in the first place—the reason being of course because of the failings of the old ways. Back to the future indeed.’

I then concluded, ‘In SHAPE we are seeing the approaches outlined in the StratCom Directive embraced more and more, while multinational corps reorganise themselves to bring the info disciplines together more effectively and to integrate information into every aspect of policy, planning and execution. Sure, it’s very much a work in progress but the direction is clear.’

Little’s memo also created a wider debate, notably a widely shared article from a well-respected pundit, Rosa Brooks, who had spent 27 months working on StratCom while in the Pentagon. In *Foreign Policy* in December 2012, in comprehensively rubbishising the memo she also described what StratCom was or could be, ‘This understanding of strategic communication—which is reflected in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and other key DOD documents—has very little to do with traditional press and public affairs activities. In this view, “strategic communication” refers to the thoughtful integration of issues of stakeholder perception and response into policymaking, planning, and operations at every level.’

She continued, ‘What strategic communication boils down to, in some ways, is a simple plea: learn, engage and listen; try to understand how people outside the United States view U.S. actors; think in advance about how what we do and say will be perceived, and plan activities accordingly.’

‘Little’s memo could have been written in 2002 or 2006. It hearkens back to the days when DOD leadership imagined that disciplined use of the right “messaging” would “win the war of ideas,” and ignores a decade of accumulated wisdom.’

Quite. In the end, Little’s memo went nowhere outside the US, where the term communication synchronization still lingers and continues to cause friction in integrating the US with NATO StratCom. Otherwise, it is a footnote, in part because StratCom had enough traction and, just

as importantly, enough Machiavellian-style ‘partisans’ to robustly fight its corner. But that should not disguise the potential problem it could have been. Such a memo just a couple of years earlier most likely would have had a far greater effect.

It should not be thought these internal struggles stopped the primary effort to support NATO’s external challenges. To be blunt, it was frustrating to have to spend so much time on such internal fights, but we were always aware the best way to build support was to show the contribution we made and focus on being part of the overall effort.

Nevertheless, it would be fair to say in terms of moving StratCom forward we were to a large degree marking time. Afghanistan had provided an initial impetus but that had not translated into the same sense of urgency for change at the highest strategic level.

Afghanistan itself was now, in StratCom terms, also marking time. As noted, the McChrystal plan and surge had benefitted the StratCom effort—it was something of a highwater mark where strategy and communication aligned. A Communications Directorate (COMDIR) with increased resources had been created, and a career communicator with a Major General’s rank was put in charge. He was followed by another two career communicators, this time at Brigadier General level, one step down, but still of general officer rank. After that it changed and not for the better, as noted below.

The COMDIR highlighted a level of commitment, but its application was erratic. The problem of inconsistent, frequently changing structures (the COMDIR structure was changed three times in one year) was amplified by variously trained, ever-rotating staff, often with little knowledge of the complex Afghan information landscape.

The irony was that the McChrystal review had produced something close to an optimal structure if only people had worked with it rather than continuously fiddling while Afghanistan smouldered. Another irony was that a number of the post-McChrystal ISAF commanders were StratCom enthusiasts. For instance, General John Allen flew to our

annual StratCom conference in Turkey in 2012, opening by saying, ‘Let me tell you why I thought it was important enough to leave the combat zone to speak with you today.... As I say at ISAF Headquarters, I view StratCom as my most responsive maneuver element.’

He was entirely sincere and active in trying to make it happen, but the intent could not be matched due to the inadequacies highlighted above. I met him some years later and his frustration was still evident. This was perhaps exemplified by the fact that ultimately the COMDIR was led by brigadier generals who were neither specialised nor even experienced in communications, and mostly had no training either. They all tried their best but, in the literal not pejorative sense of the word, were amateurs.

One incumbent on departing told me he thought he had done well but was, ‘Glad to see the back of the job.’ Earlier, before McChrystal, another brigadier without experience had been given the communications job and phoned me, asking, ‘What the f*** do I do now?’

Outside ISAF and the internationals there was also the problem of the Afghan government’s communication effort. NATO/ISAF always knew the best people to speak to Afghans were other Afghans. So, there was no lack of effort and resources, but the outcomes never matched the inputs.

The problems were familiar. Cronyism and corruption meant those Afghans who were capable and committed never got the back-up they needed, with lots of internal turf fights. The Afghan government never produced an on-the-ground operation to match the Taliban in the field, including using the traditional and cultural approaches that were still valid even in the age of smart phones.

Additionally, lots of the contractor-supplied StratCom, which much increased after the surge, was not fit for purpose—at its worst it was little more than off-the-shelf variants of StratCom more suited to Western businesses. The support from ISAF and its successor operation, Resolute Support, was inhibited by our own resource and expertise problems. We were also meant to steadily hand-off the main effort to the Afghans,

which was theoretically right but often left a vacuum the Taliban were happy to fill.

Externally, the winding down of NATO's combat operations took Afghanistan off many people's radars, even if those following it on a daily basis worried at the slowness of progress.

THE UKRAINIAN KICK-START

Then came Crimea.

This is no place for a comprehensive analysis of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but it quickly became apparent that the communication aspects of their action, first in Crimea in February 2014, and then in Eastern Ukraine, were profound, even pivotal to the success of the Russian actions. This was what is generally labelled 'hybrid conflict' in action. To use a Russian term for it, 'Information Confrontation' was totally integral to the effectiveness of their campaign.

This included disinformation and misinformation to mislead and deceive NATO and Ukraine about what was going on, false narratives to justify their actions, and creating an information bubble to isolate the Crimean population. All of this was to buy time to complete their operation, to delay any international or Ukrainian response, and to reduce resistance or win support among the population. It is also clear the Russian forces deployed in Crimea were in their actions very well aware of the information aspects of the operation.

By the time NATO had worked out what was going on in Crimea and, more importantly that it was a Russian state-led aggression, it was too late. In the aftermath, as the Russians moved onto Eastern Ukraine, there began an intense information conflict. The StratCom performance of NATO and its allies steadily improved, but we were playing catch-up.

One aspect that cannot be ignored is what I see as the Kremlin's shrewd understanding of the psychology of many NATO nation leaders. In particular, exploiting their instinctive desire to downplay the Russian state involvement. This was the time of the so-called US 'reset' to improve

relations with Russia, which ironically had deteriorated following Russia's conflict with another of its neighbours, Georgia. This attempted warming was strongly welcomed by many NATO nations who had orientated their policy to assuming Russia could be coaxed into behaving rather better. Acknowledging the total involvement of the Kremlin in the Crimean aggression would force NATO nations to consider a robust response rather than a re-set and that was an uncomfortable prospect for many. No-one, neither individuals nor nations, likes to admit to being wrong, especially so badly.

The consequence was that some demanded a level of evidence that was both unrealistic and also in reality a form of displacement activity. If they could say Kremlin involvement was not proved, then they would not have to come up with a response. It meant Russian denials were given a weight they did not deserve. The Kremlin clearly knew this and simply played for time by seeking to maintain that fog of uncertainty amongst an audience, some of whom were willing to be uncertain.

It was quite a wake-up call about all aspects of hybrid conflict, including StratCom. By the time of the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014 the fog had cleared, and Heads of State and Government declared, 'We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats.... This will also include enhancing Strategic Communications.'³

One early StratCom consequence was the accreditation of the StratCom Centre of Excellence in September 2014. It would have happened eventually anyway, but the Russian aggression accelerated it and boosted support for it. In August 2015 I gave a short speech at the inauguration of the StratCom Centre of Excellence headquarters in Riga, and highlighted the challenge, 'It is too easy to just see their lies and distortions and say we can't and shouldn't match that—and that is true. However, we should also note their professionalism, the resources they apply, their understanding and use of historical narratives, the way they

.....
³ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm Article 13

so thoroughly integrate information effects into their overall campaign. They lie, but they lie to achieve an effect.’

‘To repeat, we can’t and shouldn’t match the lies—we’re so much better than that—but we can match the professionalism. We have a better story, but we can also tell it better to help achieve our goals. And this is vital, as a fundamental part of protecting our societies, our values and the post-Cold War order that allowed individual nations, whether big or small, to make their own choices. The era of accepting big nations can impose spheres of interest in Europe simply because they are big is over—we need to keep it that way.’

The Russian aggression effectively broke the logjam on StratCom evolution. The right StratCom answer to the Russians and other hybrid actors was still to be agreed but the one thing it could not be, was the status quo, which was clearly not fit for purpose.

In the wake of Crimea, the initial improvised activities were then followed up by a wide variety of reviews that were launched covering all aspects of NATO. These were not just about including StratCom but all the same gave it more salience, and overall the reviews helped open the whole system to change.

At NATO HQ, the overarching approach drew on its 2015 Strategy on NATO’s Role in Countering Hybrid Warfare, in which the North Atlantic Council (NAC) directed the HQ to sharpen its StratCom effort and revise it in the light of hybrid warfare. This very much placed StratCom front and centre in the context of integrating with and supporting policies rather than being an add-on, which was still the instinctive default position of many in the wider policy world.

More directly for the military, in April 2015, NATO’s Military Committee (MC), the senior military policy-making body, speaking as the agreed voice of its member nations, issued NATO Military Committee Policy on Strategic Communications—Tasking to Strategic Commands.

It is a sidelight on the nature of institutional change and process that taskings to do something can often be critical to what is done, and so it was here. MC Policies, shortened to MCs, are the senior documents when it comes to military policy within NATO, reflecting an agreed position of all the nations. They are then signed off by the North Atlantic Council, NATO's senior decision-making body. Put simply, an MC policy is an order from the nations to NATO's military.

Within NATO's military there were already MCs on Public Affairs, Information Operations, and Psychological Operations—three sets of orders to three different communication disciplines. Those MCs, nominally equal, each with their own approaches, were already being used by opponents and sceptics to push back against StratCom, predicated as it was on a unifying approach. Any StratCom MC had to be able to force change in the other communication disciplines or it was dead in the water.

So, in the lengthy negotiations for the tasking, much of the debate danced around how we would deal with pre-existing MCs. Ultimately, the critical paragraph, 5c, stated, 'Consider the evolving information environment and a range of threats including hybrid activity. In so doing seek to clarify the relationships among all communication functions and as far as possible reconcile the ambiguities that are still present in existing policies, **recognising this may lead to further revision of other information-related MCs.**' (my highlighting)

Those last mild-sounding eleven words were fundamental in all that followed, opening the way for root and branch change. Every time a StratCom sceptic tried to use existing policy against us, we just quoted that. Now we were into the realm of debating what was actually needed and not being stopped purely by yesterday's policies in bureaucratic manoeuvring.

The MC tasking including paragraph 5c enabled the forging of a cohesive central communication authority, to ready us better for the fight against those external forces wielding their co-ordinated weapons of misinformation and disinformation.

But of course, it was still the start not the end. The tasking required a first draft by June 2015, to be submitted to the MC by mid-September. That was a challenging timeline to put it mildly, but that first draft was submitted to the MC on October 6, which in NATO terms is light speed. However, the policy was only finally approved by the MC on 28 June 2017 (and endorsed by the NAC on 19 July 2017). The length of time between tasking and approval indicates the intensity of debate in the interim.

That first draft was pulled together by a very small number of people and what is perhaps more surprising is that how small a proportion of the document led to that two-year delay, and equally how much was agreed virtually from the start.

For instance, the StratCom definition, which was in many respects quite radical, only had minor clarifying changes from the initial draft and did not change from the second draft of December 2015. The same applied to the StratCom principles, which set the direction for future NATO StratCom. To take one example, only a few years before saying activity is driven by narrative would have raised eyebrows among a military community more focussed on concrete activity. The fact it did not showed how far the StratCom mindset had already seeped into thinking.

However, the next two years were largely taken up with a familiar argument over authorities, mostly Public Affairs with more of a cameo role for PSYOPS and InfoOps.

This debate was at one level very narrow, arguing over a few paragraphs relating to structures, and at another fundamental. This was because at its heart StratCom is about producing synergy between all the communication disciplines and then ensuring their integration with other divisions and a prominent role within the overall effort.

That first draft stated, 'Efficiency and unity of effort dictate that the communications functions and capabilities should be structurally grouped together.' Essentially that proposal for including Public Affairs, PSYOPS, and InfoOps within a StratCom grouping never changed, along with the Communications Director reporting direct to the Command Group.

Critically, the core Public Affairs concern, direct links to the Commander at whatever level, was also protected right from the start with the Chief Public Affairs Officer (CPAO), ‘...retaining direct access to the commander on PA matters.’ So, the CPAO was both part of the structure but also with special access to the leadership. Even so this, the issue of PA separation, bedevilled the next few years but could not be conceded when the essential nature of StratCom was pulling people together not letting them go their own way.

Painful experience had shown the existing way of doing business was not delivering what was needed in the modern information age. This was not least because the communication effort was diffused among sometimes fractious elements with different command chains, and those separations meant each of those elements tended to be small, junior, and with limited influence.

How could this change if we did not change radically and just tinkered around the edges with the same old, same old? Arguing things were basically OK was simply untenable. Without doubting the sincerity of their views, this was the question the opposition never answered.

As noted, the communications community, even within the world’s largest military alliance, was small, so the debate could easily get personal. The conservatives wanted to protect their turf and saw StratCom as dangerously undermining what they valued, while the StratCom advocates regarded them as something like the cavalry in 1914, not facing up to the need to adapt to the new way of information warfare wielded by dangerous adversaries.

The mix of personality, principle, and protecting turf made for a sometimes-combustible mix. Interestingly this was conducted at a relatively junior level, mostly major or lieutenant colonel. It is a feature of StratCom, that for all the considerable attention given to it by senior levels the small numbers of actual communicators meant there were very few senior officers in communication posts. That meant communicator access to the top levels of the defence ministries was patchy.

The poor overall training within NATO also meant some of those doing the job were by no means experts, yet they were then writing the advice to their senior commanders, including to sign off as a national position presented at critical working groups. At its most extreme a nation's policy and position could effectively be that of a junior and inexperienced officer who happened to hold the relevant communication post. Working groups negotiating the policy therefore had a huge variety of expertise but inevitably gave increased weight to those few nations—not always the largest—who had genuine subject matter experts (or people who thought they were) present at the meeting.

MC0628 went through five major drafts, punctuated by some staff level re-drafting interim meetings and more critically two MC-level Working Groups with national representatives working their way through the drafts.

Over the same period dating from Russia's aggression in Ukraine there were various other developments running in parallel, notably a NAC-mandated External Review of NATO Communications and the creation of the Communication Division at SHAPE. All of them were related to and interacted with MC0628.

The external review conducted by a NATO HQ-hired contractor in the last quarter of 2015 and the first quarter of 2016 was primarily NATO HQ focussed but took in military StratCom as part of the study. Its conclusions were supportive of a new approach to communications, but its development also revealed many of the tensions.

The original working draft was not only strongly supportive of the SHAPE StratCom approach but also critical of some other elements of the existing NATO communications approach. This was not welcomed. The original military interview list had been carefully balanced between StratCom, PA, PSYOPS & InfoOps. Abruptly, some Public Affairs military StratCom sceptics were added and interviewed. Another draft came out that was much more critical of StratCom, introducing some inaccuracies. This in turn led to some formal protests from not only SHAPE StratCom but some at NATO HQ. Another, this time final,

draft took out or amended some parts and this is what went to the NAC.

It was still a useful report, but more muted than it might have been. Critically for military StratCom, while noting tensions between SHAPE StratCom and SHAPE Public Affairs, it stated, ‘We also support measures to better coordinate all ACO communications functions within a directorate style structure guided by Strategic Communications concepts.’

It also highlighted known deficiencies such as in training, social media, and information environment assessment, which was welcome. Overall, at a time when the StratCom approach was under attack by some it was a bullet dodged from those who hoped to use it to undermine MC0628 development, and in key areas was a welcome validation.

This included comments on a parallel line of effort, the creation of a SHAPE Communications Division where the report stated, ‘There is a consultative process to align and integrate military communications at SHAPE. This process is quite far down the line, and we know it has some internal opposition, we believe that the principle of an aligned and collaborative approach at SHAPE is right.’

In essence SHAPE, using the same thinking as it had with ACO 95-2 had decided it did not want to wait for the eventual approval of MC0628, which would apply throughout NATO’s military, at some unknown date in the future. Instead, it would use SACEUR’s existing authority to create a local solution within SHAPE. The view was that the need, with Russia’s information confrontation, was immediate—we could not wait.

This approach reflected wider changes underway within SHAPE’s overall structure which was being reviewed internally and significantly changed to align with the new world of hybrid conflict and as demanded by the NATO summit of September 2014.

As part of the response to Crimea, StratCom, represented by SHAPE’s Chief StratCom had already put in for an uplift in numbers in all its NATO military headquarters, although there was also a complex debate

about cutting back on the number of PSYOPs staff at the two Joint Force Commands in Brunssum and Naples. Overall though Russia's Information Confrontation was recognised as requiring a reformed and enhanced StratCom effort at both civilian and military levels.

At SHAPE the small StratCom section under the Chief StratCom provided advice and guidance but not direction to PA, PSYOPS and InfoOps. The proposal now was to create a more powerful Communication Division combining them under the authority of a Communications Director.

Such a division would have four branches: Public Affairs; Plans, Training and Education; Information Fusion; Engagement. This was very much in line with the evolving MC policy. In formal terms the proposal was well-supported. The SHAPE Command Group, including the SACEUR (then General Phil Breedlove) was in principle supportive and externally the NATO Defence Management Audit Authority (NDMAA) backed the change. The NDMAA backing was vital because they were an independent body that effectively acted on behalf of the nations in approving manpower. A 'no' from them would have been close to a deal breaker, while their approval effectively tied any increase in staffing to the reform, which was a huge boost.

But this did not get us over the line. Behind the scenes something close to a guerrilla war was waged by Public Affairs against the change. This centred on individuals using connections with one leading NATO nation to seek to delay and then stop a final decision by the SACEUR signing off on the change. It also involved secretly bypassing the chain of command to effectively campaign against the wishes of the SHAPE command group. Ultimately this failed, and General Breedlove ordered the change just before leaving office, but it was a close-run thing.

Meanwhile, the wider effort to create the MC Military StratCom Policy went on, and again it was largely the US Public Affairs community that was the main obstacle. Although many nations sought changes and suggested improvements, most of those went with the main direction of travel.

Another staff level writing team assessed the nations' comments and produced a second draft for an MC Working Group with the nations. There had been few seriously critical comments from nations and, with the protections written into PA in particular, we went into it with some cautious optimism.

Instead, one leading nation challenged the concept of a grouping, initially over PA, and then produced a stunned silence in the meeting by saying PSYOPS and InfoOps should not be part of a group. It all got quite fractious. The working group ended with the chairperson calling another meeting in two months' time, but the mood was grim.

Effectively, while most nations liked the current draft, what was being proposed by one was a StratCom structure which did not include PA, PSYOPS, or InfoOps! It was a low point, and also something of an attempted row back. Given that all nations had already signed up to various documents implicitly supporting major changes, this would effectively take us backwards.

Regardless, a third draft was prepared leading up to the Emergency MC Working Group. A key issue was to constantly remind concerned nations, especially the main objector, that while a NATO military StratCom policy would apply to NATO bodies, headquarters, and NATO-led operations, it did not require nations to apply to their own national militaries or independent operations.

This limitation on the reach of NATO policies applied to every MC policy and always had, so it was something of a surprise this had to be said so often. Of course, for many if not most nations, a NATO policy would be at the least very influential, if not simply adopted whole, but the bigger nations tended to mix and match for their own activities.

So, the second MCWG convened in June 2016 with some trepidation. The NATO intent was to demonstrate that the draft policy answered all the key objections: Firstly, that the policy was not being pushed by some minority group but was what was wanted by NATO's senior military; secondly, that Public Affairs equities were protected; thirdly, that the

need for it had been demonstrated; fourthly, that the great bulk of NATO nations wanted it; and fifthly, it did not force nations to change their national processes.

It was a tough meeting, but the representative of the objector nation ultimately not only accepted that it was on its own in its objections, but that its own national equities were still protected. An agreement was reached at the table for representatives to take back to their nations. The mood this time was buoyant.

It did not last. The national representative was heavily criticised by his peer group on his return and the agreement at the table rescinded. This writer saw some of the objecting nation's internal documents surrounding the issue, one of which claimed their representative had been unfairly bullied into agreement. Such absurdities indicate the heat StratCom could generate.

What followed cost another year before there was agreement, which meant another year of distraction and internal debate rather than concentrating, with a structure fit for purpose, on facing our very active external adversaries.

Over the whole period of its drafting, the 'guerrilla campaign' against MC0628 by a few elements of PA was continuing. Most visibly there was the leak of a draft of MC0628 to the Reuters news agency in Brussels, complete with briefing to the journalist that the policy could lead to journalists being manipulated because of PA being put alongside PSYOPS.

This was not the first time we had seen such a tactic—within NATO it had previously happened over proposed changes to ISAF communications. In protecting themselves against the supposed threat of PSYOPS then, as noted before, a few elements of PA were happy to use its supposed tools. I should add that of course most PA staff engaged in the debate fairly, but those who played games had an impact out of proportion to their numbers.

The usual follow-up to such activity was for other anti-StratCom elements to then weigh in saying that we had better reconsider changes in order to retain vital media credibility. So having stirred up the media with leaks and a misleading briefing they argued this meant we needed to calm them down by amending or withdrawing the document they had leaked.

On this occasion it did not work. This was in part due to some aggressive counter-briefing and some blunt internal discussion about the kind of underhand tactic we were getting wise to. However, it was also due to the head of steam StratCom had already built-up, making it hard to kill our momentum.

Internally there was more manoeuvring by elements of PA to try to get SACEUR to withdraw backing for MC0628. A key part of getting the policy through was the formal approval of the various drafts by the heads of SHAPE and also the other main NATO military command, Allied Command Transformation. Such disruptive efforts included inaccurate information about the position of various nations and the draft policy's relation to other NATO communication policies. It was all very unpleasant.

That top-level support was fundamental, not just in principle, but at critical moments to get active engagement to break the logjam. This could be a problem. Four-star (the highest level) generals mostly prefer their staffs to do the grunt work, then come up with options and a recommended solution. Intervening in feuding between colonels was not usual practice, and yet that was what was needed. It was very frustrating to know you had the support of the high command but to see the process drift as those against MC0628 took advantage of the lack of a firm order.

In the end, it was just such an intervention that finally broke the deadlock. Late in the process, Germany entered the fray. Germany has always been quite conservative on PA matters, and also the most sensitive about any links to PSYOPS. However, it had been relatively quiet and generally

supportive when quite suddenly, it raised objections to the grouping concept and too much closeness between PA and PSYOPS.

It looked like very bad news for MC0628 as the nation that had been an outlier now seemed to have influential company. In fact, it proved a breakthrough. SHAPE's German Chief of Staff, General Werner Freers, intervened and directed the German national staff to find a compromise solution with SHAPE StratCom. Very constructive informal exchanges then took place and additional text was added to further reinforce PA equities and meet concerns about PSYOPS. Germany withdrew its block.

That was key because if the Germans, given their stance on PA, were OK with it then it was hard for other nations to continue blocking it. Informally, we heard that the outlier nation's senior leadership decided that they did not want to be isolated on the issue when they anyway still had the freedom to act independently on national operations.

So, finally it was done. That final document, approved by the MC on 28 June 2017 and endorsed by the NAC on 19 July 2017, was in fact little different to the first draft delivered to the International Military Staff on 4 August 2015 and all the of the key proposals and principles were essentially unchanged.

For the writer that nearly two-year delay remains a source of frustration. On one level it was the necessary and therefore acceptable price to get done what needed to be done. The negotiation process had also had the collateral benefit of creating better understanding and stronger support among many nations. On the other hand, the time taken on the internal fight had inevitably taken time that would otherwise have been spent on NATO's external adversaries, all at a time when the information conflict was key.

It is still worth emphasising though that as we battled for MC0628 this external work did continue and at scale. As a snapshot, SHAPE StratCom generated an annual report to the Command Group in 2015. Aside from work towards MC0628 it showed intensive activities: support exercises; provision of training; participation in all the HQ-wide work

to counter Russia's aggression in Ukraine; preparing StratCom guidance, mostly Frameworks, on a variety of topics; supporting subordinate headquarters; all the while working closely with NATO HQ on all their outputs.

In 2014, a strong ally was also born with the launch of the StratCom Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Riga and SHAPE StratCom played an active role in its birth. The CoE will lay a strong conceptual base, provide valuable research, and overall be a springboard for future StratCom, but although it got off to a fast start, it was still in its early stages during the 0628 debate.

Nevertheless, the battle for MC0628 took far too long and, without a policy to guide activity, those activities were not as efficiently conducted as they could and should have been. Regardless, the policy now had to be implemented, and there is a long road still to travel. Much of that is the hard slog of the undramatic daily grind. It is a good point to sum up the challenges on that road.

AFGHAN DEFEAT

In so doing the NATO defeat in Afghanistan cannot be ignored. If it highlighted the problem and pointed the way to an answer, it was not enough to save the mission. So, what responsibility does the communication effort have in the West's defeat and what does it say about StratCom?

The hard truth is that our communication failure was a significant part of the overall failure—I hesitate to call it a StratCom failure because I would argue StratCom was only erratically applied. This is especially sad given several ISAF/RS commanders grasped its importance. I have already quoted General John Allen, and General Stan McChrystal was even more aware of the cognitive element, saying at a lecture in London in 2009, 'Winning the battle of perception is key.... We win when the people decide we win.' That thread ran through his assessment to the nations, linking actions and words in what he called a "deeds-based" information environment where perceptions derive from actions...

So, if generals like them, and others, got it, why did the information Line of Effort fail along with everything else? I think it was a combination of too little, too late in all respects; our thinking, policy, resources, training, understanding narrative and Information Environment Assessment. We understood the Taliban in the broad sense but not in the granular sense needed to engage in competing in the information space. McChrystal in his assessment noted on the broader front that, ‘Almost every aspect of our collective effort and associated resourcing has lagged a growing insurgency—historically a recipe for failure in COIN. Success will require a discrete “jump” to gain the initiative.’

This also applied to our StratCom effort. We started late and while we grew, the adversary grew with us, and we never jumped past them. At certain points, around the McChrystal/Petraeus period we accelerated, but we never sustained the growth, sometimes worsening the problem by chopping and changing our approach.

For all our efforts, the Afghan government effort to their own audience, aside from some effective individuals, was never good enough—a critical weakness. In fact, the international audience was never such a weakness. From quite early on NATO audiences were unenthusiastic but never to the point of active opposition, effectively giving their governments a de facto go-ahead—there were no protest marches as with Iraq. The lack of positive support constrained the willingness of some nations to be robust, or acknowledge we were in a counter-insurgency rather than peacekeeping, but it did not force nations to withdraw. The withdrawal was a policy choice—there were few votes in being either in or out of Afghanistan.

Some weaknesses StratCom could do nothing about. Afghan government corruption was one—there was awareness at all levels of its undermining effect but solving it was something else. Another weakness was the core Taliban message that they could wait us out—one day we would go, and they would still be there. The Obama time limit on the surge was a further proof of this. History has taught Afghans to hedge their bets. As the rather cynical communicators’ saying puts it—you can paint lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.

Now as we face strategic level adversaries such as Russia and China, we have still been playing catch-up and again, as we have undoubtedly grown, the problem has kept growing with us. That is why the friction in getting even basic approaches and policies agreed has cost us—you cannot recover time that has already passed.

The Afghan agenda, the issues it highlighted, still form the basis for much of today's StratCom agenda even if we have moved forward and face different adversaries in even more complex environments. I believe that is because counter-insurgency is, of all forms of warfare, the most closely related to today's so-called hybrid conflict, focussing as it does on the cognitive aspects of influence, the contest over narrative, the limits on military action as just one Line of Effort among others, the often hidden nature of the adversary and the long-term nature of the struggle with its somewhat blurry definitions of what success looks like. As I suggested earlier, in this sense 'hybrid' perhaps misleads us into thinking we are facing something entirely new when its principles are an evolution, albeit radical, of older forms of conflict better described as political warfare.

That is why this first history of NATO StratCom will, for now, end here with the passing of MC0628. For I see its passage as the winning of the war of ideas. It is always unwise to be too certain of anything, but it is nevertheless hard to see NATO going back when all around us is the evidence that the old ways did not and will not work. So MC0628 does, for me, mark a fundamental inflection point, its principles and those supporting it hugely influencing everything that follows.

That does not mean the struggle is over, far from it, as the idea, reflected as it is in the policy, is nothing without the implementation.

That phase of practical implementation will most often be slow and grinding, requiring commitment, persistence, patience, and also resources. The signs are this is happening, albeit slower than necessary given the problem is very much here and now.

All the same, on Information Environment Assessment, NATO is moving forward on a sophisticated and well-considered system that promises much. On restructuring of NATO's military, the direction of MC0628 is gathering pace, albeit in the face of a few holdouts.

Beyond that the wider integration of StratCom principles and practices across NATO's military, as outlined by MC0628, is now being followed up by the promise of significant progress on forward-looking doctrines. These are AJP (Allied Joint Publication)-01, the highest-level NATO military doctrine for all NATO operations, and AJP-10, the first doctrine on StratCom.

As I write this, drafts are being circulated that, if approved, would mark a major step forward for the implementation of StratCom within NATO and also its national militaries. Although such staff work may seem undramatic, doctrine is the codification of experience and as such is part of the hard yards of effort needed to create sustained change within and across the military.

Of more immediate effect, a thoroughly updated SHAPE directive on StratCom (ACO 95-2) has also been approved, which—because it comes into effect immediately—should direct and enable implementation within NATO's military structures.

Many of the responses triggered by Russia's aggression in Ukraine have also seen Strategic Communicators increasingly both integrated and more influential in developing key areas such as deterrence. NATO's military have also approved a comprehensive set of standards for the future training and education of communicators, and also of senior leadership who need to use StratCom as part of their overall effort. This itself followed SHAPE StratCom being made the Requirements Authority (RA) to set standards and numbers for training and education, and more recently the StratCom COE being made responsible for ensuring the delivery of that training.

So, there is a lot happening. However, the issue of training, education, and numbers is also emblematic of the continuing issues and a contributor to them. Put simply, there are not enough communicators, and they are not trained well enough and not of sufficient rank to count enough at the top table. This applies both in terms of specific practitioners and the wider community who need to know how to integrate StratCom as part of the mission. There is a clear disconnect between the stated importance attached to StratCom and the reality of putting resources in place and sustained attention to make it happen.

This also includes the top commanders personally and actively engaging to push the StratCom project on. Too often there was genuine but also passive support which enabled often quite junior staff to play the spoiler and slow things down. At critical points a logjam was finally broken only when a four-star general personally intervened to push through a policy they had already supported but was being blocked lower down. In complex institutions there are always plenty of mice willing to play if they think the cat is away or looking elsewhere. This is especially so with a new way of doing business when Machiavelli's saying about the difficulty of change holds so true.

As I write this some military entities are still resisting the reforms required by MC0628 which is, let us remember, an order not an option from NATO's and NATO nations' senior command. They get away with it because, as noted earlier, commanders sometimes fight shy of gripping their subordinates. What success I have had has been for a number of reasons such as a certain clarity of aim and determination, as well as longevity in post, but it has always been as part of a wider like-minded team. In particular, I am eternally grateful to those generals who had my back at some tricky times and intervened at the critical moment.

The issue of specialism, training, and education remains a key weakness. It is pretty much standard for the senior posts in StratCom (brigadier generals notably, but often lower as well) to be held by non-communicators, often with no or very limited training. It is often a touchy point, as the holders of those posts take umbrage at any suggestion they

are not up to the task. In terms of basic competence and motivation that is usually true, but in no other part of the military would it be considered routine for someone with minimal if any experience and minimal if any training to lead such a key area.

As I once asked a NATO Military Committee, would they allow me, as a career communicator to lead an armoured brigade? Of course, they laughed, and I then asked, why would they then allow the reverse? To a lesser but significant degree, the same applies in the civilian area.

At heart, I suspect there is an assumption that StratCom is somehow easier. It is not, and in today's hybrid environment where StratCom is a main Line of Effort—and unless the shooting starts, perhaps THE main Line of Effort—we will pay heavily for that mistake.

Indeed, StratCom is getting harder. Social media, the dark web, universal access to the internet, the speed of information flow, the complexity of data management—keeping up with the new information age will tax anyone. Even the professionals are running hard to stand still in an era of dizzying change.

As with other parts of the military profession, and in its own way the civilian sector, there needs to be career progression that attracts those who seek high office and ensures StratCom in person and as a topic has a routine place at the top table. Bluntly, knowing your StratCom needs to be seen as career-enhancing.

This also means NATO's nations must seize the challenge of StratCom, and there are some encouraging signs. The Baltic nations, especially Lithuania, were early adopters, as has been non-NATO Sweden. Belgium has restructured itself, the Netherlands has created an Information Manoeuvre Arm including a Communication and Engagement Corp. Britain has its 6th Division, including 77 Brigade that, 'prepares and generates the Army's Information Manoeuvre and Unconventional Warfare forces for both constant competition and warfighting, as well as routinely conducting operations below the threshold of armed conflict in the virtual and physical dimensions.'

Over in the US, the picture is still mixed but its army in particular is developing the concept of 'Information Advantage'. This covers both the technical and influence areas with five elements: Enabling decision-making; protecting friendly information; informing and educating domestic audiences; informing and influencing international audiences; and conducting information warfare. Although the debate is still very much alive, this is just one of a number of interesting developments within the US where Information Advantage is recognised as a commander's direct business, with information accepted alongside airpower and so on as a key element of combat power.

Of course, this also has to be translated onto the political level—we understandably fight shy of terms like political warfare, but our adversaries do not. Russian Information Confrontation, China's Three Warfares, and United Front activities are a part of our everyday reality. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted the change in 2018, 'What we see is of course that Russia is in a way...launching or is responsible for **aggressive actions below Article 5**, as we call it, **below what triggers a full-fledged response** from the alliance [my emphasis].'⁷ And if this is the zone we are working in, then information, StratCom, must be a critical element, albeit one to be used in an ethical way that reflects our values, not those of our adversaries.

I feel privileged to have worked for NATO and to have had the opportunity to make a difference, to be deeply involved in a critical part of our response to what I consider existential challenges. My time within NATO is over, but I leave behind some superb colleagues with absolute commitment and huge ability. What they need is institutional support.

This is no dialogue of despair, NATO and NATO's militaries have moved a long way, and we are in a far better place than we were, but the goalposts have also moved. There is much to do and no time to waste. The foundations have been laid, the path is clear, and the need for action is now.

HOW U.S. GOVERNMENT FELL IN AND OUT OF LOVE WITH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Jente Althuis

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, United States, United Nations, Foreign Policy, Public Diplomacy, 9/11, Counterinsurgency, Afghanistan, Iraq.*

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ABSTRACT

The development of strategic communications in the United States has taken place in conjunction with a long history of foreign interventions. Its rise in various government agencies is interwoven with these developments. This article traces the rise and fall of strategic communications in the United States government, from its emergence in the years leading up to 9/11, through debates on the definition of the

concept during conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, ending in its current stasis. Any chronology of strategic communications in the United States government leaves us with more questions than answers.

INTRODUCTION

Between the first use of the term ‘strategic communications’ by the United States government in the early 2000s and the withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, a number of reports, plans, manuals, and directives have been produced by various government agencies on the subject. Each had its own mission and understanding of strategic communications.¹ After two decades of debate, little consensus has been reached.

This article sets out to review the United States government approach to, and understanding of, strategic communications. It traces the origins and use of the term by different agencies—its twists and turns in relation to political turbulence in the United States and abroad—from the late 1990s until the last United States troops boarded a plane at Kabul airport in August 2021.

Today strategic communications is broadly understood as the aligning of words, images, actions, and policy by a political actor with the intent of achieving changes in attitudes and/or behaviour of a target audience. This is consistent with the views of scholar-practitioners like James Farwell and Christopher Paul who adopt a similar instrumentalist approach.² Nevertheless, even when viewed as a practice, Neville Bolt identifies the need to place it in the more specific framework of state to state or state to non-state actor. Hence 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,

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1 These publications are referenced throughout, and a broader range is captured in the bibliography of this article.

2 James Farwell, *The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012); Christopher Paul, ‘Whither Strategic Communication?’, *RAND Occasional Paper* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2009).

images, actions and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community'.³ By contrast, the NATO Strategic Communications Terminology Working Group takes a more essentialist perspective: Not simply, what does it do? But what is it? For the Working Group it is 'a holistic approach to communications based on values and interests that encompass everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.⁴ That strategic communications competes in a contested and dynamic environment, speaks to a particular slant on how strategy is understood. Consequently, the notion that the world of communications is fiercely contested sets the context for strategic communications to 'shift and shape long-term discourses'. While considering strategy to be synonymous with manoeuvring, negotiating, and navigating the frictions of the real world, it cautions against falling victim to the setbacks of the operational or tactical world.⁵ A contested term, it is nevertheless important to differentiate between communicating strategically and projecting strategic communications. Although the term was only to emerge with some currency in Washington several years after 9/11, the thinking and approach in which it is grounded had begun to develop even earlier.

Concepts and definitions in the realm of communications rarely appear in isolation; they originate in policy and practice. Strategic communications is not an academic discipline developed in libraries by academics. Since its inception it has been tied to the political context of its time and the internal structure and operations of, among others, the US government. Strategic communications has been debated, developed, and adapted within government agencies, each attempting to align it with pre-existing concepts including public affairs, information operations, psychological operations, and public diplomacy. Moreover, each agency has a vested interest with agendas tied to staff who seek employment security and competing positions of power within

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³ Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* Volume 6 (Spring 2019): 4-5.

⁴ Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).

⁵ Neville Bolt, *Strategic Communications and Disinformation in the Early 21st Century* (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole: European University Institute, 2022).

management structures. The evolution of the field and its definitions have been shaped accordingly. The outcome raises important questions: *what* is strategic communications; *how* does it speak to existing concepts in the information sector; *who* carries out strategic communications in government; and, importantly but often forgotten, *what* are government communicators trying to communicate?

Reviewing the trajectory of documents including reports, memos, and directives on strategic communications establishes both a genealogy and a record for future scholarship. This review is divided into four sections. It begins with the emergence of strategic communications outside US Government in the years leading up to 9/11. The concept came to the foreground of international affairs in the context of a rapidly changing world order in which the behaviour of nation states across borders was coming under increasing scrutiny.

Second, it reviews the rise of strategic communications in Washington from the early 2000s when the term found traction as it reflected a shift in attitude that would enable the United States to reengage with foreign audiences whose support was waning. Strategic communications in these years was driven most prominently through American diplomatic and military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), 2002 had sought a ‘continuation, and a deepening, of our longstanding commitment to work with all peoples of the Middle East to improve their daily lives and to help them face the future with hope’.⁶ So declared former Secretary of State, Colin Powell. Meanwhile actions in pursuit of al-Qaeda had also led to successive policies of counter-terror which evolved into counterinsurgency, stability operations, and nation building. What has been characterised as mission creep and message creep in Afghanistan by ISAF/NATO and Coalition forces and their governments, would eventually conclude with targeted

⁶ Jeremy Sharp, *CRS Report for Congress, The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 2005).

counterterrorism before withdrawal from theatre.⁷ Discussions around strategic communications are woven into these developments and should be read accordingly.

Third, this article extends its review of strategic communications through the lens of President Barack Obama who sought to align contradictory ideas and approaches, defining its core purpose by the maxim of ‘closing the say-do gap’. Even with this clearer vision, a decade of inter- and intra-agency definitional conflict endured. Those tasked with integrating strategic communications into their agencies were often thwarted in pursuit of agreeing and implementing extensive processes of strategic communications.

The final section of this review brings the debate up to date with the aftermath of President Joe Biden’s decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan while Taliban fighters were seizing the reins of power in Kabul.

Any attempt to define strategic communications in the United States is inevitably bound up with administrative turf wars in Washington and the pressures and dissonant voices emanating from fellow NATO member states during these years. Yet this account begins with the United Nations and its troubled years in the early 1990s.

REPURPOSING THE UNITED NATIONS

The Council [UNSC] initially viewed its role as preventing a third world war. As the Cold War came to define global politics, the Council moved to tackle prevention of regional conflicts (often between client states or proxies of the superpowers) from spilling into a global conflagration.⁸

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⁷ Brett Boudreau, *We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us* (Riga, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016); Gordon Adams, *Mission Creep: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy?* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

⁸ David D. Malone, *The UN Security Council: From the Cold War to the 21st Century* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), p. 4.

Yet there were long term consequences to this development. The success of mandating the use of force and intervention into Iraq (Operation Desert Storm in January 1991) and overcoming the defences of Saddam Hussein bred a certain optimism. Indeed, it apparently

induced an era of euphoria in the Council, an era that could not have arisen during the Cold War. Having successfully tackled a conceptually straightforward challenge to international peace and security in the form of Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait, the Council now waded into the murkier waters of civil wars and intercommunal strife with which it had little experience.⁹

There was a humanitarian backstory here too. In the late 1960s, against the backdrop of the Vietnam war, daily broadcasts of violence and human suffering had emerged from the African continent, too. A conflict between the small, secessionist Republic of Biafra and the Nigerian government had resulted in famine, triggering an international humanitarian relief effort. Despite the restrictions of international laws governing non-intervention, humanitarian actors responded to images of malnourished children in the Biafran War by arguing there should be no borders to humanitarian relief.¹⁰ The subsequent founding of *Médecins Sans Frontières* by French doctors who had worked in Biafra signified a shift in global discourses on foreign aid interventions. A debate over the responsibility of the international community to intervene, protect, and prevent human suffering within sovereign borders had now emerged. Such was the context that shaped the development of strategic communications in the offices of the United Nations in New York.

Two decades after Biafra and Vietnam, the United Nations faced the daunting task of implementing the responsibility to protect (R2P). Although the organisation achieved several peacekeeping successes, providing peacekeeping forces in Namibia (1989)¹¹, ending civil wars in

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⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰ Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, *L'Humanitaire en Guerre Civile: La Crise du Biafra (1967-1970)* [Humanitarians in Civil War: the Biafra crisis (1967-1970)], (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018).

¹¹ Lise M. Howard, *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1994), and monitoring elections in post-apartheid South Africa (1994)¹², the 1990s would nevertheless come to represent a nadir in its fortunes. It repeatedly failed to act in the face of serious crises. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda did not intervene when a genocide unfolded before its eyes (1994); a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations Operation in Somalia was simply ignored (1995); and Dutchbat III forces within the United Nations Protection Force (1995) refused to intervene when Bosniak Muslims were massacred in the besieged town of Srebrenica, an enclave it had declared to be safely under its protection.¹³ These setbacks for the UN had taken the shine off a new decade of hope that would rapidly descend into the turbulent 1990s. Moreover, it was detrimental to the organisation's credibility. The Agenda for Peace (1995) of then controversial Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, advocated a set of reforms following hard on the heels of the Rwandan debacle, and focusing on prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict peacebuilding.

However, it was left to his successor Kofi Annan to restore the authority and purpose of the United Nations.¹⁴ Although still respected around the world, the United Nations had lost the trust of populations whose lives it was expected to safeguard.

Reforming Communications in the United Nations

According to Annan, a shift in communication was required: from a passive response to media inquiries to seizing the attention of the media agenda. Not only was it pivotal in repairing the damage inflicted by recent crises, but the story of the United Nations had to be told better. And that required strategic communications. A *Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities*, chaired by Mark Malloch

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12 Douglas G. Anglin, 'International Monitoring of the Transition to Democracy in South Africa, 1992-1994', *African Affairs* Volume 94 (1995): 519-543.

13 Mats Berdal and Spyros Economides, *United Nations Interventionism, 1991-2004* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

14 Annan was appointed the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations in 1997, and would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, recognising his efforts to revitalise the United Nations and prioritise human rights.

Brown,¹⁵ was set up to review existing communications structures and propose a programme of reform. Alongside diplomats, Task Force members included several journalists.¹⁶ *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations* was published in 1997.¹⁷ The report's authors wrote:

The UN is principally a forum for the exchange of ideas. We argue that in some senses the UN can be thought of as a global communications agency. A culture of communications must therefore pervade the entire Organization, with responsibility for public diplomacy borne by all senior officials, ambassadors and the larger UN family.¹⁸

A 'global forum for debate', perhaps, but Malloch Brown found the UN was failing to reassure the world that it was also the spokesman and implementer of consensus reached by its member states.¹⁹ It had not only dealt ineffectively with crisis, primarily due to the indecisiveness of the Security Council, but most importantly was considered irrelevant by many because of its inability to address the issues about which they cared most. The report concluded:

at a time when the UN's unique international role and agenda, and the values it articulates, coincide with the concerns of people in both industrialized and developing countries, one might expect it to have a place at the center of peoples' world view. In fact, the opposite has happened.²⁰

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15 At the time, Malloch Brown was Vice-President of External Affairs of the World Bank.

16 Including Peter Arnett of CNN; Ingrid A. Lehmann, *Peacekeeping and Public Information: Caught in the Crossfire* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999); M. D. Alleyne, *Global Lies? Propaganda, the UN and World Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

17 Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities, *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations* (New York: United Nations, 1997).

18 Ibid., p. 11.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

The Task Force proposed delineating the organisation's two core roles – a 'unique global forum for debate' and 'spokesman, advocate and implementer of that consensus' telling its story to the world.²¹ Reform to be implemented by Annan could only succeed when reinforced by 'good communications'. This would restore the confidence of people served by the United Nations and garner global support for its mission.²² It required reorganising communications structures inside the organisation. Those in charge of communications should be integrated into decision- and policy-making rather than serve as mere outlets for decisions to the world. Communications should thus be 'at the heart of the strategic management of the Organization', brought into the Secretary General's 'innermost policy-making circle and of other policy-coordination groups'.²³ A commitment to implementing this organisational communications strategy would strengthen its global leadership position and reverse the United Nations' diminished role in the public imagination. In his review of communications arrangements in the UN, Malloch Brown defined strategic communications as:

The kind of communications that allows an organization to be effective in its substantive work as well as its constituency-building can be characterized as strategic communications... Strategic communications is more than the sum of its parts, which include public information, press relations, and constituency-building. Above all, it is an intimate link in policy-making. The vision of the Organization's role and priorities that drives the communications effort must proceed from the top policy-making level and pervade the Organization comprehensively.²⁴

.....
21 Ibid., p. ii.

22 Ibid., p. i.

23 Ibid., pp. ii-iii.

24 Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Kofi Annan took the advice to heart. Shortly afterwards, the planned reform, rooted in the findings of Malloch Brown's Task Force, was outlined in the publication *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*, in which the Secretary-General disclosed:

Here the report is seeking nothing less than to transform the leadership and management structure of the Organisation, enabling it to act with greater unity of purpose, coherence of efforts, and agility in responding to the many challenges it faces. These measures are intended to renew the confidence of Member States in the relevance and effectiveness of the Organization and Revitalize the spirit and commitment of its staff.²⁵

A core element of the reform programme was a new information and communications plan to meet the changing needs of the United Nations. Although it did not explicitly mention the term strategic communications—unlike its 1997 predecessor—its main message reflected an understanding of the concept that would continue to shape the debate: what we say and what we do communicates. Rather than root its communication capacity solely in the Department of Public Information, the 'culture of communications' recommended by the Task Force had to be integrated into all Departments of the United Nations.²⁶ In doing so, Annan instigated a fundamental change in the United Nations' understanding of information activities.

In 2002 the UN's Department of Public Information was split. It would now have a separate 'Strategic Communications Division' responsible for coordinating and shaping the image of the United Nations.²⁷ The department too became aligned with the Task Force recommendations to 'embrace public diplomacy as the means of building and sustaining support for positive changes in global cooperation on the problems that concern real people'.²⁸ Reorganised and reoriented, the department,

.....
25 United Nations Secretary-General, *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform* (New York: United Nations, 1997).

26 Ibid., p. 25.

27 The Department also established a 'News and Media Division' and a 'Public Outreach Division'.

28 Task Force on the Reorientation of UN Public Information Activities, *Global Vision, Local Voice*, p. 34.

according to Kofi Annan, was now equipped to promote the story of the UN.²⁹ The project 'Ten Stories the World Should Hear More About' was launched in 2004.³⁰ At a time when most media attention was being drawn to the conflict in Iraq, the project's intent was to bring stories of human struggle that otherwise received too little exposure in international media coverage. These included humanitarian emergencies in the Central African Republic, Tajikistan, and the Bakassi Peninsula between Cameroon and Nigeria.³¹ Although its implementation, pursued through consultation between UN agencies and local offices, meant the organisation was becoming better coordinated, its external effect remained limited.³² The stories were side-lined by the noise of the Iraq war and the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

Notwithstanding, as the new millennium arrived, the UN had committed to a number of wide-ranging and far-reaching goals that set global leaders to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental stability; and develop a global partnership for development. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals Fund still presents its case in the following terms:

In September 2000, leaders of 189 countries gathered at the United Nations headquarters and signed the historic Millennium Declaration...the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] were revolutionary in providing a universal language to reach global agreement. The 8 goals were realistic and easy to communicate, with a clear measurement/monitoring mechanism'.³³

29 United Nations Department of Information, *Questions Relating to Information* (New York: United Nations, 2003).

30 Other initiatives included increased cooperation with the private sector and the appointment of celebrities as 'goodwill ambassadors' to raise further awareness; United Nations News, 'UN spotlights top 10 issues that should garner more media coverage' (New York, United Nations, 2004), (accessed 22 December 2021).

31 Ibid.; later iterations of the project included Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nepal, and Cote d'Ivoire.

32 Annan later stated that the project was successful in fulfilling its expectation; United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization* (New York: United Nations, 2005).

33 Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDGF), 'From MDGs to SDGs', (accessed 27 December 2021). See also MDG Achievement Fund website, (accessed 2 January 2022).

As time would show, revolutionary ambitions are not always realistic and even harder to achieve, however easy they might be to communicate. The outcomes would prove at best uneven. However, the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012 promoted a fresh set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to develop the earlier MDGs. By July 2014, 17 goals drafted by the UN General Assembly Open Working Group (OWG) were placed before the General Assembly. And in 2015 these were approved and set the course for the medium-term agenda of 2015-30 in which we find ourselves today.³⁴

The ten-story project of 2004 exemplified changes in the UN's strategic communications and a desire to engage audiences in a more imaginative and less bureaucratic fashion. Human interest storytelling should replace more prosaic press releases. A 'culture of communications' was to some extent embraced, and the Organization began to strengthen its position as a global leader while underscoring the role of the UN in addressing human catastrophes and promoting human rights. At the 2005 World Summit, a gathering of 150 world leaders at the UN headquarters in New York claimed to have reached: 'a unified stance by the international community on a broad array of crucial issues from combating poverty and promoting development to unqualified condemnation of all forms of terrorism along with the acceptance of collective responsibility.'³⁵

However, its outcomes were again criticised for being vague, of little substance, and lacking any specific, targeted action plans. Even after embracing a culture of communications, the UN continues to struggle to overcome the perception of a diminishing role in the public imagination. The question remains whether this constitutes failed strategic communications. Or do the UN's governing structures prevent its agencies from taking quick and decisive action—a tension played out under public scrutiny, particularly in extreme crises or outbreaks of conflict and war? Are the processes of the Security Council and General Assembly too ridden with partisan agendas to reach unequivocal

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³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ UN General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization*, p. 2.

consensus more regularly? While New York's setting big, conceptual goals and claiming the moral high ground has been welcomed in many quarters, such strategic-level goals have been thrown off course by the all too brutal tactical demands of communicating through crises.

In more recent conflicts, the UN's response to crisis on the ground has been mixed. Decisive and substantial actions have included the passing of Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) pursuant to Resolution 1970 (2011), which authorised the use of force to protect civilians in Libya. It was the first combat operation by the UN since the Gulf War in 1991.³⁶ Described by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as a 'historic' affirmation of the global community, the Resolution has been considered a successful implementation of the Organization's commitment to R2P.³⁷ Within a month, the coalition was mobilised, a mandate secured, no-drive and no-fly zones enforced, and Muammar Gaddafi's advance on Benghazi halted.³⁸ The UN had reinforced its commitment to be present as an actor on the ground. But at the same time, it invited criticism for failing to intervene further in the Libyan civil war, and for its reluctance to seek regime change. No such interventions of force have yet been undertaken to address human suffering in Yemen and Syria, or in response to the 2021 humanitarian emergency in Afghanistan. Continuing discussions in the Security Council have yet to produce targeted action plans.³⁹

FROM COUNTERTERRORISM TO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Entering office in 2001, President George W. Bush targeted the human rights and nation-building policies of the Clinton years. Less preoccupied with the sentiments of foreign populations, he felt this lay beyond the concern of the Department of Defence. The United States military,

36 Ramesh Thakur, 'Libya and the Responsibility to Protect: Between Opportunistic Humanitarianism and Value-Free Pragmatism', *Security Challenges* Volume 7 (2011).

37 United Nations News, 'Libya: Ban welcomes Security Council authorization of measures to protect civilians', (New York: United Nations, 18 March 2011), (accessed 27 December 2021).

38 Thakur, 'Libya and the Responsibility to Protect'.

39 United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 'Abandoning Afghanistan Now, amid Humanitarian Crisis, Would Be 'Historic Mistake'', *Special Representative Tells Security Council* (New York: United Nations, 17 November 2021), (accessed 27 December 2021).

he had repeatedly emphasised in his election campaign and later as President, was about hardware—equipment, machines, training, and personnel on the ground. Time and money should not be wasted on nation-building. Bush had the support of the military establishment. Having been engaged in some of the failed peacekeeping missions that drove the United Nations to reconsider its position—Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti and Kosovo—the US military establishment pushed back against ‘Military Operations Other Than War’.⁴⁰

While the White House had not yet embraced a broader approach to American foreign military engagement with a more important role given to communications, the potential of strategic communications gradually appeared across government agencies. It can be identified in a report of the Defense Science Board Task Force (DSB), published by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of State.⁴¹ Although rooted in furthering US national interests, its understanding echoes the strategic communications adopted by the United Nations under Annan:

U.S. civilian and military information dissemination capabilities are powerful assets vital to national security. They can create diplomatic opportunities, lessen tensions that might lead to war, help contain conflicts, and address nontraditional threats to America’s interests...Information – not as “spin,” but as policy – is not simply a rhetorical flourish in which solutions to a crisis are presented, it is an integral part of the solution itself.⁴²

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40 Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), pp. 79-81.

41 Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2001). The Defense Science Board is a Federal Advisory Committee of civil experts, providing independent advice on scientific and technical matters, advising the Department of Defense.

42 Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report on Managed Information Dissemination*, p. 1.

The Task Force was the first in Washington to refer to strategic communications, albeit only once in its report, preferring to use the term ‘coordinated’ or ‘managed information dissemination’. It defined ‘sophisticated strategic communications’ as a capacity that can ‘set the agenda and create a context that enhances the achievement of political, economic, and military objectives. Over time, they may shape foreign perceptions in ways that support America’s interests.’⁴³ The report continued by proposing that civilian and military information dissemination capabilities should aim to ‘create diplomatic opportunities, reduce tensions leading to war, help contain conflicts, and address nontraditional threats to U.S. security.’⁴⁴ In order to achieve this, the authors found, efforts must go beyond the Department of Defense and engage with, among others, the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. international broadcasting services.⁴⁵ Written in the spring and summer of 2001, it was published three weeks after the attacks of September 11. Its findings were largely left unused. In an address to Congress and the nation just over a week after 9/11, President Bush moved in the opposite direction when he declared the Global War on Terror (GWOT):

...the enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country...There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries...Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated...We will direct every resource at our command – every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war – to the destruction and to the defeat of the global terror network.⁴⁶

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⁴³ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁶ ‘President Bush’s address to a Joint Session of Congress and the Nation’, *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2001, (accessed 7 December 2021).

If this was strategic communications, then it was being played out in its most coercive form. The events of 9/11 triggered a series of reviews of the failures of United States' public diplomacy. These included the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *Building Public Diplomacy Through a Reformed Structure and Additional Resources* (2002) and *The New Diplomacy: Utilizing Innovative Communication Concepts that Recognize Resource Constraints* (2003); Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab & Muslim World* (2003); U.S. General Accountability Office to the Committee on International Relations, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Expands Efforts But Faces Significant Challenges* (2003).

In the years that followed, the United States launched military interventions into Afghanistan in search of Osama Bin Laden, and Iraq, following the questionable claim that the country was hiding weapons of mass destruction.⁴⁷ Terrorism and counterterrorism became the symbiotic framework through which national security efforts were conducted by Washington. Through this lens it assessed its friends and enemies—who was a victim, and which political actors were to blame. The harbouring of those groups, state or non-state, considered a threat to the United States was sufficient justification for foreign intervention, according to the Bush administration. Rather than engage with states (and their populations) considered a potential threat, it divided the world into allies and enemies. Allies were engaged with, enemies were not.⁴⁸ This can be seen in the 2002 National Security Strategy which stated that the 'United States will continue to work with our allies' and 'must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients'.⁴⁹ The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review had already highlighted the need to step up information operations and to integrate them into 'military operations as a complement to air, land, sea, and special operations

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47 The 2002 National Security Strategy speaks of "irrefutable proof"; President Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002), p. 14

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., pp. 6, 14.

with the aim of achieving desired effects using all elements of the U.S. defense posture'.⁵⁰

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld soon encountered the defining dilemma of strategic communications—information versus influence. This dichotomy between two perspectives on the purpose and effect of information communicated by governments to populations, accounts for the historic resistance of military public affairs to strategic communications, which they perceive as no longer transmitting 'neutral' or objective information. Instead, for military public affairs, appears to be wedded to achieving a partisan effect on the enemy or its population. Rumsfeld would fall foul of this debate when ordering the establishment of the Office of Strategic Influence. Its mission being to 'generate disinformation and propaganda that would help the United States counter Islamic extremists and pursue the war on terrorism'.⁵¹ And its target: foreign media, particularly in the Middle East. Unfortunately, in the joined-up world of 21st century digital communications, relaying information—whether evidenced or fabricated—to a foreign population, could find its way back to a government's own citizens within minutes. To subvert the American population with anything resembling propaganda had already been rendered illegal under the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948.⁵² At the same time, connecting information operations to foreign populations, including those in friendly Western Europe, had traditionally been the preserve of the State Department and its public diplomacy efforts. One former psyops officer commented that the Office 'rolled up all the instruments within D.O.D. to influence foreign audiences...the D.O.D. has traditionally not done these things'.⁵³

The Department of Defense's encroachment into this already fraught moral area could only set in motion fresh turf wars inside Washington.

50 Donald H. Rumsfeld, *2001 Guidance and Terms of reference for the Quadrennial Defense Review*, United States Department of Defense, 22 June 2001, p. 13.

51 William Arkin, 'Media Mongering', *Index on Censorship* Volume 1 (2003): 26.

52 The 1948 U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act was amended in July 2013.

53 James Dao and Eric Schmitt, 'A Nation Challenged: Hearts and Minds; Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiment Abroad', *The New York Times*, 19 February 2002, (accessed 2 January 2022).

Recording the Office's obituary in 2002, the New York Times observed: 'Little information is available about the Office of Strategic Influence, and even many senior Pentagon officials and Congressional military aides say they know almost nothing about its purpose and plans. Its multimillion dollar budget, drawn from a \$10 billion emergency supplement to the Pentagon budget authorised by Congress in October, has not been disclosed'.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding, its director, a US Air Force officer, had confided its policies ranged 'from the blackest of black programmes to the whitest of white'. In short, a recipe that would spell its own demise.⁵⁵

Several initiatives in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 reflected efforts by government agencies to engage with strategic communications. But these did not see the light of day outside the framework of GWOT.⁵⁶ In 2002, the Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee was established under the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. And in 2006 the Department of Defense set up the Office of Joint Communication and the Strategic Communication Integration Group.

From Counterterrorism to Stabilisation Operations

Despite international expressions of sympathy and support for Washington in the early days after September 2001, enthusiasm for counterterror responses solidified. George Bush's 'with us or against us' proposition would soon begin to wear thin. In the following years, the international reputation of the United States would be further eroded by a range of events including allegations of torture in Iraq, CIA black sites, and the publication of photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners in Iraq. It was not until the full review of the 9/11 Commission Report was published in 2004 that the government recognised that pursuing its enemies across borders required a broader effort and engagement with the states whose sovereignty it breached. Notwithstanding, President

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⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ken S. Heller and Liza M. Persson, 'The Distinction Between Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy', in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, ed. by Nancy Snow and Philip M. Taylor, (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 225-233; Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, pp. 86-88.

Barack Obama would later breach the sovereignty of Pakistan when despatching Navy Seals to kill Osama Bin Laden.

The 9/11 Commission report revealed a shift in the understanding of the Bush administration as it began to engage with the idea that the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were not simply kinetic but more significantly, symbolic: ‘An organization like al Qaeda, headquartered in a country on the other side of the earth, in a region so poor that electricity or telephones were scarce, could nonetheless scheme to wield weapons of unprecedented destructive power in the largest cities of the United States.’⁵⁷ Consistent with the experience of the Clinton years that Al-Qaida was recruiting among the populations of unstable states, the government could not continue to ignore this. The report found:

Because the Muslim world has fallen behind the West politically, economically, and militarily for the past three centuries, and because few tolerant or secular Muslim democracies provide alternative models for the future, Bin Laden’s message finds receptive ears...Tolerance, the rule of law, political and economic openness, the extension of greater opportunities to women – these cures must come from within Muslim societies themselves. The United States must support such developments. But this process is likely to be measured in decades, not years.⁵⁸

The term strategic communications is not made explicit in the report. But this publication triggered a change in approach by the government to engaging global audiences.⁵⁹ A range of reviews of public perception of the United States by public and private sector organisations was published in the following years, including *Views from the Muslim World: Opposition to U.S. Foreign Policy Contrasts with Admiration for American Innovation and Education* (Department of Defense, 2003) and *Iraq One Year*

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⁵⁷ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), p. 362.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Later: Global Media Assessment Largely Negative Media Assessment Largely Negative (Office of Research, Department of State, 2004). The new framework of counter-terrorism would narrow the focus to a range of political and economic factors.

The National Security Strategy, 2002 had declared ‘For most of the twentieth century, the world was divided by a great struggle over ideas: destructive totalitarian visions versus freedom and equalities. That great struggle is over.’⁶⁰ Be that as it may, the strategy talked of the White House’s commitment to ‘Expand the Circle of Development by Opening Societies and Building the Infrastructure of Democracy’ and of the need to increase development assistance while opening societies to investment and commerce. Much later in 2009, Max Boot sought to set the record straight on what had been perceived—he argued misperceived—as a conservative ascendancy in the White House. At the same time, he praised the National Security Strategy as ambitious, observing ‘Bush realized the United States could no longer afford a ‘humble’ foreign policy’. He cited a menu of policy approaches: ‘US primacy, promotion of democracy, vigorous action, pre-emptive if necessary, to stop terrorism and weapons proliferation’.⁶¹

Meanwhile the findings of the 9/11 Commission echoed the continuing debate on the breach of sovereignty of those nations it labelled ‘remote regions and failing states.’ The authors argued that: ‘The United States has had to find ways to extend its reach, straining the limits of its influence’.⁶² Although in this case pursued with the national interest of the United States in mind, this shift connected its efforts to previously introduced debates on interventions that should ‘better’ the lives of those beyond a nation’s own borders. If the United States could bring democracy through healthcare, education, and economic development—while at the same time furthering its own interests by preventing conflict—it should do so. Counterterrorism would merge into a focus on stability operations and counterinsurgency

60 The White House, *National Security Review* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002), (accessed 16 December 2021).

61 Max Boot, ‘Think Again: Neocons’, *Foreign Policy*, 28 October 2009, (accessed 17 December 2021).

62 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 367.

by 2005.⁶³ It is in conjunction with these developments in United States' foreign engagements that attention to strategic communications increased in various government agencies in search of a way to achieve these ambitious and continuously expanding goals.

In the same year as the 9/11 Commission findings were published, the Defense Science Board Task Force (DSB) on strategic communications re-examined the findings it had published in 2001. It noted that 'strategic communications must be transformed. America's negative image in world opinion and diminished ability to persuade are consequences of factors other than failure to implement communications strategies. Interests collide. Leadership counts. Policies matter'.⁶⁴ Hence 'anti-American attitudes' that threaten national security, according to the authors, were not solely the result of unsuccessful public diplomacy by the Departments of Defense and State. Public opinion was influenced by 'Policies, conflicts of interest, cultural differences, memories, time, dependence on mediated information, and other factors'.⁶⁵ In other words, strategic communications was not just what was *said*, but also what was *done*. The DSB described strategic communications as:

...a variety of instruments used by governments for generations to *understand* global attitude and culture, *engage* in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions, *advise* policymakers, diplomats, and military leaders on the public opinion implications of policy choices, and *influence* attitudes and behavior through communication strategies... Engaging the right audiences at the right time can create diplomatic opportunities, reduce tensions leading to war, help contain conflicts, and address nontraditional threats to U.S. security.⁶⁶

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63 In 2005, the turn to 'stability operations' appears in several publications by the Department of Defense, providing definitions and guidance on the integration of these concepts in the Department and the military. Stability operations, the Department states: "shall be given priority to combat operations and be explicitly addressed and integrated across all DoD activities"; Department of Defense, *Directive Number 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of Defence, 2005), p. 2.

64 Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2004), pp. 1-2.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 15

66 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Furthermore, the authors built on the understanding of 9/11 as a symbolic rather than kinetic act. It was pivotal to recognise that ‘the United States is engaged in a generational and global struggle about ideas, not a war between the West and Islam. It is more than a war against the tactic of terrorism. We must think in terms of global networks, both government and non-government’.⁶⁷ This understanding began to appear throughout the United States government communications. In 2004, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice spoke at Michigan University: ‘We are engaged primarily in a war of ideas, not of armies. It will be won by visionaries who can look past the moment... It is absolutely the case that the United States needs to put new energy into its public diplomacy.’⁶⁸

These developments towards an understanding of strategic communications as engagement in a so-called ‘war of ideas’, were interwoven with a return to counterinsurgency and ‘small wars’ thinking as the dominant framework for approaching the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2005, Condoleezza Rice inaugurated the first Provincial Reconstruction Team deployed in Iraq. These civil-military organisations had the strategic purpose of achieving political and economic objectives, intended to build stability and ‘extend the reach of the Iraqi government.’⁶⁹

Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, who had deployed to Iraq in 2003 and subsequently served as military assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, co-authored the Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 with General David Petraeus in 2007. He had served in Haiti and Bosnia where he witnessed the consequences of the failed United Nations interventions of the 1990s.⁷⁰ Similar to stability operations, counterinsurgency centres on the need to provide security, services, and legitimacy which are essential to the success of military interventions.

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⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁸ Condoleezza Rice, ‘U.S. Needs New Energy in Public Diplomacy Campaign, Rice Says’ (Washington, DC: Washington File, Department of State, 2004).

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, ‘Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)’, *U.S. Department of State Archive 2001-2009*, (accessed 12 December 2021).

⁷⁰ The United States Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007); Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl had already set out these ideas in a 2006 article: Eliot Cohen, Conrad Crane, Jan Horvath, and John Nagl, ‘Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency’, *Military Review* Volume 86 (2006).

This requires the military to go beyond the use of conventional military means, and to coordinate and cooperate with civilian actors.⁷¹

Providing the security required to achieve political objectives—rather than a focus on offensive combat operations—would secure the support of the population, undermine the ability of enemies to influence the public, and tilt the balance in favour of the United States.⁷² The need to win the support of populations (‘hearts and minds’) not only triggered a significant expansion of military involvement in traditionally civilian activities, creating tensions between the Department of State and the Department of Defense, but also resulted in increased attention on strategic communications. However, all was not plain sailing for the COIN manual, as Fred Kaplan observed in the barely disguised resistance from the Army Intelligence Center—‘we must nonconcur due to the number of critical and major issues’. Kaplan noted,

The Intelligence Center’s problem with the manual – with the whole concept of counterinsurgency – boiled down to turf. Intelligence lay at the heart of a COIN campaign: the troops live among the people, keep them secure, and build their trust – as a result of which the people supply the troops with intelligence, which is then exploited to kill or capture insurgents, which makes the people still more secure, and so the cycle continues.

The manual, he went on to say

...stressed the need for troops to understand the cultural roots of an insurgency, such as tribes, clans, or ethnic groups...In its memo objecting to the COIN field manual, the Army Intelligence Center stated that “doctrinally there is no such thing” as cultural or social network analysis.⁷³

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71 Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, pp. 91-93.

72 Cohen et al., ‘Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes’; Counterinsurgency doctrine became the driver of the United States military in Iraq under General Petraeus from 2008, and in Afghanistan under General Stanley McChrystal in 2009.

73 Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp. 213-214.

Like counterinsurgency, strategic communications—a higher order, overarching concept—would set out to project a set of values alongside its interests. Like counterinsurgency, strategic communications would fall victim to turf wars inside the administration and armed forces.

Different Agencies, Different Definitions

To engage successfully in a ‘war of ideas’ and achieve the ambitious goals set out by the counterinsurgency framework of the Department of Defense and the United States military, the Defense Science Board Task Force recommended that strategic communications be understood as an overarching concept which embraced public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations, and international broadcasting services. Strategic communications should be driven by presidential direction. This would bring about sweeping reforms in the direction and coordination of strategic communications. It should entail, according to its authors, installing a Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication to oversee an interagency Strategic Communication Committee. The Deputy National Security Advisor should be granted the authority to direct and plan the work of government agencies active in public diplomacy, public affairs, and military information operations.⁷⁴ Coordination, furthermore, required leadership to enable the projection of a unified message.

The need to coordinate is subsequently picked up by several United States government agencies. Jeff Jones, Director of Strategic Communications and Information at the National Security Council, wrote in 2005: ‘There is little evidence of cooperation, coordination, or even more, the appreciation of the impact of strategic communication’.⁷⁵ Acknowledging the importance of strategic communications, but unsure about what it was and how it should be implemented, resulted in a range of definitions of strategic communications appearing throughout government. They vary—

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⁷⁴ Defense Science Board Task Force, *Report on Strategic Communication*.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey B. Jones, ‘Strategic Communications: A Mandate for the United States’, *Joint Forces Quarterly* Volume 39 (2005).

sometimes even within agencies—but often agree on the core concept exemplified by definitions outlined below.

In 2006, the Department of Defense published its Quadrennial Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communications which defined the concept as:

Focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.⁷⁶

Recognising that the United States must re-engage publics and focus on communicating its basic values was only the first step. The ideas were there, but no consensus or understanding on how to follow through. The Policy Coordinating Committee of the National Security Council saw strategic communications as equivalent to public diplomacy. In its 2007 *National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication* it blended the two into a single concept.⁷⁷ Although still confused about the precise definition of strategic communications, the Policy Coordinating Committee significantly overlapped with the Department of Defense in emphasising that it involved not only what was said, but also the ‘diplomacy of deeds’, what was done. The United States, it argued, should ‘tell the story of how these programs [economic and social development] are helping people improve their lives and opportunities’.⁷⁸

The government fully embraced strategic communications in the final years of the Bush administration. Improving how they engaged with and influenced populations around the world would create a more

76 A similar definition appears in the *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, also published by the Department of Defense; Office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006); Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02, Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010).

77 National Security Council Policy Coordinating Committee, ‘U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication’ (Washington, DC: The White House, 2007), p. 2.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

positive image of the United States beyond its borders. Expectations of the potential contribution of strategic communications to efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq were high. But during a public lecture in 2007 at Kansas State University, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed:

Public relations was invented in the United States, yet we are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and goals. It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America. As one foreign diplomat asked a couple of years ago, “How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world’s greatest communication society?” Speed, agility, and cultural relevance are not terms that come readily to mind when discussing U.S. strategic communications.⁷⁹

In his speech, Robert Gates argued that United States government institutions were outdated, lacking the capabilities to deal with a challenge such as al-Qaeda’s. Even if there were to be agreement inside Washington on how to define both the concept and subsequently the vision of what long-term success might look like, the government did not have the financial and institutional capacity to achieve this. United States government institutions, including the military, had been created to fight the wars of the past, tracing their origins to the mid-1940s.⁸⁰ They were no longer able to address current and future threats which, he argued, ‘require our government to operate as a whole differently – to act with unity, agility, and creativity. And they will require considerably more resources devoted to America’s non-military instruments of power’.⁸¹ New institutions were needed with a ‘21st century mind-set’.⁸²

79 Robert Gates, ‘*Landon Lecture Series on Public Issues*’, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 26 November 2007.

80 Gates recalls that the United States set up the ‘National Military Establishment’ in 1947 by which the Department of Defense was created. Soft power instruments were subsequently developed during the Cold War, but “allowed to wither or were abandoned” from the 1990s onwards; *Ibid.*

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*

Gates advocated for an increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security, including diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development.

Within the Department of Defense, these ideas can be found in the *National Defence Strategy* published under the leadership of Gates in 2008. Reflecting on developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, it pushed for a unified approach between military efforts and soft power capabilities. Strategic communications, it argued, was the capability to enable this unified approach to national security.⁸³ This would tilt the scales in favour of the United States when communicating the values it stands for to the world.⁸⁴ Strategic communications in the Department of Defense, from the publication of the 2008 *National Defence Strategy* onwards, represented a core concept across government agencies, ready to shape the environment and tilt the balance of the 'war of ideas' in favour of the United States.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS UNDER OBAMA: WHY ARE WE NOT WINNING?

Winning the support of populations beyond the borders of the United States proved much more difficult than expected, if not impossible. Less than a year after his inauguration in 2009, having withdrawn U.S. troops from Iraq, President Obama reluctantly agreed to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan.⁸⁵ In his effort to deal with the international conflicts he had inherited from the Bush administration, Obama set out to resolve the unresolved debate around strategic communications.

83 Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2008).

84 Gates continued to reform the Department of Defense strategic communications after the *National Defense Strategy of 2008*. In 2010, he ordered a Department of Defense-wide Front End Assessment study, evaluating the Department's strategic communications and information operations policy, definitions, and resources, after which significant reforms were implemented; Rosa Brooks, *Ten Years On: The Evolution of Strategic Communications and Information Operations since 9/11, Testimony before the House Armed Services Sub-Committee on Evolving Threats and Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Law Center, 2011), p. 1.

85 'Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan', 1 December 2009, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, (accessed 12 December 2021).

In 2010, the Obama administration published a *National Framework for Strategic Communications*.⁸⁶ The framework was grounded in the idea that the purpose of strategic communications was to close the ‘say-do gap’. This understanding had already emerged in the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*. Rosa Brooks saw it as a more ‘nuanced’ understanding in a later review of strategic communications during the Obama administration.⁸⁷ The 2010 *National Framework for Strategic Communications* defined strategic communications as ‘the synchronization of our words and deeds as well as deliberate efforts to communicate and engage with intended audiences’.⁸⁸ Elaborating on this, it continues: ‘aligning our actions with our words is a shared responsibility that must be fostered by a culture of communication throughout government’.⁸⁹ The report acknowledged that the US needed to do a better job in understanding the opinions and grievances of populations around the world. Whereas previous frameworks emanating from the Department of Defense had understood strategic communications as an overarching set of institutional capabilities in the communications community, the White House shifted the emphasis to strategic communications being the applied synchronisation of its words and deeds. It set out three priorities. Foreign audiences should ‘recognize areas of mutual interest with the United States’, ‘believe the United States plays a constructive role in global affairs’, and ‘see the United States as a respectful partner in efforts to meet complex global challenges’.⁹⁰

Furthermore, the framework acknowledged ‘the need to clarify what strategic communications mean and how we guide and coordinate our communications efforts’.⁹¹ In addressing the need to clarify the

86 The framework setting out an interagency strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communications was a requirement of the 2009 Duncan Hunter National Defence Authorization Act and was submitted to several committees of Congress.

87 Department of Defense, ‘Quadrennial Defense Review Report’ (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010); Rosa Brooks, ‘Confessions of a Strategic Communicator: Tales from inside the Pentagon’s message machine’, *Foreign Policy*, 6 December 2012, (accessed 7 November 2021).

88 This is reflected in other civilian and military agencies, including the *Marine Corps Functions Concept for Strategic Communications*, published in 2010, which states that it ‘is affected significantly more by actions than by words or images’; The White House, ‘National Framework for Strategic Communication’ (Washington, DC: The White House, 2010), p. 1; United States Marine Corps, ‘Marine Corps Operating Concepts – Third Edition’ (Arlington County: United States Marine Corps, 2010).

89 The White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communication*, p. 1.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 6

91 *Ibid.*

concept, the White House set up various interagency working groups to review and improve the government's ability to synchronise words and deeds. This would include re-evaluating the balance between civilian and military activities to identify those military programmes that might be more successful when taken over by civilian departments and agencies. The framework concludes with the suggestion that if the United States government could successfully foster a 'culture of communication' within its agencies and institutions, it would increase its communicative impact and result in maintaining 'global legitimacy' to support the national interest.⁹²

Strategic Communications as a Process

The *National Framework for Strategic Communication* clearly defined the essence of strategic communications as closing the say-do gap, and its purpose as furthering the national interest. But this broad understanding did little to ease the process of implementing strategic communications throughout government. In fact, it was followed by a decade that struggled with the question of how to *do* strategic communications. While more government agencies were embracing the term, discussions in the US shifted from *what we do*, to *how we do it*, and then to *who should do it*.

This trend was already apparent in 2009. The Department of Defense, which was required to report its organisational structure for strategic communications activities to the congressional defense committees, described the integration of strategic communications processes into its Department.⁹³ In the publication, it defined strategic communications as:

...a process rather than as a set of capabilities, organizations, or discrete activities. In its broadest sense, "strategic communication" is the process of integrating issues of audience and stakeholder perception into policy-making, planning, and operations at every level.⁹⁴

92 According to the framework, these include: Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, Military Information Operations, and Defense Support to Public Diplomacy; Ibid., p. 1.

93 This requirement was part of the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009.

94 Department of Defense, *Report on Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2009).

Similar understandings of strategic communications as process appear in other Department of Defense publications. The *Quadrennial Roles and Missions Review Report* (2009) emphasised the need for strategic communications processes to ‘improve the alignment of action and information with policy objectives’ to ‘integrate strategic communication into defense missions and to support larger U.S. policies as well as the State Department’s public diplomacy priorities’.⁹⁵ Similarly the *Joint Integrating Concept for Strategic Communication* (2009) stated:

Strategic communication is the alignment of multiple lines of operation (e.g. policy implementation, public affairs, force movement, information operations, etc.) that together generate effects to support national objectives. Strategic communication essentially means sharing meaning (i.e., communicating) in support of national objectives (i.e. strategically). This involves listening as much as transmitting, and applies not only to information, but also [to] physical communication – actions that convey meaning.⁹⁶

The DoD went on to publish the *Strategic Communication Science and Technology Plan* in 2009, responding to calls under the 2009 National Defence Authorization Act and to the House Armed Services Committee to focus specifically on the use of scientific tools and an expanded research programme to keep up with changes in the communications environment.

Closing the say-do gap, the government realised, required more than a generic statement. In 2011, the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities of the House Armed Services Committee launched its inquiry into the evolution of strategic communications and information operations since 9/11. In his evidence to the Subcommittee, Christopher

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⁹⁵ Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Roles and Missions Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2009).

⁹⁶ The Joint Staff, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept* (Washington, DC: US Strategic Command, 2009); *Joint Concepts* are produced by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the most senior military staff in the Department of Defense, advising the President, Secretary of Defense, Homeland Security Council and National Security Council. They address operational challenges, propose solutions, and identify the required capabilities.

Paul found that the lack of clear consensus on the definition of strategic communications was an obstruction to its progress in US government. It resulted in tensions between agencies and individuals acting on different definitions of the concept.⁹⁷ But even though the lack of a clear definition was a cause of concern, Paul concluded:

...the United States should be thoughtful, purposive, and coordinated in efforts to inform, influence, and persuade populations in pursuit of national policy objectives. If strategic communication as a term is too vague, too contested, or becomes politically untenable, abandon it. Just do not allow the underlying effort to coordinate government impact on the information environment to be lost too.⁹⁸

Rosa Brooks, former senior advisor to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Michele Flourney, made the opposite argument. In her statement to the Subcommittee she argued that ‘strategic communications is as much art as science, and it’s part of the long game’.⁹⁹ She develops this thought:

Strategic communication is hard because it’s *hard*. Strategic communication is, in a fundamental sense, an *aspirational* concept. We’re never going to get it 100% right; there are always going to be too many variables, many of them beyond our control. But as a government, we still have to try...Effective strategic communication requires decentralization, which creates risk. We *will* make mistakes. Somewhere, right now, some US government employee is doing something dumb, maybe even illegal, in the name of strategic communication. It’s just inevitable. But there’s been a tendency, in the media and a bit here on the Hill, to throw the baby out with the bathwater.¹⁰⁰

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⁹⁷ Christopher Paul, *Getting Better at Strategic Communication, Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011).

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 18

⁹⁹ Brooks, *Ten Years On*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 5, 12.

In her statement, Brooks advocates a looser approach to strategic communications. One with ‘less naval-gazing obsession with who does what’ and ‘less obsession with metrics and assessments’.¹⁰¹ Strategic communications, for her, is about shifting the long-term discourses in society. These cannot be measured in a timeframe, and require a more flexible, agile approach that does not get stuck in what she refers to as a ‘zero-defect mentality’.¹⁰² The concept, according to Brooks, remains confusing and could have been an unnecessary addition to the range of concepts already in existence. But it is here now. She finds:

Ideally, the term could serve as a reminder that *everything* is a form of communication – that our actions can speak as loudly as our words, and that wise officials, military and civilian alike, must consider the “information effects” of all that they say and do – from press statements to changes in force posture.¹⁰³

CONCLUSION

This is a story without an end. More a genealogy or chronology than a final word. Our decade is one that has already witnessed seismic shifts in foreign and security policy. The debate around defining strategic communications will continue as nation states transition from an age of small wars and proxy conflicts to a new Great Power geopolitics. The desire to project power while balancing persuasion against coercion, and the ambitious pursuits of ideologically opposed states and political movements set on winning the argument in the public space will only sharpen the need to address ‘what is strategic communications?’. And while for the time being the debate may have run short of steam in Washington, across fellow NATO memberstates the work continues with alacrity. Military doctrine writers and practice-oriented academics continue to explore whether mindset, process, or techniques remain the most productive lenses through which to view the projection of

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¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰³ Brooks, ‘Confessions of a Strategic Communicator.’

persuasion and coercion in the dynamic and turbulent 2020s. As a consensus emerges among thinkers outside the US, so geopolitics is already reshaping the environment into which communicators are projecting their ideas and values. Consequently, any consensus will invite revision in thinking as only befits the best policy and scholarly inquiry.

What organisational turf wars can disguise in the contested ways that agencies explain strategic communications is a privileging of institutional interest over national interest, albeit seemingly advanced with the best intentions. What should never be hidden, however, is that strategic communications speaks to the projection of values, not simply the instrumentalising of process or technique. Hence it is understood in certain NATO circles as ‘a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’.¹⁰⁴

Two decades after 9/11, the United States has withdrawn its forces from Afghanistan. Strategic communications proved not to be the panacea for the sizeable challenges ISAF/NATO faced there. Perhaps unsurprisingly, three decades of debate in this field leave more questions unanswered than resolved. The tensions that underpin this field of research and practice return the debate to the art-versus-science conundrum. At the same time, they highlight the need to position its proponents at the inception of the policy- and decision-making cycle, not at the end. Today China and Russia present strategic threats to western democracies. And so too does militant Islam. Rarely has it been so pressing for the West to align its rhetoric and actions for fear of the consequences.

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¹⁰⁴ Bolt & Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, p. 46.

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CHINA'S DISCOURSE ON STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: INSIGHTS INTO PRC EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA

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Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, China, Chinese strategic communications, propaganda*

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ABSTRACT

While tracing back to the second half of the 2000s, Chinese research on strategic communications has experienced a notable uptick over the last few years. Recent studies on China's own practice of strategic communications, and, more importantly, Xi Jinping's call to build 'a strategic communications system with distinctive Chinese characteristics' in May 2021, suggest that current Chinese views on the subject are worthy of analysis. This article examines 15 years of scholarship on the subject in Mandarin against the backdrop of institutional developments concerning 'propaganda work' in the Chinese Party-State under the Xi administration. It shows how the Chinese discourse on strategic

communications has evolved from an assessment of US doctrines and practices to a discussion of the effectiveness of the country's 'external propaganda'. Contrary to previous attempts to adapt to a perceived Western-dominated 'discourse system', Beijing is now seeking to affirm its own values and interests on the global stage.

INTRODUCTION

On 31 May 2021, during the thirtieth group study session of the 19th Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Party's General Secretary and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Xi Jinping stated:

it is necessary to strengthen top-level design and basic research, build a strategic communications system [zhanlüe chuanbo tixi] with distinctive Chinese characteristics, and make tremendous efforts to improve international communication influence, the attractive power of Chinese culture and China's image, China's discourse persuasiveness, and international public opinion guidance.¹

Notably, this was the first time Xi referred to 'strategic communications' [zhanlüe chuanbo] in a public speech. Recent literature on Chinese strategic communications has focused on Beijing's efforts to craft and project narratives in the geopolitical arena, exemplified by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, and in cross-Strait relations with Taiwan.² These studies have built on a holistic understanding of strategic communications that emerged in Western scholarship in the past decade that can be defined as 'the use of words, actions, images,

1 'Xi Jinping zai Zhong-Gong Zhongyang Zhengzhi Ju di sanshi ci jiti xuexi shi qiangdiao jiaqiang he gaijin guoji chuanbo gongzuo zhanshi zhenshi lifi quanmian de Zhongguo' [Xi Jinping Stressed the Importance of Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work to Show an Authentic, Multidimensional and Panoramic View of China During the Thirtieth Group Study Session of the CCP's Politburo], *Xinhua*, 1 June 2021.

2 Naoko Eto, 'Japan-China Strategic Communications under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of "Third Country Business Cooperation"', *Asian Perspective* Volume 45, No 3 (2021): 533-558; Aurelio Insisa, 'No Consensus across the Strait: Chinese and Taiwanese Strategic Communications in a Contested Regional Order', *Asian Perspective* Volume 45, No 3 (2021): 503-531.

or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behavior in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives’,³ and as ‘[a] holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’.⁴ Further insights on Beijing’s practice of strategic communications can be drawn indirectly from literature focusing on the activities of Chinese bureaucratic actors tasked with ‘propaganda work’ [xuanchuan gongzuo] and ‘united front work’ [tongzhan gongzuo] targeted at foreign audiences;⁵ and also from studies assessing Beijing’s attempts to achieve strategic objectives through concerted leverage across information, economic, and security domains.⁶

Yet Xi’s recent statement highlights one key gap in the research. The existing scholarship does not provide a granular inquiry of the meaning of strategic communications in relation to other modes of political communication devised by the Chinese Party-State to influence foreign audiences.⁷ To cover this gap, my research focuses on mainstream academic literature on strategic communications published on the Chinese Mainland from 2006 to the summer of 2021. The explanatory power of this body of work is somewhat limited, mainly because of the traditional reticence of Chinese scholars to discuss publicly the mechanics of Party-State propaganda,⁸ and the long-established practice of articulating sensitive debates within the circuit of ‘internal-circulation

3 James P. Farwell, *Power and Persuasion: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012), pp. xviii–xix.

4 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO StratCom CoE, 2019), p. 46.

5 See: Kingsley Edney, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda: International Power and Domestic Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Anne-Marie Brady, *Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping* (Wilson Center, 2017).

6 See: Giulio Pugliese and Aurelio Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics: Might, Money and Minds* (Culemborg: Palgrave, 2017); J. Michael Cole, *The Hard Edge of Sharp Power: Understanding China’s Influence Operations Abroad* (Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2018); Ross Babbage, Thomas G. Mahnken, and Gillian Evans, *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail, Volume I* (CSBA, 2019); Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding Influence in the Strategic Competition with China* (RAND, 2021).

7 I use the term ‘Party-State’ in this article to describe China as a Leninist political system in which ‘the Party exercises a monopoly of the state and military power to an extent unimaginable in democracies or most authoritarian states’. See: Steve Tsang, ‘Party-State Realism: A Framework for Understanding China’s Approach to Foreign Policy’, *Journal of Contemporary China* Volume 29, No 122 (2019): 305. In the context of this article, the term also hints at the overlapping party and state identities of Chinese bureaucratic actors involved with propaganda work.

8 Anne-Marie Brady, ‘How “China” Frames “Taiwan”’, in *Taiwan’s Impact on China: Why Soft Power Matters More than Economic or Political Inputs*, ed. Steve Tsang (Palgrave, 2017, ebook edition), p. 24.

only' [neibu] publications unavailable to the public.⁹ Despite these constraints, Chinese scholars advocating the adoption of a strategic communications mindset among domestic bureaucratic actors, stress its advantages vis-à-vis other modes of political communication. This type of 'constructive' criticism determined the selection of relevant sources within the literature. In turn, less emphasis is placed on more divulgatory scholarship on strategic communications that is primarily concerned with the exposition of Western, and more specifically American, concepts and practices.

Given these premises, the article is structured in the following way. The first section provides an overview of the concept of 'communication' within the broader context of China's evolving conceptualisation and articulation of its 'external propaganda' [duiwai xuanchuan] aimed at foreign audiences. This section does not aim to present an account of institutional development within the time frame of this article (late 1980s to mid-2000s). Rather, it seeks to outline the intellectual background and the benchmarks necessary to undertake a critical engagement with Chinese scholarship on strategic communications, especially regarding terminology. The second and third sections, which constitute the bulk of this study, review Chinese domestic literature on strategic communications with the goal of mapping the reception and adaptation of the concept within the PRC. The second section covers the years from 2006 to 2013, while the third covers the period from 2013 to 2021. The article continues with a fourth section, in which I investigate patterns of correlation between the articulation of the Chinese academic debate on strategic communications since 2013 on the one hand, and the bureaucratic restructuring of Party-State actors tasked with external propaganda under the Xi Jinping administration on the other. Given the opacity of Chinese institutions, this section relies on a diverse body of works consisting of 'China-watching' reports and secondary literature. Finally, in the conclusion I sum up the findings of this study and outline remaining issues and areas of investigation.

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⁹ Daniel C. Lynch, *China's Futures: PRC Elites Debate Economics, Politics, and Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. xi-xii.

CHINA'S EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA AND 'EXTERNAL/INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION', 1980s-2000s

Since at least the end of the First World War, the term 'propaganda', translated in Mandarin as 'xuanchuan', has been popularly understood in Western societies through a moralist outlook. It is associated with a mode of political communication featuring one-way information flows, widespread use of falsehoods and distortions, and malicious intent.¹⁰ Western attitudes toward propaganda stand in stark contrast with China. The Chinese Party-State never disavowed the Leninist heritage of its own propaganda institutions, which trace their origins to the period prior to the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the political legitimacy of 'propaganda work'.¹¹ Any attempt to scan the landscape of China's influence activities must start with acknowledging the continuing centrality of this Leninist paradigm. More broadly, the Party-State's ability to adapt to new communication theories, information technologies, and organisational approaches to maintain its hold on political power since the era of reform and opening-up began in 1978,¹² suggests that Chinese propaganda cannot be reduced to popular Western perceptions of the phenomenon. Rather, as Edney notes, propaganda should be primarily understood as 'a collection of practices through which the Party-State exercises power in relation to the public articulation of discourses'.¹³

This relational understanding of propaganda highlights the differences between 'domestic propaganda' and 'external propaganda'. The former can be understood as the exercise of power practices in the tightly controlled discourse of the PRC. The latter as the exercise of a separate

10 On popular understandings of propaganda in Western societies, see Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, 'Introduction: Thirteen Propositions about Propaganda', in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, eds. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-16. On the moralist framing of propaganda see: John H. Brown, 'Two Ways of Looking at Propaganda', *CPD Blog*, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 29 June 2006.

11 On the role of propaganda in the construction of Marxist-Leninist regimes, see: Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). On CCP propaganda before and after 1949, see: Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Timothy Cheek, 'China's Directed Public Sphere: Historical Perspectives on Mao's Propaganda State', in *Redefining Propaganda in Modern China: The Mao Era and Its Legacies*, eds. James Farley and Matthew D. Johnson (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 36-53.

12 Anne-Marie Brady, 'Guiding Hand: The Role of the CCP Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* Volume 3, N° 1 (2006): 58-77.

13 Edney, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, p. 8.

set of power practices within a contested discourse space that has been shaped by Western perceptions of what is to be considered legitimate or not. This predicament, namely the historical dominance of Western norms and standards in the collective understanding of legitimate modes of state communication, has posed a notable challenge to Beijing—especially as the country's interactions with the outside world and its status in international politics have grown in tandem with its astonishing economic growth since the late twentieth century. Contrary to Western states, who—led by American example and the emergence and development of public diplomacy—have been relatively successful in distancing their own modes of state-driven political communication from popular perceptions of propaganda, Beijing has not been able to chart a similar 'transition' out of the Leninist propaganda model. Political culture, pattern dependency within domestic institutions, and, above all, the centrality of domestic propaganda practices in the CCP's exercise of political power appear as insurmountable obstacles to this shift.¹⁴ As a result, discourse on political communication targeted at foreign audiences, articulated across Party-State institutions and Mainland Sinophone academia, has grown increasingly complex, and at times downright confusing. This is because of a fundamental internal contradiction: maintaining a Leninist propaganda model while articulating new modes of political communication that should not be perceived by foreign audiences as 'propaganda'.

The concept of 'external communication' [duiwai chuanbo], also described as 'international communication' [guoji chuanbo] in later sources, has played a central role in this endeavour.¹⁵ The emergence of 'communication' as a concept both related to and contrasting with propaganda can be traced back to the second half of the 1980s, when the Party-State and the scholars in its orbit began to undertake a re-valuation

14 See: Nicholas J. Cull, 'Roof for a House Divided: How U.S. Propaganda Evolved into Public Diplomacy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, eds. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 131-146.

15 'External communication' and 'international communication' are, ultimately, interchangeable terms. The two adjectives generally convey slightly different nuances: 'external communication' focuses on the agency of Chinese actors, while 'international communication' focuses on the two-way dynamic between Chinese actors and international audiences. Other terms sometimes used by Chinese scholars, such as 'media propaganda' [meiti xuanchuan] and 'media diplomacy' [meiti waijiao] can be associated with external/international communication, even though they refer to a narrower media-centric dimension of this facet of external propaganda work.

of China's external propaganda activities.¹⁶ Among the studies published in this period, a 1988 monograph authored by Duan Liancheng introduced a contraposition between propaganda and external communication to mainstream academic debate.¹⁷ The former was considered a solipsistic, boastful, and damaging mode of political communication associated with the darkest pages of the Cultural Revolution but still present in the China of the 1980s. The latter was championed as a new alternative based on communication studies, objective reporting, the establishment of two-way flows of information, and the ability to adapt content and channels of communication to different recipients.¹⁸ However, in doing so, Duan also injected a considerable degree of ambiguity into the use of the term 'propaganda' in Chinese discourse. The term was now used both in a disparaging fashion to indicate outdated and damaging modes of communication *and* in a neutral way to refer to the institutional set-up and set of practices tasked with influencing foreign audiences.

Throughout most of the 1990s, the nuances and ambiguities exemplified by Duan's study appeared in the minutiae of academic debate. In the aftermath of the international backlash following the June Fourth Incident, which Ohlberg has painstakingly reconstructed, concerns about the perception of China's state-driven political communication aimed at foreign audiences took the backseat. Emphasis lay on an overhaul of the external propaganda apparatus and of the strategic logic underpinning it. In the first half of the decade, the focus rested on restructuring existing institutions, with the rise of the Office for External Propaganda / State Council Information Office (SCIO) as the main engine of the propaganda apparatus. As well as on the establishment of new infrastructure for the dissemination of state-driven information abroad, with the creation and

16 Mareike Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda* (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics (PhD diss., Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2013), pp. 278-280.

17 On the introduction in Sinophone Mainland Chinese communication studies of the term 'chuanbo' as a Mandarin translation for 'communication' see: Jiang Fei, 'Ruhe zouchu Zhongguo guoji chuanbo de "shizilukou"' [How To Exit the Crossroads of Chinese International Communication], *Guoji chuanbo* [Global Communication] Volume 1, No 1 (2016): 32-33.

18 Duan Liancheng, *Duiwai chuanbo xue chutan / How to Help Foreigners Know China (Han-Ying hebianben)* [A Preliminary Exploration of External Communications Studies (Chinese-English Bilingual Edition)] (Beijing: Zhongguo jianshe chubanshe, 1988). Duan was a former director of the Foreign Languages Publication and Distribution Office—a propaganda unit then under the Ministry of Culture.

reorganisation of state media and the introduction of new practices such as the institutionalisation of press conferences and the publication of white papers. Successively, against the backdrop of this renewed media and institutional infrastructure, the second half of the 1990s saw the formalisation of a new strategic outlook that interpreted information as one of the multiple domains of an international competition pitting China against hostile foreign forces—a domain in which external propaganda had the fundamental responsibility to create a ‘favourable international public opinion environment’ that would facilitate China’s rise.¹⁹

The issue of negative foreign perceptions of China’s external propaganda would only re-emerge by 1999, to then take centre stage in 2003 and 2004, when the Party-State implemented a comprehensive upgrade of external propaganda rooted in a starkly realist, zero-sum view of international politics as a multi-domain struggle for primacy. Against this backdrop, external propaganda was reconceptualised as a priority task aimed at sustaining and enhancing the PRC’s ‘comprehensive national power’ [zonghe guoli] against Western hostile forces. Now considered key in upholding China’s cultural and ideological security, external propaganda was elevated to the national security level. This conceptual shift, in turn, explains the major changes affecting the articulation of Chinese external propaganda throughout the mid-2000s: the implementation, through massive investments, of a ‘going out’ [zouchuqu] strategy for Chinese state-controlled media in 2004; the embrace of public diplomacy, with the creation of a public diplomacy unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also in 2004 and the launch of the Confucius Institute in 2005; as well as the official adoption of ‘soft power’ [ruan shili] as a conceptual tool to shape and scope this mode of political communication in 2007.²⁰

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19 Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment*, pp. 297-334. 1997-1998 was a brief exception to this trend, as the CCP Central Propaganda Department decided to edit the official translation of ‘xuanchuan’ from ‘propaganda’ to ‘publicity’ in 1997, a decision that would eventually lead the Party organ to change the translation of its own English moniker to ‘Central Publicity Department’ the following year.

20 Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment*, pp. 334-445. For a state-of-the-art overview of soft power in China, see: Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, eds., *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China’s Campaign for Hearts and Minds* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020).

In the aftermath of these profound transformations, the academic discourse on Chinese propaganda became increasingly fraught by the end of the decade. Here external propaganda is to be understood, paraphrasing Edney, as the set of diverse power practices held by the Party-State in the international information sphere and the institutions and information infrastructure supporting it. The aforementioned reforms of external propaganda shaped an academic consensus around the fact that China had now successfully ‘modernised’ its political communication and moved away from outdated modes of ‘one-way’ political communication associated with foreign audiences’ perceptions of ‘propaganda’. The nature of this shift, however, remained contested, mainly because of the difficulty in placing external communication within this intellectual construct. Starting with the reforms of state media tasked with external propaganda in the early 1990s, the concept of external communication mainly came to define those media-centric power practices concerned with the more immediate dimension of information dissemination: the selection of information, the translation of content from domestic propaganda and the creation of exclusive content for foreign audiences, the organisation and management of ad hoc state media deputed to the dissemination of information abroad, and the measurement of effectiveness across different foreign audiences.²¹

Whether or not this specific dimension of China’s external propaganda had to be considered as a subset of the new public diplomacy remained subject to debate. Some scholars retroactively figured a three-stage process in which China’s political communication targeted at foreign audiences had evolved from the unidirectional propaganda of the Maoist era to the two-way external communication that characterised the first decades of the reform and opening-up period, and finally to the emergence of a contemporary, all-round public diplomacy.²² While from a Western perspective the inclusion of state-driven information

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21 See: Liu Na, *Zhongguo guangbo dianshi duiwai chuanbo li yanjiu* [Research on the External Communication Power of Chinese Broadcasting and Television] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2017).

22 For an overview of the academic debate on communication, public diplomacy, and external propaganda in China, see: Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute* (Abingdon and New York, 2015), pp. 68-70.

dissemination clashes with perceptions of what constitutes public diplomacy, these discourses reflected a tendency, noted by Bandurski, to present it as the evolution of China's external propaganda writ-large by the second term of the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration (2007-2012).²³ Other scholars, however, continued to regard external communication as a part of external propaganda, and as separate from the practices of public diplomacy focused on audience engagement. They either foregrounded the successful transition from one-way propaganda to two-way international communication, or considered 'communication' an ideal standard that was yet to be fully realised.²⁴ It was within this conceptual landscape, marked by the tension between the perceived need to uphold a Leninist paradigm of propaganda and widespread concerns for the reception and credibility of China's political communication, that Mainland Chinese scholars and Party-State institutions tasked with propaganda work began to investigate the emergence of strategic communications in the US from the late 2000s to the early 2010s.

CHINA DISCOVERS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, 2006-2013

The concept of strategic communications first appeared in mainstream Chinese academia in an article authored by Shen Suru and published in July 2006 in the academic journal *International Communication* [Duiwai chuanbo]. The article discussed the evolution of the PRC's political communication targeted at foreign audiences from outdated propaganda models to soft-power focused public diplomacy. Shen defined strategic communications, in a somewhat cumbersome manner, as 'the promotion of a set of themes or the implementation of specific government policies through symbolic and communication activities'. She framed it as one of three levels of Chinese public diplomacy, alongside 'reporting' [baodao] and the establishment and management of close relations with elite

23 David Bandurski, 'Public Diplomacy', in *The Decoding China Dictionary*, eds. Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen (Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, 2021), pp. 46-49.

24 See: Xiaolin Zhang, 'From 'External Propaganda' to 'International Communication': China's Promotion of Soft Power in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies', in *China's Information and Communications Technology Revolution: Social Changes and State Responses*, eds. Xiaoling Zhang and Yongnian Zheng (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 103-120; Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy*, pp. 68-70.

actors and epistemic communities in foreign countries (namely, ‘united front work’).²⁵ The article remained an isolated case in the Chinese academic landscape until 2008, when new studies began to appear following the publication of a series of official documents on strategic communications issued by US bureaucratic actors: the US Department of Defense’s (DoD) *Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication* published in September 2006, the 2007 amendment of the DoD *Joint Publication 1-02* including for the first time a definition of strategic communications, and the US Department of State’s (DoS) 2007 *National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, the 2009 DoD *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*, and the 2010 US *National Framework for Strategic Communication* by the Obama White House.²⁶

It is possible to identify two main trends in this earliest period of Chinese scholarship on strategic communications. The first is, unsurprisingly, preoccupied with explaining the emergence of a US approach to strategic communications between the second George W. Bush administration and the first Obama administration. The first three academic monographs published on the subject in Mainland China between 2008 and 2014, can each be considered part of this trend. These studies focused on reconstructing how strategic communications emerged from communication science, on mapping the evolution of the bureaucratic and technological infrastructure that enabled the US to transition from WWII propaganda to Cold War-era public diplomacy to contemporary strategic communications, and on outlining the relation between strategic communications and other modes of US political communications. These include public diplomacy, public affairs, psychological operations, and ‘international broadcasting’ [guoji guangbo]—a term used to describe the US government’s influence over major international media. Moreover, with an eye on the War on Terror, these studies presented the pivot to strategic communications as a tool

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25 Shen Suru, ‘Kaizhan ‘ruan shili’ yu duiwai chuanbo de yanjiu’ [Developing Research on ‘Soft Power’ and ‘Strategic Communications’], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communication] No 7 (2006): 24-28.

26 For a review of the emergence of an official literature on strategic communications in the US, see: Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communications: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), pp. 19-20.

to protract American dominance in the global information sphere, thus maintaining its hegemonic status in international politics.²⁷

The second trend in early Chinese scholarship on strategic communications is an attempt to frame strategic communications in terms of public diplomacy, soft power, and 'national image'.²⁸ Thus, Li Defang described strategic communications as an important aspect of Chinese public diplomacy, to be used in order to enhance a country's soft power.²⁹ Meanwhile, Yu Zhaohui labelled it the centerpiece of an integrated public diplomacy practice that aims to create an effective national image to be disseminated on the global stage.³⁰ Even scholars such as Bi Yantao and Wang Jinling, who avoided reductionist definitions of strategic communications as some sort of strategic dimension of public diplomacy, tended to fall within this camp. The two authors offered a more comprehensive definition of strategic communications, defining it as a process by which governments or NGOs mobilise and coordinate resources to transmit information and influence designated targets to realise specific strategic interests. Yet some of the goals they outlined, such as image creation and identity construction,³¹ do reveal the continuing dominance of these themes.

Integrating the debate on strategic communications in China in the wider discourse on public diplomacy, soft power, and national image, also allowed local scholars to use strategic communications as a conceptual tool to convey 'constructive criticism' of China's external propaganda. Yu Zhaohui, for instance, ascribed Beijing's perceived shortcomings

27 Yu Zhaohui, *Zhanlüe chuanbo guanli: Lengzhan hou Meiguo guoji xingxiang goujian yanjiu* [Strategic Communication: An In-Depth Study of US Image-Building in the Post-Cold War Era] (Beijing: Shishi chubanshe, 2008); Bi Yantao and Wang Jinling, *Zhanlüe chuanbo gangyao* [Essentials of Strategic Communications] (Beijing: Guojia xingzheng xueyuan chubanshe, 2011); Li Jian and Zhang Chengyuan, *Zhanlüe chuanbo: Meiguo shixian guojia anquan yu junshi zhanlüe de zhongyao shoudian* [Strategic Communications: An Important Means to Implement US National Security and Military Strategy] (Beijing: Hangkong gongye chubanshe, 2014).

28 On the relation between 'national image' and foreign policy behaviour in China, see: Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

29 Li Defang, 'Gonggong waijiao yu Zhongguo ruanshili jianshe' [Public Diplomacy and the Construction of China's Soft Power], *Lilun xuesi* [Theory Study] No 2 (2008): 58-59.

30 Yu Zhaohui, 'Zhenghe gonggong waijiao: Guojia xingxiang goujian de zhanlüe goutong xin shijiao' [Integrated Public Diplomacy: A New Perspective on the Strategic Communications of the Construction of National Image], *Guoji guanli* [International Review] No 1 (2008): 21-28.

31 Bi Yantao and Wang Jinling, 'Zhanlüe chuanbo chutan' [A Preliminary Study on Strategic Communications], *Hainan Shibao Daxue xuebao* (Shehui kexue ban) [Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences)] Volume 24, No 5 (2011): 160-162.

in constructing an appealing national image abroad and in providing a 'correct' understanding of its policies to foreign audiences to the absence of strategic communications mechanisms.³² Instead, Wang Yi and Pang Tong used strategic communications as a tool to criticise the effectiveness of what they define as one of the subsets of China's public diplomacy: media diplomacy, or external communication. In their eyes this practice featured bureaucratic actors who put too much emphasis on 'propaganda tasks' [xuanchuan renwu] and neglected the 'rules of journalism' [xinwen guilü], thus affecting China's persuasiveness and credibility on the international stage.³³

During this first phase of domestic scholarship on strategic communications, the tendency to devise the concept as a tool to criticise, or more precisely, to suggest improvements for Chinese external propaganda, can also be seen among scholars discussing the propaganda work of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). As early as the summer of 2008, Fu Changyi used strategic communications as a conceptual tool to criticise traditional shortcomings of the PLA's external propaganda work: literal translation of internal propaganda content into external propaganda, an inability to 'zone' [fenqu] propaganda and obtain a granular understanding of target audiences to produce tailored communication activities, as well as a tendency to respond slowly to crises, hampering the timely dissemination of accurate reports to foreign audiences. More importantly, against the backdrop of US developments, Fu argued that, in order to effectively meet the requirements of national strategy, PLA external propaganda work should be elevated to a strategic position and incorporated within the overall framework of China's strategy to develop international communication.³⁴

32 Yu Zhaohui, '9·11 hou Meiguo Zhong-Dong zhanlüe chuanbo guanli yanjiu' [A Research on the US Management of Strategic Communications in the Middle East after 9/11], *Alabo shijie* [Arab World], 44.

33 Wang Yi and Pang Tong, 'Qianxi wo guo meiti waixuan gongzuo de zhuanxing zhi lu' [A Preliminary Analysis of the Avenues of Transformation for the External Propaganda Work of Our Country's Media], *Wenhua yu chuanbo* [Culture & Communication] Volume 2, N° 5 (2013): 14-17.

34 Fu Changyi, 'Mei jun zhanlüe chuanbo de tedian ji dui wo jun duiwai xuanchuan gongzuo de qishi' [Characteristics of the US Armed Forces' Strategic Communications and Lessons for the External Propaganda of Our Armed Forces], *Xi'an Zhengzhi Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of the Xi'an Politics Institute of PLA] Volume 21, N° 4 (2008): 40-43.

Fu's views were echoed later in 2011 by Li Mingfu, who also portrayed strategic communications as a criterion to improve the effectiveness of PLA external propaganda work. Li was the first scholar to provide a concrete example of the PLA's ineffective external propaganda that could have benefited from a strategic communications approach: the 2001 Hainan Island spy plane incident involving the US.³⁵ Also in 2011, Wei Chao re-examined the nexus between PLA external propaganda and strategic communications, focusing more directly on Western media's perceived capacity to monopolise the global information environment through agenda setting and thus to project their 'China threat theory'. Wei suggested to bridge this gap by maximising 'source control' [xinyuan kongzhi] in the dissemination of the PLA's external communication to Western media, and by simultaneously enhancing engagement with the foreign public. In a rather puzzling move, Wei also argued in favour of donating 'propaganda materials' as a possible tool of strategic communications targeting the foreign public.³⁶ Similarly, Wang Jianjun highlighted three proposals for PLA strategic communications: the 'optimisation' of the various organs tasked with the 'management of military information'; the simplification of censorship procedures to speed up information dissemination; and a deeper engagement with foreign media. These proposals were later echoed by Xiao, Liu, and Zhang's call for strengthening military-civilian cooperation, establishing a cross-agency information sharing platform, and strengthening oversight on intelligence acquisition, resource allocation, and staffing.³⁷ A further insight can be drawn from these studies: contrary to scholars focusing on China's international relations, scholars working in the orbit of the PLA were not particularly worried about defining the

35 Li Mingfu, 'Mei jun xingxiang zhanlue chuanbo de neihan tedian jiqi qishi' [The Essential Features of the US Armed Forces' Strategic Communications – and Insights on Them], *Guofang keji* [National Defense Science & Technology] Volume 268, No 3 (2011): 85-88. On the international and domestic impact of the 2001 US spy plane incident see: Peter Hayes Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 108-109.

36 Wei Chao, 'Zhongguo jundui de duiwai xuanchuan yu zhanlue chuanbo' [The External Propaganda of China's Armed Forces and Strategic Communications], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communications], No 8 (2011): 9-10.

37 Wang Jianjun, 'Linian zhuanbian: Wo jun guoji xingxiang jiangou de xianshi yaoqiu' [A Conceptual Shift: Pragmatic Requirements to the Construction of Our Armed Forces' International Image], *Junshi jizhe* [Military Correspondent] No 2 (2012): 42-43; Xiao Liuwei, Liu Yan and Zhang Zongbo, 'Mei jun zhanlue chuanbo fazhan tedian ji qishi' [Developing Features of the US Armed Forces' Strategic Communications and Their Implications], *Guofang keji* [National Defense Technology and Science] Volume 35, No 4 (2014): 28-32.

Chinese Armed Forces information activities as ‘propaganda’. Bypassing ambiguities in distinguishing between external propaganda as a set of power practices, and external propaganda as a discrete mode of political communications supposedly superseded by either public diplomacy or international communications, these scholars tended to interpret strategic communications simply as a cipher for *better* propaganda work.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE XI ERA, 2013-2021

A qualitative shift in Chinese scholarship on strategic communications emerged from 2014. Critiques of China’s external propaganda based on strategic communications, as well as proposals for adopting mechanisms and a mindset based on it, assumed a more sophisticated and concrete character. Four speeches delivered by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in the second half of 2013 can be retroactively singled out as signaling a top-down shift in the direction of the country’s external propaganda. This shift, in turn, led to new developments in the research agenda on strategic communications.

The first was Xi’s announcement of what would eventually morph into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during an official visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013.³⁸ The BRI is still an evolving project as it approaches its second decade. Despite enduring international backlash and obstacles, the BRI has become a tangible example of Beijing’s ambitions to expand its geo-economic footprint across and beyond Eurasia, and a key driver in promoting an alternative model of international governance to the Western paradigm.³⁹ The second was a speech given by Xi in October of the same year at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference. For the first time the Chinese leader signaled a shift away from the Denghist credo ‘hide one’s capabilities and bide one’s time’ [taoguang yanghui], and the arrival of a new era for Chinese diplomacy in which Beijing

38 ‘President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 7 September 2013.

39 Within the sizeable literature on the BRI, the most comprehensive analysis of its geo-strategic rationale is arguably: Nadège Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau Research, 2017). On influence projection in the context of the BRI, see: Nadège Rolland, ‘Mapping the Footprint of Belt and Road Influence Operations’, *Sinopsis*, 8 December 2019.

would ‘strive for achievements’ [fenfa youwei].⁴⁰ Finally, the third and fourth were two speeches that Xi delivered in August, for the annual National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference, and in December, during the twelfth group study session of the 18th Politburo of the CCP. These two speeches grounded the Party-State propaganda work in the new, emerging direction of China’s engagement with the outside world. At the August conference Xi asked to innovate ideas and methods in propaganda and ‘thought work’,⁴¹ while later in December he called for permeating every aspect of the country’s external communication with contemporary Chinese values and expanding its platforms and vehicles.⁴²

The first discernible pattern in assessing how directives asking for a more proactive external propaganda have filtered down into Chinese scholarship, concerns the conceptualisation of strategic communications. As seen in the previous section, with the exception of PLA environments, during the Hu-Wen administration Chinese scholars had primarily understood strategic communication as a dimension of public diplomacy. Since 2014, however, the main framework grounding strategic communications in the broader debate on external propaganda has become that of external communication. Several scholars have framed this shift as a course reversal in relations between China and the international public opinion environment. If in the past China had tried to fit within a ‘discourse system’ shaped by the West, now the Party-State had the opportunity, through strategic communications, to successfully project its own values onto the international public opinion

40 ‘Xi Jinping zai zhoubian wajiao gongzuo zuotan hui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua’ [Xi Jinping Delivered an Important Speech at the Work Conference on Peripheral Diplomacy], *Xinhua*, 25 October 2013. For a detailed analysis of this speech, see: Michael D. Swaine, ‘Chinese Views and Commentaries on Periphery Diplomacy’, *China Leadership Monitor*, N° 44 (2013): 1-43. Further evidence that 2013 was a key year in the reconceptualisation of China’s foreign policy behavior and objectives can be found in: Bonnie S. Glaser and Alice Szalwinski, ‘Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics’, *China Brief* Volume 13, N° 16 (2013): 9-12.

41 ‘Xi Jinping zai quan guo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao xionghuai daju bawo dashi zhuyuan dashi nuli ba xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo zuo de geng hao’ [Xi Jinping Stressed the Importance of Keeping the Larger Picture in Mind, Grasping General Trends, Looking Towards Great Matters, Doing Propaganda and Thought Work Even Better at the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference], *Gongchandangyuan wang* [Website of the Members of the CCP], 21 August 2013.

42 ‘Xi Jinping zai Zhong-Gong Zhongyang Zhengzhi ju di shi’er ci ji ti xuexi shi qiangdiao jianshe shehuizhuyi wenhua qiangguo zhuzhi, tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili’ [Xi Jinping Stressed the Importance of Building a Socialist Culture to Strengthen the Country and of Putting Further Efforts into Improving National Cultural Soft Power During the Twelfth Group Study Session of the CCP’s Politburo], *Gongchandangyuan wang* [Website of the Members of the CCP], 31 December 2013.

environment. Shi Anbin and Wang Xi, for instance, advocated a shift toward strategic communications and away from what they perceived as external propaganda driven by *Realpolitik* calculations. For them strategic communications offers a powerful and appealing alternative, based on the symbiosis of traditional and socialist moral values encapsulated in the ‘Chinese Dream’.⁴³

Similarly, Wang Weijia argued that China’s attempt to embed its external communication within a Western-dominated global media market since the 1990s to ‘tell the China story well’ [jianghao Zhongguo gushi], had only resulted in a situation where ‘nobody listens to’ and ‘nobody believes in’ [shuo le mei ren ting, ting le mei ren xin] China. However, as the balance of power in international politics changes, Beijing is on the threshold of acquiring capacities that will allow it to achieve ‘cultural autonomy’ and escape from its subaltern position in the global public opinion environment. Moreover, Wang argued, because of this shift in the international balance of power, an official strategic communications organ is bound to emerge as a consequence of the centripetal bureaucratic process in the Party-State that will proceed in lockstep with the expansion of the country’s capabilities. According to Wang, in a future where boundaries between national security, social governance, and propaganda management will eventually blur, strategic communications mechanisms responding directly to the central leadership will emerge from the seamless integration of ‘economic work, diplomatic work, and national security work’ [jingji gongzuo, waijiao gongzuo, guojia anquan gongzuo].⁴⁴

More broadly, Wang Weijia’s article is an example of how strategic communications has become a topic that allows scholars to insert themselves into wider conversations on the future direction of China’s external propaganda, at a time when the Party-State leadership has

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43 Shi Anbin and Wang Xi, ‘Cong ‘xianshi zhengzhi’ dao ‘guannian zhengzhi’: Lun guojia zhanlue chuanbo de daoyi ganzhao li’ [From *Realpolitik* to *Noopolitik*: On the Moral Appeal of National Strategic Communications], *Xueshu qianyan* [Frontiers] № 12 (2014): 16-25.

44 Wang Weijia, ‘Zhongguo duiwai chuanbo huayu tixi mianlin de shishi yu tiaozhan’ [The Current Scenario and Challenges Facing China’s External Communication Discourse System], *Guojia Xingzheng Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Chinese Academy of Governance] № 3 (2017): 10-14.

reaffirmed a hands-on approach. This predicament explains the proliferation of definitions of ‘national strategic communications’ [guojia zhanlüe chuanbo] that emphasise the centrality of state actors and international communication in recent years. Wang Fang, for instance, has defined strategic communications as a ‘communication behaviour’ and a ‘strategic viewpoint’ that is state-centric and guided by national interest, that aims at seeking support within the international community and at winning over the ‘right to speak’ [huayu zhudong quan], that is based on rules and systematic planning, that is articulated through mass media and other channels of communication, and that is targeted at both specific countries and at the international community.⁴⁵ Jiang Fei has portrayed it, instead, as an evolution of international communication from an original model of cross-cultural communication in which the main actors were NGOs and individuals, to a new type of communication guided by political and military interest-groups.⁴⁶ Finally, Zhu Yubo labelled it an ‘institutionalized and systematized propaganda activity led by the state to serve a nation’s strategic interests and goals.’⁴⁷ From this perspective, even Zhao Qizheng’s questionable claim that Mao Zedong’s 1938 work *On Protracted War* represents an *avant-la-lettre* case of strategic communications that proves how Chinese statesmen have long mastered this art, could be interpreted as an attempt to enhance the appeal and the legitimacy of the concept.⁴⁸

A second, more intriguing pattern in recent Chinese scholarship concerns the proliferation of suggestions and proposals to enable ‘national strategic communications’ within the Chinese Party-State. One facet of this scholarship is concerned with the managerial dimension of state media—a trend that further proves how, since the beginning of the

45 Wang Fang, ‘Guojia zhanlüe chuanbo kuangjia yu huayu tixi goujian yanjiu’ [A Research on the Construction of a National Strategic Communications Framework and Discourse System], *Guangxi shehui kexue* [Social Sciences in Guangxi], 262 (2017): 143-147. On the Chinese concept of ‘right to speak’, a term also translatable as ‘discourse power’, see: Kejin Zhao, ‘China’s Rise and Its Discursive Power Strategy’, *Chinese Political Science Review* Volume 1, N° 3 (2016): 539-564.

46 Jiang, ‘Ruhe zouchu Zhongguo guoji chuanbo de “shizilukou”’.

47 Zhu Yubo, ‘Fanyi de zhanlüe chuanbo guan - Yi “Zhongguo guanjian ci” xiangmu wei li’ [A Strategic Communications View of Translation Through the “Chinese Keywords” Project Case Study], *Dangdai waiyu yanjiu* [Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies] N° 2 (2020): 111-118.

48 Zhao Qizheng, ‘Tisheng dui ‘zhanlüe chuanbo’ de renshi he shijian’ [Promoting the Knowledge and the Practice of Strategic Communications], *Gonggong waijiao jikan* [Public Diplomacy Quarterly] N° 3 (2015): 1-5.

Xi era, strategic communications has been more closely identified with external communication rather than public diplomacy. Scholars calling for this type of managerial reform, however, have only provided vague suggestions for the improvement of external propaganda in state media—perhaps because it is a sensitive topic in open-access mainstream scholarship. Cheng Manli and Zhao Liangying focused on the absence of coordination among propaganda units, on the continuing presence of ineffective self-reported evaluations to measure effect, and on the lack of scientific methods to measure outcomes, while arguing in favour of the establishment of flat management, centralised allocation of resources, merging of units with overlapping responsibilities, and the creation of a joint workforce.⁴⁹ The overall picture suggests that in this context strategic communications can be understood as a conceptual platform to call for the enactment of ‘better’ propaganda, similar to the earlier literature that emerged in PLA environments in the second half of the 2000s. It should not be surprising, then, that these studies have resorted to the same type of stark contraposition between one-way propaganda and two-way communication that traces back to Duan Liancheng’s work in the late 1980s. Zhao Liangying and Xu Xiaolin, for instance, have lamented that China’s ‘international communication has been managed as if it was propaganda’.⁵⁰

More importantly, beyond this narrow managerial dimension, Chinese scholars have made more concrete proposals for the establishment of new institutional mechanisms for strategic communications within the Party-State. Zhao Qizheng has suggested the creation of an ad hoc institution that would include organs tasked with ‘government diplomacy’, public diplomacy, national security, external propaganda,

49 Cheng Manli, ‘Guoji chuanbo nengli jianshe de xietongxing fenxin’ [A Collaborative Analysis of International Communication Capacity Building], *Dianshi yanjiu* [TV Research] Volume 295 (2014): 16-17; Wang Mei, ‘Cong zhanlüe cengmian wei wo guo guoji chuanbo jianyan xiance: Zhuanfang Beijing Daxue Guojia Zhanlüe Chuanbo Yanjiuyuan yuanchang Cheng Manli’ [Suggestions for Our Country’s International Communication from a Strategic Level: An Interview with the Director of the National Strategic Communications Institute of Peking University, Cheng Manli], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communications] No 3 (2015): 30-31; Zhao Liangying, ‘Meiguo de guojia zhanlüe chuanbo tixi jiqi qishi’ [The US Strategic Communications System and the Insights That Can Be Drawn From It], *Xueshu baijia* [Academic Debate] No 10 (2015): 11-13.

50 Zhao Liangying and Xu Xiaolin, ‘Jiji goujian Zhongguo guojia zhanlüe chuanbo tixi’ [Actively Building a Chinese National Strategic Communications System], *Xueshu baijia* [Academic Debate] No 9 (2016): 10-14.

and foreign aid.⁵¹ Shi Anbin and Wang Xi have advocated the launch of interministerial meetings to plan the country's strategic communications on major foreign policy issues and initiatives, and the establishment of a strategic communications mechanism within the Central National Security Commission formed in November 2013.⁵² The most comprehensive proposal, however, has been advanced by Zhao Liangying in his 2017 monograph. Zhao's proposal opens with a scathing assessment of the bureaucratic infrastructure of the Party-State international communication, described as a sprawling ensemble of units unable to coordinate effectively amongst each other. This, according to Zhao, means that the country's communication capabilities are unable to keep pace with the country's rising status in global politics. To solve this impasse, he advocates the creation of a strategic communications system within the Party-State bureaucratic machine, that would adapt US mechanisms to the Chinese political system.⁵³

Here it is necessary to consider the layered meaning of the term 'system' in the Party-State bureaucracy, which translates to two different terms in Mandarin: 'xitong' and 'tixi'. As Engstrom explains, a 'xitong'-system is 'a discrete system that carries out specific functions'. Conversely a 'tixi'-system is 'a large integrated system that comprises multiple types of *xitong*-systems ... and carries out numerous and varied functions. Specifically, a *tixi*-system denotes either a system of systems or a system's system'. To further complicate these definitions, 'no distinct or objective conceptual boundary can be drawn between most systems (*xitong*) and what constitutes a system of systems (*tixi*); this is a matter of perspective'.⁵⁴ It is worth noting how, from this bureaucratic perspective, external propaganda can be seen as a 'tixi'-system that is articulated across two 'xitong'-systems, namely 'foreign affairs' and 'propaganda'.⁵⁵

51 Zhao Q., 'Tisheng dui "zhanlue chuanbo" de renshi he shijian'.

52 Shi and Wang, 'Cong "xianshi zhengzhi" dao "guannian zhengzhi"'.
53 Zhao Liangying, *Meiguo guojia zhanlue chuanbo tixi yanjiu* [A Research on the US National Strategic Communications System] (Wuhan: Wuhan Daxue chubanshe, 2017).

54 Jeffrey Engstrom, *System-Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare* (RAND, 2018), pp. 2-3.

55 Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment*, p. 150.

Thus, Zhao argues that China must establish a new strategic communications ‘tixi’-system capable of harnessing the external communication capacities of multiple Party-State organs. At the helm of this ‘tixi’-system there would be a ‘national strategic communications leading small group’ [guojia zhanlue chuanbo lingdao xiaozu] (LSG) guided by the Party-State leadership and responsible for the overall design, coordination, promotion, and implementation of China’s strategic communications.⁵⁶ The LSG would include the heads of a variety of Party-State organs: propaganda, diplomacy, national defence, national security, commerce, culture, tourism, folk religions, united front, Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan affairs, but also major companies and media organisations. A ‘national strategic communications centre’ would then be established under the supervision of the LSG, headed by a figure with a specific profile: versed in both Chinese and Western cultures, and possessing a profound knowledge of communication strategies, national strategy, and the ‘diplomatic arts’. Dedicated offices answering directly to the centre would then be established in all relevant departments, creating the key nexus for the articulation of strategic communications.⁵⁷ As a ‘tixi’-system, strategic communications would rely on four ‘xitong’-systems, reflecting the diverse responsibilities of the Party-State organs involved: public diplomacy, online public opinion, media propaganda, and national defence communication.⁵⁸

A third pattern that has emerged in the scholarship concerns the application of strategic communications. Bi Yantao and Yin Juanjuan have discussed the use of strategic communications on social media as a tool for Chinese border governance against extremists.⁵⁹ Bi Yantao, this time together with Lin Xinyan, has presented strategic communications

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56 LSGs are ‘coordinating bodies that address important policy areas that involve several different (and occasionally competing) parts of the bureaucracy’. Since the beginning of the Xi administration, the number and scope of LSGs has expanded dramatically, becoming key vehicles in the centralisation of power conducted by the Chinese leader. See: Christopher K. Johnson and Scott Kennedy, ‘Xi’s Signature Governance Innovation: The Rise of Leading Small Groups’, *CSIS*, 17 October 2017.

57 Zhao L., *Meiguo guojia zhanlue chuanbo tixi yanjiu*, pp. 259-260.

58 Ibid., pp. 263-274.

59 Bi Yantao and Yin Juanjuan, ‘Xin meiti, zhanlue chuanbo yu bianjiang zhili’ [New Media, Strategic Communications, and Frontier Governance], *Yichun Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Yichun College] Volume 36, N° 5 (2014): 64-67.

as a tool to soften the backlash experienced by the BRI.⁶⁰ Similarly, He Hui has suggested a concerted strategic communications approach to respond to the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration over the South China Sea that ruled in favour of the Philippines and which Beijing has not recognised. Once again, it is difficult to consider strategic communications in these studies as little more than a cipher for a more effective but fundamentally traditional form of propaganda. Bi and Lin reduce strategic communications, in the context of the BRI, to achieving a more granular understanding of target audiences and focusing on contrasting Western readings of the geopolitical significance of the project.⁶¹ Instead, He Hui's understanding foregrounds timely responses and the integration of different channels of communications such as news, advertising, public relations, peer-to-peer personal communication, book distribution, movies and TV promotions, and other communication methods and forms, to convey China's policies and positions on territorial disputes such as the one concerning the South China Sea.⁶²

Other studies, however, show a more sophisticated understanding of the challenges and opportunities that come with embracing the strategic communications paradigm. An article published in 2017 by Kou Liyan provides a concrete picture of strategic communications as an inherently dynamic process that exists at the juncture between long-term strategic objectives and the need to adapt a state's communication to an everchanging international scenario. Kou uses the rise to power of President Trump and his administration's 'America First' foreign policy as a case study. Against this backdrop, Kou uses strategic communications as a tool to criticise the Chinese tendency to rely on macro-level and abstract concepts in its political communication. Although, the solution the author proposes to counter backlashes against China and the BRI—to provide relatable stories that emphasise the contraposition between a supposedly inspirational 'Oriental collective struggle' against a 'Western

60 Bi Yantao and Lin Xinyan, 'Zhanlue chuanbo shijiao xia de "Yidai-yilu"' [The Belt and Road Initiative from a Strategic Communications Perspective], *Gonggong waijiao jikan* [Public Diplomacy Quarterly], N° 1 (2016): 73-79.

61 Bi and Lin, 'Zhanlue chuanbo shijiao xia de "Yidai-yilu"'.

62 He Hui, 'Jiaqiang Nanhai zhuquan guishu Zhongguo de zhanlue chuanbo' [Strengthening Strategic Communications over China's Sovereignty on the South China Sea], *Duitui chuanbo* [International Communication] N° 11 (2016): 26-27.

individual struggle’—fall under those same trappings.⁶³ Another example of a scholarly piece showing an acute understanding of key traits of the Western strategic communications paradigm is a recent article by Xu Meng on the COVID-19 pandemic. As in the case of Kou’s article, Xu emphasises the saliency of strategic communications in situations where a long-term strategic objective, such as the construction of a national image appropriate to China’s economic and political status, is forced to adapt to the challenges posed by an unexpected crisis, such as the pandemic. Between the lines of domestic political correctness, Xu highlights a distinctly Chinese type of strategic communications, one that is built upon the coordination of domestic propaganda and external propaganda for a single, paramount, strategic objective: domestic regime stability.⁶⁴

It is worth concluding this overview of Chinese scholarship in the Xi era with an outlier case: the Research Institute of National Strategic Communications of Peking University, a think tank launched in November 2014.⁶⁵ A few months after its creation, a short essay authored by the Director of the Institute, Professor Cheng Manli, and previously published in the *Guangming Daily* (one of the major state newspapers) was posted on the SCIO website. The essay provided a concise outline of the emergence of strategic communications in the US, defining it as a process that is more goal-oriented, more ‘offensive’, and better at integrating resources than public diplomacy. Cheng presented a three-stage agenda that, through the integration of communication activities of state media, public diplomacy actors, national security, and military intelligence organs, would eventually integrate into a ‘national strategic communications’ organ tasked with influencing both domestic and

63 Kou Liyan, ‘Zai “wei-douzheng” zhong kaizhan zhanlue chuanbo: Telangpu ru zhu baigong dui Zhongguo zhanlue chuanbo de yingxiang ji yingdui’ [Developing Strategic Communications in the ‘Micro-Blogging Confrontation’: The Impact of Trump’s Arrival in the White House on China’s Strategic Communications and Its Response], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communication] N° 2 (2017): 18-20.

64 Xu Meng, ‘Zhongda tufa shijian zhong guojia xingxiang de zhanlue chuanbo: Jiyu zhong guo kangji xinguan feiyan yiqing de sikao’ [National Strategic Communications during Major Emergencies: Insights From China’s Thinking on Fighting the New Coronavirus Epidemic], *Shijiazhuang Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Shijiazhuang University] Volume 32, N° 2 (2021): 102-109.

65 ‘Beijing Daxue jiang chengli Guojia Zhanlue Chuanbo Yanjiuyuan’ [Peking University Will Establish the Research Institute of National Strategic Communications], *Renmin wang* [Website of the People’s Daily], 19 November 2014.

foreign audiences through ‘manipulation or management’.⁶⁶ Also in 2015, the Research Institute began to run the ‘China House’ project in the Pakistani cities of Karachi and Islamabad. Explaining the task of the project, Cheng described the China Houses as ‘long-term mechanisms for the “localisation” of popular diplomacy’ that had the mission of enhancing contacts with Pakistani media and think tanks. Quite candidly, Cheng explained that the people-to-people contacts driven by an NGO such as the Institute could avoid ‘the strong flavor of propaganda’ [qianglie de xuanchuan secai] that comes with official diplomacy, and could help Beijing reach a deeper level than government institutions in establishing those ‘people-to-people bonds’ critical to the success of the BRI in Pakistan—one of the geostrategic junctions of the project.⁶⁷ The publication on the website of the SCIO, and especially the China House project in Pakistan, suggest that Cheng Manli and her Research Institute, at least for a short period of time, enjoyed a degree of interaction and even coordination with Chinese Party-State actors, setting them apart from other Chinese scholars and the other centres on strategic communications that appeared in the PRC throughout the 2010s.⁶⁸ Yet, as of late 2021, the Research Institute does not have a dedicated webpage on the website of Peking University, and no recent reports or studies associated with the institute are accessible to the public. Similarly, no trace of the ‘China House’ project appears online, suggesting the project was rapidly folded after its launch. At the moment the Research Institute seems to be simply a ‘nameplate’ for Professor Cheng Manli. It remains to be seen whether it will be relaunched after Xi’s call for establishing a strategic communications system.

66 Cheng Manli, ‘Guojia guoji chuanbo nengli jianshe xuyao yongyou zhanlue shiye’ [The Construction of National International-Communication Capacities Requires the Possession of a Strategic Vision], State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 21 July 2015.

67 Cheng Manli, ‘Tansuo minjian waijiao xin moshi: Beida Guojia Zhanlue Chuanbo Yanjiuyuan zai Bajisitan de shijian’ [Exploring a New Model of Popular Diplomacy: The Activity of the Peking University’s National Strategic Communications Institute in Pakistan], *Guoji chuanbo* [Global Communication] No 1 (2016): 82-86.

68 At least nine strategic communications research institutions within Mainland Chinese universities were established between 2010 and 2017. See: Yang Qifei and Chen Hong, ‘Zhongguo zhanlue chuanbo yanjiu kuangjia yu huayu tixi goujian’ [The Research Framework and Discourse System Construction of China’s Strategic Communications], *Xueshu shalong* [Academic Salon] No 2 (2019): 206.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA IN THE XI ERA

Scholars scrutinising the Chinese Party-State have highlighted how the gradual emergence of a ‘total national security concept’ [zongti guojia anquan guan] during the first term of the Xi administration (2013–2018) has driven a comprehensive, centripetal process of bureaucratic restructuring affecting virtually all the actors involved in the production of what could broadly be defined as external propaganda.⁶⁹ Because of the blurring of boundaries between the internal and external dimensions of national security, the separation between internal and external propaganda has lost salience in the face of a new paradigm prioritising centralisation, coordination, and proactiveness, leading to a wave of bureaucratic restructurings.

The first and arguably most significant restructuring, though never directly acknowledged by state media, was the absorption of the leading organ tasked with external propaganda, the CCP Office for External Propaganda (better known by what became its ‘governmental nameplate’ SCIO), within the CCP Central Propaganda Department (CPD) in 2014.⁷⁰ A similar pattern can be seen in the PLA reforms enacted in 2016, in which the General Political Department, the organ which had been responsible for PLA external propaganda, was incorporated into the newly established Political Work Department of the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC).⁷¹ The establishment of the Central United Front Work Small Leading Group in 2015 and comprehensive restructuring of tasks and bureaucratic organisation of the CCP United Front Work Department that followed, can also be considered steps in this process. Especially if we consider ‘united front work’ targeted at overseas Chinese communities, foreign businesses, and political elites as one of the facets

69 Matthew D. Johnson, ‘Safeguarding Socialism: The Origins, Evolution and Expansion of China’s Total Security Paradigm’, *Sinopsis*, 16 June 2020.

70 Jichang Lulu, Filip Jirouš and Rachel Lee, ‘Xi’s Centralisation of External Propaganda SCIO and the Central Propaganda Department’, *Sinopsis*, 25 January 2021, p. 8.

71 On post-2016 reforms: Joel Wuthnow and Philip C. Saunders, ‘Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA’, in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, eds. Philip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), pp. 1–42.

of external propaganda, here understood in its broader meaning as the exercise of power through practices of discourse-control in a contested international environment.⁷² The process of comprehensive bureaucratic restructuring continued in the following years as the CPD, by assuming the unified supervision over ‘news and publishing work’ [xinwen chuban gongzuo] in 2018,⁷³ became the supervising organ of the Central Radio and Television Network, a new unit that absorbed state media tasked with external propaganda⁷⁴: China Global Television Network, China National Radio, and China Radio International.

The political and organisational concerns motivating these developments can all be associated with a strategic communications paradigm. This notwithstanding, the opacity of both the Chinese political system and, by virtue of the parallel ‘neibu’ [internal circulation only] circuit of publication, the relationship between the academic community and the Party-State, prevents any meaningful attempt to unearth a causal nexus between research on strategic communications and the bureaucratic restructurings enforced between 2014 and 2018. While it is safe to assume that the PLA and the Ministry of National Defense had been closely monitoring the development of US strategic communications doctrine since the mid-2000s,⁷⁵ there is not enough evidence to identify an institutional embrace of strategic communications throughout the 2010s. In light of this, I argue that the causal link should be reversed. Growing interest in strategic communications in Chinese academia in recent years should be understood as a *reflection* of the Xi administration’s concerns for increasing bureaucratic centralisation, coordination, and proactiveness of the Chinese external propaganda machine. Concerns

72 Alex Joske, ‘The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising United Front Work’, *Sinopsis*, 23 July 2019.

73 ‘Zhong-Gong Zhongyang yinfa “shenhua dang he guojia jigou gaige fang’an”’ [The CCP Central Committee Issued the ‘Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs’], *Xinhua*, 21 March 2018.

74 Here to be understood in the immediate, media-centric dimension of external communication. David Bandurski, ‘When Reforms Means Tighter Control’, *China Media Project*, 22 March 2018.

75 Tangential evidence of the Party-State’s knowledge of strategic communications is given by a Chinese scholar’s account of their participation in an ‘advanced training course’ [gaoji peixunban] in ‘international strategic communications’ [guoji zhanlue chuanbo] organised by the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense in March 2010. See: Jin Chuan, ‘Zai ying wai renwu zhong zhanxian Zhongguo jundui xingxiang: Canjia guoji zhanlue chuanbo gaoji peixunban de sikao yu tihui’ [Showing the Image of China’s Army When Welcoming Foreign Visiting Deployments: Reflections on Participating in an Advanced Training Course in International Strategic Communications], *Duimai chuanbo* [International Communications] N° 8 (2010): 21-22.

which had been made explicit in the speeches delivered by Xi in the second half of 2013, examined in the previous section. The best evidence supporting this argument is the shift in the conceptualisation of strategic communications that occurred between the Hu-Wen era and the Xi era. While the earliest scholarship on strategic communications attempted to provide an indigenous framework centered on public diplomacy, by the mid-2010s strategic communications was framed in terms of external communication, reflecting the Party-State leadership's change of priorities. Further patterns that can be identified in this body of work, namely growing attention given to the bureaucratic organisation of strategic communications and the application of related practices to face crises and challenges in China's foreign policy, strengthen this claim.

There still are, however, lingering questions regarding the timing of Xi's call for building a strategic communications 'tixi'-system with Chinese characteristics. What does this announcement mean for future conceptualisation and articulation of strategic communications? That is assuming that the term will not happen to be a *hapax legomenon* in the CCP vocabulary given the authoritative nature of the source. In short: why did Xi announce the construction of a strategic communications system in May 2021, and not earlier? After all, the shift in Beijing's posture in international politics and an open willingness to reshape global norms and values around domestic standards predates these developments, tracing back to the earliest years of the Xi administration.⁷⁶ My argument is that the two major events that have prompted a renewed sense of urgency for upgrading China's international communication capabilities, were indeed the core themes of his May 2021 speech.⁷⁷ The first is the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent scholarly pieces have emphasised China's efforts to counter international backlash, tout its extraordinary success in public health management, and, since the earliest stages of the pandemic, shape

76 Marcike Ohlberg, 'Boosting the Party's Voice: China's Quest for Global Ideological Dominance', *MERIC'S China Monitor*, 21 July 2016.

77 'Xi Jinping zai Zhong-Gong Zhongyang Zhengzhi Ju di sanshi ci jiti xuexi shi qiangdiao jiaqiang he gajin guoji chuanbo gongzuo zhanshi zhenshi liti quanmian de Zhongguo.'

public health paths out of the crisis at a global level.⁷⁸ As early as February 2020, Xi stressed the need to strengthen ‘integrated communication’ and control public opinion at home, while also seizing the initiative and effectively influencing international public opinion.⁷⁹ The second is the perception of an acceleration in the decline of the US in the aftermath of racial protests in the summer of 2020, the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic under the Trump administration, and the Capitol Riot on 6 January 2020.⁸⁰ In light of this, as of late 2021, we do not yet know what the construction of a Chinese strategic communications system will amount to. Will an institutional mechanism be established, possibly along the lines articulated by Zhao Liangying, that will supervise an upgrade of international communication as the key facet of the Party-State external propaganda? Or will it evolve into a ‘discourse’ instead – an officially-sanctioned conceptual platform in the domestic public space to articulate a continuing process of centralisation, coordination, and proactiveness in disseminating the ‘China story’ to the outside world.

CONCLUSION

The study of strategic communications has been a niche topic in the Chinese academic landscape. Recent developments, however, suggest that the subject is worthy of attention. One reason is the increasing scholarly attention in Anglophone academia towards China’s practice of strategic communications, in lockstep with other regional actors in the Asia-Pacific.⁸¹ A second reason is the announcement of the establishment of a ‘system of strategic communications with Chinese characteristics’ by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in May 2021. In the absence of grey literature

78 Nadège Rolland, ‘China’s Pandemic Power Play’, *Journal of Democracy* 31, N° 3 (2020): 25-38; Suisheng Zhao, ‘Rhetoric and Reality of China’s Global Leadership in the Context of COVID-19: Implications for the US-Led World Order and Liberal Globalization’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2020; Lina Gong, ‘Humanitarian Diplomacy as an Instrument of China’s Image-Building’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2021.

79 Xi Jinping, ‘Zai Zhongyang Zhengzhixu changwei hui huiyi yanjiu yingdui xinxing guanzhuang bingdu feiyan yiqing gongzuo shi de jianghua’ [Speech During a Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the CPC Addressing the Response to the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic], *Qinshi* [Seek Theory], 15 February 2020.

80 On recent developments in Chinese perceptions of the US, see: Jude Blanchette and Seth G. Jones, ‘How Beijing’s Narrative of Strategic Decline Is Leading to Strategic Overconfidence’, *Csis*, July 2021.

81 Chiyuki Aoi, ‘Japanese Strategic Communication: Its Significance as a Political Tool’, *Defence Strategic Communications* Volume 3 (2017): 71-102; James D.J. Brown, ‘Russian Strategic Communications toward Japan: A More Benign Model of Influence?’, *Asian Perspective* Volume 45, N° 3 (2021): 559-586.

or detailed official statements from which it is possible to discern the Chinese Party-State's conception of strategic communications, this study has mapped Mainland Sinophone scholarship on the subject, from the introduction of the concept in the domestic academic landscape in the second half of the 2000s to the period of Xi's announcement in 2021. It has then framed this scholarship in the context of the comprehensive institutional reforms pushed by the Xi administration since 2013.

The key finding of this study is the distinct articulation of strategic communications in China as a discourse on the effectiveness of the country's external propaganda. More precisely, this study has shown how strategic communications has been used as a conceptual tool to scope issues related to the perceived credibility deficit of a Leninist propaganda system competing in a global information environment. Mainland Sinophone scholarship on strategic communications has, as a result, been concerned with providing a new vocabulary and a new approach to discuss issues that have long preoccupied propaganda actors in China: the effectiveness of bureaucratic organisation, the adaptation to technological developments in the global information domain, the correct identification of target audiences and the appropriate localisation of propaganda activities, the relationship with domestic propaganda, and the measurement of outcomes.

In addition, by examining this body of work, this study has also shed light on the wider debate over the role of state-driven information dissemination—defined as 'external communication' or 'international communication' in Chinese official and academic parlance—within the wider set of practices defining external propaganda in the 21st century. Throughout the second term of the Hu-Wen administration (2008-2013) this facet of external propaganda was generally subsumed in an attempt to present Party-State external propaganda mainly through the frame of public diplomacy. Following the rise to power of the Xi administration, however, the main frame of reference for external propaganda appears to have shifted toward external communication. This change in terminology may appear as evidence of a solipsistic, if not esoteric, debate to observers on the outside. But, in simpler terms,

it signals an inward shift in focus: from engagement with and adaptation to foreign audiences, to the challenges for Party-State bureaucratic actors to craft, organise, and disseminate information, coherent with domestic propaganda and the requirements of an ever-expanding national security agenda. More importantly, this shift is the result of a wider and more consequential change in posture under the Xi administration: Beijing moved away from an attempt to explain and justify China's positions and interests within a Western-dominated international 'discourse system' to launching a bid to reshape said system according to Chinese values and worldviews.

The scholarship examined in this study has closely followed this evolution. The early phase focused on the divulgence of US strategic communications doctrine that emerged during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations. But by the end of the Hu-Wen administration the scholarship pivoted to portraying strategic communications as a 'strategic' dimension of public diplomacy that could contribute to enhancing the country's soft power and construe a more effective 'national image'. In the aftermath of Xi's rise to power, however, scholars began to produce research on the bureaucratic and managerial dimension of external communication, putting the coordination of Party-State actors and media into the spotlight, and devising strategic communications-focused responses to international crises. This development leads to the second meaningful finding of this work. Proposals raised in the second half of the 2010s by Mainland Chinese scholars to update the Party-State external propaganda apparatus according to a strategic communications paradigm that privileges coordination and centralisation in fact *followed* actual institutional make-overs within the Party-State external propaganda apparatus that had previously occurred under the radar, tracing back to between 2014 and 2016.

These findings, in turn, open two paths for future research on China's strategic communications. The first regarding the relationship between Party-State bureaucratic actors involved with propaganda work and the academic community on the Mainland. As this study suggests, domestic scholarship on propaganda, similar to academic debates on

China's international relations, may provide a 'perceptual parameter' of the opinions and thoughts present in the leadership of the country's propaganda actors.⁸² In light of the opacity of Chinese institutions tasked with propaganda work, examining domestic scholarship may remain, in the short to medium term, one of the few avenues available to track developments in this field. Future access to 'internal-circulation only' [neibu] publications may prove particularly useful from this perspective. A second path of research considers the establishment of a 'tixi'-system of strategic communications with Chinese characteristics. The key questions will be whether this system will result in the emergence of ad hoc strategic communications organs embedded in the Party-State's propaganda apparatus, as Mainland Chinese scholars have proposed, or whether it will evolve into a more nebulous organisational frame including pre-existing organs, as the use of the term 'tixi' [system of systems] by Xi himself appears to imply.

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⁸² Huiyun Feng and Kai He, 'Why Do Chinese IR Scholars Matter?', in *Chinese Scholars and Foreign Policy Debating International Relations*, eds. Huiyun Feng, Kai He and Yan Xuetong (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 7.

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FROM 'PUTIN THE SAVIOUR' TO 'IRREPLACEABLE PUTIN': THE ROLE OF THE 1990s IN THE KREMLIN'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Kremlin, Vladimir Putin, Russia.*

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ABSTRACT

The Soviet Union ceased to exist thirty years ago. However, its memory and the memory of the decade of crisis that followed its dissolution, continue to serve the Kremlin. Existing literature claims that Vladimir Putin, helped by the state-controlled media, has manipulated the memory of the Soviet Union and the trauma of the 1990s to justify his regime. This article takes a different approach. By adopting the framework of Strategic Communications, it claims that the Kremlin used the traumatic experience of the 1990s to build strategic narratives intended to justify

Putin's regime within the context of the values held by the majority of the Russian public. On the one hand, it argues that the Kremlin's Strategic Communications are rooted in the past, either by glorifying it (nostalgia for the Soviet Union) or by vilifying it ('the wild nineties'), because this is what resonates best with the Russian people. On the other hand, it suggests that Putin's use of this past, combined with deep understanding of his domestic audience, allowed him to adapt and adjust his strategic narratives to the evolving situation in Russia, justifying his regime in the last two decades and legitimising its potential continuation beyond 2024.

INTRODUCTION

In a special interview broadcast on 5 July 2020, a few days after a successful constitutional referendum, President Putin argued:

I am absolutely convinced that we are doing the right thing by accepting the amendments to the current constitution. They will strengthen our statehood, [and] create conditions for the progressive development of our country for decades to come.¹

It is not surprising that Putin justified the constitutional changes that would allow him to stay in power for two more six-year presidential terms. But his argument in support of the change might seem puzzling. In his interview, he referred to Article 26 of the 1922 'Treaty on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' that declared a unilateral right for each republic to leave the Union.² Putin argued that the new constitution was intended to protect Russia from this 'time bomb' that migrated from one version of the Soviet constitution to another and had ultimately lead to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.³ The 1991 Belovezha Accords, which officially initiated the Soviet

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1 Vladimir Putin in an interview for '[Moskva. Kremlin. Putin.](#)' [Moscow. The Kremlin. Putin.], *Channel 1*, 5 July 2020, YouTube, (accessed 20 July 2021).

2 '[Deklaratsiya i Dogovor ob obrazovanii Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik](#)' [Treaty on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics], 30 December 1922, (accessed 20 July 2021).

3 Putin interview for '[Moskva. Kremlin. Putin.](#)'

Union's dissolution, used the 1922 Treaty to justify the status of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as founding members of the Union.⁴ Putin's allusion in 2020 to a poorly written Article in a one-hundred-year-old treaty that established a country that ceased to exist 30 years ago, raises several questions about the Kremlin's communications strategy. After all, according to Putin himself, the main amendments were intended to address the problems of social security,⁵ and not to prevent the repetition of the fatal destiny of the Soviet Union.

Understanding Putin's reference to the 1922 Treaty in the context of the 2020 constitutional change requires a broader appreciation of the role and place of the Soviet Union (and most importantly the decade of crisis that followed its dissolution) in the Kremlin's Strategic Communications (SC), which aimed at justifying not only constitutional change, but Putin's regime as a whole. In other words, it is important to understand how the collective perception of the Soviet Union's dissolution and the following decade of crisis, has been used by the Kremlin since Putin's arrival in office more than 20 years ago.

The Soviet Union officially ceased to exist on 26 December 1991, following the declaration by the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.⁶ Its disintegration was a result of many long-term processes inherent in how the 'Soviet machine' was built to function.⁷ Some Russian political scientists even trace them back to the death of Stalin. After whom, they say, Soviet officialdom 'started to act formulaically', failing to protect the Soviet Union from 'the systematic and purposeful global information war waged against it by the West'.⁸ The reasons for the Soviet Union's dissolution present an interesting case for the field of SC. This article, however, focuses on its consequences.

4 'Soglasheniye o sozdanii Sodruzhestva Nezavisimyykh Gosudarstv' [Agreement on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States], 8 December 1991, (accessed 20 July 2021).

5 Putin interview for 'Moskva. Kremlin. Putin.'

6 The Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 'Declaration № 142-№2' [Russian original], 26 December 1991, (accessed 20 July 2021).

7 Wisla Suraska, *How the Soviet Union Disappeared: An Essay on the Causes of Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

8 Igor Panarin, *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR* [The First World Information War: The Dissolution of the U.S.S.R.] (Saint-Petersburg: Piter, 2010), p. 116.

It investigates how the Kremlin has built strategic narratives amid new realities created by the fall of the Soviet Union and how these narratives were integrated into the Kremlin's domestic SC.

While SC entails 'a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment',⁹ it may be argued that SC is conducted by building and maintaining strategic narratives, understood as 'a means for political actors to construct a shared understanding of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.'¹⁰ With these definitions in mind, this article will examine how the Kremlin under President Putin has instrumentalised a shared understanding (among the Russian public, based on Russian values and interests) of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the crisis of the following decade to achieve the Kremlin's main domestic political objective: the justification and legitimisation of Putin's regime. In other words, following Manuel Castells' maxim that 'social power [...] operates primarily by the construction of meaning in the human mind through processes of communication',¹¹ this article investigates how the Kremlin has used the traumatic experience that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union to create a certain meaning of Putin's regime in the minds of the Russian people and to increase its 'social power' over them.

This article consists of four parts. The first two focus on the context within which the Kremlin's narratives were constructed. The first describes the realities of the 1990s and, more importantly, how the Russian people thought about the situation in which they found themselves immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second part focuses on Russian political values and sentiments regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since any successful SC should resonate with a target audience's feelings, emotions, and values, these sections offer important

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9 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, June 2019), p. 46.

10 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

11 Manuel Castells, 'A Network Theory of Power', *International Journal of Communication* Volume 5 (2011): 779.

context for further analysis. Moreover, in light of the argument put forward by some researchers that, since his rise to power in 2000, Putin has recreated and manipulated Russian national identity and the memory of the Soviet Union with the help of state-controlled media,¹² these two parts are based exclusively on evidence collected during the 1990s. This approach ensures that the interpretations presented here are as historically accurate as possible.

The third and fourth parts analyse how the trauma of the 1990s has been used to construct the Kremlin's strategic narratives during the last two decades. In the third part the analysis focuses on Putin's first two terms from 2000 to 2008, when the traumatic experience of the 1990s was used as an antithesis to construct the narrative of 'Putin the Saviour'. Since the Kremlin had to provide new ideas to justify Putin's prolonged stay in power after 2012, the fourth part focuses on how the meaning of the 1990s in the Kremlin's SC was recalibrated to support the narrative of 'Irreplaceable Putin'. Finally, the conclusion places the findings of this article in the context of existing literature, raising several questions about the nature of the Kremlin's SC and what it means to the field of SC.

RUSSIAN CONTEXT I: THE REALITY OF 'THE WILD NINETIES'

From the beginning, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was communicated differently by the Russian leadership than in other former Soviet Republics. While the leaders of other former republics framed dissolution as an opportunity for a brighter future shaped by the ability to follow their own independent paths, Russia's leadership had no external actor to blame for the detrimental situation. There was a striking difference between President Boris Yeltsin's 1992 New Year's speech, held a few days after the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, and that of his Ukrainian counterpart in the Belovezha Accords, President Leonid Kravchuk.

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¹² See Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Miguel Vázquez-Liñán, 'Historical Memory and Political Propaganda in the Russian Federation', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Volume 50 N° 2 (2017): 77-86; Anna Geifman and Yuri Teper, 'Russia's New National Identity under Putin's Regime', *BESA Center Perspectives Paper* Volume 279 (29 December 2014), (accessed 20 July 2021).

When Kravchuk argued that ‘the dream of many generations has come true’, as ‘our nation has come up from its knees, becoming the master of its land’, and ‘from now on, our future destiny is in our hands’,¹³ Yeltsin complained that ‘the inheritance that we got is simply depressing’. He promised to ‘stabilise the economy by the autumn’ and ‘that by the end of the year [1992], people’s lives would gradually begin to improve’.¹⁴

Yeltsin’s promises of fast economic recovery, however, were too optimistic. His radical market-oriented reforms led to the contraction of Russia’s GDP—an estimated 40% between 1991 and 1998.¹⁵ Culminating in the 1998 Russian financial crisis, the first decade of Russia’s independence was ‘a decade of extreme macroeconomic turbulence’. Between December 1991 and December 2001 ‘the ruble’s value dropped by more than 99% against the dollar’.¹⁶

The economic devastation of the 1990s was not the only destructive consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union. First, in addition to economic chaos, the disintegration of the Soviet Union ‘left moral anarchy’. As Anatol Lieven put it, ‘corruption, crime and disobedience [were] not simply aspects of the new Russian state [...] – they lay at its heart’.¹⁷ Second, Yeltsin’s government, associated with economic failure and a high level of corruption, was unable to project effective control over Russia’s regions, leading to the First Chechen War from 1994-1996. Still suffering from the trauma of war in Afghanistan, Russians saw this war as Yeltsin’s attempt to prove his power, rather than to defend Russian land. Soon the Russian public wanted ‘to get rid of both its hapless president and his Caucasian adventure’,¹⁸ with 39% of the Russian public directly accusing Yeltsin of the bloodshed in Chechnya. In the same opinion poll of February 1995, only 20% blamed the Chechen separatist leader

13 Leonid Kravchuk, ‘1992 New Year Speech’ [Ukrainian original], 31 December 1991, YouTube, (accessed 20 July 2021).

14 Boris Yeltsin, ‘1992 New Year Speech’ [Russian original], 31 December 1991, YouTube, (accessed 20 July 2021).

15 Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, ‘A Normal Country’, *Harvard Institute of Economic Research, Discussion Paper Number 2019* (Cambridge, MA: 23 October 2003), p. 9.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

17 Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 170.

18 Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, *Russia’s Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), p. 50.

Dzhokhar Dudayev.¹⁹ The Russian people were simply not ready to fight this war. In January 1995, surveys suggested that 40% of the population preferred a peaceful solution, with a further 24% rejecting any military involvement, and asking to withdraw forces from Chechnya. Moreover, in June 1995, another survey showed that in response to 'What, in your opinion, should be done in relation to Chechnya?' about 38% approved of it leaving the Russian Federation.²⁰

Yet Yeltsin persisted in fighting the war, regardless of the fact that 'Russia that went to war in Chechnya in December 1994 was both a weak state and one in the throes of a liberal capitalist revolution'.²¹ His public approval, which peaked at 58.67% in the 1993 Russian Government Referendum, fell to a record low of 12% in a 1995 opinion poll.²² After a brief increase during the 1996 election campaign (which Yeltsin won by enlisting media and business elites, rather than the Russian people),²³ it plunged again to almost single-digits by 1998 with no chance of recovery.²⁴

During the 1990s, the Russian people not only experienced economic hardship, rising levels of crime, political corruption, and a bloody war in Chechnya, they no longer believed their leadership capable of improving their lot. Russians describe this decade as the 'wild nineties' [*likhie devinostye*] for a reason. It 'was symbolic of deep pessimism and lack of hope'.²⁵

19 Lev Gudkov, 'God chechenskoy voyny v obshchestvennom mnenii Rossii' [A Year of Chechen War in the Russian Public Opinion], *Druzhba Narodov* 2 (1996), (accessed 20 July 2021).

20 Ibid.

21 Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, p. 150.

22 Percentage is based on the numbers of those who said they 'absolutely trust', 'generally trust', and 'more trust than distrust' their leader. Svetlana Migdisova, Yelena Petrenko, Tat'yana Zakharova, Anna Vorontsova, and Dmitriy Chubukov, 'Yesli god nazad na odnogo dveryayushchego prezidentu prikhodilos' dva nedveryayushchikh, to seychas – desyat' [If a Year Ago There Were Two Distrustful People for Every One Who Trusted the President, Now There Are Ten], *Fond 'Obshchestvennoye mneniye'* ['Public Opinion' Foundation], 10 March 1995, (accessed 20 July 2021).

23 Matthew Lantz (ed.), *The Russian Elections Compendium* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Strengthening Democratic Institutions (SDI) Project, Harvard University, 1996).

24 Sergey Vasil'tsov and Sergey Obukhov, 'Vozrast kharizmy: Politicheskii prognoz', [The Charisma's Age: Political Forecast], *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, № 74 (12548), 3 June 2004, (accessed 20 July 2021).

25 James C. Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin's Russia* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020), p. xi.

On the one hand, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova is right in arguing that for many Russian citizens the 1990s were ‘a decade of political pluralism, economic opportunity, open borders, cultural creativity, and freedom of political and artistic self-expression’.²⁶ On the other, this is not how most Russians felt during the period. According to Levada Center opinion polls in 1996, 81% of correspondents agreed (entirely or partially) with the statement that ‘the things that are currently happening in Russia make me feel ashamed of it’.²⁷ From 1992 to 1999 the percentage of Russians who believed that Russian political life was characterised by escalating chaos and anarchy increased from 51% to 62%.²⁸ When in 1999 Russians were asked to summarise the preceding decade by responding to the question, ‘what feelings emerged or became stronger in people around you over the past years?’, 52% indicated ‘tiredness, indifference’, 37% ‘bitterness, aggression’, 37% ‘desperation’, and 29% ‘fear’. Only 10% chose ‘hope’, 3% ‘self-respect’, and 2% ‘pride in their nation’.²⁹ In other words, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following ‘wild nineties’ were not, as Sharafutdinova claims, a ‘chosen trauma’ constructed and manipulated by Putin to advance his political ambitions.³⁰ Instead, they were a real ‘collective trauma’, in the context of which Putin had to craft his SC toward the Russian people.

RUSSIAN CONTEXT II: RUSSIAN VALUES AND SENTIMENTS

Since discussing the range and depth of Russian values is beyond the scope of this article, the following analysis will focus on two key aspects: Russian values regarding political power, and sentiments of the Russian people towards their Soviet history in general and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in particular. Importantly, the arguments presented in this analysis will be supported by data collected during the 1990s, before Putin’s arrival in the Kremlin. Accordingly, it presents the original

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²⁶ Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p.113.

²⁷ Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015* (Moscow, 2016), p. 49.

²⁸ Levada Center, *Obschestvennoye mneniye – Yezhegodnik 2014* [Public Opinion – Yearbook 2014] (Moscow, 2015), p. 41.

²⁹ Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 17.

³⁰ Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, chapter 5.

pattern of values and sentiments that Putin had to work with, rather than something that was, as some researchers claim,³¹ constructed by the Kremlin's 'propaganda machine' during Putin's 20 years in power.

The relationship between the Russian people and political power is complex. When Russian political philosophers write about natural freedom inherent in the 'Russian Soul',³² they do not mean the Western understanding of freedom (human rights based on culturally-inherent individualism), but an entirely Russian interpretation of freedom: 'freedom from earthly worries'.³³ Russians have traditionally sought to achieve this freedom through a transfer of political responsibility to an authority (either a local master, imperial monarch, or communist government), ultimately accepting powerful, even totalitarian, rule as a required precondition to organise a stable society. As a famous Russian proverb says: '[the] Master will come – [and the] master will judge us' [*Vot priyedet barin—barin nas rassudi!*].³⁴

On the one hand, this lack of responsibility for one's land and life generates a feeling of unlimited personal freedom in the Russian political environment, creating a strong belief that probably [*avos*], supposedly [*nebos*], or somehow [*kak-nibud*] problems will be resolved. Conversely, it creates a strong belief in, and even demand for, a powerful authority that can guide the people and protect them from their own carelessness.³⁵ In the Russian mind, these two seemingly contradictory characteristics (personal freedom and strong authority) have successfully coexisted.

31 See Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*; Vázquez-Liñán, 'Historical Memory and Political Propaganda'; Geifman and Teper, 'Russia's New National Identity'.

32 Ivan Ilyin, *Sushchnost' i svoeobrazie Russkoy kul'tury* [The Essence and Peculiarity of Russian Culture] (Moscow: Russkaya Kniga-XXI Vek, 2007); Nikolay Lossky, *Kharakter Russkogo naroda – Kniga 1* [The Character of the Russian people – Book 1] (Frankfurt am Main: Possev-Verlag, 1957); Ivan Solonevich, *Narodnaya Monarkhiya* [People's Monarchy] (Moscow: Algoritm, 2011); Nikolai Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii* [The Destiny of Russia], reprint edition from 1918 publication (Moscow: Filosofskoye Obshchestvo SSSR, 1990).

33 Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii* [The Destiny of Russia], p. 5.

34 This proverb originated from the short poem "Zabytaya derevnya" [Forgotten Village] by Nikolay Nekrasov.

35 Vyacheslav Gubanov, *Russkiy natsional'nyy kharakter v kontekste politicheskoy zhizni Rossii* [Russian National Character in the Context of the Russian Political Life] (Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'skiy Tsentr SPbGMGU, 1999), pp. 46-57; Berdyaev, *Sud'ba Rossii* [The Destiny of Russia], pp. 14-15; Ilyin, *Sushchnost' i svoeobrazie Russkoy kul'tury* [The Essence and peculiarity of Russian Culture], pp. 45-47.

Recognising their reluctance to take responsibility for their actions, the Russian people have demanded strong and even ruthless treatment. The best example of this phenomenon is provided by Russian exiled political philosopher Nikolay Lossky:

In St. Petersburg in the spring, when the ice on the Niva River started to melt, the ice-crossing of the river became unsafe. The mayor ordered policemen to be placed on the riverbank to stop those crossing the ice. A peasant, despite warning shouts from a policeman, went onto the ice, fell, and began to drown. The policeman saved him from death, but the peasant, instead of being grateful, began to criticise him: “Where have you been?”. The policeman answered him: “But I shouted out a warning”—“Shouted?! You had to sock me in the face!”, replied the peasant.³⁶

Since they are not based on empirical evidence, arguments amongst Russian political philosophers for a culturally innate demand for strong authority may be challenged. Yet numerous opinion polls and sociological and psychological research conducted since the fall of the Soviet Union, suggest a similar picture. According to Levada Center opinion polls in 1996, 69% of respondents gave positive answers to the question, ‘Are there situations where the presence of a strong and authoritative leader, a “strong hand”, is necessary for the people?’. 37% agreed with the statement that ‘our people need a “strong hand” at all times’ and 32% agreed that ‘there can be situations (like now) where it is necessary to give full power to one person’.³⁷ A poll in the same year conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, asked a similar question: ‘Do you agree or disagree that bringing order to Russia today requires a regime with a “strong hand”?’. And it revealed similar results: 62% agreed with the statement.³⁸ Having conducted a mixed method analysis of the image of power in Russia in the early 1990s, which combined surveys with in-depth interviews, political psychologist Elena Shesto-

36 Lossky, *Kharakter Russkogo naroda* [The Character of the Russian people], p.48.

37 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 70.

38 Anna Petrova and Anna Vorontsova, ‘Rastet chislo storonnikov rezhima “zhestkoy ruki”’ [The Number of the Supporters of a “Strong Hand” regime Is Growing], *Fond “Obshestvennoye mneniye”* [“Public Opinion” Foundation], 12 December 1996, (accessed 20 July 2021).

pal concluded that Russians want to see political power to be ‘solid, strong, and even ruthless’.³⁹

At a time when many in the West were celebrating Russia’s transition to democracy,⁴⁰ and when President Clinton was arguing that the US sought ‘to support the development of democracy and freedom for the people of Russia’,⁴¹ Russians did not necessarily subscribe to this freedom. While for many Americans democratic rights and freedoms are integral parts of their self-determination, for Russians these rights have always been ‘something external, something that had been awarded by the generous fatherland or a kind master and, at any given moment, can be taken away without reasonable explanations’.⁴² It is not surprising that, when faced with unprecedented economic hardship and general lawlessness, Russians were ready to exchange their newly acquired rights and freedoms for order and stability. In 1994, in answer to the question, ‘If you had to choose between increasing living standards and preserving democratic rights and freedoms, which would you prefer?’, 65% of correspondents preferred ‘increasing living standards’ with only 18% voting for ‘preservation of democratic rights and freedoms’.⁴³ By the end of the decade, this readiness to trade rights and freedoms for law and order only increased. According to a series of opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center in 1998, 1999, and 2000, when answering the question ‘What do you think is more important for Russia now?’, an increasing majority chose ‘Order, even if it can only be achieved by certain violations of the principles of democracy and restriction of personal freedoms’—73% in 1998, 77% in 1999, and 81% in 2000.⁴⁴

39 Elena Shestopal, ‘Obraz vlasti v Rossii: zhelaniya i real’nost’ (Politik-psikhologicheskii analiz) [The Image of Power in Russia: Aspirations and Reality (Political and psychological analysis)], *Polis. Politicheskoye issledovaniye*, Volume 4 (1995): 9.

40 Alfred B. Evans, ‘The Failure of Democratization in Russia: A comparative Perspective’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 2 (2011): 40–51.

41 William J. Clinton, ‘US Support for Russian Democracy’, *US Department of State Dispatch*, Volume 4 № 13 (1993): 177.

42 Iosif Dzyaloshinskiy, ‘Kultura, zhurnalistika, tolerantnost’ [Culture, Journalism, Tolerance], in Iosif Dzyaloshinskiy and Marina Dzyaloshinskaya, (eds), *Rossiyskiye SMI: kak sozdaietsya obraz vruga* [Russian Mass Media: How the Image of Enemy is Created] (Moscow: Moskovskoe Byuro po Pravam Cheloveka ‘Academia’, 2007), p. 25.

43 Svetlana Migdisova and Yelena Petrenko, ‘Povysheniye urovnya zhizni rossiyane predpochitayut sokhraneniyyu demokratcheskikh prav i svobod’ [Russians Prefer Improving Living Standards to Preserving Democratic Rights and Freedoms], *Fond “Obshchestvennoye mneniye”* [“Public Opinion” Foundation], 11 November 1994, accessed 20 July 2021.

44 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013–2015*, p. 54.

It is not surprising that, as Russians yearned for stronger political power capable of bringing order even at the expense of democratic rights and freedoms, they retained warm feelings towards the old Soviet Union. In 1998, a Levada Center poll showed that the most frequent characteristics accorded Soviet administrations of the late 1970s and early 1980s were: 'with a common touch (congenial)' – 36%, 'legitimate' – 32%, 'habitual, familiar' – 32%, 'strong, durable' – 27%, and 'reputable, respected' – 21%, but also 'bureaucratic' – 30%, and 'short-sighted' – 23%.⁴⁵ Throughout the 1990s, the majority of Russian people believed they would be better off without Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. Answering the question 'Do you agree that it would be better if everything in the country remained the same as it was before the start of perestroika?', at least half repeatedly agreed: 53% entirely or partially agreed in 1995, 49% in 1996, 52% in 1997, 51% in 1998, and 50% in 2000.⁴⁶

The argument that post-Soviet nostalgia in Russia originated in the mid-1990s and gained prominence in the early 2000s, as presented by Sharafutdinova in *The Red Mirror*,⁴⁷ is not entirely justified. This nostalgia emerged almost immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. According to Levada Center opinion polls, already in March 1992, 66% of respondents regretted the collapse of the Soviet Union, and this number reached 75% by December 2000.⁴⁸ Given that more than 70% of Russian citizens voted for the preservation of the Soviet Union in the 1991 Referendum,⁴⁹ and that since its dissolution the situation in Russia had only deteriorated, this early appearance of nostalgia for the 'good old days' of the Soviet Union should not be surprising. Already in February 1996, opinion polls showed that the largest proportion of the Russian population (39%) preferred the Soviet political system 'which we had before the 1990s', with 28% voting for Western-style democracy, and only 8% giving priority to the current

45 Ibid, p. 61.

46 Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye – Yezhegodnik 2011* [Public Opinion – Yearbook 2011] (Moscow, 2015), p. 234.

47 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 112.

48 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 350.

49 'Soobshcheniye Tsentral'noy komissii referendum SSSR ob itogakh referendum SSSR, sostoyavshegosya 17 marta 1991 goda' [Report of the Central Commission for the Referendum of the USSR on the Results of the Referendum of the USSR, Held on 17 March 1991], *Pravda*, 27 March 1991.

system.⁵⁰ Most Russians recognised that their country had lost its status as a great power. In 1994, an opinion poll showed that only a quarter of respondents believed that Russia was a great power.⁵¹ Yet they never ceased to believe that Russia should have preserved its status. According to Levada Center polls, the share of people who agreed with the statement that 'Russia should preserve its status as a great power' increased from 72% in 1992 to 78% in 1999.⁵²

By the end of the 1990s, Russians were ready to exchange their newly acquired freedoms and rights (in which they had little trust anyway) for a strong political leadership that would bring order and stability. They also had become disillusioned with the Western way of life. In 1992, only 13% of respondents agreed with the statement 'Russia is a great nation that has a special purpose in human history' and a large majority (80%) stated that 'Russia is a nation like any other'. By 1999, results were quite different: 57% argued that Russia was a great nation with a special purpose and only 36% saw Russia as a nation among equals.⁵³ In May 2000, to the question, "To what extent do you believe that the "Western" (western European, American) type of social order is suitable for Russia?", 68% (entirely or partially) stated that it did not suit Russian conditions.⁵⁴ While today many experts accuse Putin of steering Russia off the path toward democratic transition, it seems that by the time of his arrival in the Kremlin, the Russian people were already keen to make this turn.

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50 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 36.

51 Svetlana Migdisova and Yelena Petrenko, 'Kogda govoryat o "velikoy derzhave", tri chetverti vspominayut o Sovetskoy Soyuz, i tol'ko chetvert' – o segodnyashney Rossii' [When They Talk about a "Great Power", Three Quarters Think about the Soviet Union, and Only a Quarter - about Today's Russia], *Fond 'Obshchestvennoye mneniye'* [Public Opinion Foundation], 29 April 1994, (accessed 20 July 2021).

52 Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye – Yezhegodnik 2020* [Public Opinion – Yearbook 2020] (Moscow, 2015), p. 28.

53 Levada Center, 'Dve treti rossiyan ustydilis' razvala SSSR i "vechnoy" bednosti v strane', [Two-thirds of Russians Were Ashamed of the Collapse of the USSR and the "Eternal" Poverty in the Country], 17 January 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).

54 Levada Center, 'Zapadnyy put' obshchestvennogo ustroystva – dlya Rossii?' [The Western Way of Social Order – For Russia?], 22 June 2011, (accessed 20 July 2021).

PHASE I (1999-2012): 'PUTIN THE SAVIOUR' – THE 1990s AS AN ANTITHESIS

In the late 1990s, a little-known Vladimir Putin was neither the first, nor the obvious choice for the presidency. Gleb Pavlovsky, a political advisor and strategist working for the Kremlin in the late 1990s and 2000s, recalled:

Putin didn't seem like the best choice for the leading role. Even before, he had been made fun of at meetings. He was awkward and secretive, being either silent, or offering completely absurd ideas. His first appearance in the Duma was a semi-failure, and yet the Duma approved him as a convenient enemy.⁵⁵

However, Putin's appointment as Russia's Prime Minister in August 1999 signalled that he headed Yeltsin's short-list of potential successors. And Pavlovsky was tasked with working on his image as 'a prudent bloke against the background of a departing old man':

Against the backdrop of a weak Yeltsin, the strong style of the young prime minister stands out more clearly. By the end of the campaign, from a protege of the 'family', the candidate turns into a banner of revenge for all socially disadvantaged in Russia. Defender of the elderly pensioners, the leader of the impoverished army, the idol of educated people and housewives, and the leader of the growing majority. And in the end, with the early resignation of Yeltsin, Putin is already an acting president, that is, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces until the day of the presidential election.⁵⁶

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⁵⁵ Gleb Pavlovsky in 'Preymnik. Inaya vlast' Otryvok iz knigi razgovorov Gleba Pavlovskogo i Ivana Krasteva "Eksperimental'naya Rodina" o prikhode Putina k vlasti' [Successor. Other power. An excerpt from the book of conversations between Gleb Pavlovsky and Ivan Krastev 'Experimental Homeland' about Putin's coming to power], *Colta.Ru*, 4 July 2018, (accessed 20 July 2021).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

While the political strategist Pavlovsky was driven by ‘electoral potentials’ to find a way ‘to patch together Putin’s coalition and build it up to a majority’,⁵⁷ for Putin it was about more than winning an election campaign. His actions, as Sharafutdinova accurately described, were built on ‘astute and, potentially, sincere understanding of the state of symbolic loss and normative breakdown that Russian citizens experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union’.⁵⁸

Either intuitively, or due to his personal experience as a KGB officer,⁵⁹ or by studying Russian history, Putin understood the power of the Russian people:

Russia is essentially invincible when facing a foreign adversary. But the same people who successfully defended their country against Napoleon and Hitler, and eventually defeated and destroyed them, brought down their own country twice within a single century: in 1917 and again in 1991.⁶⁰

‘He carefully analysed his predecessors, Nicholas II, the last tsar, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader’, argues Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and well-known critic of the Kremlin. Putin, in the words of Trenin, came to believe that the main recipe for power in Russia ‘is to stay in close touch with the bulk of the people’.⁶¹ By the end of the 1990s ‘the bulk of the people’ in Russia became disillusioned with Western-style democracy, was desperate to be rid of old and weak Yeltsin, and willing to sacrifice its rights in return for a ‘strong hand’ leadership to bring sorely missed order and stability.

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⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 100.

⁵⁹ Michel Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2018).

⁶⁰ Dmitri Trenin, ‘Putin’s Biggest Challenge Is Public Support’, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 15 January 2015, (accessed 20 July 2021).

⁶¹ Ibid.

It is important to remember that Post-Soviet nostalgia did not mean the Russian public sought to re-establish the Soviet Union. In 1999, according to Levada Center opinion polls, only 15% wanted to see a future Russia as 'a social state like the USSR'.⁶² The majority of Russians perceived the economic hardship, general uncertainty on personal and state levels, criminality, and political corruption of the 1990s as an antithesis to the predictability, stability, and order of the Soviet Union. It was these characteristics that Russians were nostalgic about. And Putin understood it all too well. In a major Q&A television broadcast during his 2000 election campaign he said: 'Anyone who does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart. And anyone who wants it back has no brain'.⁶³ A few years later, during his 2005 Address to the Federal Assembly, he expressed this sentiment even more candidly: 'First and foremost, it is worth acknowledging that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'.⁶⁴

In constructing narratives to justify his arrival in the Kremlin, Putin tried to integrate both nostalgia for a strong leader 'with a common touch' and resentment against weak and untrustworthy leadership of the 1990s. In constructing a shared understanding of Russia's past, present, and future, he did not seek a return to the Soviet system. After all, this was not what the majority of Russia's public wanted. And there was already a party (Russia's Communist Party, re-established in 1993) that promoted exactly that. Instead, Putin sought to justify his arrival in the Kremlin as a promising contrast to the illegitimate and corrupt Yeltsin. In other words, the collective trauma of the 1990s was explicitly built into the strategic narratives intended to justify Putin's regime, since his political identity was constructed as an antithesis to the politics of the 1990s.⁶⁵

62 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 36.

63 Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, 'Ispolnyayushchiy obyazannosti Prezidenta, Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva Vladimir Putin provol "Pryamuyu liniyu" s chitatel'yami gazety "Komsomol'skaya Pravda"' [Acting President, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin held a "Direct Line" with the readers of the newspaper "Komsomol'skaya Pravda"], 9 February 2000, (accessed 1 July 2021).

64 Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, 'Poslaniye Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii' [Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 25 April 2005, (accessed 20 July 2021).

65 Olga Malinova, 'Obosnovaniye politiki 2000-kh godov v diskurse V.V. Putina i formirovaniye mifa o "likhikh devyanostykh"' [The Policy Rationale during the 2000s in the Discourse of Vladimir Putin and the Formation of the Myth about the "Wild Nineties"], *Political Science (RU)* Number 3 (2018): 45-69.

As Pavlovsky explains:

Candidate Putin acted against the backdrop of Yeltsin. [...] From a deadly burden for the Kremlin's candidate, Yeltsin turned into an engine of the dramatic plot: as the old man was dissolving, his place was slowly replaced by the young – like an installation of new software. [...] The tenets of Putin's 1999 campaign – decisiveness, youth and sportiness – were based on the [election campaign] staff's narratives "Putin personally leads the country", "Putin is young and strong", and so on. Today they are a part of the dogma of power, but then, they were a novelty.⁶⁶

These narratives, born in antithesis to Yeltsin, have become an integral part of the Kremlin's domestic SC aimed at justifying Putin's leadership. From his first election campaign in 2000 until today, the Kremlin has used any occasion, staged or otherwise, to showcase Putin's health and active lifestyle, to emphasise his personal involvement and decisiveness, and to accentuate his ability to be 'in-touch' with the Russian people.

Probably the easiest narrative to build was around Putin's health, as Daniel Treisman observed: 'Yeltsin – ailing, gaffe-prone, at times visibly inebriated – could hardly have seemed more different from the disciplined, energetic, sober Putin, a former spy and judo black belt.'⁶⁷ The idea of a healthy and sporty Putin started with a publicity stunt in the form of the 1999 book *Learning Judo with Vladimir Putin*⁶⁸, co-authored by Putin. But soon it was developed into a full-scale strategic narrative. Since 1999, Putin has not only repeatedly demonstrated his judo skills, but has also learnt to play hockey, taken part in different extreme sports, and explored distant parts of Russia on fishing trips during highly publicised vacations. Such public demonstrations of Putin's health should not be surprising.

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⁶⁶ Pavlovsky in 'Preymnik. Inaya vlast' [Successor. Other power].

⁶⁷ Daniel Treisman, 'Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin', *American Journal of Political Science* Volume 55, N° 3 (2011): 593.

⁶⁸ Vladimir Putin, Vasilii Shestakov and Aleksey Levitskiy, *Uchimysya dzyudo s Vladimirom Putinyim* [Learning Judo with Vladimir Putin] (Moscow: OLMA-PPRESS, 1999).

According to Levada Center polls, 85% of Russians consider the ‘good physical condition of the president’ to be ‘important for the country’.⁶⁹ The importance placed on Putin’s health was best explained by the deputy director of the Levada Center, Aleksey Grazhdankin, in 2012: ‘young and energetic Putin replaced incapable Yeltsin and people looked at him, hoping that he, and not an undefined entourage, will rule the country’.⁷⁰

Grazhdankin’s observation helps to understand why during his fourth presidency, a more senior Putin still performs carefully staged and nationally broadcast judo exercises.⁷¹ It also connects to the second important strategic narrative evoked to justify Putin’s regime: a leader with a ‘strong hand’ who personally leads the country. From the beginning, Putin had used any opportunity to showcase decisiveness and personal involvement. In 1999, directly after his appointment as Prime Minister, Putin paid tribute to the fallen soldiers during a briefing with Russian generals in Chechnya. The beginning of his remarks followed the usual custom:

I would like, according to Russian tradition, [...] to raise this glass and drink it for the memory of those who have fallen [...] We have no right to allow ourselves any moment of weakness, because if we will, then those, who have fallen, died for no reason.

But they took an unexpected turn:

This is why, I suggest, to put this glass away today. We definitely will drink for them [fallen soldiers], but we will drink later, when the immediate goals of principal character will be solved. This is why, I suggest having a bite and start working.⁷²

69 Levada Center, ‘Grazhdane Rossii zhelayut sebe zdorovogo Vladimira Putina: Pyataya chast’ respondentov “Levada-tsentra” zamechala snizheniye aktivnosti prezidenta’ [Russian citizens Wish for Healthy Vladimir Putin: A Fifth of the Levada Center Respondents Noticed a Decrease in the President’s Activity], 24 December 2012, (accessed 20 July 2021).

70 Ibid.

71 ‘Putin potrenirovalsya s dzyudoistami v Sochi’ [Putin Trained with Judokas in Sochi], *Izvestiya*, 15 February 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).

72 Vladimir Putin in Vladimir Solovyev, *President* (Moscow: Masterskaya Movie Company, 2015).

The act of firmly placing the glass back on the table symbolised to Russians the decisiveness and power of a leader over his followers. During the 2000 election campaign, Pavlovsky recalled:

Every single day, Putin summoned those in charge and gave orders in front of the TV camera, glaring at the minister sitting opposite him. The ministers portrayed awe before the “boss”, something that at this time was pretty staged.⁷³

As time passed, however, and Putin solidified his power, the ‘awe before the boss’ became more and more genuine. One of the most memorable moments occurred at the beginning of the 2008 Economic Crisis, when, during a visit to RUSAL (the world’s second largest aluminium company), he forced Oleg Deripaska (a Russian oligarch and the president of the company) to sign a contract in front of running cameras, while grilling the trembling with fear company’s managers: ‘I think that you have made thousands of people hostage to your ambitions, unprofessionalism, and maybe just trivial greed ... this is absolutely unacceptable.’⁷⁴

Moreover, these narratives of power and personal leadership were not only crafted as an antithesis to Yeltsin’s leadership during the 1990s. Their demonstration to the public was in and of itself a reversal of Yeltsin’s practices. When Yeltsin was approached by Egor Gaidar, his first prime minister, to establish ‘a service that would explain that what you do is right and necessary for Russia’, he replied, ‘Egor Timurovich, you want to recreate the propaganda section of the CPSU Central Committee? While I am the president, I will not allow that to happen’.⁷⁵ Putin, however, quickly realised the importance of filling this communication vacuum between the government and people.

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⁷³ Pavlovsky in ‘Preymnik. Inaya vlast.’ [Successor. Other power.].

⁷⁴ Solovyev, *President*.

⁷⁵ ‘Yegor Gaidar o Borise Yeltsine. Beseda s Ol’goy Romanovoy (2007)’ [Yegor Gaidar about Boris Yeltsin. Conversation with Olga Romanova (2007)], *LiveJournal*, 24 July 2007, (video accessed 20 July 2021).

In a ‘confidential conversation’⁷⁶ with Vitaly Mansky, a Russian filmmaker who produced a series of documentaries in 2001 about Vladimir Putin, Boris Yeltsin, and Mikhail Gorbachev,⁷⁷ Putin remarked, ‘I must act as I see fit ... [however] I believe that I am obliged to explain the motives of my behaviour to absolutely everyone’.⁷⁸

In addition to carefully staged appearances intended to feed the narratives described above, Putin initiated ‘Direct Line with Vladimir Putin’ – an annual live broadcast and Q&A that has run continuously since 2001 (even during his time as prime minister from 2008 to 2012). Through a series of preselected questions, these carefully staged events allow Putin to showcase his power and directly address the people: from ‘explaining’ the developments of the past year and newly adopted policies, to ‘taking personal responsibility’ by addressing grievances and cases of officials’ wrongdoings raised by the public.

Sharafutdinova is right to assert that Putin’s relationship with the media is often reminiscent of the Soviet propaganda machine.⁷⁹ Since Russia’s leadership of the 1990s clearly distanced itself from the Soviet leadership style, and Putin sought to construct his leadership in opposition to Yeltsin, it should not be surprising that the result resembles the Soviet original. On the other hand, it is important to remember that a re-creation of the Soviet Union (or its practices) was never Putin’s goal. In another ‘confidential conversation’ with Mansky in 2000, Putin claimed that ‘bringing anything back is simply impossible [...] if we try to turn back, we will definitely destroy everything completely’.⁸⁰ Instead, feeling that ‘the absolute majority [of the Russian public] has a certain nostalgia’,⁸¹ Putin shaped his domestic SC as an explicit antithesis to the realities of

76 As Putin was aware of the camera, the conversation was hardly confidential. However, it was a private conversation defined as ‘dovertel’nyy razgovor’, where Putin appears genuine and relaxed. This conversation was omitted for the original 2001 documentary *Putin. Viskosnyy god 2001* [Putin. Leap Year 2001], and was released only in Mansky’s 2018 documentary *Svideteli Putina* [Putin’s Witnesses].

77 Vitaly Mansky, *Putin. Viskosnyy god 2001* [Putin. Leap Year 2001], (Moscow: Vertov Studio, 2001); *Yel’tsin. Drugaya zhizn’* [Yeltsin. Another Life], 2 movies, (Moscow: Vertov Studio, 2001); *Gorbachev. Posle imperii* [Gorbachev, After the Empire], 2 movies, (Moscow: Vertov Studio, 2001).

78 Vitaly Mansky, *Svideteli Putina* [Putin’s Witnesses], (Latvia, Switzerland, Czech Republic, 2018).

79 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, pp. 22-23.

80 Mansky, *Svideteli Putina* [Putin’s Witnesses].

81 Ibid.

the 1990s, as this narrative resonated best with the values and sentiments of the Russian public in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

It is important to remember that the success of Putin's domestic SC was not only an outcome of well-structured strategic narratives. It was also (and probably even more so) a result of Russia's economic recovery during the 2000s. The export of fossil fuels was exceptionally lucrative during the decade. Building on rising oil and gas revenues, Russian economic growth in the early 2000s was not only substantial, it rapidly reached unprecedented heights.⁸² This success had an immediate positive influence on domestic public opinion. Putin was considered a 'saviour of the nation', 'restorer of order', and 'distributor of wealth'.⁸³

Meanwhile, as the economic situation improved, the power of framing Putin's regime in opposition to Yeltsin's leadership began to fade. In August 1995, Levada Center opinion polls showed that, when asked to assess the political situation in Russia (on the scale: peaceful-calm-tense-critically explosive), 52% of the public described it as 'tense' and 34% as 'critically explosive'. Only 5% described it as 'calm' and less than 1% as 'peaceful'. However, by the end of the decade, in August 2010, the situation was different—52% described the situation in Russia as 'calm', 4% as 'peaceful', 31% as 'tense' and only 4% as 'critically explosive'.⁸⁴ The narrative of 'Putin the Saviour' was rooted in the idea of making Putin's Russia an antithesis of Yeltsin's Russia. The closer this goal came to fulfilment, the less relevant became the narrative, forcing the Kremlin to recalibrate the role and place of the 1990s in its domestic SC.

82 Åslund Anders, 'An Assessment of Putin's Economic Policy', *CE.Sifo Forum* Volume 9, N° 2 (2008): 16-21,

83 Kirill Rogov, 'Sverkhbol'shinstvo dlya sverkhprezidentstva' [Supermajority for Superpresidency], *Pro et Contra* Volume 17, N° 3-4 (2013): 107.

84 Levada Center, 'Rossiyanе o svoem nastroyenii i material'nom polozenii, ekonomicheskoy i politicheskoy obstanovke v strane, krizise' [Russians Speak about Their Mood and Financial Situation, the Economic and Political Situation in the Country, the Crisis], 23 May 2012, (accessed 20 July 2021).

PHASE II (2012-PRESENT): 'IRREPLACEABLE PUTIN' – THE 1990s AS A THREAT

'If there is Putin – there is Russia; if there is no Putin – there is no Russia' was the 'key thesis' advocating the position of Putin in Russia, as articulated by the Kremlin's deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin at the 11th Valdai Club conference in 2014.⁸⁵ Indeed, since the annexation of Crimea, the popularity of Putin has skyrocketed, and many Russians have been struggling to imagine Russia without Putin. In the summer of 2017, Levada Center public opinion polls showed that 67% of the public wanted Putin to remain Russia's president beyond 2024. Although this number has been falling since then (54% in 2019 and 48% in 2021), it still represents the largest group of the Russian public. In 2019, 38% opposed the idea of Putin staying beyond 2024 and 8% were undecided. In 2021, 41% were against him staying and 11% were undecided.⁸⁶ The strategic narrative of the irreplaceable Putin, however, was neither Volodin's idea, nor introduced by him. As Sharafutdinova rightly argues, it has been consistently constructed in a top-down manner by 'the Kremlin, the Orthodox Church and the cultural elites' since the latter part of the 2000s.⁸⁷

The collective trauma of the 'wild nineties' was used in different ways to construct this narrative. Since it was built as a natural continuation of the initial narrative of Putin-not-Yeltsin, the notion of a 'decade without patriotism'⁸⁸ continued to play an explicit role. In his 2008 book *Putin: A Guide for Those Who Are Not Indifferent*, Vladimir Solovyev, a Russian television host, who had risen to the position of one of the Kremlin's principal media mouthpieces by the mid 2010s, wrote:

Putin, in contrast to Yeltsin, behaves as a true statesman.
[...] In a certain sense, Putin is Yeltsin's antagonist.

85 'Bez Putina ne budet Rossii – takoye mneniye vyskazal pervyy zamestly administratsii prezidenta Vyacheslav Volodin' [There Will Be no Russia without Putin - This Opinion Was Expressed by the First Deputy Head of The Presidential Administration Vyacheslav Volodin], *Radio Echo Moskvy*, 23 October 2014, (accessed 20 July 2021).

86 Levada Center, 'Otnosheniye k novomu sroku Vladimira Putina' [Attitudes towards the New Term of Vladimir Putin], 26 February 2012, (accessed 20 July 2021).

87 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 31.

88 Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin's Russia*, p. xi.

Putin is probably the most [Russian] national of all presidents we have ever had. Not in the sense that he is of Russian nationality, but in a sense that his feeling of being a citizen of this country and being responsible for graves of its ancestors. He cannot imagine himself apart from Russia.⁸⁹

Likewise, Russian historian Evgeny Anisimov's 2009 book *The History of Russia from Rurik to Putin* (2009) skilfully constructs the strategic narrative of the irreplaceable Putin. The book's thesis not only perfectly connects the past, present, and future of Russia, but also elevates Putin's leadership to that of the great Russian dynasties of the past—the Rurikids and Romanovs.⁹⁰ Anisimov's original intention was perhaps nothing more than a catchy title. After all, the book is critical of Putin's achievements during his first two terms. Yet, the potential of his framework for SC was quickly realised by the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been a steadfast supporter of Putin's regime.⁹¹

Since 1995, the Russian Orthodox Church has organised exhibitions titled 'Orthodox Russia' across cities in Russia. Initially, the main target audience for the exhibitions was the Orthodox community. The focus shifted in the early 2010s with the arrival of Archimandrite Tikhon as the Responsible Secretary of the Patriarch's Council for Culture at the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. At that time, he was one of the most influential church ministers, labelled by opposition media as Putin's personal confessor.⁹² Under his supervision, an entire new series of exhibitions was developed based on the same multimedia format: virtual 3D models, modern displays, touch screens, and specially

89 Vladimir Solovyev, *Putin: putevoditel' dlya neravnodushnykh* [Putin: A Guide for Those Who Are Not Indifferent] (Moscow: Eskimo, 2008), p. 35.

90 Evgeny Anisimov, *Istoriya Rossii ot Ryurika do Putina: Lyudi, Sobytiya, Daty* [The History of Russia from Rurik to Putin: People, Events, Dates] (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2009).

91 Bozena Iwanowska, 'The Russian Orthodox Church as a Source of the Legitimacy of Putin's Presidential Power', in *Aktual'nyye problemy sovremennykh politiko-psikhologicheskikh fenomenov: teoretiko-metodologicheskiye i prikladnyye aspekty: materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii 10–11 marta 2012 goda* [Actual Problems of Modern Political and Psychological Phenomena: Theoretical, Methodological and Applied Aspects: Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference on 10–11 March 2012], (Penza, Yerevan, Kolin: Scientific Publishing Centre 'Sociosphere', 2012).

92 Vlad Pushkarev and Sergey Yerzhenkov, 'Kto on — «dukhovnik Putina», chto yego na samom dele svyazyvayet s prezidentom, i kak s yego podachi moglo nachat'sya delo Serebrennikova' [Who Is He — "Putin's confessor", What Actually Connects Him to the President, and How He Could Initiate the Serebrennikov Case], *Dozhd*, 15 November 2017, (accessed 20 July 2021).

commissioned short documentaries. In 2015 the main exhibition ‘Russia – My History’ [Rossiya – Moya Istoriya] opened at the All-Russian Exhibition Centre in Moscow. It consisted of three main expositions: ‘Rurikids 862-1598’; ‘Romanovs 1630-1917’; and ‘20th Century’.⁹³ Since the exhibition did not showcase any artefacts and was based on material that could be easily reproduced, by 2021 identical exhibitions had opened in 24 regional centres across Russia.⁹⁴ From the outset, the exhibition had been widely labelled by the community of Russian historians ‘not as an historical-educational, but as an agitation-propaganda project’⁹⁵ to promote an interpretation of history favourable to the Kremlin. At the entrance, visitors are greeted by a tall stand titled ‘History of Russia from Rurik to Putin’, listing all the major events in Russian history. Another case in point is the space and attention given to telling Russia’s post-Soviet history. The trauma of the 1990s is emphasised, and the narrative highlights the irreplaceable contribution of Putin to Russia’s recovery. As Professor of History at the Ural Federal University, Aleksey Mosin, concluded:

The last halls of the exhibition, dedicated to the post-Soviet period, cannot be substantially analysed, since the materials presented in them mainly consist of well-known slogans and clichés, reflecting a completely unequivocal interpretation of trends in social development: from the “collapse of the USSR” and the “wild nineties” to stability under the conditions of sovereign democracy and rallying the nation under the slogan “We Trust Putin!”⁹⁶

93 Sergey Khazov-Kassia, “Rossiya – moya istoriya”. Diletanty obratilis’ k uchenym, pobedila ideologiya’ [“Russia – My History”. Amateurs Turned to Scientists, Ideology Won], *Radio Svoboda*, 7 October 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).

94 Official website of the project, (accessed 20 July 2021).

95 Aleksey Mosin, “Moya Istoriya” ili “Moya Mifologiya”? [“My History” or “My Mythology”?], *Istoricheskaya Ekspertiza* Volume 1 N° 14 (2018): 82. See also Adrian Selin, ‘O vystavkakh v istoricheskom parke “rossiya — moya istoriya” v Sankt-Peterburge’ [On the Expositions at the Historical Park “Russia – My History” in Saint Petersburg], *Istoricheskaya Ekspertiza* Volume 1 N° 14 (2018): 59-77; Andrey Suslov, ‘Istoricheskii park “rossiya — moya istoriya” v Permi’ [The Historical Park “Russia – My History” in Perm], *Istoricheskaya Ekspertiza* Volume 1 N° 14 (2018): 78-81.

96 Mosin, “Moya Istoriya” ili “Moya Mifologiya”? [“My History” or “My Mythology”?], p. 90.

This leads to another and probably the most important way the 1990s were used to construct the narrative of the irreplaceable Putin. The memory of the collective trauma of the 1990s became an implicit threat to justify Putin's continuous presidency. Since the trauma of the 1990s was firmly linked to the idea of 'Putin the Saviour', Putin and his supporters constructed the following narrative: only Putin could keep Russia on its 'right' course, and without him the 'times of trouble' would soon return.

From the late 2000s, several documentaries made by Putin supporters reinforced his image as a saviour from the 'disastrous' 1990s. The most prominent are Nikita Mikhalkov's documentary *55* (celebrating Putin's fifty-fifth birthday in 2007),⁹⁷ Vladimir Solovyev's *President* (released in 2015, a year after the annexation of Crimea),⁹⁸ and Andrei Kondrashev's documentary *Putin* (released in 2018, in advance of the presidential elections).⁹⁹ All three directors build on the Putin leadership's narratives in their documentaries. They repeatedly acknowledged not only the absence of an alternative to Putin, but also that, due to his experience 'of saving Russia from the 1990s', he should remain in the Kremlin. Just before the release of his documentary in 2007, Mikhalkov co-authored an open letter to Putin, in which he urged him, 'on behalf of all representatives of creative professions in Russia', to stay on for a third consecutive term, as 'thanks to your efforts, social stability and progress have been achieved, [and] the authority of our Motherland has increased enormously across the world'.¹⁰⁰

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97 Nikita Mikhalkov, *55* (Moscow: Russiya-1, 2007).

98 Solovyev, *President*.

99 Andrei Kondrashev, *Putin* (Moscow: Russiya-1, 2018).

100 Zurab Tsereteli, Tahir Salahov, Albert Charkin and Nikita Mikhalkov, 'Pis'mo prezidentu Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putinu' [Letter to the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 16 November 2007, (accessed 20 July 2021).

In March 2020, in answer to a question about a possible Putin presidency after 2024, Mikhalkov unsurprisingly continued in the same vein:

Tell me who can replace him today? I don't see anyone yet. In any case, I do not see a more experienced person who went through not only political, but also economic experience [...] and who knows the country. We need to be driven by the interests of the state, and not just by the rules. I understand that there is a letter of the law, there is a Constitution. I understand everything, but if what may come is worse than it is now, I would not want it.¹⁰¹

Andrey Kondrashev, another staunch supporter of Putin, who was appointed as press secretary to Putin's election campaign in 2018 after the release of his documentary, replied to a question on Putin's suitability for the presidency:

The main slogan of the campaign is "Strong President—Strong Russia". The realities of nowadays require us to move forward, despite all the pressure and restrictions that other countries impose on us. A good base has been created for this. We need very strong-willed decisions, we need a person who can and knows how to do it. It does not seem to me that what we need now is a period of experiments. We need a breakthrough and strong-willed decisions that only Putin can make.¹⁰²

In contrast to Mikhalkov and Kondrashev who celebrated Putin as Russia's 'saviour', Soloviev warned that Russia might return to the '1990s' without Putin's leadership. Referring to rising opposition forces in an episode of his radio show aired a few months before the presidential elections in 2012, he declared:

101 'Nikita Mikhalkov — o Putine. "Metamorfozakh" i koronavirus' [Nikita Mikhalkov — About Putin, "Metamorphoses" and Coronavirus], *OTV: Sverdlovskoye Oblastnoye Telenideniye*, 5 March 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021).

102 'Andrey Kondrashev: Rossii nuzhen ryvok, obespechit' kotoryy mozhet tol'ko Putin' [Andrey Kondrashev: Russia Needs a Breakthrough that only Putin Can Deliver], *Federal'noye Agentstvo Norostey*, 14 March 2018, (accessed 20 July 2021).

The question is simple enough: do you want to return the 1990s? Perhaps you have a hard time remembering them. Let me remind you. [...] The 1990s is when bandits felt themselves to be in absolute control [...] The 1990s is when Russia's legitimately elected parliament was shot down at the order of the president [...] The 1990s is when the president of Russia, Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, declared a civil war, sent in troops and bombed the Russian city of Grozny [...] Those were the jolly times, if someone does not remember them. So, does anyone want to return to the 1990s? The 1990s, when the state practically did not exist and the word "corruption" did not make sense because there was nothing else but corruption.¹⁰³

Putin himself has frequently used the trauma of the 1990s to justify his policies or threaten that an alternative to his regime would bring back crisis. In 2010 on his *Direct Line* show, he chose to answer a provocative question about the leaders of non-systemic opposition: 'What do Nemtsov, Ryzhkov, Milov and others really want?':

Money and power, what else do they want?! In their time in the 1990s they had their mess. Together with Berezovsky and others, who are currently in prison and about whom we talked earlier today, they looted many billions. Driven from the manger, running out of money, they want to come back and fill their pockets. However, I think that if we allow them to do this, this time they will not restrict themselves to some billions, they will sell out Russia.¹⁰⁴

On the same show nine years later, he decided to answer another provocative question ("so that there's no impression that we avoid this type of questions") about the legitimacy of his government.

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¹⁰³ Vladimir Soloviev quoted in Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Putin in "Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinym. Prodolzheniye". Polnyy tekst programmy' ["Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continuation". Full Text of the Program], *Vesti*, 16 December 2010, (accessed 20 July 2021).

Responding to, ‘Where is this gang of patriots from United Russia taking us?’, Putin commented:

In my opinion, when people take responsibility, including for making decisions that are not very popular but extremely necessary for the country, this means that they are mature people who see their goal, the goal of their life, the goal of their political career – to strengthen the country and improve people’s lives in the long run.

I will not call people who were at the helm in the 1990s a gang, but I want to note that during that time, our social sphere, industry, and defence industry completely collapsed—we lost the defence industry, we practically ruined the Armed Forces, brought the country to civil war and bloodshed in the Caucasus, and put the country on the brink of loss of sovereignty and collapse, we must say this directly.¹⁰⁵

Unsurprisingly, the narrative of ‘Irreplaceable Putin’ became especially relevant during the Kremlin’s campaign for the 2020 Russian Constitutional Referendum, intended to pave the way for Putin to stay in power beyond 2024. The traumatic period of the 1990s played an important role in justifying constitutional change. These changes were framed not as the introduction of something new, but as a means to prevent Russia from returning to the 1990s. In a televised meeting with the leaders of the main factions in the Russian State Duma, Putin eloquently demonstrated how the 1990s have been used as a threat to justify his irreplaceability:

It is not an accident that the Constitution is called the Basic Law, which should consolidate the entire society. I think that we will succeed to put to the national vote a draft of amendments to the Basic Law that will do exactly that.

.....
¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, ‘*Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinym*’ [Direct Line with Vladimir Putin], 20 June 2019, (accessed 20 July 2021).

Things that unite all of us, even politically, can also be found. For example, I have never heard from you that the country should return to the 1990s. Despite all the positives associated with the democratisation of the country, returning to the years of difficult trials for citizens – probably no one wants this for sure.

But it is not enough for us to simply draw a line under a certain stage in the development of our country. We need guarantees of the impossibility of a rollback in the direction in which we do not want to return, the inadmissibility of new attempts to swing the country – no one wants that either. Many of you have witnessed those difficult events. I am sure that nothing of that kind should be repeated in our history, or rather, in our future.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the collective trauma of the 1990s was not the only cornerstone used by the Kremlin to construct its SC. During the last two decades, other themes and ideas, words and deeds, have been used by the Kremlin to construct a shared understanding of the past, present, and future. For example, according to Vera Michlin-Shapir, ‘national calendars represent a collectively imagined past, projected future, and how societies perceive their present social essence’. She describes the Kremlin’s construct of Russia’s new ‘unified national religious-militarized calendar’ as ‘a political technology that was meant to recreate a sense of stability in highly volatile late modern circumstances’.¹⁰⁷ Another example is the strategic narrative of subversive ‘Information War’ (or Hybrid War– ‘*gibridnaya voyna*’) allegedly conducted by the West against Russia. Since 2012, this has been another important part of the Kremlin’s domestic SC, helping ‘the Russian political leadership to close ranks

106 Vladimir Putin in Presidential Executive Office of Russia, ‘*Ystrecha s rukovoditelyami fraktsiy Gosudarstvennoy Dumi*’ [Meeting with the Leaders of the State Duma Fractions], 6 March 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021).

107 Vera Michlin-Shapir, *Fluid Russia: Between the Global and the National in The Post-Soviet Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 127, 174–175.

against a new/old enemy, the West, mobilising Russian public opinion and the support of other Russian major political actors’.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, as many researchers point out, Putin’s regime is *de facto* a product of the 1990s—‘the country was looking for a group saviour, and Vladimir Putin worked to fit this role’.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, it should not be surprising that the collective trauma experienced by the majority of Russians during that decade, served not only as a foundation for constructing the main strategic narratives of ‘Putin the Saviour’ or ‘Irreplaceable Putin’, but also fed other intermediate sub-narratives such as ‘Putin is One of Us’, ‘Putin is Doing It for Us’, ‘Putin is Crafting a Sense of Us’, and ‘Putin is Making Us Matter’.¹¹⁰

By adopting the conceptual prism of SC, the analysis presented in this article presents certain challenges to the arguments suggested by previous research. One argument frequently put forward is that since his rise to power in 2000, Putin, helped by state-controlled media, has been manipulating the memory of the Soviet Union and the trauma of the 1990s to justify his regime.¹¹¹ Indeed, the 1990s were instrumental for the construction of the Kremlin’s SC. But accusing Putin of forcefully reinterpreting history to benefit his regime misunderstands the way SC and strategic narratives work. First, it is important to remember that neither post-Soviet nostalgia nor the collective trauma of the 1990s was invented by Putin. Russian public perception of these two issues was formed long before Putin’s accession to power. Secondly, Putin doubtlessly instrumentalised collective trauma to structure his strategic narratives. However, collective trauma is too powerful a tool to be excluded from SC. Contemporary history is full of instances of using collective trauma in SC. The Holocaust constitutes an integral part of

108 Ofer Fridman, *Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Resurgence and Politicisation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 151.

109 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 101. See also Malinova, ‘Obosnovaniye politiki 2000-kh godov v diskurse V.V. Putina i formirovaniye mifa o “likhikh devyanostykh”’ [The Policy Rationale during the 2000s in the Discourse of Vladimir Putin and the Formation of the Myth about the “Wild Nineties”]; Mansky, *Svideteli Putina* [Putin’s Witnesses].

110 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, pp. 36–49.

111 See Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*; Vázquez-Liñán, ‘Historical Memory and Political Propaganda in the Russian Federation’; Geifman and Teper, ‘Russia’s New National Identity under Putin’s Regime’.

Israel's diplomacy,¹¹² and the collective trauma of 9/11 'helped facilitate the shift from grief to aggression pursued so successfully by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the attacks'.¹¹³ In other words, if SC is about achieving objectives in a contested environment in the context of values and interests, Putin's use of trauma is a case of well-constructed SC. His objectives might not be to our taste, and we might disapprove of his methods. But if we assess SC based on how well narratives resonate with the majority of a targeted audience (the Russian public), then Putin's strategic communications should be deemed a success.

The Kremlin's representation of history in its SC is also frequently discussed in the literature. Emphasis on both positive nostalgia for the Soviet past and negative memory of the 1990s are seen to hamper constructive conversations about Russia's future.¹¹⁴ As one Russian journalist put it:

We "break our spears" and argue until we are blue in the face about the past, about Stalin and Yeltsin, about the 1930s and 1990s, as if there are no other problems in life; we have gone into the past, either been nostalgic about it or condemning it, because we do not see the future in today's Russia.¹¹⁵

The future of Russia is ultimately a black box, and if it looks anything like Russia's 20th century history, it will be full of surprises. The Kremlin's emphasis on history rather than on Russia's possible future, should be understood in the context of Russian culture and values. How Russians relate to their past and future was best described by Vasily Klyuchevsky, a leading Russian historian of the late 19th century.

112 Yair Gad and Sharon Odom-Weiss, 'Israeli Diplomacy: The Effects of Cultural Trauma', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* N° 9 (2014): 1–23; Norman Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, second edition (London: Verso, 2008).

113 Alexander Dunst, 'After Trauma: Time and Affect in American Culture Beyond 9/11', *Parallax*, Volume 18, N° 2 (2012): 56–71.

114 Ilya Kalinin, 'Nostalgic Modernization: the Soviet Past as "Historical Horizon"', *Slavonica* Volume 17, N° 2 (2011): 156–166; Sergey Medvedev, 'Traumaticheskiy opyt svobody: pochemu u nas tak nenavidyat 90-ye' [The Traumatic Experience of Freedom: Why We Hate the 1990s So Much], *Forbes*, 22 September 2015, (accessed 20 July 2021); Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, pp. 175–177.

115 Medvedev, 'Traumaticheskiy opyt svobody: pochemu u nas tak nenavidyat 90-ye' [The Traumatic Experience of Freedom: Why We Hate the 1990s So Much].

He characterised Russians as circumspect people with a tendency to dwell on the past rather than to focus on the future: ‘everyday adversities and accidents taught him [the Russian] to emphasise the path already travelled, rather than to think of the further one, to gaze back more than to look ahead.’¹¹⁶ Empirical research conducted by organisational and cultural psychologists at the beginning of the 21st century arrived at the same conclusion. It repeatedly demonstrated that Russian society scored extremely low on the scale of future orientation,¹¹⁷ understood as ‘the extent to which members of a society or an organisation believe that their current actions will influence their future, [...] and look far into the future for assessing the effects of their current actions’.¹¹⁸ Put simply, Russians feel ambivalent about the future, and place greater value on their past. Since 1999, when asked ‘what is your first association when you think about your people?’, respondents repeatedly chose ‘our past, our history’.¹¹⁹ It is no surprise, then, that the Kremlin’s SC dwell on the past, either by glorifying it (nostalgia for the Soviet Union) or by vilifying it (‘the wild nineties’). After all, this is what resonates most with the Russian people.

The Kremlin’s SC presents an excellent example of strategic narratives crafted to resonate with the values held by the majority of the targeted audience (Russian domestic public). Instead of continuing the painful transformation of Russian traditional values initiated by the fall of the Soviet Union, Putin chose to deliver what the Russian people desired most: a ‘solid, strong, and even ruthless’ leadership,¹²⁰ order, even if at the expense of democratic rights,¹²¹ and a focus on the past rather than visions for the future.¹²²

116 Yuri Vasil'ev, 'Identichnost' russkogo naroda v istoricheskoy kontseptsii V. O. Klyuchevskogo' [The Identity of the Russian People in the Historical Concept of V.O. Klyuchevsky], *Vlast'*, № 7 (2011): 39.

117 Neal Ashjanasy et al., 'Future Orientation', in *Culture, Leadership, and Organisations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*, edited by Robert J. House et al. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004); Mikhail V. Grachev, Nikolai G. Rogovsky, and Boris V. Rakitski, 'Leadership and Culture in Russia: The Case of 'Transitional Economy'', in *Culture and Leadership Across the World: The GLOBE Book of In-Depth Studies of 25 Societies*, edited by Jagdeep S. Chhokar, Felix C. Brodbeck and Robert J. House (New York: Routledge, 2008).

118 Ashjanasy et al., 'Future Orientation', p. 285.

119 Levada Center, 'Gordost' i identichnost' [Pride and Identity], 19 October 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021).

120 Shestopal, 'Obraz vlasti v Rossii: zhelaniya i real'nost' [The Image of Power in Russia], p. 91.

121 Levada Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2013-2015*, p. 54.

122 Levada Center, 'Gordost' i identichnost' [Pride and Identity].

Perhaps Putin has rightly been accused of turning Russia away from democratic transition. After all, he made the choice ‘to stay in close touch with the bulk of the people,’¹²³ who resisted this transition. Yet values are not set in stone. They can be shifted and changed. Maybe, instead of learning from Nicholas II and Gorbachev,¹²⁴ Putin should take lessons from Peter the Great and Joseph Stalin. These leaders sought to build a different Russia, despite the values held by ‘the bulk of the people’. On the one hand, such transformations in Russian history have usually been associated with large-scale social distress and suffering, which ultimately overshadowed the leader implementing that change. On the other hand, with the ‘old system’ having been destroyed under Yeltsin, Putin was free to mould new values into the Russian social fabric without being made responsible for the consequences of the ‘wild nineties’.

Looking at this conclusion through the prism of SC raises two important conceptual questions. First, to what extent can strategic communicators challenge a targeted audience’s existing framework of values to achieve desired change without losing their legitimacy? The second question is how far they should be allowed to go in their attempts to shape and shift these frameworks according to their own beliefs. Addressing these thought-provoking questions is beyond the scope of this article and must be left for another time.

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123 Trenin, ‘Putin’s Biggest Challenge Is Public Support’.

124 Ibid.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN HISTORY: THE EMPEROR AUGUSTUS

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Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, history, ancient history, Augustus, poetry*

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ABSTRACT

While the term 'strategic communications' was coined in the early 21st century, the core tenets of strategic communications have been employed by political actors throughout history. This article demonstrates that strategic communications aptly describes the Roman emperor Augustus' methods for articulating and advocating his conception of a new world order. Through policy, law, art, architecture, religion, and poetry, presented to both a domestic audience in Rome and an external audience in the provinces, Augustus sought to establish a stable political model and to emphasise his role as a peacemaker. This took place in a contested communications environment, following a century of intermittent civil war waged across the Roman empire

from provincial battlefields to the heart of the Senate. Augustan poetry not only communicated Augustus' key messages to his contemporary audiences, but also left a legacy that informs our modern understanding of the Roman empire.

INTRODUCTION

When Augustus became the first emperor of Rome—an unprecedented achievement in Rome's hitherto republican political system—he consolidated his sole rule by communicating to audiences near and far simple but compelling messages that associated peace and political stability with himself and his family as an established institution of power. Through this series of messages, conveyed through a variety of media, including architecture, the religious calendar, and poetry, he created a legacy that has come to be historically accepted as the symbolic representation of the Roman empire. This article will argue that Augustus' lasting reputation was the result of effective strategic communications, which not only successfully communicated his message to contemporary audiences, but also conveyed his legacy to subsequent generations through the creative and enduring medium of poetry.

'Strategic communications' is a 21st century term, and the study of this field has gained ever more traction in the last twenty years, but so far there has been a limited exploration of historical precedent for strategic communications. By interrogating the seismic events of the Augustan period from a communications perspective, this article will also address a gap in the literature from the classical tradition on the subject of Augustan culture. While there is a general consensus among modern academic views of Augustan culture that poetry was part of a coordinated cultural strategy, there has been very little analysis of the effect this strategy had on its intended audiences.¹ By applying strategic

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1 Duncan Kennedy, "Augustan" and "Anti-Augustan": Reflection on 'Terms of Reference' in Anton Powell, *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), p. 35; Greg Woolf, 'Provincial Perspectives' in Galinsky, p. 127; Alessandro Barchiesi, "Learned Eyes: Poets, Viewers, Image Makers" in Karl Galinsky (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 281; Jasper Griffin, 'Augustan Poetry and Augustanism' in Galinsky, p. 319; Karl Galinsky, 'Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as World Literature' in Galinsky, p. 340.

communications theory to Augustan poetry, this article seeks to define the message Augustus intended to communicate, to explore how he conveyed that message through poetry, and to analyse how his target audiences understood his message and what role this played in shaping their mindset and behaviours.

The article also responds to the call made first by Fernand Braudel and later by Ned Lebow for a historian's view of the social sciences.² In his seminal essay from 1960, 'History and the Social Sciences', Braudel draws parallels between the compartmentalisation of academic fields and trends in history writing: political scientists' views of history are measured in days,³ whereas Braudel seeks to identify social patterns across centuries. Braudel initiated a discussion about long-term trends, themes, narratives, and cycles within the social sciences, drawing together both history and social science in an exploration of underlying theory. A recent response to this call can be found in Lebow's theory of 'inefficient cause',⁴ in which he confronts the temptation to frame reasons and causes in a pattern that builds to a specific political turning point or decision, thereby rejecting the trap of a teleological explanation of cause and effect.⁵ Instead, Lebow considers the multiple and connected layers of cause that underpin any event in international relations. The development of a 'causal map'⁶ will necessarily draw on multiple connected disciplines, creating a framework for understanding in the kind of broad perspective advocated by Braudel. Like Braudel, Lebow calls for 'the historian's art' to complement 'the social scientist's conceptual rigour'.⁷ In a similar vein, Herbert Blumer builds on the work of George Herbert Mead in defining societal structure in terms of symbolic interactionism, characterising actions, both individual and collective, as the result of

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2 Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, 'History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* Volume 32 N°2 (2009): 171–72; Richard Ned Lebow, *Constructing Cause in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 68.

3 Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences', p. 176.

4 Lebow, *Constructing Cause*, p. 5.

5 Ibid., p. 65.

6 Ibid., p. 66.

7 Ibid., p. 68.

the making of meanings and the transference of communications between individuals and across groups.⁸

In a short-term, snapshot view, balances of power may be characterised along an axis of threat or coercion, such as those proposed by Thomas Schelling and Joseph Nye,⁹ but a more nuanced, holistic, and long-term view is required when analysing the shaping of discourse, which the school of strategic communications helps to examine. Both Lebow and Blumer take the long view in their models of inefficient cause and symbolic interactionism, as they trace the formation of meaning through a layered series of interdependent interactions. Discourse is shaped through the creation and fostering of symbols that carry meaning and are transmitted, understood, and formed anew across multiple generations—what Braudel would call the *longue durée*.¹⁰ As a holistic discipline, strategic communications considers elements of meaning-making in the effort to appreciate and characterise long-term strategy. It is this long-term model of meaning-making that will be applied here to the historical context of Augustan Rome and to the discourse shaped by Augustan art, architecture, and in particular, poetry, all of which were mechanisms for structuring and transmitting messages across Roman society.

In the 1st century BC, poetry was as much a hammer used to shape society as it was a mirror that reflected it.¹¹ Poetry was the primary popular form of storytelling and commanded audiences and readers across the Roman empire. Augustus leveraged poetry together with other communicative methods, embedding a new idea of Roman identity within existing cultural identities and building on these ideas to create an attractive conception of an imperial power framework that could appeal to both the core and peripheral audiences of the Roman empire.

8 Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 2–12.

9 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 1; Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), p. 2.

10 Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences', pp. 171–74.

11 Zenia Duell, 'Mirrors and Hammers' in L. Haiden (ed.) *The Future is Now* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021).

This article examines three Augustan poets, identifies the audiences with which their poetry resonated, and invokes the principles of strategic communications to evaluate their effectiveness. More than any other symbolic action of the era, poetry continues to communicate Augustus' messages of political stability to modern audiences.

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Perhaps the clearest performance indicator for the effectiveness of Augustus' strategic communications is that still today the Roman empire needs no introduction. Mention of the name immediately conjures up images redolent with clear branding: red tunics, eagle-shaped standards, great buildings with columns, and letters carved in stone in the now archetypal font. However, until 31 BC the concept of a Roman emperor was anathema to the idea of Rome.

The city of Rome was purportedly founded on 21 April 753 BC,¹² and, according to legend, the first king of Rome was Romulus. There followed several generations of kings, who began the process of expanding Rome's territory and sphere of influence, conquering areas in the immediate vicinity.¹³ According to the Roman historian Livy, the rule of kings ended with Lucius Tarquinius Superbus [Lucius the Proud], whose son disgraced the ruling family and destroyed alliances that had been built among the powerful families of Rome when he raped Lucretia, the wife of a Roman general.¹⁴ In the political outrage that followed, the Tarquinius family was driven from Rome by a faction led by Lucius Junius Brutus, and the Roman Republic was established. The Romans were proud of this new political model: the Republic took great pains to stress that sole rule was not to be tolerated, except as a temporary measure in specific circumstances.

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¹² As Henry Sanders explains, this date was pure guesswork on the part of ancient authors. Henry A. Sanders, 'The Chronology of Early Rome', *Classical Philology* Volume №3 (July 1908): 316–29; The historian Varro settled on this date, working backwards from known later dates in Roman history, and this particular date became universally accepted as the foundation date of Rome, both by Romans and by current historians. The birthday of Rome was celebrated on 21 April each year together with a shepherd's festival, the Parilia. See Ovid, *Fasti*, translated by A.S. Kline (Online: Poetry in Translation, 2004), Book IV.

¹³ Timothy B. Lee, '40 Maps that Explain the Roman Empire', Vox, 19 August 2014.

¹⁴ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, Volume I: Book 1, translated by B.O. Foster (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1919), 1: 57–60. The Rape of Lucretia is a popular image in Renaissance artwork. The story was also romanticised by William Shakespeare in his poem, *Lucrece*.

The political model of the Republic operated on the basis of elected officials, called senators, chosen from among a particular class of Roman men (only those who had a certain level of income or property). The senators were tiered according to responsibility:

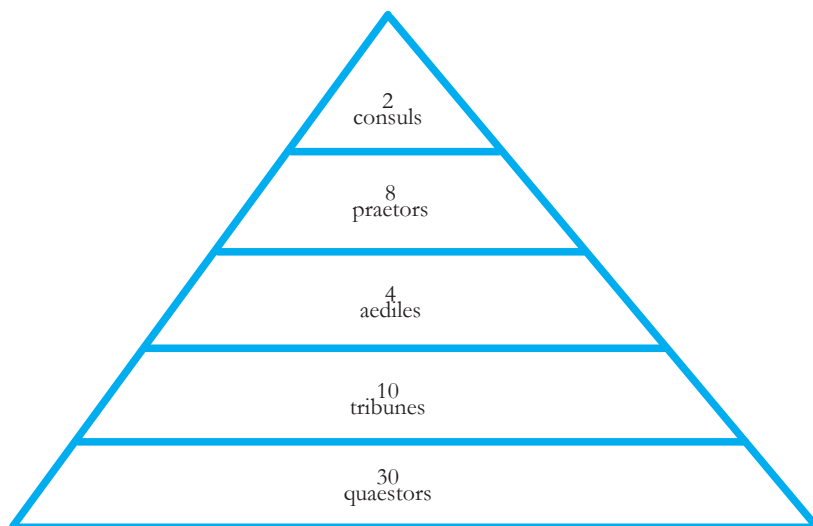


Figure 1. Roles within the Roman senate

At the top of this pyramid of responsibility were the consuls. Two consuls were elected each year so they could hold each other to account, so that power could not, in theory, be concentrated in a single, perpetual ruler. However, in a time of political or military emergency, a ‘dictator’ could be elected from among the senators, who would be given specific decision-making powers for a limited period of time in order to combat a particular crisis.¹⁵ (In Latin ‘dictator’ simply means ‘one who speaks’ and in that period the term was free of the pejorative meaning with which it is now associated.)

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¹⁵ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 2: 18.



Figure 2. Roman territories in the early Republican period¹⁶

This system worked effectively for four hundred years, during which time the empire expanded significantly.

This expansion was due in part to the involvement of Rome in the wars of succession that followed the death of Alexander the Great.

¹⁶ Encyclopædia Britannica, 'The Roman Republic'. [Accessed 21 August 2021]

His conquests had created the Greek/Macedonian empire, stretching from the Aegean to the Ganges, subsuming the entire Persian Empire, Egypt, Afghanistan, and even parts of India into his area of administration, the centre of which was the ancient Mesopotamian city of Babylon. With his military conquests came cultural conquests: Alexander founded approximately twenty cities named after himself throughout the empire, several of which still bear his name today.¹⁷

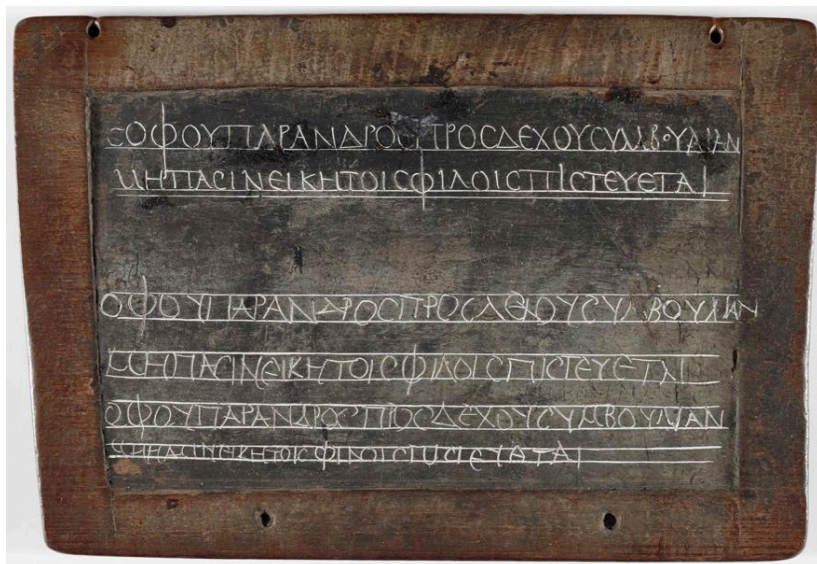


Figure 3. A child's writing tablet from the 2nd century AD in Egypt ¹⁸

These new cities were designed in the Greek style, with grid planning for houses and streets and the amenities unique to Greek culture: theatres, libraries, gymnasia, and public baths. Eventually, existing cities adopted this design and a cultural revolution spread across the area known as the

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17 Alexandria in Egypt is the most obvious of the surviving Alexandrias, but Iskenderun in Turkey is Alexandria in modern Turkish, and Kandahar in Afghanistan is an Afghan rendition of the name.

18 A writing tablet found in Egypt in the 2nd century AD shows an exercise completed by an Egyptian schoolchild. The writing is in Greek. British Library, *Wax diptycha or writing tablets, forming a schoolboy's exercise-book*, [shelfmark Add MS 34186].

Near East. Persian actors performed Greek plays in theatres in Seleucia,¹⁹ Egyptian schoolchildren learned to spell in Greek in Alexandria, and Central Asians played Greek discus games in gymnasia at Ai Khanum.²⁰ This cultural revolution is known as Hellenisation.

After Alexander the Great's death in 323 BC, his generals divided the empire among them. There followed a series of wars in which rival generals (the *Diadochi* or 'Successors') sought to protect their spoils from the others. Rome, meanwhile, had developed a reputation for having a powerful fighting force, and several of these Successors enlisted Roman mercenaries in their wars, or looked to Rome as a neutral political arbitrator.²¹ The fledgling Roman empire was able to leverage this power in the Near East, and gradually accumulated territory, allies, client kings, and political influence across the Near East and Persia.²² At the same time, it was expanding its influence northwards into the Alps and Gaul (France and Northern Italy), westwards into Spain, and southwards into North Africa, which was largely administered by the powerful Carthaginian empire.

The Romans were not yet able to offer these conquered lands the kind of cultural revolution Alexander had launched, but they could serve their provinces as a guarantor of security and as an arbitrator of international disputes. Rome had both the political and military power to leverage its influence throughout the wider Mediterranean world.

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19 The Greek biographer Plutarch writes that when the Roman general Crassus was captured and killed on a campaign against the Parthian Empire, he was beheaded and his head was used as a prop in a performance of Euripides' play *Bacchae*, performed at Seleucia near modern-day Baghdad. Plutarch, 'Crassus' in *Parallel Lives*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1923), section 33. This evidence reveals that Greek plays and performers were still popular in Mesopotamia several hundred years after the dissolution of Alexander the Great's empire.

20 The excavation of the ancient city of Ai Khanum in Afghanistan revealed a gymnasium, designed in the Greek style but with wider proportions more suitable for the Central Asian climate. Paul Bernard, 'The Greek Colony at Ai Khanum and Hellenism in Central Asia' in Fredrik Hiebert and Pierre Cambon (eds) *Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World* (London: British Museum Press, 2011), pp. 89–90.

21 Graham Shipley, *The Greek World After Alexander, 323–30 BC* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), pp. 370–97.

22 Vickie Sullivan, 'Alexander the Great as "Lord of Asia" and Rome as His Successor in Machiavelli's *Prince*', *The Review of Politics* Volume 75 N°4 (2013): 517.



Figure 4. Rome and the Successor Kingdoms²³

In the 1st century BC, a series of civil wars that started in Rome, caused by competing factions within the senatorial system, played out across the entire empire. These civil wars culminated with the victory of Gaius Julius Caesar's faction, and Caesar declared himself dictator for life. For many of the other powerful senators in Rome, this was a step too far towards the monarchical system that had ended when Brutus drove the Tarquiniis out in 510 BC.²⁴ The tension was further exacerbated when Caesar's friend and political ally, Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony), crowned Caesar with a diadem during a religious celebration.²⁵ In March of 44 BC, Marcus Junius Brutus, a direct descendant of Lucius Junius Brutus, led a coup in the senate in which Caesar was assassinated. This led to a second civil war between two factions: the pro-Republic faction of Brutus, and the pro-Caesar faction led by Mark Antony.

²³ Lee, Timothy B., '40 Maps that Explain the Roman Empire', *Vox*, 19 August 2014.

²⁴ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 55.

²⁵ Ibid.

Caesar had died without a legitimate male heir, but in his will, he adopted his great-nephew Gaius Octavius Thurinus (Octavian) as his son. It was into this tense political environment, wracked by civil war, that the eighteen-year-old Octavian entered following Caesar's assassination. Octavian immediately adopted the surname Caesar, in order to promote his legitimacy as Caesar's heir. He saw political advantage in creating an alliance with Mark Antony, Caesar's closest friend and supporter and leader of the pro-Caesar faction in the senate. To their alliance, Antony and Octavian added a senator called Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. This alliance was known as the Second Triumvirate;²⁶ Octavian, Mark Antony, and Lepidus divided administration of the provinces between them. Octavian took over Italy, Antony claimed Gaul and the East, while Lepidus received the provinces in Africa. Octavian further cemented the alliance with Antony by arranging a marriage between Antony and his elder sister, Octavia.

The combined power of this Triumvirate enabled the pro-Caesar faction to defeat Brutus' army at the battle of Philippi in Greece. However, after their mutual enemy had been destroyed, the Triumvirate eventually disintegrated. Mark Antony embarked on an ambitious campaign against the kingdom of Parthia (modern day Iraq/Iran). In order to accumulate the resources to launch his campaign, Mark Antony forged an alliance with the wealthy and powerful Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. There is clear evidence that this was much more than a political alliance: Antony did not attempt to deny that he was the father of Cleopatra's twin children.²⁷

Octavian spun Mark Antony's relationship with Cleopatra to his political advantage. When Antony requested reinforcements from the west for his expedition against Parthia, Octavian sent his sister, Mark Antony's wife, with just 10% of the troops requested. Antony was disappointed: he accepted the troops, but dismissed Octavia, returning instead to Cleopatra. Octavian used this snub to whip up a sense of outrage in Rome, painting Octavia as the virtuous wife and Cleopatra as an

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²⁶ The First Triumvirate had been the alliance between Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus (60–53 BC).

²⁷ Martin Goodman and Jane Sherwood, *The Roman World: 44 BC–AD 180*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 37; Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, p. 261.

untrustworthy foreign homewrecker;²⁸ he also delegitimised Antony's cause by implying a loss of agency. When the relationship between the two men had been strained to breaking point, Octavian was able to use this sense of outrage to initiate a war against Anthony, presented to the public as a Roman war on Egypt and Cleopatra, rather than yet another civil war. It was political semantics, but to a domestic audience that had suffered many years of bloodshed already, it was important for Octavian to communicate that he would be a different sort of leader, so he framed his homegrown opponent as the 'other'.

The rivalry came to a head at the battle of Actium in 31 BC. Octavian's forces, led by his right-hand man and experienced naval commander Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra. Cleopatra fled to Egypt and Mark Antony followed. Their subsequent suicides are recounted in the works of the Greek biographer Plutarch and the historian Cassius Dio.²⁹

The fact that only one bust of Antony remains, created in the century after the Battle of Actium, suggests that Octavian was successful in destroying all evidence of support for his political rival. Octavian's narrative regarding Cleopatra was already embedded in the Greco-Roman orientalising tropes that characterised the East (including Egypt) as effeminate, gluttonous, and sexually liberal.³⁰ The leaflets, speeches, and campaigns produced by Octavian in the third decade BC have now been lost, but evidence from Roman historians attests to the fact that Octavian synonymised Cleopatra with Roman stereotypes of the East, reifying and conceptualising her as an enemy who was both real and abstract.³¹

28 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, pp. 265 and 275.

29 Plutarch, 'Antony', in *Parallel Lives*, pp. 77–87; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, translated by Earnest Cary (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1914–27), p. 50.

30 Maria Wyke, *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 213; Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 1 and 50.

31 Wyke, *The Roman Mistress*, pp. 223 and 228, drawing on Suetonius, *Augustus* 17. See also C.B.R. Pelling, 'The Triumviral Period' in A.K. Bowman, E. Champlin, and A. Lintott (eds) *The Cambridge Ancient History* [2nd edition] Volume X: *The Augustan Empire, 43 BC–AD 69* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 41–46.



Figure 5. Bust of Mark Antony in the Vatican Museum, from the Flavian period³²

He also communicated his characterisation of Cleopatra very tangibly in the Roman forum. In 44 BC, Julius Caesar placed a golden statue of Cleopatra in the Temple of Venus; historians have conjectured that Octavian placed images of his wife Livia and his sister Octavia,

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³² Sergey Sosnovskiy, photo credit, public domain, Wikimedia Commons jpg file: [Marcus Antonius marble bust in the Vatican Museums](#). [Accessed 21 August 2021]

portrayed as perfect Roman matrons, next to Cleopatra's statue in the temple so that the Roman public could directly compare these rival ideas of womanhood.³³

Following the Battle of Actium, Octavian returned to Rome the undisputed, unrivalled holder of political power.³⁴ However, Octavian was careful not to fall into the same trap as his adoptive father in overtly claiming absolute monarchy but instead kept the consular system in place. In theory, Rome was still operating as a Republic, but in reality, it was universally understood within the political body of Rome that decision-making power lay with a single person. Already from 38 BC, Octavian had adopted the title *imperator*, meaning 'military commander' in Latin, and it is from this word that we get the English word 'emperor'. In 27 BC the Senate voted him several other titles: *Augustus*, *princeps*, and *pater patriae*.³⁵ *Augustus* has a very particular meaning in Latin; translated as 'venerable' the word also carries connotations of religious reverence and piety,³⁶ and of social and political elevation. *Princeps* is the root of the English words 'prince' and 'principate', and literally means 'first'—here in the context of 'first among equals'. Octavian, or as he may now be titled, the Emperor Augustus, was carefully treading the line between political leader and monarch. These titles acknowledged his hegemony but did not compromise the essence of the Republic. *Pater patriae* means 'father of the fatherland' and acknowledged his status as the leader who brought an end to civil war. Augustus was building an image of himself as a fatherly figure, concerned for the welfare of the whole Roman people, not just his own political status.

Aesthetic Framework

After almost a century of civil war, Augustus had created a form of political stability. But it was fragile, and it was a hegemonic system—such as the Romans had violently rejected five hundred years earlier following

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³³ Wyke, *The Roman Mistress*, p. 218.

³⁴ Goodman and Sherwood, *The Roman World*, p. 38.

³⁵ Gregory Aldrete, 'Unpacking the Titles of Augustus: Wordplay and Double Meanings', *The Great Courses Daily*, 21 October 2019.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

the actions of Tarquinius. Entrenching this hegemonic political system would require a re-evaluation of what it meant to be Roman.³⁷ The following section will outline how Augustus set about constructing and communicating this new identity, this new set of values, this new world order,³⁸ to his domestic audience in Rome and to his audiences in the wider empire.

DOMESTIC AUDIENCE

The architectural landscape of the city of Rome was a cacophony of statements of power, erected by and for elite viewers.³⁹ Paul Zanker describes the fierce competition for visual supremacy as an echo of political jostling for power among the Roman elite during the late Republican period.⁴⁰ The city was also, in many ways, a graveyard of painful memories from the civil wars: the senate house itself went up in flames after the assassination of Julius Caesar, and the *rostrum*—a platform made of the bows of ships that sailed in the Battle of Antium in 338 BC—was used to display the hands and head of Cicero after he was murdered on the orders of the Second Triumvirate.⁴¹ Augustus aimed to replace ‘the memory of the violent changeability of the political and social conditions of the last decades of the Republic’ with an ideology that appealed to ‘notions of continuity, stability, fixity’.⁴²

.....
³⁷ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Augustan Rome* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p. 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Stephen H. Rutledge, ‘Conflict, Culture and Concord: Some Observations on Alternative Memory in Ancient Rome’ in Galinsky and Lapatin (eds) *Cultural Memories in the Roman Empire* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2015), p. 225.

⁴⁰ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, translated by Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p. 11.

⁴¹ Wallace-Hadrill, *Augustan Rome*, p. 55.

⁴² Philip Hardie, ‘Augustan Poets and the Mutability of Rome’ in Anton Powell (ed.) *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), p. 61.



Figure 6. The Theatre of Pompey, where Julius Caesar was assassinated⁴³
Now the Largo di Torre Argentina—a cat sanctuary

In order to consolidate his own position of authority within this competitive landscape, Augustus set out to redesign Rome, reconstructing its identity in both time and space, and making the identity of Rome synonymous with himself as emperor, and his family as the guarantee of a continuation of that identity. As John Storey points out, ‘hegemony involves [...] a consensus in which a social group presents its own particular set of interests as the general interests of society as a whole [...] this works in part through the circulation of meanings’.⁴⁴ Before Augustus’ claim to sole power, the Senate had sought to represent the interests of the people of Rome through their slogan SPQR—*Senatus Populusque Romanus*, meaning ‘the Senate and the People of Rome’ (although the reality, of course, was that much of Roman society—proletariats, slaves, and women—had no say in political matters). Julius Caesar, on the other hand, as dictator for life, sought to position himself above the Senate. When this was demonstrated by Antony crowning him with a diadem,

.....
43 Buckley, Julia, ‘Site Where Julius Caesar was Killed to Open to Tourists in 2021’, *Condé Nast Traveler*, 22 February 2019.

44 John Storey, *Culture and Power in Cultural Studies: The Politics of Signification* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 6.

his position became unacceptable for the rest of the Senate, who saw themselves as the gatekeepers of the social order. Augustus, however, did not seek to override this social order but rather positioned himself within it. He circulated messages within his domestic audience through a series of symbolic acts that became embedded in the daily activities of the elite community of Rome, 'saturat[ing] the social with meanings that support[ed] the prevailing structures of power'.⁴⁵ By establishing himself as an inextricable part of the existing communications landscape, rather than in opposition to it, he immunised himself from competing messages. One of the ways he achieved this was through a coordinated programme of public buildings.

According to the historian Suetonius, Augustus claimed to have 'found [Rome] a city of brick, and left it a city of marble'.⁴⁶ While this is certainly a sweeping statement, it was 'more than a mere metaphor', as Galinsky attests.⁴⁷ During Julius Caesar's dictatorship, new marble quarries opened up at Carrara, providing Rome with a plentiful supply of cheap, local marble—a supply of which Augustus made full use.⁴⁸

Augustus not only redesigned the traditional Roman forum to reflect the presence and values of his own family,⁴⁹ but also added another forum of his own design to this focal public space. The new forum was frequented primarily by the Roman elite—in fact, the firewall Augustus erected at the back of his forum separated it physically from the seedy Subura district, which was associated with the lower classes.⁵⁰ As a space for the elite, Augustus' forum had both practical and ceremonial functions. At the end of the forum was a temple to Mars *Ullor*—the Avenger—which Augustus had vowed to dedicate following the defeat of Julius Caesar's assassins, thanking Mars for 'revenge' against his adoptive father's

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⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁶ Suetonius, *Augustus*, 28.

⁴⁷ Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 97.

⁴⁸ Wallace-Hadrill, *Augustan Rome*, p. 50.

⁴⁹ The temple to the deified Julius Caesar became the axis of the forum, flanked by the two largest public administrative buildings, the Basilica Julia and Basilica Aemilia, both named after Augustus' adopted twin grandsons, Gaius and Lucius. The neighbouring temple of the twin gods Castor and Pollux was also a nod to the imperial twins. See Wallace-Hadrill, *Augustan Rome*, pp. 53–55.

⁵⁰ Rutledge, 'Conflict, Culture and Concord', p. 226.

murderers. The dedication reinforced his personal narrative, positioning him as the heir of Julius Caesar and as the divinely ordained protector of the Roman state as a whole.

The forum also served as a museum that portrayed Augustus in the context of Roman history. The central plaza of the forum, in front of the Temple dedicated to Mars, showcased a statue of Augustus in a four-horse chariot—a symbol of triumph; porticoes on either side of the plaza were filled with a series of statues of Roman leaders. Two semi-circular rooms on either side of the porticoes housed statues commemorating Rome's mythological heroes, whose story would be related in full by the poet Virgil in an epic poem commissioned by Augustus. While these images, and the message of teleology that they communicate, are clearly targeted at elite educated viewers with enough knowledge of history to be able to 'interpret cultural material',⁵¹ Stephen Rutledge acknowledges that this visual display must have also communicated a general impression of power to the lay viewer. As Zanker outlines, 'never before had [the viewer] encountered such an extensive, fully integrated set of images'⁵²—the messages were simple, clearly defined, drawn from a limited selection, and repeated on every possible occasion,⁵³ so that 'even the uneducated viewer was indoctrinated in the new visual program'.⁵⁴ James Farwell emphasises the importance of consistency of message in strategic communications:⁵⁵ nowhere is consistency more clearly demonstrated than in Augustus' forum.

.....
51 Ibid., pp. 225–26.

52 Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 112.

53 Ibid., p. 113.

54 Ibid., p. 112.

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

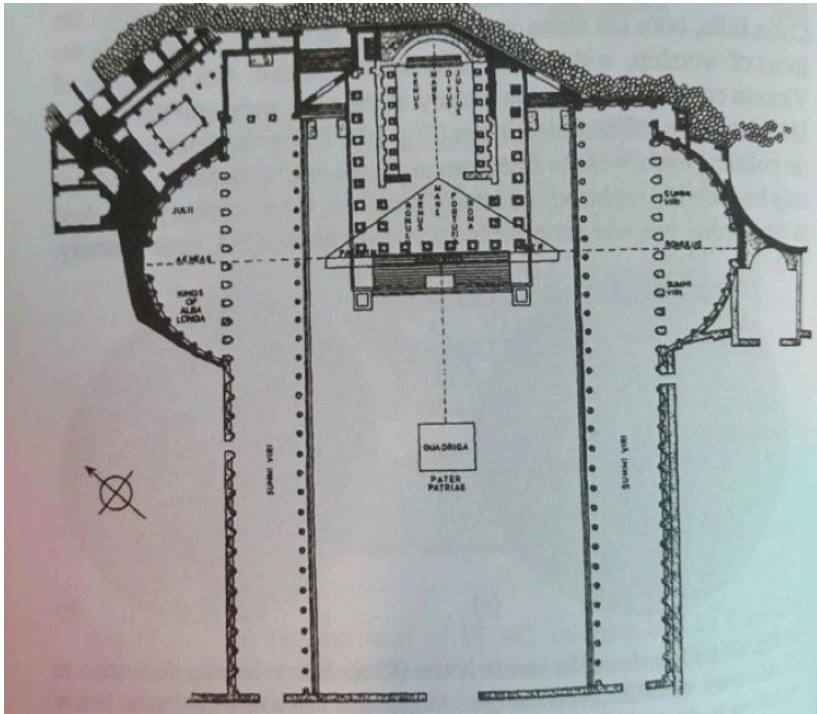


Figure 7. Plan of the Forum of Augustus, with iconographic programme⁵⁶

Augustus was keen to emphasise that he brought peace after a long period of civil war: the *Pax Romana* was equally the *Pax Augusta*.⁵⁷ As an architectural expression of this message, Augustus erected an Altar of Peace, or *Pax*, within the Field of Mars, or *Campus Martius*—a marshy area of Rome used for military drills. While some Republican-era buildings already stood in this area, Augustus' decision to fill an ostensibly military space with new programmatic architecture commemorating himself and his family communicated to his domestic audience that the emphasis had changed from war to peace, from conflict to stability.

56 Wallace-Hadrill, *Augustan Rome*, p. 50.

57 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 228.

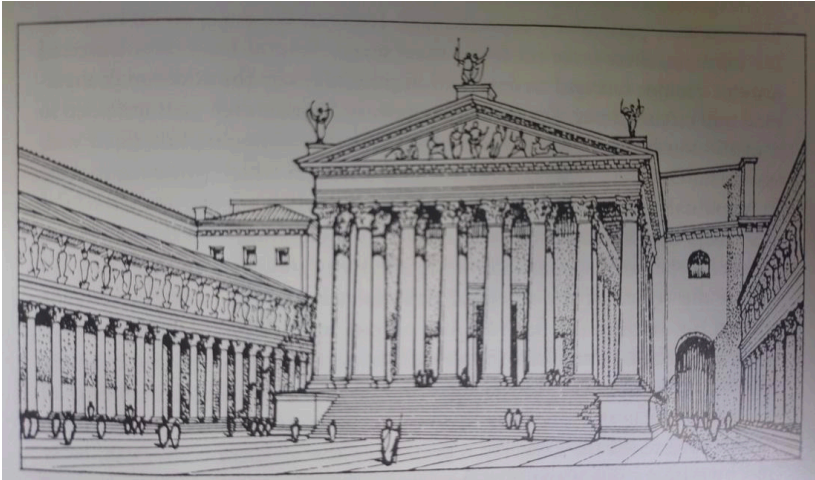


Figure 8. Artist's impression of the Forum of Augustus⁵⁸

The Altar itself was placed in the Field of Mars with mathematical precision in relation to an Egyptian obelisk, imported from Egypt after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra. On 23 September, Augustus' birthday, the shadow of the obelisk would function as a giant sundial, pointing directly towards the centre of the Altar of Peace.⁵⁹ The message was subtle but clear: the conquest of Egypt led to the establishment of peace, and both were achieved by Augustus. As both Galinsky and Zanker describe in detail, the artwork adorning the Altar of Peace is much softer in style; images of family life in Rome are woven in among depictions of religious processions and scenes of the natural world.⁶⁰ The overwhelming impression is one of wholesome plenty. Galinsky demonstrates that the messages on the Altar of Peace were appreciated by a variety of audiences: while a full understanding of the programmatic art, its borrowed artistic styles and mythological contexts, would require

.....
⁵⁸ Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, pp. 225–26.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 146.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 141–55; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, pp. 118–23.

an ‘exceptionally high level of education’,⁶¹ motifs from the Altar of Peace can also be found on the funerary reliefs of middle-class families,⁶² showing that the messages communicated by the Altar filtered through to multiple levels of society. The religious processions depicted on the altar reflected the daily activities of the senatorial elite; even without a strong understanding of artistic references, these depictions would have largely resonated with the population of Rome.⁶³

Augustus’ impact on the physical and artistic environment was literally monumental. As well as commissioning these new buildings, Augustus repaired some of the old Republican buildings, thereby inserted himself and the imperial family into the very fabric of Rome’s architectural environment and redesigning the landscape so that his own constructions were in positions of prominence. In this way, he positioned himself at the teleological culmination of Roman history, a history characterised by war that had concluded with him, and with peace. Not only was Augustus signalling a new world order, but he was also signalling the ‘end of history’.⁶⁴ His architectural programme would be repeated, elevated, and ultimately immortalised in an epic poem by Virgil, commissioned by Augustus himself, which will be further explored in the next section of this article.

Another way in which Augustus embedded himself and the imperial family into social meaning and Roman identity was in the very measurement of time itself. While the Roman calendar had months, it did not divide those months into weeks, so there was no concept of a working week and a weekend. Instead, days of rest were determined by religious festivals,⁶⁵ documented in calendars known as *fasti*. Julius Caesar had already reformed the calendar during his dictatorship, renaming the month of *quintilis* after himself [July]; Augustus named the following

61 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 150.

62 Ibid. The motif of a group of adults with a child tugging at the mother’s dress appears for the first time on the Altar of Peace and is repeated regularly on funerary monuments thereafter.

63 Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 123.

64 In the same way that Francis Fukuyama saw Western liberal democracy as the pinnacle of human government at the end of the Cold War, so Augustus was portraying his sole rule as the pinnacle of Roman government. Fukuyama, Francis, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, N°16 (1989): 4.

65 Sarah Bond, ‘The History of the Birthday and the Roman Calendar’, *Forbes*, 1 October 2016.

month, *sextilis* after himself [August]. He also incorporated imperial anniversaries and celebrations of himself and his family into the calendar of religious celebrations—an act Andrew Wallace-Hadrill describes as ‘a positive invasion, a planned and systematic act of intrusion which has the cumulative effect of recasting what it meant to be Roman’.⁶⁶

Archaeological evidence from the Augustan period, and from the reign of his successor Tiberius, shows that the reform of the Roman calendar was successful in consolidating Roman identity. During these periods, there is a proliferation of calendars inscribed in marble, as opposed to being painted on walls, which suggests a sense of certainty about the longevity of the calendar.⁶⁷ Given the close relationship between power and time as outlined above, a calendar set in stone is a direct reflection of political stability. Inscribing the *fasti* became an act of competitive flattery: ‘to inscribe the Roman calendar was a statement of loyalty to the Roman system, and acknowledgement of the Emperor as a central figure of that system’.⁶⁸

This message even filtered through to slaves and freedmen. An inscription at Antium was erected by slaves of the imperial household who had set up a *collegium*, the ancient equivalent of a workers’ union. The inscription shows not only the monthly calendar, recording religious and imperial festival days, but also lists the slaves who held office in the *collegium* that year.⁶⁹ Thanks to this artefact, we know that Eros *glutinator* [the man who glued papyrus scrolls together], Dorus *atriensis* [the doorman], and Anthus *topiarius* [the gardener] were proud to take their places in the record alongside Rome’s political system, the imperial family, the religious cycle, and the marking of time itself.⁷⁰ Using Storey’s terminology, this demonstrates a clear investment by ‘subordinate groups’ in the ‘values [and] ideals’ that ‘incorporate them into the prevailing structures of power’.⁷¹

66 Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, quoted in D.C. Feeney, ‘*Si licet et fas est*: Ovid’s *Fasti* and the Problem of Free Speech under the Principate’ in Anton Powell (ed.) *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus*, Chapter 1 (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), p. 5.

67 Wallace-Hadrill, ‘*Mutatas Formas*: The Augustan Transformation of Roman Knowledge’ in Galinsky, p. 60.

68 Ibid.

69 Wallace-Hadrill, ‘*Mutatas Formas*’, p. 61.

70 Ibid.

71 Storey, *Culture and Power*, p. 7.

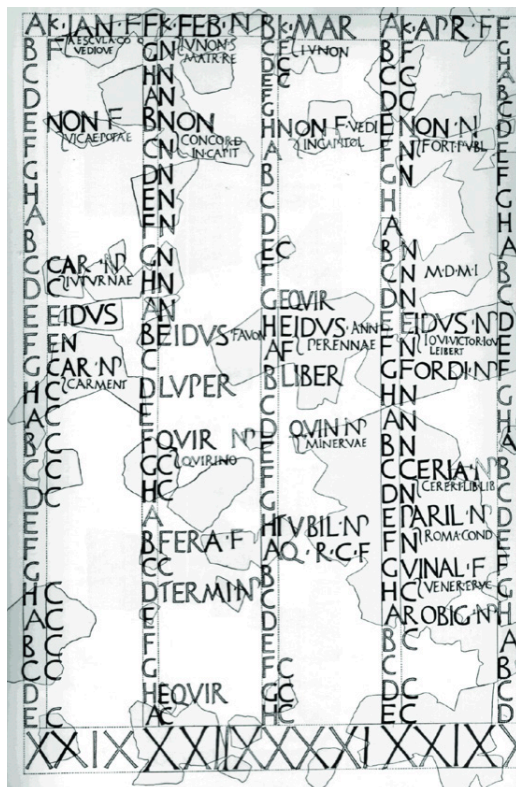


Figure 9. Inscription of Fasti from Antium⁷²

EXTERNAL AUDIENCE

Elsewhere in the empire Augustus faced communicative challenges of another kind. The provinces, particularly those in Egypt and Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey and Syria), had a well-established tradition of venerating imperial rulers as gods. Asia Minor had been the historical playground of several successive empires, so the people there were

⁷² Erdkamp, Paul (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 476.

accustomed to venerating a succession of sole rulers. For inhabitants of the provinces to feel they were a valued part of the Roman Empire, Augustus needed to communicate his hegemony in terms familiar to them. To accomplish this, he supported the establishment of an imperial cult. S.R.F. Price argues that, for the cities of Asia Minor, the imperial cult was ‘the one model that was available to them for the representation of a power on whom the city was dependent which was external’, and yet still familiar to the distinct and complex culture of the cities in question.⁷³ Prior to the Augustan age, cities such as Aphrodisias in Asia and Chios in Greece set up cults to the goddess Roma, a personification (or deification) of the power of Rome.⁷⁴ There are no recorded dedications, however, to the Roman Senate,⁷⁵—an indication that their robust identity as a collective deliberative body was not something that translated easily into a tradition of cultic homage.

During the civil wars, Mark Antony had fostered positive alliances with many major cities and regional powers in Asia Minor and the Levant, and many of these same cities and powers allied themselves with him and Cleopatra against Octavian in the civil war that ended with the Battle of Actium. After Octavian emerged as the victor, many of these regional powers sought to foster positive relationships with Octavian. One way to achieve this was by naming new cities after the new emperor.

King Herod of Judea, for example, transferred his allegiance to Octavian, founded a shrine to the emperor, and built a city around it. Herod named the city *Sebaste*, the Greek equivalent of ‘Augustus’; today the city is known as Caesarea.⁷⁶ King Juba of Mauretania (modern-day Algeria) did the same—today this city is called Cherchell, a name derived from its ancient title, Caesarea.⁷⁷ The proliferation of Caesareas across the ancient world as Augustus solidified his power matches the effect

73 S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 29.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

75 *Ibid.*

76 Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Volume I, translated by H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), I: 40; Woolf, ‘Provincial Perspectives’, p. 112.

77 Woolf, ‘Provincial Perspectives’, p. 112.

of Hellenisation following Alexander the Great's establishment of his eponymous cities. However, a key difference is that Alexander founded his cities by conquest and decree, whereas Herod and Juba named their cities because they were attracted to and incentivised by the new Roman power and identity.

While Augustus faced a clear communications challenge with his domestic audience, walking a fine line between monarch and 'first among equals', in the Greek-speaking provinces his status as sole ruler was much easier for audiences to process, given their cultural background. Through the imperial cult, Augustus supported and encouraged their engagement with him as the representative and embodiment of Roman power, to which they were subject.

There is, however, one message Augustus communicated equally to both his domestic and external audiences. An inscription known as the *Res Gestae*, literally 'things that have been accomplished', was discovered in Ancyra (modern-day Ankara) and published by archaeologist Theodor Mommsen in 1883. Inscribed in both Latin and Greek, *Res Gestae* is Augustus' own account of his path to power, written towards the end of his life (the inscription records that he wrote it at the age of seventy-six).⁷⁸ Several versions of the inscription have been discovered in various locations in Central Anatolia and the historian Suetonius records that Augustus had these *Res Gestae* inscribed in bronze letters and affixed to his mausoleum, which was located in the Field of Mars.⁷⁹ This is evidence that Augustus broadcast the same carefully curated account of his own achievements across the empire. The key messages within the text reveal much about what he wanted to convey to these audiences and to later generations. Augustus heavily emphasises the idea of peace and his responsible use of public money while making 'calculated omissions' of some of the less glorious events in the civil wars.⁸⁰

.....
⁷⁸ *Res Gestae*, 35.

⁷⁹ Suetonius, *Augustus*, 101.4.

⁸⁰ Suna Guven, 'Displaying the Res Gestae of Augustus: A Monument of Imperial Image for All', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* Volume 57 N°1, (Mar 1998): 30.

Poetry

Like the *Res Gestae*, Augustan poetry communicates Augustus' messages to both domestic and external audiences. The *Res Gestae* may have functioned as a clear mission statement, but, as the next section will explore in greater detail, poetry was more effective in reaching multiple audiences and over a longer period of time. This is because, throughout the ancient world, poetry and the reading of poetry was not a linear communication but rather a responsive engagement in storytelling. As Raymond Williams observes, hegemony must be 'continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, altered, limited, challenged.'⁸¹ The next section will outline which poets and poems were at the centre of Augustan discourse, and what effects their poetry had on contemporary domestic and external audiences.

This section will focus on three poets: Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil), Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace), and Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid). These three are widely accepted as the 'great poets' of the Augustan age and, as this article will demonstrate, their work had the greatest effect on both contemporary and future audiences.

As Stephen Hinds and Stephen Rutledge have established, the Augustan reading public was far from monolithic.⁸² Much of the discourse promoting the Roman identity that Augustus established and catalysed was communicated successfully on multiple levels to audiences with varying degrees of education.⁸³ Basic messages in art, for example, could be understood simply through observation; architecture could convey meaning through its sheer scale. Whilst evidence of ancient graffiti in Pompeii demonstrates that there was broad basic literacy in the Roman empire,⁸⁴ poetry of the kind that Virgil, Horace, or Ovid were writing would have been consumed by those with an advanced education and

81 Raymond Williams and Eric Mottram, *Marcism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 122.

82 Stephen Hinds, 'Generalising About Ovid' in A.J. Boyle (ed.) *The Imperial Muse: Ramus Essays on Roman Literature of the Empire, To Juvenal Through Ovid* (Victoria, AU: Aureal Publications, 1998) p. 26; Rutledge, 'Conflict, Culture and Concord', pp. 225–29.

83 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 228.

84 Willian Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 175 and 196.

a high level of literacy. Horace himself attests that he wrote for the ‘discerning few’⁸⁵—but those few had significant influence.

Virgil

Virgil was born in 70 BC, in the rural Italian town of Mantua. He lived through the civil wars, and much of his early poetry reflects the horror and disruption of the conflict. His *Fourth Eclogue* expresses a ‘yearning for peace and tranquillity after decades of civil wars’.⁸⁶ In 39 BC, Virgil was patronised by Maecenas, a senator and close friend of Augustus. In approximately 31 or 32 BC, Maecenas, most likely in response to a request from Augustus, commissioned Virgil to write an epic poem. While the exact terms of the original brief from Maecenas are not known, it seems apparent that Virgil was under pressure to write something that would glorify Augustus.⁸⁷

The way Virgil took on this brief, and the poem produced as a result of it, is remarkable. Instead of writing a panegyric to Augustus and overtly placing him at the centre of the poem, Virgil traces back the origins of the Roman people to Aeneas, a figure in Homer’s *Iliad*. In so doing, Virgil creates direct connections between his own poetry and that of the established epic poetry, between Greek history and Roman history, between mythology and reality. In his opening line, *arma virumque cano*, ‘I sing of arms and a man’,⁸⁸ Virgil links the opening lines of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The former concerns war (arms), the latter traces the journey of a single man. Throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil’s poetic imagery echoes and complements the iconography established on Augustus’ buildings, such as the programmatic statues of Roman mythological heroes in the Forum of Augustus. In a particularly profound passage,⁸⁹ which describes a shield made for Aeneas by the smith-god Vulcan (another direct echo of Homer’s *Iliad*, in which Achilles has a shield

85 Horace, *Satires*, 1.10.73–90 in *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926); Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 325.

86 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 91.

87 Griffin, ‘Augustan Poetry and Augustanism’, p. 315.

88 This line is endlessly quoted and paraphrased today. The title of Thomas Schelling’s book, *Arms and Influence*, is an example of such a paraphrase.

89 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.626–731.

made for him by the Greek smith-god Hephaistos),⁹⁰ the iconography on the shield charts key moments in Roman history, culminating with Augustus.

Virgil's poetic rendition of this teleological historiography is also rooted in the literary traditions of the wider Greco-Roman world. As early as the 2nd century BC, during Rome's ongoing wars with Carthage, the Greek historian Polybius charted Rome's rise to power through the various wars of the Hellenistic Age. To him, Rome's hegemony in this contested political environment seemed inevitable.⁹¹ Another Greek historian, Dionysius of Halicarnassus,⁹² writing during Augustus' lifetime, composes a *History of Archaic Rome* in which he charts the teleology of Rome's political dominance. While Dionysius' pro-Roman stance was not uncontested during his period,⁹³ the effect of his narrative, which was widely read in the Roman empire,⁹⁴ was to place Rome in relation to the Greek system of chronology, effectively legitimising Roman civilization in the accepted Greek historical canon.⁹⁵ Virgil's epic poem follows on from Greek mythology, thereby including the Romans in the Greek cultural canon; this nod is reciprocated by Greek writers seeking to explain their own place within a world order dominated by Roman power. In the Temple of Mars *Ultor*, Augustus wove himself into global history through the messages conveyed in his art and architecture; in the *Aeneid*, Virgil wove Augustus, synonymous with Roman power, into the broader narrative of pan-Mediterranean history.

By linking Roman epic with Greek epic, Virgil is tapping into 'broader trends of Mediterranean history' and historiography,⁹⁶ and inviting the Greek world to see themselves as part of the Roman narrative. This worked to bring the empire closer together, allowing different cultures

90 Homer, *Iliad*, 18.468–617.

91 Andrew Erskine, 'Making Sense of the Romans: Polybius and the Greek Perspective' in *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, Supplément N° 9 (2013): 125.

92 Halicarnassus is modern-day Bodrum, Turkey.

93 Emilio Gabba, *Dionysius and The History of Archaic Rome*, Sather Classical Lectures N° 56 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 41.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

96 Woolf, 'Provincial Perspectives', p. 116.

to buy into the Roman identity.⁹⁷ Virgil's *Aeneid*, although left unfinished at his death, became a classic in its own time. It was used as a textbook in schools across the ancient world, where pupils of both sexes learned Latin by writing and reciting this epic teleological poem. The *Aeneid* became the entrance ticket to Roman trade networks and political office; for many subsequent generations, the Roman way of life was entered into on Augustan terms. Farwell writes of the importance of terminology in conveying effective consistent communications.⁹⁸ Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan evaluated the power of different media for conveying effective messages.⁹⁹ But even more fundamental is the power of a *lingua franca* to mould communications and render the intended message inescapable. This is what the *Aeneid* achieved for Roman identity.

Influence of Virgil's text has been found as far from the epicentre of Rome as Hadrian's Wall. In 1986, a wooden writing tablet from the 2nd century AD was discovered at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall, preserved in the anaerobic mud. It is a birthday party invitation written by Claudia Severa to her friend, Sulpicia Lepidina. A line in the invitation echoes a line of the *Aeneid*,¹⁰⁰ demonstrating that even a woman living in this remote outpost of the Roman empire was familiar with the epic poem more than a century after its publication.

97 In his study of the Roman provinces, Greg Woolf outlines multiple ways in which provincial elites bought into Roman identity, including consuming Roman food, buying Roman tableware, and educating their children using Latin texts. Woolf, 'Provincial Perspectives', p. 124.

98 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 58.

99 Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 7; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Routledge Classics, 1964), p. 7. See also Graeme H. Patterson, *History and Communications—Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan: The Interpretation of History* (Toronto, Ontario; Buffalo, New York; London, England: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 4.

100 Judith Hallett, 'The Vindolanda Letters from Claudia Severa' in Churchill, Brown, and Jeffrey (eds), *Women Writing Latin: Women Writing Latin in Roman Antiquity, Late Antiquity, and the Early Christian Era* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), p. 95. The deeply affectionate language Claudia uses to address her friend echoes the language used in Virgil's *Aeneid* (4.8 and 4.31) to characterise Dido's relationship with her sister, Anna. Hallett also draws out phrasing reminiscent of the poetry of Catullus and Sappho (pp. 94–95), indicating that Claudia was well-read in Latin and Greek poetry.

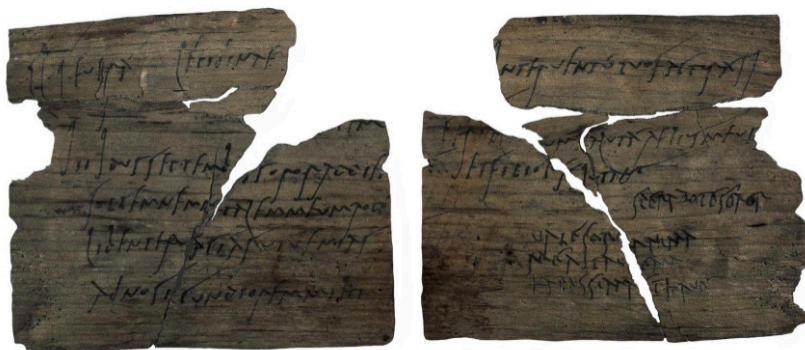


Figure 10. Birthday Party Invitation¹⁰¹

Horace

Horace joined the circle of Maecenas in the 30s BC, having previously fought on the side of Brutus in the civil war. This, however, did not appear to have negatively impacted his career; the surviving correspondence between him and Augustus points to a close relationship between the poet and the *princeps*. The letters are written in a ‘bantering tone’. Augustus jokingly references Horace’s ample belly, and at one point he even offers him a position as his private secretary—an offer Horace politely refuses.¹⁰² This close relationship is apparent in the tone and quality of Horace’s poetry. Ronald Syme dismisses Horace as ‘safe and subsidised in Rome’,¹⁰³ and as Anton Powell observes, the deadlier word there is ‘safe’.¹⁰⁴ Duncan Kennedy describes Horace’s *Satires* as ‘mild and reassuring’ in tone, containing ‘unremarkable received wisdom’—‘an integrational text *par excellence*’.¹⁰⁵ However, as Kennedy also notes,

101 British Museum, ‘Wooden Writing-tablet from Vindolanda: birthday invitation to the commander’s wife’, ‘Tabl. Vindol. 291’, Item N° 85.057, Museum N°1986,1001.64.

102 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 235; Horace, *Epistles*, 2.1.250–51; see also Kirk Freudenburg, ‘*Recusatio* as Political Theatre: Horace’s Letter to Augustus’, *The Journal of Roman Studies* Volume 104 (2014): 123 and Phebe Lowell Bowditch, *Horace and the Gift Economy of Patronage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 166.

103 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, p. 459.

104 Anton Powell, ‘The *Aeneid* and the Embarrassments of Augustus’ in Powell, p. 142.

105 Kennedy, ‘“Augustan and Anti-Augustan”’, p. 33.

this tone is reflective of a political environment in which the politically ruthless Octavian was being transformed into the moral authority of Augustus, *pater patriae*, the father of the fatherland.¹⁰⁶

Horace's poetry played an important role in reinforcing Augustus' orientalising narrative around the Battle of Actium. As Wallace-Hadrill observes, this battle was at the heart of the 'emotionally charged symbols' and 'basic values' on which Augustus based his new narrative of dominance.¹⁰⁷ In his *Odes*, Horace never names Antony or Cleopatra, but is unmistakably referring to the Egyptian queen in *Ode* 1.37, when he caricatures her as a doom-laden monster [*fatale monstrum*], drunk on wine and her own inflated sense of power [*mentemque lymphatam Mareotico; fortunaque dulci ebria*] and surrounded by effeminate men [*contaminato cum grege turpium morbo virorum quidlibet inpotens*]. The poem begins with an oft-quoted line *nunc est bibendum*, 'now is the time for drinking', a reference to the relief and celebration now permitted to the Roman people following the defeat of their abstract feminine Egyptian enemy. This negative and nameless impression of Cleopatra is further reinforced by another Roman poet, the love elegist Propertius, who again characterises her as perpetually inebriated,¹⁰⁸ and echoes the Roman relief and celebration following her defeat and death.¹⁰⁹

Horace also plays a pivotal role in Augustus' restructure of Roman time. In 17 BC, Augustus organised the celebration of the *saeculum*. As Denis Feeney explains, a *saeculum* corresponds to modern ideas of a century, but in the Roman world it was associated with a generation, one hundred years being thought to be the maximum possible lifespan.¹¹⁰ The *saeculum* was celebrated approximately every hundred years and had deep religious significance—the ritual celebration commemorated the previous hundred years while looking forward to the next and asking the gods

.....
106 Ibid.

107 Wallace-Hadrill, *Augustan Rome*, p. 1.

108 Propertius, *Elegies*, 3.11 in *The Elegies: Book IV*, translated by A.S. Kline (Online: Poetry in Translation, 2008).

109 Ibid., 4.6.

110 D.C. Feeney, *Caesar's Calendar: Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 145.

to bless the coming generation.¹¹¹ The three-day event culminated in the performance of the *Carmen Saeculare*, the anthem of the celebration, which Augustus had commissioned Horace to write. The ‘secular hymn’ emphasises the key Augustan themes of peace, stability, and longevity,¹¹² but is also an important mechanism for setting out Augustus’ new moral legislation. His laws brought certain matters that had previously been considered private into public consideration. The laws mandated marriage by a certain age and remarriage after a given period of time following widowhood or divorce, imposed penalties on the childless, forbade marriages between certain classes, and made adultery a public crime.¹¹³ These extremely controversial reforms were in fact rejected by the senate in 28 BC, but were finally passed ten years later.¹¹⁴ In becoming *pater patriae*, father of the fatherland, Augustus was effectively also assuming the role of the *paterfamilias*, the head of the household.¹¹⁵ So important were these laws to Augustus that he delayed the celebration of the *saeculum* until after they had been passed.¹¹⁶ The song was performed by 27 boys and 27 girls, representing the ‘marital fecundity and future hope’ of Rome.¹¹⁷ The message to the contemporary audience would have been unmistakeable. The moral legislation, reinforced by Horace’s poetry, preached a message of responsibility to the Roman people.¹¹⁸

Horace, too, became a classic in his own lifetime.¹¹⁹ His work was also used as a textbook for Roman schoolchildren—a fact attested, and perhaps mocked, by a later Roman satirist, Juvenal.¹²⁰ Horace was aware of the power of his own poetry, aligned as it was with the political power of his day, and claimed his poetry might even have the power to outlast that of Augustus. In his *Carmina*, Horace writes that he has ‘built a memorial more lasting than bronze’—a direct reference to the Augustan practice

.....
111 Ibid., p. 147.

112 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 105: ‘... *aevum* in *Carmen Saeculare* [line] 68 may be a tacit allusion to the concept of *Roma aeterna*, which Horace elsewhere affirms’.

113 Laurel Fulkerson, *Ovid: A Poet on the Margins* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 22.

114 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 97.

115 Fulkerson, *Ovid: Poet on the Margins*, p. 23.

116 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 128.

117 Ibid., p. 102.

118 Horace also links morality with Roman power in *Odes* 3.6.

119 Kennedy, ‘“Augustan and Anti-Augustan”’, p. 37.

120 Juvenal, *Satires*, 7.216–27.

of mounting gilded bronze letters on monuments as inscriptions.¹²¹ Horace's work was instrumental in communicating Augustus' political agenda during his own historical period, and beyond.

Ovid

Ovid, born in 43 BC, was younger than the two aforementioned poets and was not patronised by Maecenas. While Horace and Virgil lived through, and even fought in, the horrors of the civil wars, Ovid was raised in a fully Augustan environment. The consequence of this is apparent in his poetry: whereas both Virgil and Horace express relief at the political stability that Augustus created, knowing the alternative, Ovid takes this stability for granted, and begins to critique it. In this way, Ovid may be seen as 'the truest product of the Augustan age'.¹²²

Ovid began his poetic career by writing love poetry. His poem *Ars Amatoria*, 'The Art of Love', makes a mockery of Augustus' carefully planned architectural communicative strategy and overt promotion of family values by characterising Augustan buildings as ideal places to pick up women. He singles out the theatre and library of Marcellus, erected in memory of Augustus' nephew;¹²³ he points out a portico commissioned by Augustus' wife, Livia.¹²⁴ He even characterises the occasion of Augustus' military triumph as an opportunity to look out for women, and suggests chat up lines based on Augustus' military conquests.¹²⁵

This is the very opposite of the moral message espoused by Horace in the *Carmen Saeculare*, written in support of Augustus' moral laws. While it seems to have been popular with the Roman public (*Ars Amatoria* was published in at least two editions),¹²⁶ the poem, together with an unspecified 'error',¹²⁷ caused Ovid to be banished to Tomis, modern-day Constanta in Romania on the Black Sea coast. Augustus seems not

121 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 240.

122 Ibid., p. 228.

123 Ovid, *Ars*, 1.69.

124 Ibid., 1.72.

125 Ibid., 1.210–28.

126 Feeney, 'Si licet et fas est', p. 4.

127 Ovid, *Tristia*, 2.207 in *Tristia. Ex Ponto*, translated by A. L. Wheeler and revised by G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924). This mysterious error has been the subject of much scholarly speculation.

to have realised that Ovid's playful, flippant poems were perhaps the most flattering reflection of the Rome he had built and the stability he had achieved.¹²⁸ by creating political certainty, Augustus had fostered an artistic environment so stable as to leave room for creativity and critique, which are expressed in Ovid's poetry. It is a flaw in his otherwise exemplary model of strategic communications—as a non-linear process, communications should leave room for response. Augustus' exile of Ovid reveals that he was threatened by Ovid's playful poetry and sends a message that his society may not have been as stable as Augustus portrays it to be. Strategic communications includes messages conveyed by actions as well as non-actions: in this situation, a non-action from Augustus would have better reinforced his strategic message of stability.

However, prior to his exile, Ovid was working on his response to Virgil's epic poem. His *Metamorphoses* charts mythology and history from creation through to his present, 'as a seamlessly interconnected series of transformations'.¹²⁹ As Wallace-Hadrill observes, 'the transformational skill with which Augustus constructed his new order [...] is conceptually parallel to the processes [of metamorphosis], which Ovid loves to describe'.¹³⁰ However, the *Metamorphoses* were a product of their time in another way: the period in which Ovid was writing saw an explosion in popularity of a new art form, the *pantomime*.¹³¹ This was a type of interpretive dance set to music, in which a single dancer/actor would mime a compilation of well-known scenes from mythology. It was particularly popular among wealthy Romans, the same audience that would be consuming Ovid's poetry. In fact, the 2nd century satirist Lucian follows Ovid's timeline of metamorphoses: he writes that a good pantomime dancer should 'know the history of the world, from the time when it first emerged from Chaos down to the days of Egyptian Cleopatra'.¹³² Unlike Virgil, writing to connect Roman history and identity with its Greek

.....
128 Ibid., p. 20.

129 Wallace-Hadrill, 'Mutatas Formas', p. 55.

130 Ibid. See also Fulkerson, *Ovid: Poet on the Margins*, p. 26.

131 Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, p. 265.

132 Lucian, *De Saltatione*, 37 in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, translated by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905). Lucian was from Samosata, modern-day Samsat in Turkey, now submerged under the Atatürk dam. He wrote exclusively in Greek. Lucian's work is another indication that Augustus' message became deeply embedded in the Greek-speaking provinces.

forbears, Ovid's form and style of epic are designed for a specifically and uniquely Roman audience.

Following his exile, Ovid published a series of poems that best communicate the values associated with being Roman. They are directed at Augustus and his audience back in Rome. The poems contrast the attractions of the city of Rome with the environment to which he has been exiled, on the very frontiers of Roman control. Ovid uses the language of the *Metamorphoses* in his descriptions of Tomis to characterise it as a topsy-turvy world, on the brink of descending into primordial chaos—a clear contrast with the established order of Rome.¹³³ It is as though Ovid, by being exposed to the 'other' (the world beyond Roman frontiers), finally sees the 'self' (Roman identity) clearly and expresses his longing for it in his poetry. As Laurel Fulkerson observes, Augustus and Rome now become Ovid's objects of desire, as opposed to the girls he once chased around Augustus' buildings in the city of Rome.¹³⁴

In his epilogue to the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid specifically appeals to a wider readership—in contrast to Horace, who, as noted above, targeted his poetry only at the discerning few.¹³⁵ Archaeological evidence from Pompeii reveals that this was no empty boast. Wealthy homeowners in Pompeii commissioned painted artwork for the public rooms in their houses, such as the entrance hall, the dining room, and the study (where the head of the household would carry out business meetings). The proportion of wall paintings in Pompeian houses corresponds to the estimated literacy rate,¹³⁶ indicating that those who were in a position to read poetry were also in a position to commission painters and decorators for their houses. Of those wall paintings, nearly half depict scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.¹³⁷ One particular wealthy homeowner advertises his literary tastes, and his predilection for Ovid in particular, by displaying

133 Sara K. Myers, 'Ovid's Self-reception in his Exile Poetry' in John F. Miller (ed.) *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 13.

134 Fulkerson, *Ovid: Poet on the Margins*, p. 18.

135 Peter E. Knox, 'Ovidian Myths on Pompeian Walls' in John F. Miller (ed.) *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 36.

136 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

137 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

common themes from the *Metamorphoses* such as the stories of Dionysus and Ariadne, Hercules and Omphale, and Echo and Narcissus in one part of the house, while in the adjacent rooms he has commissioned erotic scenes as a nod to Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.¹³⁸

CONCLUSION

This article has invoked strategic communications theory in analysing and explaining the success and enduring legacy of a key historical figure. It has demonstrated the ways in which the emperor Augustus communicated messages of peace and political stability, as well as the construction of a new morally sound Roman identity to his target audiences: the Roman elite and wider Greek-speaking empire. His strategy served to influence discourse and shape meaning across the entire empire. It changed the way in which elite Romans viewed themselves, as well as the way in which inhabitants of the wider empire perceived what it meant to be Roman. In this way, Augustus deliberately and successfully influenced discourse and shaped perception across a vast geographical area and a long stretch of time.

The article also sought to address the gap in existing literature on Augustan poetry by analysing its communicative effect and has demonstrated the palpable influence of the works of Virgil, Horace, and Ovid on Roman audiences within the context of Augustus' wider communicative strategy. However, when viewed over an extended period of time, beyond the Roman context, it becomes apparent that the communicative power of this poetry only increased, as other forms of communication deployed by Augustus crumbled away.

Horace was prescient when he wrote that he had built a monument more lasting than bronze. The bronze letters of Augustus' monuments have since been melted down and reused. The buildings he erected have either disintegrated or have been dismantled or repurposed. Yet the words of Virgil, Horace, and Ovid are still taught in schools and universities today,

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¹³⁸ Ibid., pp. 41–43.

just as they were taught in schools in the Roman empire. The artistic and architectural messages of Augustus' buildings, calendars and cults have been salvaged and reconstructed by archaeologists, but the messages conveyed through poetry have remained constant.

Strategic communications seeks to shape discourse and influence outcomes. As advocated by Braudel and Lebow, a historical perspective can identify and analyse this process of discourse-shaping over a long period of time. This article has demonstrated historical precedent for strategic communications and proved its effectiveness in the *longue durée*. Particular attention has been drawn to the creative expression of strategic communications through poetry, as a form of meaning-making that has the potential to outlast other, more tangible communicative symbols.

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

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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24 Ibid, p. 6.

25 Robert M. Gates, 'London Lecture', Kansas State University, 26 November 2007.

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

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

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

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

30 Ibid, p. 442.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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35 ‘Kontseptual’nyye vzglyady na deyatel’nost’ Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii v informatsionnom prostreanstve’, Russian Ministry of Defence, 2011.

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

37 ‘Kontseptual’nyye vzglyady’, ‘Information Security Doctrine’.

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

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

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

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

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

Using CDA, the current research analysed two sets of textual and audio-visual materials. First, it surveyed President Vladimir Putin's remarks, speeches, and articles on Nord Stream 2, which were published on the Kremlin's website in 2019-2021.⁴⁴ The texts were retrieved using the website's search engine, searching for the term 'Nord Stream 2'. This produced six long texts and transcripts in which Putin and other actors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1: Primary Sources Surveyed for the Analysis

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

FINDINGS 1: PUTIN’S DISCOURSES ON NORD STREAM 2

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

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

Nord Stream 2 Economic Logic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nord Stream 2 as a European Project

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

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

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

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⁵² 'Forum "Rossiyskaya energeticheskaya nedelya"'.

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

⁵⁴ 'Forum "Rossiyskaya energeticheskaya nedelya"'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The proliferation of self-interest and corruption

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

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

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

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

61 Ibid.

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

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

Green politics

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

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

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

⁶⁴ 'Vstrecha s predstaviteľyami delovyykh krugov Frantsii'.

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

FINDINGS 2: NORD STREAM 2 IN DW AND DER SPIEGEL

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

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

Economic logic

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

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

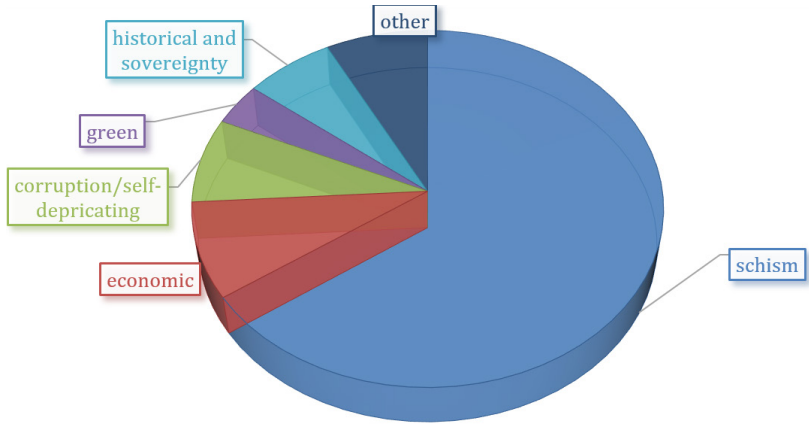


Chart 1: Distribution of Narrative Themes in *DW* and *Der Spiegel* Media Clippings on Nord Stream 2 (November 2020-July 2021)

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

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

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

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

Sovereignty and Historical Themes

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

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

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

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

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

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

Euro-Atlantic schism

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

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

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Self-deprecation and Corruption

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

85 Von Rohr, 'A Price Too High'.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

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

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

95 Ibid.

Green politics

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

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

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

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

98 ‘German small town of Lubmin’.

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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⁹⁹ Panarin, *Informatsionnaya Voyna I Kommunikatsii*, p. 215.

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

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

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

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¹⁰⁰ Weiss, 'Aquarium Leaks'.

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

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

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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

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WELCOMING THE OTHER: EMOTION AND EMPATHY IN GERMANY'S 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS

Ruth Shepherd

Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, Merkel, Germany, empathy, emotion, refugees*

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ABSTRACT

In response to the 2015 refugee crisis, Germany welcomed more than one million refugees and became the country with the fifth highest population of refugees in the world.

This article seeks to unpack how Germany, under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, used strategic communications to gain support for such a bold and unusual approach. Building on the work of Claire Yorke, Naomi Head, and other scholars, it argues that emotion

and empathy played a transformative role in the German government's strategic communications. The article reviews literature from a broad range of research on emotion and empathy and considers important contextual factors for Germany in the years leading up to 2015. Through discourse analysis of key texts concerning the 2015 refugee crisis, this article reveals how emotion and expressions of empathy were central to Germany's strategic communications. The article concludes by evaluating the legacy and impact of this approach.

INTRODUCTION

Major displacement and migration events are increasingly common in today's world. Such events, whether prompted by war, civil unrest, or insurgency, create millions of refugees.

UN Refugee Agency (UNHRC) statistics show that the number of refugees has steadily increased over the last decade, and in 2020 it was estimated at 26.4 million people.¹ With 24/7 international news coverage, the plight of these people is seen in real-time by audiences around the world. The refugee population, therefore, poses a pressing challenge to individual nation states, to international organisations, and to the established political order of a globalised world.²

Public opinion on how refugees should be treated and managed by nation states varies. In European states, views are often particularly polarised when there is a significant increase in people seeking asylum.³ The refugee crisis of summer 2015 brought this issue dramatically to Europe's doorstep with millions of people who had fled civil war in Syria and its neighbouring states seeking refuge. Germany, the leading economy of the European Union (EU), went against the grain by adopting and communicating a welcoming approach to refugees at this

1 'Refugee statistics: global trends at a glance', UNHRC, (accessed 20 July 2021).

2 'World Migration Report 2020', International Organisation of Migration (IOM), 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021), p. 2.

3 Christian S. Czymara, 'Attitudes toward refugees in contemporary Europe: A Longitudinal Perspective on Cross-National Differences', *Social Force* Volume 9 N° 3 (2021): 1324.

time. By contrast, many other European states were communicating to their domestic audiences about efforts to strengthen borders and to limit the numbers of refugees arriving.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and her government made three key decisions in response to the crisis. First, Germany committed to welcoming one million refugees in 2015. By following through on this commitment, Germany became the country with the fifth highest refugee population in the world.⁴ Second, Merkel suspended the enforcement of the Dublin Agreement in Germany. This agreement enables EU countries to return asylum seekers to their first 'safe country of origin'.⁵ And third, the interpretation of the German constitution was expanded to provide refuge to all those fleeing war, rather than just those fleeing persecution, effectively removing any upper cap on the number of refugees that Germany would accept from war-torn Syria.⁶

Merkel's handling of the crisis divided opinion both at home and abroad. While high numbers of citizens participated in welcoming refugees into Germany, others had mixed feelings about the government's approach.⁷ In the months and years following summer 2015 many actively protested against the policies and far-right parties gained momentum. On the international stage Merkel received more emphatic praise. She was in the running to receive a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for her leadership in the crisis, and *Time Magazine* chose her as its 2015 'Person of the Year'.⁸ Writing in 2019, Fritz Breithaupt described Germany's approach as 'perhaps the boldest political step in the cause of humanitarianism in the twenty-first century thus far'.⁹

4 Philip Oltermann, 'How Angela Merkel's great migrant gamble paid off', *The Observer*, 30 August 2020, (accessed 28 December 2021).

5 Manasi Gopalakrishnan, 'The Dublin Regulation explained', *Infomigrants*, last updated 24 January 2020, (accessed 20 August 2021).

6 Ludger Helms, Femke Van Esch and Beverly Crawford, 'Merkel III: From Committed Pragmatist to "Conviction Leader"?'', *German Politics* Volume 28, N° 3 (2019): 359.

7 Ulrike Hamann and Serhat Karakayali, 'Practicing Willkommenskultur: Migration and Solidarity in Germany', *Insections* Volume 2, N° 4 (December 2016): 70.

8 Karl Vick, 'Time Person of the Year 2015: Angela Merkel', *Time Magazine*, 9 December 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).

9 Fritz Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 131.

How did the German government, led by Merkel, use strategic communications to achieve its objectives and persuade its target audiences to support such a bold and unusual approach? What were the contextual factors for Germany, and Merkel, that contributed to this?

This article argues that emotions and empathy played a central role in the strategic communications of Merkel and the German government. Its intention is not to assess Merkel's approach from a political or ethical standpoint, but to analyse the strategic communications approach and its impact. To what extent did Merkel influence her target audiences and shift long-term views on, and behaviours towards, refugees? How did she secure public support for the government's approach? This article endeavours to answer these questions.

After a short note on terminology, I review the extensive and multi-disciplinary literature related to the role of emotion and empathy in political life. The analysis highlights a growing consensus among scholars on the importance of emotion and empathy in geopolitics, international relations, and strategic communications. The article then considers the specific case of Germany and the 2015 refugee crisis. It sets out why it is illuminating to think about the role of emotion and empathy here and offers a brief overview of Germany's unique stance regarding refugees.

This is followed by discourse analysis of the Merkel government's strategic communications during that time. The role and impact of emotional appeals in Merkel's communications are traced, including through her words, actions, and inactions. Three emotions are analysed in particular: guilt, pride, and compassion. I highlight these three emotions because they were so effective in achieving the government's objectives in this case. The article then transitions into an analysis of how Merkel used empathy to achieve her objectives. Her role as an 'empathic entrepreneur'¹⁰—a term introduced in Naomi Head's work—is considered and discussed, as are the costs and limitations of this approach.

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¹⁰ Naomi Head, 'Costly encounters of an empathic kind: a typology', *International Theory: A Journal of International Politics, Law and Philosophy* Volume 8, N° 1 (March 2016): 172.

Reflecting on the years following 2015, the article concludes with a brief analysis of the legacy and longer-term outcomes of Merkel's strategic communications. I conclude by restating the importance of emotion and empathy in strategic communications in this case study. As Head writes, empathy and emotion are 'embodied, messy, personal, and political'.¹¹ But they are also fundamental to human life, politics, and strategic communications, and are therefore worthy of study.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

It is helpful to justify the choice of two terms used throughout this article: 'refugees' and 'refugee crisis'. Refugees are a subset of the migrant population with a particular international status. The UN '1951 Refugee Convention' defines a refugee as:

...a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group of political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.¹²

This definition seeks to create international consensus on what makes someone a refugee. It frames refugees as deserving of universal protection by the international community, though there are significant differences in the perception and treatment of refugees around the world.

The article refers to the events of the summer of 2015 as 'the refugee crisis'. This terminology evokes the notion of a vast and unmanageable problem.¹³ A crisis is commonly understood as something rare that challenges the established order, collapses the legitimacy of existing

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11 Naomi Head, 'A politics of empathy: Encounters with empathy in Israel and Palestine', *Review of International Studies* Volume 42 (June 2015): 99.

12 'The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol', UNHRC, (accessed 21 July 2021).

13 Helen Dempster and Karen Hargrave, *Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants*, (London: Chatham House Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2017), 20.

ways of working, and therefore points to new ways of seeing problems.¹⁴ The term ‘refugee crisis’ draws attention away from the systemic causes which led to their arrival in Europe, and de-emphasises the consistent occurrence of refugee flows throughout history.¹⁵ It is important to be mindful of these connotations, especially in a discussion about strategic communications. However, the arrival of 1.25 million refugees to Europe in 2015 was extraordinary.¹⁶ These numbers were the highest seen since the aftermath of the Second World War,¹⁷ and posed a dramatic challenge to Europe.

Both terms – refugee [Flüchtling] and refugee crisis [Flüchtlingskrise] – were frequently used by Merkel, the German government, German media, and other contemporary commentators. They are also helpful shorthand expressions in this discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The definition of strategic communications is debated by academics and practitioners. Yet there is broad agreement that it is a holistic endeavour covering a range of communications activity that political actors use to achieve their objectives in a contested environment.¹⁸ Everything an actor says and does, how it is communicated, and the context in which it is perceived and understood, all impact the ability to achieve objectives.¹⁹ Audience and contextual insight are crucial, and strategic communicators must also understand the emotions of their target audiences if they are to succeed.²⁰

14 Simon Goodman, Ala Sirriyeh, Simon McMahon, ‘The evolving (re)categorisation of refugees throughout the “refugee/migrant crisis”’, *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* Volume 27, N° 2 (February 2017): 105.

15 Lilie Chouliraki and Rafal Zaborowski, ‘Voice and community in the 2015 refugee crisis: A content analysis of news coverage in eight European countries’, *The International Communication Gazette* Volume 79, N° 6-7 (September 2017): 632.

16 Esther Gruessing and Hajo G. Boomgaarden, ‘Shifting the refugee narrative? An automated frame analysis of Europe’s 2015 refugee crisis’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Volume 43, N° 11 (September 2017): 1749.

17 ‘Global Trends: forced displacement in 2015’, (Geneva: UNHRC, 20 June 2016), (accessed 20 July 2021), p. 5.

18 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 29.

19 Claire Yorke, ‘The significance and limitations of empathy in strategic communications’, *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 2 (Spring 2017): 140.

20 Claire Yorke, ‘Empathy and emotions in strategy, strategic communications and international relations’ lecture, *Strategic Communications: Theory and Concepts* module, King’s College London, November 2019.

Empathy is another critical tool for the strategic communicator. It offers a lens to identify, understand, and interpret another person—their emotional state, perspective, and world view.²¹ For a political leader, empathy can be both a performative and communicative act which must be expressed to be understood by target audiences.²² As Claire Yorke summarises, ‘the act of listening and seeking to understand another itself communicates the value you attribute to them’.²³ The following review considers the broad-ranging literature on the role of emotion and empathy in politics, society, and strategic communications.

Debates about emotion

What is meant by emotion and its significance in politics and society has been debated by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, from biology to philosophy.

Darwin is often considered the first to have studied emotion systematically from a biological perspective, but there are many who preceded him in seeking to understand it.²⁴ Looking back to antiquity, Aristotle and Hippocrates wrote about the somatic aspect of emotion and its powerful physiological symptoms in the human body,²⁵ while Thucydides recognised its power to persuade, motivate, and prompt people to war. Thucydides famously believed fear was one of the causes of the Peloponnesian War, while also recognising the importance of courage, love, and honour in shaping people’s attitudes and behaviours.²⁶

Philosophers of the early modern period, often characterised by their focus on reason and science, also highlighted the pre-eminence of emotion in human and political behaviour. In *Leviathan* (1651) Thomas

.....
21 Yorke, ‘Empathy and emotions’ lecture.

22 Claire Yorke, ‘Making the connection: the role of empathy in communicating policy’, *Global Relations Forum Young Academics Program*, Volume 10 (August 2020): 4.

23 Yorke, ‘The significance’, p. 139.

24 Neta Crawford, ‘The passion of world politics: propositions on emotion and emotional relationships’, *International Security* Volume 24, N°4 (Spring 2000): 123.

25 See Douglas Cairns, ‘A Short History of Shudders’, in *Unveiling Emotions II: Emotions in Greece and Rome: Texts, Images, Material Culture, Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien (HABES)*, Volume 55, ed. by Angelos Chaniotis and Pierre Ducrey (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), p. 78.

26 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 49.

Hobbes unpacked the critical role that fear, compassion, desire, honour, and love play in political life.²⁷ David Hume (1711-1776) wrote extensively about the importance of emotion in his philosophical works. He commented that ‘the feelings of our heart, the agitation of our passions, the vehemence of our affections, dissipate all (philosophy’s) conclusions, and reduce the profound philosopher to a mere plebeian’.²⁸ It is striking to see Hume, a philosopher, subjugate his own discipline to the force of emotions. This demonstrates that he considered emotions to be ubiquitous and fundamental to understanding human attitudes and behaviour. Their significance has continued to be debated in philosophy and the social sciences.²⁹

Emotions are central to strategic communications because they pervade all human relationships, attitudes, decisions, and behaviours. Yorke highlights how emotions influence an audience’s wants, beliefs, and actions.³⁰ People are motivated by fear, pride, guilt, and compassion just as much as they are influenced by facts and rational arguments. Indeed, emotions such as fear, pride, guilt, and compassion have become a particular focus in academic literature.³¹ Collective emotions like these help to build common values and interests, and shape long-term views and behaviours. Therefore, influencing the collective and individual emotions of audiences is the business of strategic communications.

The plight of refugees is one of the most emotive issues in contemporary politics, but economic and political analyses have sometimes overlooked the emotional dynamics which shape public attitudes towards refugees.³² Research from a range of social science disciplines has suggested that attitudes and behaviours towards refugees are influenced by a spectrum of emotions, rather than by logic or rational argument.³³ Despite this, refugees test the limits of the state’s capacity for

27 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 118.

28 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.

29 Paolo Boccagni and Loretta Baldassar. ‘Emotions on the move: mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration’, *Emotion, Space and Society* Volume 16 (2015): 73.

30 Yorke, ‘Empathy and emotions’ lecture.

31 See Crawford, ‘The passion of world politics’.

32 Boccagni and Baldassar, ‘Emotions on the move’, p. 73.

33 Dempster and Hargrave, *Understanding public attitudes*, p. 21.

compassion.³⁴ Acknowledging these limits, realist scholars have pointed to states' common prioritisation of national security, international order, and economic stability³⁵ over a politics of compassion for refugees. More broadly, the figure of the refugee tests dichotomies of 'here and there' and 'us and them' on the geopolitical stage.

The role of emotion in shaping attitudes, opinions, and behaviours

Bleiker and Hutchison see emotions as central to the decision-making process, pointing to evidence from brain scans.³⁶ Neuroscientist Antoine Bechara has also traced how emotion drives decision-making in patients, and that people often rely on an emotional or 'gut' level instinct.³⁷ Bleiker and Hutchison conclude that given the central role of emotions in forming decisions and beliefs, they are critical to how politics is 'conducted, perceived, and evaluated'.³⁸

It is helpful here to signpost the body of literature which has highlighted the interconnectedness of emotion and cognition. Mercer writes about how cognition and emotion should not be separated: '...by now it has been amply demonstrated that cognition and emotion are largely inseparable'.³⁹ Cognitive psychologists also demonstrate the relationship between emotion and cognition: emotions can be revised through cognitive means, and vice versa.⁴⁰

As well as being fundamental to the attitudes, opinions, and behaviours of target audiences, emotions play a critical role in shaping behaviours and decisions of political actors. While theorists of political science have traditionally relied on the rational actor model to analyse state decision-making, there is increasing recognition that emotions should also be

.....
³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁵ Elisabeth Porter, 'Can Politics Practice Compassion?', *Hypatia* Volume 21, N° 4 (2006): 103.

³⁶ Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics', *International Theory: A journal of international politics, law and philosophy* Volume 6, N° 3 (November 2014): 496.

³⁷ Antoine Bechara, 'The role of emotion in decision-making: evidence from neurological patients with orbitofrontal damage', *Brain and Cognition* Volume 55, N° 1 (June 2004): 31.

³⁸ Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotion', p. 496.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

⁴⁰ Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 128.

scrutinised as part of this.⁴¹ Scholars have highlighted how the rational actor model for state decision-making falls short in analysing the motives, decisions, and behaviours of states. Fearon, for example, questions how war could even occur if one believes that states are genuinely rational and unitary actors.⁴²

Emotion on a state-level

Scholars have also grappled with the question of how individual emotions, manifest and traceable in the human body, become collective. Crawford defines emotion as ‘the inner states that individuals describe to others as feelings...those feelings may be associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioural states and changes’.⁴³ This definition highlights the all-encompassing nature of emotion; that it can be prompted by one’s biological, cognitive, or behavioural state. But while Crawford refers to the integral role of *communicating* emotions (‘states that individuals *describe to others*’), she puts the focus on the individual’s experience rather than on the group’s experience.

By contrast, social constructivists place the emphasis on the role of the group in shaping emotions. They believe that emotions are characterised by cultural beliefs, values, and morals in specific communities, and emerge from the interaction between individuals, and between the individual and the collective.⁴⁴ This understanding of emotions is particularly relevant to strategic communications, which seeks to shift views and values of groups on the political and geopolitical stage.

Scholars have also debated whether and to what extent categories of emotion are universal, or whether they are contingent on specific cultures and contexts.⁴⁵ Hutchison and Bleiker write about the constructed nature of emotions and their relevance to political and social life. For them, emotions are formed within particular social and cultural environments,

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41 Hutchison and Bleiker, ‘Theorizing emotions’, p. 496.

42 Crawford, ‘The passion of world politics’, p. 117.

43 Ibid., 125.

44 James Mercer, ‘Feeling like a state: social emotions and identity’, *International Theory: A journal of international politics, law and philosophy* Volume 6, N° 3 (November 2014): 520.

45 Ibid.

and the nation state is identified as a group of individuals who cultivate, share, and identify with one another *emotionally*.⁴⁶ Mercer also writes about the importance of collective emotion in international politics, arguing that it is possible to 'feel like a state'. Countering those who state that emotions can only be experienced in the individual body and cannot be felt by a group, he argues that emotion cannot be reduced to the body or to mere 'atoms of feelings'.⁴⁷ For him, group emotion is in fact real and observable in political life.

Mercer links collective emotion with collective identity, arguing that identity is shaped by group emotion: 'identification requires a *feeling* of attachment'.⁴⁸ Emotion gives meaning to group identity: 'Whereas indifference makes identities meaningless (and powerless), emotion makes them important. Pride in one's group or hate of one's enemy presupposes identities that one cares about'.⁴⁹ A group emotion such as pride is particularly motivating and persuasive because it is experienced as externally-driven; it is not just *my* feeling but *our* feeling.⁵⁰

Empathy in Strategic Communications

Empathy is the 'faculty which enables us to feel with another human being, to cognitively and affectively put ourselves into his or her place, and therefore to become aware of the other's feelings, needs, and wants'.⁵¹ Empathy plays an important role in both social and political life. It is typically viewed by societies as something positive that should be encouraged.⁵² Building on this, Head suggests empathy can expand the boundaries of the moral universe and enable reconciliation, social cohesion, and 'humanising' processes.

Political actors have also recognised empathy's constructive role in international relations, with US President Barack Obama, for example,

46 Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions', p. 504.

47 Mercer, 'Feeling like a state', p. 519.

48 Ibid., p. 517.

49 Ibid., p. 522.

50 Eliot R. Smith, Charles R. Seger and Diane M. Mackie, 'Can Emotions be Truly Group Level? Evidence Regarding Four Conceptual Criteria', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Volume 93, N° 3 (2007): 438.

51 Rafael Moses, 'Empathy and dis-empathy in political conflict', *Political Psychology* Volume 6, N° 1 (March 1985): 135.

52 Head, 'A politics of empathy', p. 95.

placing it at the heart of his administration. He believed in its power to connect people and galvanise positive action, as expressed in his commencement address to students at Northwestern University.⁵³

Empathy is closely related to emotion. But it holds a distinct place in the literature because it is characterised by a complex relationship between both emotion and cognition.⁵⁴ Batson and Ahmad distinguish four different ‘states of empathy’ to reflect this relationship; two are cognitive, two are emotional. The first two states are the cognitive capacity to imagine another’s perspective, and to imagine oneself in that perspective. The second two states are the emotional capacity to feel *as* another, and then the capacity to feel *for* another. Batson and Ahmad argue that none of these states is dominant, and that each should be identified when analysing case studies of empathy.⁵⁵

Other scholars interrogate the hardwired dimension of empathy; empathy that humans feel automatically. Biologist Franz de Waal argues that this has evolved over millennia and can be observed in animals as well as humans. He concludes that, ‘there is now increasing evidence that the brain is hardwired for social connection, and that the same empathy mechanism underlying human altruism may underline the directed altruism of other animals’.⁵⁶ This evidence base for the intrinsic nature of empathy makes it even more important for strategic communicators to consider in seeking to achieve their objectives.

Scholars have also studied more deliberate demonstrations of empathy, such as the conscious effort of active perspective-taking; the attempt to view the world through another’s eyes.⁵⁷ Head writes about how this effort to recognise the stories of the other can be an act of non-violent resistance. The empathic process enables responsibility, vulnerability, and

.....
53 See Barack Obama, ‘Obama to graduates: cultivate empathy’, Northwestern University, filmed 19 June 2006, (accessed 14 July 2021).

54 Head, ‘Costly encounters’, 174.

55 C. Daniel Batson and Nadia Ahmad, ‘Using Empathy to Improve Intergroup Attitudes and Relations’, *Social Issues and Policy Review* Volume 3, N° 1 (November 2009): 144.

56 Frans de Waal, ‘Putting the Altruism Back into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy’, *Annual Review of Psychology* Volume 59 (July 2007): 292.

57 Yorke, ‘Empathy and emotions’ lecture.

reciprocal recognition and acknowledgement of collective trauma and patterns of violence.⁵⁸ As such it can open new ways of viewing the world from another's perspective.

Looking specifically at empathy in the strategic communications of political actors, scholars have highlighted how it can be performed and used to communicate a particular message. For example, empathy was both communicated and performed when New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden visited Muslim communities following the terrorist attacks in Christchurch, helping to achieve desired political objectives and shape audience perceptions in a certain way.⁵⁹

While empathetic engagement in political life can be transformative, it can also be difficult and costly. Moses points out how empathy stands in contradiction to 'the demonisation of the enemy, to scapegoating, to the polarisation of good and bad which creates a world ... of heroes and villains and little else.'⁶⁰ As such it involves uncomfortable introspection for both political actors and their target audiences, and often disrupts established ways of viewing the world.

Building on this, Steven Pinker points to how engaging empathetically can disrupt societal norms: 'the (Civil) Rights Revolutions show that a moral way of life often requires a decisive rejection of instinct, culture, religion, and standard practice. In their place is an ethics that is inspired by empathy and reason and stated in the language of rights'.⁶¹ For Pinker, empathy was a key driver in achieving the objectives of the civil rights movement, disrupting established norms, and helping to create a new path.

Asymmetries in power

Here it is important to question the assumption that empathic engagement by political actors is always positive. Empathy has been normalised and praised by politicians in recent years, particularly those in Western liberal

.....
58 Head, 'A politics of empathy', p. 108.

59 Yorke, 'Significance and limitations', p. 139.

60 Moses, 'Empathy and dis-empathy', p. 135.

61 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our nature: a history of violence and humanity*, (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 573.

democracies. However, scholars have drawn attention to the power dynamics at play in empathy and how it can favour the privileged.

Questions such as—What does empathy do? Whom does it serve? What are the risks?—provide a more critical analytical frame for empathy, rather than assuming it is inherently good.⁶² There is frequently an asymmetry of power at work. The act of empathising is often the choice of the privileged, and can itself be a way to assert power.⁶³ Such empathetic engagement can establish or reinforce unequal power relations to the benefit of ‘the empathiser’ over ‘the sufferer’.⁶⁴ A normalising view of empathy in political action can also draw attention away from wider structural and socio-political issues. When it is not reflective of context or paired with action to end oppression, empathy may simply further serve the privileged.⁶⁵

Empathy for refugees can also be costly for the ‘empathiser’, whether that is a political actor or a particular target audience. The denial of others’ stories and perspectives might be the easier road to take.⁶⁶ When discourse and media coverage portray refugees in a dehumanising way, this is perhaps evidence that the costs and difficulties of empathy have been deemed too great. As Yorke explains, empathy is often situated in a non-linear and complex communications environment where it is shaped and mediated by many factors.⁶⁷ It therefore rarely leads to easy answers or quick wins.

This discussion of emotion and empathy in the literature has provided a basis for an analysis of the case study of Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the state’s response to the 2015 refugee crisis.

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62 Carolyn Pedwell, ‘Affect at the margins: alternative empathies in ‘A Small Place’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, Volume 8 (August 2013): 25.

63 Pedwell, ‘Affect at the margins’, p. 19.

64 Head, ‘A politics of empathy’, p. 101.

65 Ibid., 110.

66 Yorke, ‘Empathy and emotions’ lecture.

67 Yorke, ‘Making the connection’, p. 7.

A 'COUNTRY OF IMMIGRATION'

Polling reveals that refugees are a continuing concern for citizens in Western democracies. This is particularly true when there is an increase in the numbers of people seeking asylum in a country. And Germany is no exception to this rule. Pew Research shows a significant peak of concern in Germany in 2015, where immigration was a major concern for Germans and citizens of many European states.⁶⁸

However, for many German citizens the plight of refugees also has personal significance. At the end of the Second World War, around one quarter of German territory was lost. Much of the land, home to Germans for centuries, was no longer theirs, and the Potsdam Agreement mandated that all citizens living beyond the post-1945 national borders must migrate 'back' to their designated homeland. As a result, between twelve and fourteen million Germans were forcibly removed from their homes in central and eastern Europe and sought refuge in present-day Germany.⁶⁹ The scale of this inward immigration was dramatic, and makes the refugee experience resonate in Germany today. It is part of almost every family's personal history.

Since the Second World War, in legal and constitutional terms, Germany has also had one of the world's most generous asylum systems. Article 16a of the Grundgesetz [Basic Law or constitution] of Germany proclaims the unqualified promise to harbour victims of persecution⁷⁰, setting into law the rights of refugees as declared by the UN.

Another significant factor in Germany's immigration history is unification. In 1989, citizens of East Germany were granted freedom of movement to migrate across the Iron Curtain and into a new, unified country. Angela Merkel was one such Easterner and describes herself as someone from 'a migration background'. She publicly identifies as an

.....
⁶⁸ Laura Silver, 'Immigration concerns fall in Western Europe', *Pew Research Centre*, 22 October 2018, (accessed 28 December 2021).

⁶⁹ Neil MacGregor, *Germany: Memories of a Nation* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 477.

⁷⁰ Joyce Marie Mushaben, 'Wir schaffen das! Angela Merkel and the European Refugee Crisis', *German Politics* Volume 26, N° 4 (2017): 517.

outsider; an immigrant who integrated into the newly unified Germany. Her political career, background, and approach to refugees in the lead up to the 2015 crisis is the subject of the following section.

Why Merkel matters

From the beginning of her chancellorship in 2005, Merkel focused on strengthening the integration of immigrants in German society. She was looking to build Germany as a ‘a land of immigration and integration’.⁷¹ In 2007 Merkel introduced a National Integration Plan that laid the foundations for the ‘Willkommenskultur’ [welcoming culture] which would become such a central symbol of Germany’s response to the refugee crisis.

By 2015, Merkel had been in power for a decade and was not preoccupied with re-election or the need to establish her legitimacy or power.⁷² She was an established leader with economic and political successes and had built a reputation as ‘a decidedly pragmatic leader’.⁷³ In the months before the 2015 refugee crisis Merkel had also successfully kept the EU together through the Greek Eurozone crisis.⁷⁴ As such, she had some rare political capital to make brave—even unpopular—policy decisions.

Merkel’s personal convictions, particularly those that may have influenced her leadership during the refugee crisis, also invite consideration. She was a pioneering political leader: she was the first woman and first East German to be Chancellor.⁷⁵ Her personal experience of restrictive East German policies, many of which violated international human rights accords, positioned her as a leader uniquely placed to empathise with refugees.⁷⁶

71 Mushaben, ‘Wir schaffen das!’, p. 526.

72 Helms et al, ‘Merkel III’, p. 353.

73 Ibid., p. 351.

74 Ibid., p. 355.

75 Joyce Marie Mushaben, *Becoming Madam Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the German Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 2.

76 Mushaben, ‘Wir schaffen das!’, p. 530.

Analysis of contemporary reporting of European national media outlets shows that the words and actions of politicians like Merkel also dominated coverage at the time.⁷⁷ Despite the rise of social media and democratising effect of online communications, research shows that the words and actions of political leaders were still leading mainstream media coverage in 2015. Merkel was able to capitalise on this to achieve her objectives.

Emotion in Merkel's Strategic Communications

It is unsurprising that Merkel sought to shape and galvanise the collective emotions of her target audiences to communicate about the refugee crisis. As highlighted in the literature review, a wide range of academic study shows that emotion is a driving force in political and social life, particularly during times of crisis.⁷⁸

The primary audience for Merkel's strategic communications was the domestic German public. However, from the outset, she also sought to influence audiences in other EU states, including their political leaders and voting publics. With her bold approach to refugee policy, Merkel needed to employ all the weapons in her communications arsenal to persuade audiences and win their support. The aim of her strategic communications was to persuade audiences that her approach was the right one and to gain their support and engagement in the welcoming effort.⁷⁹

As a framework for analysis, the role of three specific emotions in Merkel's strategic communications will be evaluated in this article: guilt, pride, and compassion. These emotions were significant in the strategic communications of Merkel at this time, but they are also significant in world politics more generally. There are methodological difficulties in analysing emotion. They are not easily measured and evaluated. But methodological problems should not prohibit this analytical lens,

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⁷⁷ Chouliarakis and Zaborowski. 'Voice and community', p. 621.

⁷⁸ Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 130.

⁷⁹ Neville Bolt, 'What is strategic communications' lecture, *Strategic Communications: Theory and Concepts*, King's College London, October 2020.

especially given the central role of emotion in political life and strategic communications.⁸⁰

Guilt

Collective guilt is experienced when one's social group is perceived as having perpetrated immoral acts. It motivates people to make amends for the harm done and take responsibility for action.⁸¹ Today's German citizens are no strangers to this emotion. Reminders of the nation's moral failures and the horrific consequences of the Third Reich can be seen across the cities and towns of Germany, as well as in school curricula, political institutions, and other facets of public life.⁸²

This sense of guilt and Germany's complex relationship with its past have a unique word in German: 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung'. It was first associated with Germany's process of coming to terms with the atrocities of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and can be translated as 'wrestling with the past'.⁸³ Building on this, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas stressed the importance of remembrance in political and social life, believing there was a moral dimension to how Germans related to their past in the present. For him, remembrance creates a necessary and beneficial emotion of collective guilt. Rather than repressing or stifling people, Habermas believed 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' would move Germans to a greater sense of moral duty and responsibility.⁸⁴

Feelings of guilt about the past and responsibility for the present are still powerful motivators for many Germans. In strategic communications they can be applied to persuade people to 'accept as their duty the welcoming of millions of "strangers"'.⁸⁵ Well aware of this emotional heritage, Merkel used it to appeal to her audiences and gain their support.

80 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 118.

81 Mark Ferguson and Nya Branscombe, 'The social psychology of collective guilt', in *Collective Emotions*, ed. by Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

82 Karl Vick, 'Time Person of the Year 2015', *Time Magazine*, 12 December 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).

83 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung', *Deutsche Welle*, 12 September 2011, (accessed 28 December 2021).

84 Max Pensky, 'On the use and abuse of memory: Habermas, 'anamnesic solidarity,' and the Historikerstreit', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* Volume 15, N° 4 (October 1989): 357.

85 Clemena Antonova, 'Everyone is responsible for everyone and everything': insights on the refugee crisis drawn from Russian religious thought', *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review* Volume 38, N° 1 (January 2016): 22.

Guilt and responsibility were key themes of her famous ‘Wir schaffen das’ speech [‘We can do this’] at the summer press conference on 31st August 2015.

The speech unpacked the government’s approach to the crisis, sought to persuade domestic audiences of the inherent value of welcoming refugees, and to mobilise audiences to action. In the speech, Merkel addressed Germany’s responsibility to refugees:

Ladies and gentlemen, what is playing out in Europe at the moment is not one single disaster, but a multitude of disastrous situations. There are an infinite number of tragedies playing out, and there is also incomprehensible atrocity. Like a few days ago in Austria, when a truck was found with about 70 people found dead – lives ruined by unscrupulous smugglers. These are atrocities that one cannot believe and where one simply has to say: these are images that we cannot imagine. This happens all while we live here in very orderly circumstances.⁸⁶

Merkel was referring to the tragic death of 71 refugees found suffocated in a lorry making the journey across Europe to reach Germany. Their bodies were discovered on 27th August, a few days prior to this press conference. This horrific event acted as a catalyst for Germany to act and avoid further tragedy. Merkel spoke of how the event had left leaders in Vienna ‘all shaken by this terrible news’.⁸⁷ In her speech she contrasted their awful fate with the ‘very orderly’ circumstances of life for German citizens, bringing the average voter into the frame and highlighting the shared humanity of all.

Images of refugees in contemporary media coverage would have also evoked powerful memories for the German people, including the lived experience of millions who had moved back to the country after the

.....
86 Angela Merkel, ‘[Sommerpressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel](#)’, Deutsche Bundesregierung website, 31 August 2015, (accessed 20 July 2021).

87 Bethany Bell and Nick Thorpe, ‘[Austria’s migrant disaster: why did 71 die?](#)’, *BBC News*, 25 August 2016, (accessed 28 December 2021).

Second World War and fall of the Berlin Wall. Images and stories of refugees crossing borders served as reminders that seeking refuge is something close to home, not just something that happens to others.⁸⁸

The focus on guilt in Merkel's strategic communications did not go unnoticed by her target audience, the German public. Research by the group *More in Common* in 2016 found that German audiences believed that a sense of collective guilt was a key factor in the strategic communications of the government at the time. In focus groups researching the attitudes towards national identity, immigration, and refugees in Germany, one participant commented: 'It's about the Third Reich. They want to claim that Germans are still collectively guilty and, because of that, have to conduct themselves towards the rest of the world in a certain way'.⁸⁹ Other participants expressed similar views on how the government was seeking to shape public opinion about the refugee crisis.

The following section looks at pride, another important emotion drawn out in Merkel's discourse and strategic communications.

Pride

Collective pride is a powerful emotion in the nation state. As outlined in the literature review, academics from a broad range of disciplines have recognised its influence in political life. Revisiting the 'Wir schaffen das' speech, it is clear that Merkel was tapping into a sense of national pride. The phrase itself speaks to confidence and pride in the ability of the nation and its people. Following the summer press conference, it went on to become the recognised slogan of the government's approach to the crisis.

In the speech, Merkel described the great benefits of living in contemporary Germany: its freedom, its rule of law, and its economic strength. She went on to say: 'The world sees Germany as a land of

88 Maja Zehfuss, "'We Can Do This': Merkel, Migration and the Fantasy of 'Control'", *International Political Sociology* Volume 15, No 2 (June 2021): 178.

89 Mark Helbling et al., 'Attitudes toward national identity, immigration, and refugees in Germany', *More in Common*, July 2017, (accessed 19 July 2021), p. 59.

hope and opportunity, and it really wasn't always that way.⁹⁰ In doing so, she acknowledged the country's difficult past, while setting out a new identity for Germany on the world stage. By participating in this bold and welcoming approach to refugees, Merkel said Germans now had a chance of redemption—'an opportunity to prove that they had learned from the past and show the world Germany's goodness.'⁹¹ Merkel understood that her target audience wanted to feel good about themselves and win social approval.⁹²

Merkel also listed the specific achievements of modern Germany in the speech, including the handling of the financial crisis and successful phasing out of nuclear energy. All this built up to her key pitch to the German people:

I say very simply: Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these things must be: we have achieved so much – we can do it! We can do it, and where there is something in the way, it must be overcome and must be worked through.

The assertion that 'we can do it' sought to stir up the confidence and pride of the German people. But this was an unusual sort of national pride. Not the pride of an in-group and corresponding fear of outsiders; rather a national pride built on welcoming the outsider.⁹³ As Zehfuss commented, Merkel was seeking to reframe views about inward migration and refugees crossing borders. It was not a loss of control but rather 'a sign of strength and occasion for pride'.⁹⁴

.....
90 Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.

91 Matthew Karnitschnig, '5 years on from Angela Merkel's three little words: "Wir schaffen das!"', *Politico*, 31 August 2020, (accessed 28 December 2021).

92 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 150.

93 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 149.

94 Zehfuss, "We Can Do This", p. 185.

Speaking months later at her party conference in December 2015, Merkel commented:

I can say ‘we can do this’ because it is part of the identity of our country to do great [things], to build the country of the economic miracle out of the rubble [of the Second World War] and to become a highly regarded country of unity and freedom after the division [of East and West Germany].⁹⁵

This story, and this sense of pride in Germany’s ability and capacity of ‘schaffen’, was a golden thread running through the government’s strategic communications at the time.

And there is evidence that Merkel had some success in instilling this feeling of collective pride among Germans and motivating them to action. Looking again to research carried out by *More in Common*, researchers found the approach to refugees did evoke feelings of pride. As one participant commented, ‘you can be proud of the fact that they all want to come here.’⁹⁶ The large numbers of German citizens who volunteered their time to welcome refugees or donate goods as part of the ‘Willkommenskultur’ [welcoming culture] also points to Merkel’s success. Surveys show that 10.9% of Germans over 14 years of age volunteered to support arriving refugees in autumn 2015,⁹⁷ and estimates that 88% of German citizens donated goods for the purpose of welcoming refugees,⁹⁸ highlight the scope and scale of participation. There was a genuine shift in attitudes and behaviours in response to Merkel’s strategic communications and the call of ‘Wir schaffen das’.

Compassion

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum defines compassion as ‘a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved

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95 Billy Holzberg, “‘Wir schaffen das’: Hope and hospitality beyond the humanitarian border”, *Journal of Sociology* Volume 57, No 3 (September 2021): 4.

96 Helbling et al, *Attitudes toward national identity*, p. 69.

97 Hamann and Karakayali, ‘Practicing Willkommenskultur’, p. 70.

98 Helms et al., ‘Merkel III’, p. 359.

misfortune'.⁹⁹ With this awareness comes the belief that suffering is serious, and that the suffering person does not deserve the pain. It resembles empathy, which will be discussed later, but differs in that it infers a motivation to alleviate the suffering one sees. Empathy, by contrast, is the human faculty to put oneself in the shoes of another and does not necessitate any compulsion to alleviate suffering seen or experienced.¹⁰⁰

Perhaps one of the most arresting and upsetting images of the European refugee crisis was the body of 3-year-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean. The image was shared around the world in early September 2015, and vividly brought to life the tragedy of the 5,538 people known to have drowned attempting to reach Europe in 2015.¹⁰¹ The image raised the plight of Syria's refugees to the top of the global agenda.¹⁰² World leaders were united in acknowledging the tragedy of the boy's fate and expressing compassion for refugees like him who were making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

Merkel led the charge in responding to this outpouring of emotion. She spoke repeatedly about the humanitarian impetus to stop the suffering of refugees and respond proactively to the crisis.¹⁰³ Speaking to journalists in September she said, 'if we start to apologize for welcoming these desperate people, then this is no longer my country'.¹⁰⁴

In the early autumn of 2015, the German media were largely amplifying Merkel's appeals to compassion and her call on the German public to step up and help. Contemporary content analysis in the late summer and early autumn shows that refugees were positioned as suffering people deserving of compassion in mainstream media outlets (the newspapers *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*).¹⁰⁵

99 Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 301.

100 Yorke, 'Emotions and empathy' lecture.

101 Zehfuss, "'We Can Do This'", p. 173.

102 Vick, 'Time Person'.

103 Holzberg, "'Wir schaffen das'", p. 13.

104 Helms et al., 'Merkel III', p. 139.

105 Hugrun Adalsteinsdottir, 'Coming to terms with the past? Constructions of refugees in three leading German newspapers', Masters Thesis (Reykjavik University of Iceland, 2016), p. 45.

However, there were many other frames used to present the refugee in the German media, including as an economic boon and labour force, and also as a security threat.

It is important to highlight the sometimes fragile and conditional nature of compassion. The image of Alan Kurdi was an unequivocal depiction of an innocent victim of the crisis, and therefore a compassionate response was near universal in the contemporary discourse. However, commentators highlighted the desire of audiences to separate refugees into deserving and undeserving categories throughout the crisis.¹⁰⁶ When the helplessness of the object of compassion is called into question, audiences are quick to withdraw their sympathy.¹⁰⁷ An example of this was the public's angry response to refugee selfies with Merkel, which were increasingly shared in the media coverage throughout the autumn and winter of 2015. As Holzberg notes, these selfies portrayed the 'wrong' behaviour from the refugee. The images complicated 'the imperative of suffering that needs to be conveyed in order for people to be read as deserving refugees'¹⁰⁸ and the audience reaction demonstrated the fragility of compassion.

Denying fear

Evolutionary biology has shown that threat perception is hardwired in humans regardless of circumstance. As Crawford notes, 'individuals are biased toward threat perception, whether or not a threat exists'.¹⁰⁹ Therefore perceptions of threat and the related emotion of fear are commonplace. There is a broad consensus that fear plays an important role in politics, influencing attitudes and behaviours and mobilising states and their peoples to action.¹¹⁰

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106 Goodman et al., 'Evolving (re)categorisations', p. 106.

107 Pedwell, 'Affect at the margins', p. 19.

108 Holzberg, "'Wir schaffen das'", p. 9.

109 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 136.

110 See Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Fear no more: emotions and world politics', *Review of International Studies* Volume 34 (2008): 119.

As Thucydides famously noted in the 5th century BC, men are motivated by 'honour, greed, and above all, fear'.¹¹¹

Thinking about the theme of this article, the fear of the other who is ethnically and culturally different to oneself can be particularly pervasive. Broader fears about immigration and refugees can stem from concerns about the future of political and social life. As Zehfuss comments, '(immigration) concern is not simply about present state effectiveness, but about the future of...political community'.¹¹²

Research has also shown that German media coverage in late summer and early autumn was broadly in step with Merkel's agenda. It did not widely report on or represent the fears and concerns of the public who felt alarmed by the country's refugee policy.¹¹³ It is also noteworthy that in the 'Wir schaffen das' speech, Merkel praised the media for their coverage of the refugee response:

I want to expressly thank you for the many wonderful reports that you, the media, have reported on in recent days. I am taking the liberty of encouraging you to continue doing exactly this; because you give many good citizens the possibility, by seeing the coverage, to see role models and examples they can follow.¹¹⁴

This is further evidence that the media and government had some alignment in seeking to shape public perceptions and downplay concerns about the handling of the crisis.

Nevertheless, there were feelings of fear and anxiety among German audiences about refugees. The attempt to downplay these feelings led to a distrust in the media who were denounced as the 'Lügenpresse' [lying press] at anti-Merkel rallies. This impression also acted as a boon to right-

111 Thucydides, quoted in Robert G. Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', in *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 305.

112 Zehfuss, "We can do this", p. 175.

113 Guy Chazan, 'German media accused of one-sided coverage of refugee crisis', *Financial Times*, 24 July 2017, (accessed 21 August 2021).

114 Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.

wing parties and movements such as Pediga and Alternative for Germany (AfD). Lutz Bachmann, co-founder of Pediga, commented that what united those in the movement was ‘the feeling that the politicians are no longer paying attention to us’.¹¹⁵ So there were consequences to Merkel’s choice to minimise fear in her strategic communications. Her denial of its power led to increased distrust in the government and media.

TRACING EMPATHY IN MERKEL’S APPROACH

One of the first questions to ask when analysing the empathy of a political actor is: with whom are they empathising? Merkel’s empathic effort was directed towards refugees. This was an unusual choice for a political leader. Rather than empathising with German citizens—those whom she was serving and who had put her in power—Merkel prioritised refugees. Chris Hann took note of this choice and wrote about the need to develop empathy for both refugees *and* concerned German citizens: ‘we may be able to develop empathy with both sides: with the refugees and other migrants, of course, but also with those in the receiving societies who feel trapped and vulnerable to different forms of dispossession’.¹¹⁶

Considering the case of Merkel and the refugee crisis, this section offers a discourse analysis to shed light on the impact of Merkel’s empathy for refugees in her strategic communications.¹¹⁷

Like emotion, empathy is not easily quantified or measured. However, it is possible to identify the key criteria of empathy in the strategic communications and discourses of the time: evidence of interpersonal empathy, awareness of how others perceive one’s words and actions, perspective-taking, and discussion of others’ perspectives.¹¹⁸

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115 Quoted in Vick, ‘Time Person’.

116 Chris Hann, ‘The fragility of Europe’s Willkommenskultur’, *Anthropology Today* Volume 31, N° 1-2 (2015): 2.

117 Head, ‘A politics of empathy’, p. 98.

118 These are the criteria for measuring empathy in discourse analysis as set out by Claire Yorke in her article ‘Significance and limitations’, p. 146.

Interpersonal empathy relates to the direct relationship between two people. It can be prompted during an interaction with another person and can also emerge because of that interaction.¹¹⁹ It is often seen as an inherent character trait. For some political leaders it seems to come naturally, while for others it proves more difficult. One much-cited example is the difference between Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush in the second presidential debate in 1992. Clinton demonstrated interpersonal empathy with a questioner in the audience, saying 'I feel your pain', whereas Bush failed to do so.¹²⁰ Merkel has often been seen as a leader in the Bush camp. She is known for her pragmatism and common-sense approach, rather than her natural charm or interpersonal skills.¹²¹

This reputation seemed to be reinforced during Merkel's personal encounter with 14-year-old Palestinian refugee Reem Sahwil in July 2015. The encounter happened during a question-and-answer session with a group of young people. Sahwil asked Merkel about what would happen to refugees like herself and her family who faced deportation. Responding to the girl, Merkel focused on the pragmatic realities of asylum management and the limited capacity of Germany to take in more people.¹²² Replying to Sahwil, Merkel said that Germany could not take in everyone, using the phrase 'wir können das nicht schaffen' [we cannot do it].

When the girl became visibly upset by Merkel's response, the Chancellor attempted to comfort her (see image below). She seemingly mistook Sahwil's tears as being related to the stress of public speaking, rather than to her family's situation. Merkel appeared to fail to empathise with Sahwil or understand her perspective. But, as Yorke notes, 'to speak to people, it is important that they also feel heard.'¹²³

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119 Yorke, 'Significance and limitations', p. 142.

120 Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions' lecture.

121 Helms et al., 'Merkel III', p. 351.

122 'Merkel criticised over crying refugee', *BBC News*, 17 July 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).

123 Yorke, 'Making the connection', p. 6.



Image 1. 'Merkel criticised over crying refugee'. BBC News. 17 July 2015. Via YouTube.

Following this interaction, media coverage focused on Merkel's lack of empathy. She was perceived as cold and unable to understand the plight of refugees. A popular hashtag on social media, #Merkelstreichelt ['Merkel caresses'], mocked Merkel's attempts to comfort the girl.

Perhaps no surprise then that Merkel would go on to use a more hopeful and empathetic tone by turning the negative phrase she used here ('wir können das nicht schaffen') into a positive one ('wir schaffen das'), that would go on to become the slogan of her approach.

To what extent the encounter in the Q&A session and Merkel's apparent failure to empathise with this girl on an interpersonal level acted as a catalyst for her shift in policy and strategic communications about refugees is difficult to assess. However, the phrase's positive reappearance in the 'Wir schaffen das' slogan suggests as much. As Breithaupt observes 'there is hardly a stronger catalyst for empathy than a (perceived) failure of empathy'.¹²⁴

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¹²⁴ Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, p. 154.

There was also evidence of Merkel taking the perspectives of others throughout 2015. In the ‘Wir schaffen das’ speech, Merkel said:

The vast majority of us thankfully do not know the state of full exhaustion of flight combined with a fear for one’s own life or the lives of children or partners. People who come... must have overcome situations and endure fears that we might simply collapse under.¹²⁵

Merkel here described the experience and feelings of the refugee to her audience—evidence of her own cognitive and emotional empathy. Moreover, she was asking that her audience join her in empathising in this way.

Finally, the policy decisions of the German government demonstrated strategic empathy. As Yorke notes, strategic empathy involves ‘a conscious effort to design policy approaches with the other in mind’.¹²⁶ The welcoming of one million refugees is a clear example of this.

The cost of being an ‘empathy entrepreneur’

Head describes those who take on the costly process of empathy as ‘empathy entrepreneurs’.¹²⁷ Empathy is costly because it is demanding as both a psychological and embodied experience, often disrupting one’s identity in multiple ways.¹²⁸ As Atticus Finch famously says in the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, ‘You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it’.¹²⁹ These lines neatly capture the embodied and imaginative aspects of empathy.

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125 Merkel, ‘Sommerpressekonferenz’.

126 Yorke, ‘Empathy and emotions’ lecture.

127 Head, ‘Costly encounters’, p. 170.

128 Ibid., p. 192.

129 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Arrow Books, 1997), p. 33.

Head sets out a framework to analyse the specific costs of empathy. The five costs she identifies are: epistemological, cognitive, emotional, material, and embodied. The epistemological cost for Merkel and the German people, in choosing to empathise with refugees, involved a disruption to their established forms of 'knowing'. By welcoming one million Syrian refugees, Merkel was asking German citizens to be open and vulnerable to foreign 'others'; people who were completely new to German society, culture, and language and were therefore disruptive to the state's established national identity.

There could be no doubt that the welcoming of one million refugees would disrupt established modes of thinking and feeling in German society. The fabric of the state, its intellectual and institutional hierarchies would be challenged.¹³⁰ In choosing to empathise with refugees, Merkel and Germany also paid the cost of this disruption to their national identity. Despite this, thousands of Germans chose to participate in the welcoming effort or 'Willkommenskultur'.

As discussed in the literature review, the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy are closely intertwined, hence they are discussed together. One of the costs of empathy with both a cognitive and emotional dynamic is the sense of alienation from an in-group and its established collective narrative. A sense of alienation from the EU was experienced by Merkel and by the German nation in their handling of the crisis. While the choice of empathising with refugees was lauded by many internationally, as witnessed in her 'Time Person of the Year' accolade, the German state became an outlier in Europe.

From the start, Merkel sought to lead an EU-wide approach to the refugee crisis. In the 'Wir schaffen das' speech she spoke repeatedly of the crisis as a joint responsibility: 'Europe must move as a whole. The member states must share the responsibility to refugees'.¹³¹ This was crucial for Merkel, as she saw the handling of the crisis as an existential challenge for the whole EU.

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¹³⁰ Head, 'Costly encounters', p. 186.

¹³¹ Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.

Speaking to the German parliament on 9th September 2015, she said:

If we show courage and lead the way, a common European approach is more likely...If Europe fails on the refugee issue, we would lose one of the key reasons for founding a united Europe, namely universal human rights.

Despite this, the numbers of refugees accepted in Germany towered above its neighbours, making them an outlier in both policy and strategic communications.

Finally, there are the embodied costs of empathising with the refugee. Head lists the following expressions of bodily cost: sleeplessness, discomfort, vulnerability, and fatigue. Again, the cost on the body was experienced particularly by Merkel as political leader and ‘empathy entrepreneur’.

For Merkel personally, there are two significant ‘embodied’ encounters which illustrate this. Merkel’s physical response to the refugee Reem Sahwil in July clearly demonstrated her physical discomfort in seeing the crying child. Although Merkel’s act to comfort Sahwil became a derisive social media hashtag, ‘#Merkelstreichelt’, it was nevertheless a portrayal of Merkel connecting with the bodily experience of another.

Another instance of the embodied cost for Merkel was her visit to refugee centres throughout August and September 2015, often coming face-to-face with riots and protests. One event covered extensively by German media was her visit to a refugee centre in Heidenau in August.¹³² Right-wing protests about the refugee policies had taken place in the city, and Merkel was booed and insulted during her visit. As a seasoned politician she was no doubt used to confronting an angry public, and in her press conference on 31st August she commented that insults and affronts ‘(don’t) bother me’.¹³³ However, footage from the visit shows the uncomfortable nature of the encounter, and one contemporary

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¹³² Daniel Tost, translated by Erika KÖrner, ‘Merkel booed at site of refugee attacks’, *Euroactiv Germany*, 27 August 2015, (accessed 21 July 2021).

¹³³ Merkel, ‘Sommerpressekonferenz’.

government source said that this physical experience did have an impact and was the moment when ‘the political became the personal’ for the Chancellor.¹³⁴

The backlash and legacy

There is evidence of a significant backlash to Merkel’s strategic communications about and approach to the refugee crisis, with many German citizens voicing concern about the numbers of refugees and right-wing political parties and movements being mobilised.¹³⁵ The Alternative for Germany party, pushing an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agenda, won votes and gained a 12.6% share in the German parliament in the 2017 federal elections, and the right-wing Pediga movement gained traction with the public.¹³⁶

Public anxiety about the refugee population also increased following a number of terrorist attacks in the months following the crisis. There was a marked shift in public discourse and mood following the sexual assaults which took place in Cologne at the end of 2015.¹³⁷ This came on the heels of the terrorist attacks in Paris in November, which were claimed by Islamic State and in which 130 people died.¹³⁸ And in December 2016, the terrorist attack on the Berlin Christmas market by a Tunisian immigrant further shook public attitudes and support.¹³⁹ Such events increased the perception of threat and unease about the refugee population.

These events could not have been predicted by the government, but they affected the mood, attitudes, and beliefs of German citizens. In 2016, polling by the Pew Research Centre showed that public opinion about the handling of the refugee crisis was not

134 Joyce Marie Mushaben, ‘Angela Merkel’s Leadership in the Refugee Crisis’, *Current History* Volume 116, N° 788 (March 2017): 97.

135 Philip Oltermann, ‘Angela Merkel’s great migrant gamble paid off’, *The Guardian*, 30 August 2020, (accessed 28 December 2021).

136 ‘2017 German federal election’, *Wikipedia*, (accessed 23 August 2021).

137 Mushaben, ‘Angela Merkel’s leadership’, p. 98.

138 ‘Paris attacks: what happened on the night’, *BBC News*, 9 December 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).

139 Ibid., p. 99.

favourable.¹⁴⁰ In response, Merkel adjusted some of her initial policy decisions, rolling back some aspects of the welcoming culture and refugee policy.¹⁴¹

But what has been the longer-term legacy of Merkel's approach and strategic communications regarding refugees? More than six years on from 2015, there is little consensus about the overall benefits and costs. Polling has shown consistently strong support for refugee protection in Germany since 2015, with in-country polling in 2021 finding that 71% of respondents believed that people should be able to seek refuge in countries such as Germany to escape war and persecution.¹⁴²

Having retired from politics, Merkel's personal legacy is a hot topic of discussion. Her policy decisions and strategic communications about refugees will no doubt form a key part of that legacy. As Williams notes in a wider discussion about human rights, the language of human rights must be more than an assertion or fiction to secure social harmony.¹⁴³ Merkel sought to match her words and assertions about the worth and dignity of refugees with concrete actions and policies; she sought to close the 'say do' gap.

Unsurprisingly, the 2015 'Time Person of the Year' profile placed Merkel's legacy in a favourable light. Vick concluded that 'Merkel's legacy—her bold, fraught, immensely empathetic act of leadership—challenges more than the comfort of European life. It also challenges the comfort of assumptions about any group, including, if it works out, Germans'.¹⁴⁴ This passage shows that for Vick, Merkel did shift societal conversations, attitudes, and behaviours in Germany. Her bold policies to welcome the refugee and her strategic communications about the topic demonstrated her conviction to speak and act on what she believed mattered most.

140 Jacob Poushter, 'European opinions of the refugee crisis in 5 charts', *Pew Research Centre*, 16 September 2016, (accessed 28 December 2021).

141 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

142 Kerrie Holloway et al., 'Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants', *Overseas Development Institute*, (accessed 8 January 2022), p. 7.

143 Rowan Williams, 'Religious Faith and Human Rights' lecture, 1 May 2008, London School of Economics, (accessed 24 July 2021).

144 Vick, 'Time Person'.

CONCLUSION

Merkel, the German government, and the German people did not have to take this course of action. Accepting one million Syrian refugees in 2015 was a bold move which shocked many other countries. Germany's response to the refugee crisis cannot be reduced to economic or materialistic imperatives, and an analysis of the emotional and empathetic drivers in the state's strategic communications moves the discussion beyond a zero-sum game of economic or political strategy.

This article has argued that emotions and empathy played a transformative role in the strategic communications of the German government at this time, and that they contributed significantly to the government achieving its objectives. The impact of this approach is seen perhaps most clearly in the very high numbers of Germans who participated in the 'Willkommenskultur' and the long-term legacy of Merkel as a respected political leader, despite her having adopted this unusual approach to refugees.

I have also highlighted the important contextual factors which affected Merkel and Germany's response to the crisis, including the country's political history and Merkel's unique set of convictions as a leader. As Helms et al. point out, 'even in the most complex and dispersed leadership environments, such as the Federal Republic of Germany or the European Union, leaders and their convictions can and do make a difference.'¹⁴⁵

The shaping and shifting of views, attitudes, and behaviours about refugees through strategic communications continues to be highly relevant for nation states and all political actors. The example of Merkel and the German government stands as a fascinating paradigm of how this can be done.

¹⁴⁵ Helms et al., 'Merkel III', p. 365.

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ANALYSIS OF KREMLIN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN AFTER THE POISONING OF ALEXEI NAVALNY

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Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, disinformation, disinformation campaign, Alexei Navalny, Russian state-owned media (RSOM), Kremlin*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the disinformation campaign launched by Russian state-owned media after the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, comparing its key elements with findings from discussions held at the NATO StratCom COE in 2016 and from relevant literature, to develop a better understanding of the Kremlin's long-term pattern of communications that further its strategic objectives domestically and internationally. We systematically analysed the disinformation campaign both quantitatively and qualitatively using the 'A2E model', adapted from an analytical framework created in 2019 by the Transatlantic Working Group. We concluded that familiar strategies designed to neutralise Western criticism and 'fog the news', such as projecting multiple alternative narratives, flooding the media with large numbers of articles, and inviting pro-Kremlin 'experts' to comment, were still being employed in 2020. We show how Russian state-owned media generate narratives to debunk evidence, deny responsibility, discredit opponents, and distract domestic and international audiences—a '4D framework' for disinformation. This research into the Kremlin's strategic communications is timely and necessary as it reveals the Kremlin's practice of using disinformation, not only in military contexts, which have been better studied, but also as analysed here, to cover an assassination attempt.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation has a number of strategic goals that it hopes to advance through its use of disinformation, including restoring Russia to great power status, preserving its sphere of influence, protecting Putin's government, and enhancing its military effectiveness.¹ While there is much discussion of Russian disinformation focused on specific case studies, the conversation about how these fit within the Kremlin's strategic objectives has been limited.² Recent analyses have focused on immediate and tactical methods, and the possible intentions behind

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¹ Kasey Stricklin, 'Why Does Russia Use Disinformation?', 29 March 2020. [Accessed 16 July 2021].

² Geir Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule: Ten Lessons about Russian Political Influence Activities in Europe', *Palgrave Communications*, Volume 5, N°19 (2019). [Accessed 9 July 2021]

various disinformation campaigns,³ rather than on the interpretation of how and why they are used in the long-term. These questions are becoming increasingly important, especially considering new high-profile events. Most recently, Kremlin disinformation campaigns have been extended to cover and ‘support’ assassination attempts, such as the recent poisoning of Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny.⁴ This paper analyses the disinformation campaign launched by the Kremlin in the aftermath of the Navalny poisoning and compares current findings to previous findings regarding Kremlin information activities to determine which elements can be considered part of Russia’s long-term communications strategy.

On 20 August 2020, while flying back to Moscow from Tomsk in Siberia, Alexei Navalny suddenly lost consciousness, necessitating an emergency landing in the city of Omsk, where he was taken for treatment. A day later, amid speculation about a possible poisoning attempt, Omsk doctors gave a press statement announcing that Navalny had suffered a metabolic disorder and no poisonous substances had been found. On 22 August, after some initial delays, the Kremlin agreed to a request from Navalny’s family and his team to transport him to the Charité hospital in Berlin, Germany. A few days later, the hospital issued a press release indicating a high probability that Navalny had been poisoned. On 2 September 2020, the German government reported the results of the German Bundeswehr laboratory, confirming that Navalny had been poisoned by the Novichok nerve agent—the same substance used two years previously in an attempt to kill former GRU⁵ agent Sergei Skripal.

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3 For case studies of Kremlin media disinformation, see: Ulises A. Mejias and Nikolai E. Vokuev, ‘Disinformation and the Media: The Case of Ukraine and Russia’, *Media, Culture and Society*, Volume 39 N°7 (2017): 1027–42; Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, ‘The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It’, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016). [Accessed: 9 July 2021]; Tolz, Vera, Stephen Hutchings, Precious N. Chatterje-Doody and Rhys Crilley, ‘Mediatization and Journalistic Agency: Russian Television Coverage of the Skripal Poisonings’, *Journalism* (2020): 1–20; Edward Deverell, Charlotte Wagnsson, and Eva-Karin Olsson, ‘Destruct, Direct and Suppress: Sputnik Narratives on the Nordic Countries’, *The Journal of International Communication* Volume 27, N°1 (2021): 15–37.

4 Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin’s Threat to Russia and the West* (Bloomsbury, 2014); Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2017).

5 GRU is an initialism for Glavnoye Razvedyvatel’noye Upravleniye [Главное разведывательное управление], the foreign military intelligence main directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Regardless of these discoveries, the Russian state neither supported the German medical findings nor admitted responsibility for the poisoning attack; the official position of the Kremlin remains that Navalny suffered from a ‘metabolic disorder’. President Vladimir Putin himself stated that: ‘If Russian special services wanted to kill him, they would have “finished it”.’⁶

The poisoning attempts against former intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in 2018 and Alexei Navalny in 2020, were followed by extensive and well-rehearsed disinformation campaigns launched by the Russian State-owned Media (RSOM). Both campaigns were designed to deny and ‘neutralise’ evidence of Russian state involvement in the assassination attempts, whilst promoting a more favourable perception of Russia, both domestically and internationally, and demeaning Western official government narratives. This article takes the poisoning of Navalny as a case study to help develop a better understanding of the Kremlin’s information activities that seek to further strategic objectives domestically and internationally, especially following high-profile events that incriminate the Russian state. Our analysis builds upon insights from closed-door discussions that took place in Riga at the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) in May 2016.⁷ This summary contains key insights from academics and experts and thus provides a good reference for comparison with more recent findings regarding Kremlin information activities. The article at hand answers the research question: Which elements of the disinformation campaign launched by Russian state media in response to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny can be considered part of the Kremlin’s overall communication strategy?

We examined 1186 articles related to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny published in Russian state-owned media over a three-week period between 20 August 2020 and 9 September 2020. Due to the involvement of both

6 Mary Ilyushina, Laura Smith-Spark and Jennifer Hansler, ‘[Putin says if Russia wanted to kill opposition leader Navalny, it would have “finished” the job](#)’, CNN, 17 December 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

7 Gregory Simons and Antti Sillanpää, ‘[The Kremlin and Daesh Information Activities](#)’, (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016).

Russia and Germany in the Navalny case, we analysed two domestic RSOM outlets—*Ria Novosti* and *TASS*—and two German-language RSOM broadcasters—*RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch*. To structure our results, we used a conceptual framework previously developed for analysing cases of disinformation on social and mainstream media. The framework, which we call the ‘A2E model’,⁸ breaks down and systematises the analysis of disinformation along five principal vectors, which, when taken together, facilitate the construction of a comprehensive ‘full-spectrum’ view of any disinformation case, but especially when the case engages both media and social media assets. The five vectors are: (A = Audience) the audience that has been targeted with disinformation; (B = Behaviour) the behavioural signatures of the disinformation campaign; (C = Content) the content used and its underlying motivation; (D = Dynamics) the dynamics of how and when the material was published and consumed; (E = Effects) the effects the disinformation campaign appears to have had online and *offline*.

Comparing the Navalny case to the Kremlin information activities discussed in the 2016 StratCom proceedings we found an overall continuity and consistency of method across all five categories in the A2E model: (A = Audience) RSOM articles are geared towards audiences already receptive to alternative viewpoints about Western politics and society and toward those who maintain a favourable view of Russia and Putin; (B = Behaviour) RSOM published at least eleven different versions of events in a variety of media in a tactical attempt to ‘fog’ the information environment and disrupt Western narratives, rather than prioritizing one particular interpretation; (C = Content) the content of the narrative variations can be categorised according to the intent behind each narrative—to debunk, deny, discredit, and distract—a 4D framework; (D = Dynamics) RSOM sought to publish and distribute a large number of articles rapidly and at critical moments (immediately

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⁸ The A2E analytical framework was inspired in part by Camille François, ‘Actors, Behaviors, Content: A Disinformation ABC Highlighting Three Vectors of Viral Deception to Guide Industry & Regulatory Responses’, A working paper of the Transatlantic High Level Working Group on Content Moderation Online and Freedom of Expression, *Graphika and Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University*, 20 September 2019. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

after the poisoning and immediately following the Novichok revelations), resulting in high viewership and engagement; (E = Effects) while effects are difficult to measure,⁹ it can be deduced that the Kremlin used its anti-Navalny information campaign to ‘set the scene’ for the subsequent imprisonment of Navalny and to justify retaliatory measures against the West.

The next section reviews and summarises existing literature on Russian strategic communications and Kremlin disinformation activities. Section three describes the methodology used to collect and analyse the data, section four summarises the results, section five presents a further discussion of our findings, and we share our conclusions in section six.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic communications involves ‘the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences, to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives’¹⁰ in the interests of a nation or a political community. Rather than simply projecting short-term tactical goals, strategic communications implies a more holistic approach targeted at the ‘long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies’.¹¹ This also comes with the recognition that any long-term effect must compete in a continually changing, noisy, and contested information environment.¹²

The boundaries of the discipline of Strategic Communications are not clearly defined and often cross-pollinate with studies of Propaganda, Active Measures, Information Operations, Psychological Operations, and Public Diplomacy amongst others.¹³ Despite conceptual overlaps, strategic communications must be understood as a tool of grand

9 Natascha A. Karlova and Karen E. Fisher, ‘A Social Diffusion Model of Misinformation and Disinformation for Understanding Human Information Behaviour’, *Information Research* Volume 18 N°1 (2013): n. pag.

10 James Farwell, *The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), pp. xviii–xix.

11 Neville Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 6 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 4.

12 Ibid., p. 7.

13 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), pp. 21–22.

strategies.¹⁴ In other words, while public diplomacy, propaganda, and information operations can contribute to long-term strategic communications efforts, they can also be targeted at more short-term and tactical objectives that do not necessarily relate to national policy goals.

While Russia does not recognise or use the term ‘strategic communications’, the Kremlin’s information strategy exhibits many of its features. Russian president Vladimir Putin has increasingly referenced the security of the country’s information domain as a vital priority. Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy and its 2016 Information Security Doctrine have extended the conventions of national security policy discourse into the domain of information by citing foreign-originating information flows and cyber-attacks as a potential threat to the country’s stability.¹⁵ These documents imply that information security has grown increasingly important in view of the fact that communication technologies are used ‘by some countries’ in order to ‘achieve the geopolitical goals [by] resorting to manipulation with public opinion and history falsification’.¹⁶ Both strategic documents cite measures intended to strengthen Russian national interests in the information sphere.

In addition to securing its information space against perceived threats from foreign countries, the Kremlin also makes use of more controversial offensive methods. An analysis of forty annual reports from fifteen intelligence and security services in eleven Western countries, covering the period 2014–18, found an overwhelming consensus that Russia has been targeting the West through a variety of methods using mainstream and social media in an attempt to set its adversaries against each other in ‘a divide and rule approach’.¹⁷ These activities are seen as ‘long-term efforts to ensure Russian political interests and achievement of the country’s

14 Raphael Camargo Lima, ‘Strategic Communications as a Tool for Great Power Politics in Venezuela,’ *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 6 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019). [Accessed 30 March 2021]

15 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘*Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation*’, 2016 [Accessed 30 March 2021]; Russian Federation, ‘*On the Russian Government’s National Security Strategy*’, [Full text translation], December 2015 [Accessed 30 March 2021].

16 Russian Federation, ‘*National Security Strategy*’, Article 21.

17 Karlsten, ‘*Divide and Rule*’.

objectives',¹⁸ reminiscent of the 'active measures' [*aktivnye meropriyatiya*] used in Soviet times, 'both in the wide spectrum of methods employed and in the scale and intensity of influence activities'.¹⁹ These activities support three main strategic objectives: regime security for Putin's government, the predominance of Russia in its near abroad, and world-power status for Russia, which entails pursuing the long-term objective of weakening and destabilising the West and Western alliances while projecting a favourable image of Russia internationally.²⁰

In addition to 'strategic communications', this paper invokes two other key concepts: 'disinformation' and 'active measures'. Disinformation refers to *intentionally* misleading information, as opposed to misinformation, which relates to *unintentionally* incorrect information,²¹ misguided or erroneous information,²² or unintentionally inaccurate information.²³ The term disinformation is a translation of the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, which can be traced back to Stalin and the Soviet Union. Before his defection to the United States in 1969, Ladislav Bittman, a former high-ranking intelligence officer in the Czechoslovak Intelligence Service, defined *dezinformatsiya* citing the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia of 1952 as 'the dissemination (in the press, radio, etc.) of false information with the intention to deceive public opinion'.²⁴ Contemporary definitions of the term maintain the notion of intentionality, for example: information that aims to sow confusion and proliferate falsehoods,²⁵ news stories deliberately designed to weaken adversaries,²⁶ and intentionally incorrect information.²⁷ However, both 'old school' and contemporary formulations agree that disinformation is a more complex and nuanced

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18 Ibid., p. 5.

19 Ibid., p. 12.

20 Ibid.

21 Alice Marwick, 'Why Do People Share Fake News? A Sociotechnical Model of Media Effects', *Georgetown Law Technology Review* 474 (2018).

22 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, Sixth ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014).

23 Caroline Jack, *Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information*, (Data & Society Research Institute, 2017).

24 Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), p. 49.

25 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money* (New York: Institute of Modern Russia, 2014).

26 Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*.

27 Marwick, 'Why Do People Share Fake News?'

phenomenon than simply being incorrect information.²⁸ Accurate information may be conveyed but shrouded in half-truths, exaggerations, and biased interpretations.²⁹

In this article we use the term ‘disinformation narratives’ to refer to messages published in state-funded news articles that are intentionally designed to foster a biased or misleading version of a story. In the case of Russian state-media, such narratives are often associated with core themes that appear consistently in Russia’s communications efforts. We will explore how state-funded disinformation narratives are constructed and disseminated using a variety of disinformation methods and techniques of influence.

Major General Oleg Kalugin, retired KGB (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, i.e. the Russian Committee for State Security)³⁰ operative, saw disinformation as a critical component of Russia’s overall Active Measures Strategy.³¹ ‘Active measures’ is a Soviet term for active intelligence operations designed to influence world events so as to further Soviet geopolitical goals. Some of the main goals included weakening the West, driving wedges into Western alliances (particularly NATO) and sowing discord among the Allies.³² Various methods have been used to achieve these ends, such as creating front organizations, establishing opposition parties, supporting criminal and terrorist organizations, and spreading disinformation through official and unofficial channels in order to sow discord within a targeted audience.³³ Soviet active measures were not necessarily designed to persuade an audience to think in a specific way, but rather to ‘muddy the waters’, to confuse and distort information spaces around particular topics leaving the public unsure

28 Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, and Tom Wilson, ‘Disinforming as Collaborative Work: Surfacing the Perspiratory Nature of Strategic Information Operations’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, N°127 (2019): 1–26.

29 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

30 KGB is an initialism for *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti* [Комитет государственной безопасности], translated into English as Committee for State Security. The KGB’s successors are the secret police agency FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation) and the espionage agency SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service).

31 Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyanski, ‘Disinformation—Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya)’, *The Cyber Defense Review*, Volume 3 N°3 (Fall 2018): 21–28.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

of what to believe and how to react.³⁴ Active measures were supported by a dedicated apparatus that focused on producing and disseminating disinformation to bring about a ‘new era in which distortion concisely and purposefully taints the natural flow of information throughout the world’.³⁵ One can observe, that while they did pursue tactical objectives, Soviet active measures were primarily designed in service of strategic goals that worked towards major long-term political change.

To determine whether the Kremlin has been ‘re-laundering’ Soviet strategies for information activities,³⁶ we compare key findings from the results of our analysis of the Navalny case in 2020 with observations from closed-door discussions that took place in Riga, Latvia in 2016 where four main questions were considered: (1) How are Kremlin communications and messages constructed and disseminated? (2) Are the Kremlin’s methods for information operations changing? (3) What audiences do the Kremlin’s messages appeal to? and (4) What can the West do to improve their response to such information activities?

The 2016 StratCom proceedings are relevant to our study for two reasons: (1) The field of participating experts was international and drawn from both academia and military affairs; their observations of Russian information activities were consistent with the broader literature and expert opinion on the subject at that time.³⁷ (2) The discussions were held at a significant juncture when new allegations about the Kremlin’s information activities around the world were beginning to emerge, notably the covert use of social media trolls and bots in coordination with more public Russian media campaigns in

34 Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*.

35 Ladislav Bittman, *The Deception Game: Czechoslovak Intelligence in Soviet Political Warfare* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1972), p. 20.

36 The contributors cited in ‘*The Kremlin and Daesh Information Activities*’ use the term ‘information activities’ as a collective description when referring to the different types of communications and messages (pp. 6–7) by the Russian state and DAESH, including the promotion of false or misleading information (pp. 27–28).

37 See the annual reports of 2016 and 2017 for Germany’s *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution* both of which observed that the Kremlin uses state-owned media amongst other tools to project a biased version of events and promote Russian interests externally: Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, ‘*Studierende, Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler im Visier Russischer Geheimdienste* [Students and Scientists in the Sights of Russian Secret Services], 2016 and ‘*Arbeitsschwerpunkt der Spionageabwehr: Cyberangriffskampagne*’, 2017. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

attempts to influence the 2016 US presidential elections³⁸ and other elections in European countries.³⁹

Several conclusions from 2016 to be of interest. First, that the Kremlin had been able to exploit societal vulnerabilities, especially in the West, by targeting segmented or fringe audiences, particularly amongst younger populations. This observation was supported by extensive literature discussing how the Kremlin has targeted far-left and far-right movements, greens, anti-globalists, and financial elites, with the intention of exacerbating divisions and creating an echo chamber of Kremlin support.⁴⁰ Second, in order to take advantage of emerging opportunities the Kremlin has employed flexible messaging techniques, strengthening and diversifying 'traditional' narratives regarding threats from the West against Russia and Western propaganda and censorship, and instilling the idea that Western countries are facing deeply rooted social problems. Journalists and researchers such as Peter Pomerantsev, Edward Lucas, and Ben Nimmo have argued that the aim of Russian media is not to provide a sole, unified narrative, but rather to create many clashing narratives in order to confuse different audiences with different messages.⁴¹ Third, that the anti-Western narratives propagated by the Kremlin were simultaneously coupled with others constructing a robust 'Russian identity'—a favourable image of Russia that is very different from how it is presented in the West.

The current article seeks to contribute to the understanding of Russian information activities by comparing these insights from 2016 to the findings from our analysis of the domestic and international disinformation campaign launched by the Kremlin in the aftermath of

38 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 'Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns Panel 1', 2017. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

39 Andrew Dawson and Martin Innes, 'How Russia's Internet Research Agency Built its Disinformation Campaign', *The Political Quarterly* (2019).

40 Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*; Weiss, Andrew S., 'With Friends Like These: The Kremlin's Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria', *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]; Lóránt Györi and Péter Krekó, 'Don't Ignore the Left! Connections Between Europe's Radical Left and Russia', *Open Democracy*, 13 June 2016. [Accessed 30 March 2021]; Dmitry Adamsky, 'Christ-loving Diplomats: Russian Ecclesiastical Diplomacy in Syria', *Survival* Volume 61 N°6 (2019): 49–68.

41 Edward Lucas and Ben Nimmo, *Information Warfare: What Is It and How To Win It*, CEPA Infowar Paper N°1 (2015). [Accessed 3 July 2021]; Thornton, Rod, 'The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare', *The RUSI Journal*, Volume 160 N°4 (2015): 40–48. [Accessed 3 July 2021].

the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. We explore the disinformation tactics and techniques deployed in today's strategically polluted information environment using the A2E model. We hope this multi-dimensional model will be useful for structuring future research in strategic communications⁴² and Russian disinformation.⁴³

DATA & METHODOLOGY

The article is informed by an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of news stories covering the Navalny poisoning published online by four Russian State-owned Media outlets: two domestic Russian-language news agencies—*Ria Novosti* and *TASS*; and two German-language outlets—*RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch*—during the period from 20 August 2020 (the day Navalny was poisoned) to 9 September 2020 (a week after the German government announced that the nerve agent Novichok had been used). We searched the four outlets using the embedded search functions for articles mentioning the key words 'Navalny' for the Russian and 'Nawalny' for the German outlets, obtaining a total of 1186 articles. Table 1 shows that five times more articles were published in the domestic media *Ria Novosti* and *TASS* than in *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch*.⁴⁴

Due to the very large number of publications, a sample of 220 articles—three randomly chosen articles per outlet per day⁴⁵—was extracted from the larger database of 1186 articles and subjected to an in-depth qualitative analysis. The sample included articles that contained both disinformation and factual reporting. While most contained disinformation (defined above as intentionally false or misleading information), particularly a denial of evidence showing Russia's involvement, the articles analysed displayed a strategy of 'diversifying' messages and 'mixing' disinformation

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42 Katerina Tsetsura and Dean Kruckeberg, *Strategic Communications in Russia: Public Relations and Advertising* (Routledge, 2020).

43 See Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*; Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*; Rid, *Active Measures*.

44 *Sputnik Deutsch* underwent a rebranding on 8 December 2020. The well-known brand name 'Sputnik' was changed to 'SNA' (Sputnik News Agency) and the web address changed from 'de.sputniknews.com' to 'snanews.de'. All articles previously published by Sputnik were deleted in this rebranding effort. However, they were archived by the Way Back Machine.

45 Some outlets published fewer than three articles on certain days, in which case only the available articles were included in the sample.

Outlet Name	Ownership and language of publication	Number of Alexei Navalny-related articles published in the period between 20 August and 9 September 2020
Ria Novosti	Domestic, Russian language, state-owned	739
TASS	Domestic, Russian language, state-owned	264
Russia Today Deutsch	International, German language, state-owned	76
Sputnik Deutsch	International, German language, state-owned	136

Table 1. Overview of the four Russian media outlets analysed in this article

with factual reports, especially when those facts were non-consequential for the overall disinformation narrative. Observations of both Soviet and contemporary information activities show that to be effective disinformation must build on a kernel of truth—a piece of plausible and verifiable information.⁴⁶

Recognising that the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns are frequently multi-faceted, we chose an ‘A2E model’⁴⁷ to structure and organise our results in broadly comparable terms across five vectors:

A = Audience—Describing/evaluating the audience targeted by a particular disinformation campaign, and mapping, whenever possible, the relative distribution of audience vulnerabilities and engagement with disinformation content. A study of the intended audience can help to identify groups for which deceptive information might be especially

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46 Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*; Rid, Active Measures.

47 François, ‘Actors, Behaviors, Content’.

salient and who might be particularly receptive to such messaging. We performed a quantitative analysis of readers' reactions in the form of comments logged on to articles in *RT Deutsch* and in the form of comments, 'likes', and 'dislikes' logged on to articles in *Sputnik Deutsch*.⁴⁸ In addition, we classified the content of these articles as 'pro-Russian' (e.g. articles citing Russian sources and propagating pro-Kremlin narratives) or 'anti-Russian' (e.g. articles containing Western countries' criticism of Russia). We also performed volumetric analysis of viewership for *Ria Novosti* (the only source that displayed viewership metrics on its website) to scale audience 'readership' over the three-week period.

B = Behaviour—Identifying and evaluating the 'behavioural signatures' of the actors who author, disseminate, or amplify false or distorted information. While this has previously been done in profiling 'fake' social media accounts,⁴⁹ our analysis employs Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM)⁵⁰ to identify repeating behavioural signatures, such as specific techniques of influence, that overlapped across articles in our database. The GTM approach was suitable in our case as it is a flexible methodology that allows researchers 'to discover or construct theory from the data, systematically obtained and analysed using comparative analysis'.⁵¹ We also performed comparative analysis on a random selection of the remaining 966 articles (those not included in the initial sample of 220).

C = Content—Using qualitative empirical analysis to determine how deceptive material has been constructed and to identify the logic/motivation behind each alternative narrative. We analysed the content published by the four RSOM outlets, two in Russian and two in German, to identify the most common narratives and then categorised our findings following the GTM approach as described above.

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48 A similar quantitative analysis was not possible for *Ria Novosti* and *TASS* because neither outlet displays readers' reactions.

49 Dawson and Innes, 'How Russia's Internet Research Agency'.

50 Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).

51 Ylona Chun Tie, Melanie Birks and Karen Francis, 'Grounded Theory Research: A Design Framework for Novice Researchers', *SAGE Open Medicine* Volume 7 (2019).

D = Dynamics—Identifying how deceptive material is transmitted: is disinformation especially influential at particular moments in an emerging timeline and is it enabled by particular communications networks? We analysed (1) the volume of articles appearing in the four media channels and (2) the distribution of viewership or engagement metrics (comments, ‘likes’, and ‘dislikes’ logged onto articles) wherever these were available.⁵²

E = Effect—Measuring the influence of disinformation campaigns. Although the ability of the current state of the art to measure influence is limited, this study incorporates some degree of interpretative assessment to identify where disinformation activities may have been especially consequential.

RESULTS

In this section, we describe in greater detail the results of our analysis for each of the five A2E vectors.

Audience

Our analysis suggests that the Kremlin aims to influence three key target audiences: (1) those already receptive to alternative viewpoints about Western politics and society; (2) those who hold favourable opinions of Russia and Putin; and (3) those who do not belong to either group one or group two and lack a clear understanding or formulated opinion of Russia’s relations with the West. All of these groups can likely be influenced by inducing sufficient doubt so as to make it difficult for them to distinguish between true reports, ‘fake news’/disinformation, and conspiracy theories.

Our quantitative analysis of audience reactions to articles appearing in the German-language RSOM confirm our observations regarding these target groups. The three articles appearing in *RT Deutsch* that received the greatest number of comments were about: (1) the German

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⁵² While *Ria Novosti* logs viewership metrics on its website, *TASS*, *RT* and *Sputnik* do not. Thus, only viewership metrics for *Ria Novosti* were qualitatively analysed. In addition, *RT* and *Sputnik* log metrics for ‘likes’, ‘dislikes’, and ‘comments’, while *Ria Novosti* and *TASS* do not.

government and German politicians accusing Russia and Putin of trying to poison Navalny with Novichok (485 comments, published 02.09.20);⁵³ (2) German politicians demanding sanctions against Russia (425 comments, published 25.08.20);⁵⁴ and (3) Charité's clinical tests indicating that Navalny was poisoned (403 comments, published 24.08.20).⁵⁵ An analysis of the comment section in *RT Deutsch* revealed that audience engagement was high when Germany was presented as an 'aggressor' against Russia.

Similarly, the articles appearing in *Sputnik Deutsch* that attracted the most engagement were about: Charité's clinical tests indicating that Navalny was poisoned (246 comments, published 24.08.20; 199 comments, published 24.08.20);⁵⁶ and an article about a Facebook post by a Middle East expert raising a number of questions about Navalny's poisoning such as why Putin allowed Navalny to be transported to Germany if he wanted him dead and why he would use an infamous poison for a 'secret' murder (221 comments, published 09.09.20).⁵⁷

The majority of readers engaging with *Sputnik Deutsch* tended to 'dislike' articles containing anti-Russian content and 'like' articles containing pro-Russian content. Moreover, articles about Germany being involved in the Navalny case typically received many dislikes. The articles that generated the greatest number of dislikes related to: (1) German politicians calling for sanctions against Russia (753 dislikes, published 23.08.20);⁵⁸ (2) Germany not handing over evidence of Navalny being poisoned with

53 "Wer jetzt noch an Putins Unschuld glaubt": Erste Reaktionen auf "Nowitschok-Vergiftung" Nawalyns ["Who still believes in Putin's innocence": First reactions to "Novitschok poisoning" of Navalny], *RT Deutsch*, 2 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

54 "Der Täter steht schon fest: Deutsche Politiker fordern weitere Sanktionen gegen Moskau wegen Nawalny [The culprit has already been determined: German politicians are calling for further sanctions against Moscow over Navalny], *RT Deutsch*, 25 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

55 "Berliner Charité: Alexei Nawalny wurde laut klinischen Befunden vergiftet [Berlin Charité: According to clinical findings, Alexei Navalny was poisoned], *RT Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

56 "Charité: Klinische Tests von Nawalny weisen auf Vergiftung hin [Charité: Navalny's clinical tests indicate poisoning], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021]; "Nawalny vergiftet—und Punkt? Wofür Cholinesterase-Hemmer aus Charité-Statement stehen [Navalny poisoned—and period? What cholinesterase inhibitors from the Charité statement stand for], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

57 "Warum sollte Putin...?"—Jürgen Todenhöfer wirft heikle Fragen zum Fall Nawalny auf ["Why would Putin...?"—Jürgen Todenhöfer raises sensitive questions about the Navalny case], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 9 September 2020. [25 November 2021] (e.g. why Putin allowed for Navalny's transport to Germany if he wanted to kill him, or why Putin should have used the same poison again for 'secret' murder).

58 "Nawalyns Erkrankung: Deutsche Politiker fordern Sanktionen gegen Russland [Navalny's illness: German politicians are calling for sanctions against Russia], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 23 August 2020. [Accessed 25 September 2021].

Novichok (719 dislikes, published 08.09.20);⁵⁹ and (3) Germany stating that Navalny had been poisoned (505 dislikes, published 24.08.20).⁶⁰ In contrast, articles with pro-Russian topics generated many likes. The article attracting the most likes was the previously mentioned *Sputnik Deutsch* article about the FB post (1284 likes, published 09.09.20).⁶¹ The article with the next highest number of likes described Lukashenko's television statement claiming a wiretapped call between Warsaw and Berlin revealed that Angela Merkel's announcement that Navalny had been poisoned was a fake (1050 likes, published 03.09.20);⁶² the article attracting the third highest number of likes was about a German politician stating that the German government's position on Navalny's poisoning was a 'pitiful hypocrisy' (893 likes, published 03.09.20).⁶³ These findings potentially reveal a pattern that can be used to predict which German-language RSOM articles are most likely to attract a high number of comments, and which will provoke negative sentiment (dislikes outweigh likes).

According to previous research, 'likes' express appreciation of content, whereas 'dislikes' express disapproval of content.⁶⁴ Although clearly establishing such correlations is a complicated task, our analysis suggests the audience for German-language RSOM tend to 'like' pro-Russian articles. Correspondingly, any reporting about Germany being involved in the Navalny case or Western countries discussing sanctions against Russia tended to attract an exceptionally high number of dislikes and negative comments. However, it is difficult to determine whether the online reactions are organic and genuine, and inauthentic and manipulated in some way.

59 "“Nowitschok”: Befund zu Nawalny an Russland übergeben? BMVg und Charité antworten Sputnik [“Novichok”: Report on Navalny handed over to Russia? The Federal Ministry of Defence and Charité answer Sputnik], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 8 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2020].

60 "“Schwerwiegender Verdacht eines Giftanschlags”: Regierungssprecher äußert sich zum Fall Nawalny [“Serious suspicion of a poison attack”: Government spokesman comments on the Navalny case], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

61 "Warum sollte Putin...?", *Sputnik Deutsch*, 9 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

62 "Lukaschenko: Warschau-Berlin-Gespräch abgefangen—Erklärung über Nawalyns Vergiftung gefälscht [Lukashenko: Warsaw-Berlin conversation intercepted—declaration about Navalny's poisoning falsified], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 3 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

63 "Berlin kommentiert Fall Nawalny—Lafontaine spricht von “erbärmlicher Heuchelei” [Berlin comments on the Navalny case—Lafontaine speaks of “pathetic hypocrisy”], *Sputnik Deutsch*, 3 September 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

64 M. Laeeq Khan, "Social media engagement: What motivates user participation and consumption on YouTube?", *Computers in Human Behavior* Volume 66, Issue C (2017): 236–47.

As readers' reactions were not registered for articles appearing in the Russian-language outlets *Ria Novosti* and *TASS*, we compared our insights regarding the two German-language outlets to our analysis of viewership metrics for *Ria Novosti* and found a similar pattern. While Navalny-related articles generally attracted an exceptionally high viewership (30,273,243 views across 720 articles), it is noteworthy that the most deceptive pro-Kremlin articles generated the highest number of views. For example, the most-viewed *Ria Novosti* article in our database (1,177,242 views)⁶⁵ stated that 'the [Kremlin's] main working diagnosis is a "metabolic disorder" that caused a sharp drop in blood sugar'. This claim is still regarded as the Kremlin's official version of events.

Behaviour

Following the GTM approach, three 'behavioural signatures' emerged from our analysis of the four RSOM outlets, indicating a coordinated communications strategy. Immediately following Navalny's collapse on 24 August 2020, the Kremlin media: (1) pivoted from their previous (strategic) disregard of Navalny to mounting a full-on information campaign; (2) generated and disseminated multiple alternative interpretations of events to 'fog', or confuse, the information environment; (3) and began to publish an overwhelming number of articles to 'swamp', or overwhelm, the information environment.

Breaking the silence. The Kremlin has been infamous for largely ignoring leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny. Russia-watchers have observed that where his challenger is concerned, President Putin maintains a 'policy of silence'. He makes an effort never to mention Navalny by name, but instead uses various condescending epithets, such as 'this gentleman'.⁶⁶ Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and other members of Putin's circle follow his example. However, with Russia implicated in the attempt to poison him, ignoring Navalny was no

65 'Немецкие врачи назвали причиной болезни Навального отравление [German doctors say poisoning is the cause of Navalny's illness]', *Ria Novosti*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

66 Carl Schreck, '“Voldemort Of Our Time”: At Putin Press Conference, Navalny Seen As “He Who Must Not Be Named”', *Radio Free Europe*, 14 December 2017.

longer possible or desirable. The new priority had to be managing and influencing the public perception of the Kremlin's antagonist and the claims being made about what happened to him. While both Putin and Peskov continued to avoid mentioning Navalny by name, the poisoning case led to an explosion of reports in the RSOM, thus giving him all the media visibility the Kremlin had been sidestepping for years.

'Fogging' the news. During the three-week period of study, the RSOM outlets in question constructed and disseminated at least eleven main narrative accounts of the Navalny poisoning, many of which included various narrative variations and sub-narratives. This strategy is less about persuasion and more about damaging the credibility of Western narratives by 'fogging' the information space. Multiple 'possible explanations' of the poisoning that contradicted the findings of the official German investigation were widely circulated. These included counter-narratives, in the form of denials and contradictions, and alternative narratives, in the form of conspiracy theories.

'Swamping' the news. Immediately following the incident, all four RSOM outlets began generating large volumes of articles covering the poisoning. *Figure 1* shows that the domestic propaganda outlet *Ria Novosti* published by far the highest number of articles related to Navalny (more than 70 articles on certain days), followed by *TASS*, the other domestic outlet. The German-language RSOM outlets published fewer articles but kept up a consistent pace so that during the three-week period following the poisoning three to five Navalny-related articles appeared on most days with up to 18 articles at certain junctures. *Figure 1* shows an overall correlation of publication dynamics between the two domestic outlets and the two German-language outlets. For example, all four outlets show an initial peak in volume, as the media story around Navalny unfolded on 21 August, only to subside for a few days and then rise again on the 24th—the date Berlin Charité publicly announced that Navalny had been poisoned. The largest peak was registered at the beginning of September 2020 when the German Bundeswehr laboratory confirmed the Novichok finding.

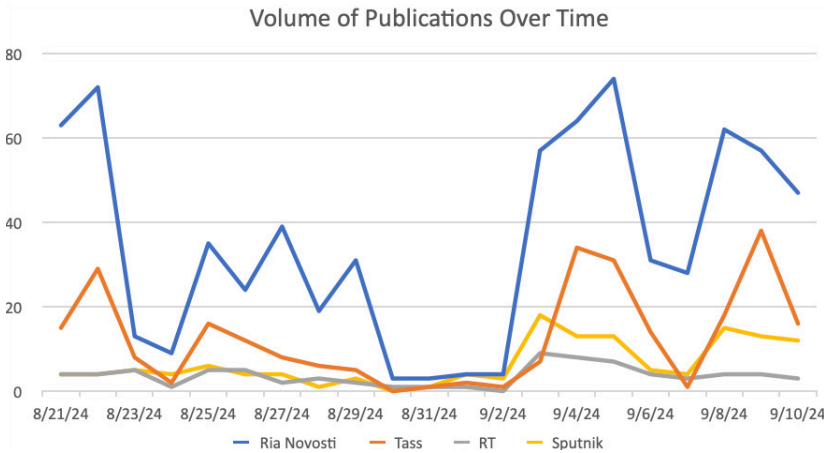


Figure 1. Volumetric graph of publications over time across the four outlets: RT Deutsch, Sputnik Deutsch, Ria Novosti, and TASS

Content

Following the GTM approach, a qualitative analysis of the ‘content’ appearing in our article dataset revealed four categories of repeating narratives and counter-narratives, each designed to serve a strategic purpose—to debunk, to deny, to discredit, or to distract. *Table 2* summarises the results of the coding process and quantifies how often these four types of narratives were identified across the 220 articles analysed. A single article often contained more than one narrative.

Debunking. The Kremlin media sought to *debunk* evidence of poisoning, especially anything implicating Russia. In the week following Navalny’s transfer to the Charité hospital, German authorities and German doctors began releasing their own medical findings, which clearly contradicted those of the Omsk doctors and the Russian government’s official narrative. In an attempt at damage control, the Kremlin media began to publish articles that ‘identified gaps’ in the story, detailing various alleged inconsistencies in the German medical investigation in an attempt to sow doubt about its findings.

Outlet	No. of articles	Debunk	Deny	Discredit	Distract	Factual Reporting/ No Narrative
Ria Novosti	63	45	27	24	38	3
TASS	52	18	11	21	11	15
Sputnik Deutsch	49	11	22	22	10	9
Russia Today Deutsch	56	29	25	26	31	5
Total	220	103	85	93	90	32

Table 2. Results of coding process for the 220 sampled articles

To boost the credibility of their ‘evidence’, the RSOM employed the familiar technique of citing Kremlin-friendly political or scientific ‘experts’. For example, *Ria Novosti* cited Professor Igor Molchanov, the Russian Ministry of Health’s chief specialist in anaesthesiology and resuscitation (a Kremlin employee), who questioned whether detecting ‘substances affecting cholinesterase’⁶⁷ five days after Navalny fell ill was at all possible:

After five days, it’s out of the realm of fantasy to determine that he was injected with drugs that affect cholinesterase.

Professor Igor Molchanov, cited in *Ria Novosti*, 24 August 2020⁶⁸

.....
67 Cholinesterase is an enzyme that helps the body break down and utilise acetylcholine, an important neurotransmitter necessary for muscle contraction throughout the entire body, among other functions. Disruptions to this physiological process can lead to severe muscle contractions, spasms, paralysis, and even death.

68 ‘Эксперт усомнился в возможности выявить найденные у Навального вещества [Expert doubts the possibility of identifying substances found in Navalny]’, *Ria Novosti*, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

Denial. Both Kremlin domestic and German-language media *denied* Russian involvement in the poisoning. Accusations were brushed off using various sub-narratives, for example: insisting that there is no conclusive evidence proving Russia's guilt; attesting that neither Putin nor the Kremlin had a motive to kill Navalny; and emphasising Russia's 'good will' and readiness to be team-players and collaborate in the investigations (unlike their Western partners).

Above all, it is not credible to imply that Moscow has a motive for taking revenge on a 'traitor'.

RT Deutsch, 30 August 2020⁶⁹

I think we are returning to those times that I would like to leave behind to be honest, the times of unsubstantiated statements, lack of facts when discussing serious issues. I wish these times did not come anymore, but I have some kind of constant feeling of *déjà vu*.

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova cited in *Ria Novosti*, 2 September 2020⁷⁰

Discreditation. The RSOM sought to *discredit* the German government and German media and to devalue their statements. The discreditation technique was based on three sub-narratives:

(a) attributing the accusations to German (and Western) Russophobic prejudice:

[...] the presumption of innocence does not apply to Russians. Isn't that racism?

RT Deutsch, 27 August 2020⁷¹

69 'Die Jagd auf "Kreml-Kritiker" und Ex-Spione: Russlands "Sündenregister" im Faktencheck [The hunt for "Kremlin critics" and ex-spies: Russia's "register of sins" in a fact check]', RT Deutsch, 30 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

70 'В МИД прокомментировали заявление об отравлении Навального "Новичком" [Foreign Ministry comments on statement about Navalny "Novichok" poisoning]', *Ria Novosti*, 2 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

71 'Um Alexei Navalny zu würdigen': Jürgen Trittin will Immobilien "korrupter Russen" beschlagnahmen [To pay tribute to Alexei Navalny: Jürgen Trittin wants to confiscate real estate from "corrupt Russians", RT Deutsch, 27 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

The world information environment of recent days, with its aggressive-hysterical Russophobia, clearly resembles the events of 2014–2015, when the West launched an anti-Russian campaign of a planetary scale and insane intensity.

Ria Novosti, 7 September 2020⁷²

(b) attributing the accusations to Germany's covert intentions to use the case for its own political benefit, notably imposing more sanctions on Russia:

BRD's statement about the 'poisoning' of Alexei Navalny with a substance from the Novichok group is a provocation dictated by political motives.

GRU Colonel Alexei Kondratyev cited in *RIA Novosti*, 2 September 2020⁷³

The current, broad-based disinformation campaign clearly shows that its creators are not concerned about Alexei Navalny's health or clarifying the real causes of his hospital stay, but rather aim to mobilize sanctions.

Russian Foreign Ministry cited in *RT Deutsch*, 9 September 2020⁷⁴

(c) attacking Western media outlets for what they characterised as biased and politicised reporting, or 'political propaganda'; meanwhile, Russian media was presented as objective and reliable:

The vast majority of German journalists follow this Western conspiracy theory. Only a few media show anything of balance.

RT Deutsch, 5 September 2020⁷⁵

72 'Запад готов к войне на самоуничтожение [The West is ready for a war of self-destruction]', *Ria Novosti*, 7 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

73 'Сенатор назвал провокацией новое заявление ФРГ о ситуации с Навальным [Senator calls new statement from BRD about the Navalny situation Navalny a provocation]', *Ria Novosti*, 2 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

74 'Russisches Außenamt zum Fall Nawalny: "Breitaufgestellte Desinformationskampagne" gegen Moskau [Russian Foreign Office on the Navalny case: "Wide-ranging disinformation campaign" against Moscow]', *RT Deutsch*, 9 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

75 "'Typische Zeichen einer Feindbildwahrnehmung"—Hannes Hofbauer zur Nawalny-Medienberichterstattung ["Typical signs of the perception of an enemy"—Hannes Hofbauer on Navalny media coverage]', *RT Deutsch*, 5 September 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

The Russian media are more objective because they rely on the test results carried out by the doctors and do not allow themselves to speculate.

RT Deutsch, 24 August 2020⁷⁶

Distraction. The final technique was to deflect attention from the accusations against Russia by *distracting* target audiences with various conspiracy theories. One such conspiracy theory suggested that Navalny could have poisoned himself.⁷⁷ Another theory suggested that the alleged poisoning was an attempt by the CIA to interfere in Russia's domestic security by creating political tension.⁷⁸

Dynamics

An analysis of 'dynamics' tracks the timing and transmission of deceptive material. The timing of the publication of propaganda communications is crucial for those seeking to influence online communities⁷⁹ because first impressions persist, even after new evidence has been provided to discredit them.⁸⁰ A deliberate and timely spreading of rumours and conspiracy theories can create long-lasting impressions, which then selectively bias the interpretation of subsequent information.⁸¹

The Kremlin's network of RSOM was already in place to enable the dissemination of large volumes of targeted messages immediately following crucial developments in the timeline of the investigation. By reacting with agility, the RSOM were able to attract high viewership and engagement at strategic moments. *Figure 2* shows viewership metrics for *Ria Novosti* articles and *Figure 3* shows engagement metrics (comments,

76 "Wenn in Russland etwas passiert, ist Putin schuld"—Die Causa Nawalny und der deutsche Hochmut "If something happens in Russia, Putin is to blame"—The Navalny case and German arrogance], RT Deutsch, 24 August 2020. [Accessed 30 March 2021]

77 Vergiftung, Hintermänner, Geld: Im Fall Nawalny mangelt es an Transparenz—auch bei diesen Fragen [Poisoning, backers, money: there is a lack of transparency in the Navalny case—even on these issues], Sputnik Deutsch, 26 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021]

78 "Unbegründete Beschuldigungen" inakzeptabel: Moskau antwortet westlichen Ländern im Fall Nawalny ['Unfounded accusations' unacceptable: Moscow responds to western countries in the Navalny case], Sputnik Deutsch, 25 August 2020. [Accessed 25 November 2021]

79 Leonard W. Doob, 'Goebbels' Principles of Propaganda', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 14, N°3 (1950): 419–42.

80 Nicholas Difonzo and Prashant Bordia, 'Rumors Influence: Toward a Dynamic Social Impact Theory of Rumor', in A. R. Pratkanis (ed.), *The Science of Social Influence: Advances and Future Progress*, Frontiers of Social Psychology series, (New York: Psychology Press, 2007), pp. 271–95.

81 Ibid.

likes, and dislikes) for articles published by *Sputnik Deutsch*. In both cases, we see an increase in viewership and engagement dynamics in the initial stages of the investigation, when Navalny first went into hospital, and a second significant spike on 2 and 3 September 2020, when the German government announced that the nerve agent Novichok had been used against Navalny. Higher viewership metrics correlate with a higher volume of articles (see *Figure 1*), indicating that RSOM efforts to ‘bombard’ their audiences with a pro-Kremlin version of events may have been successful.

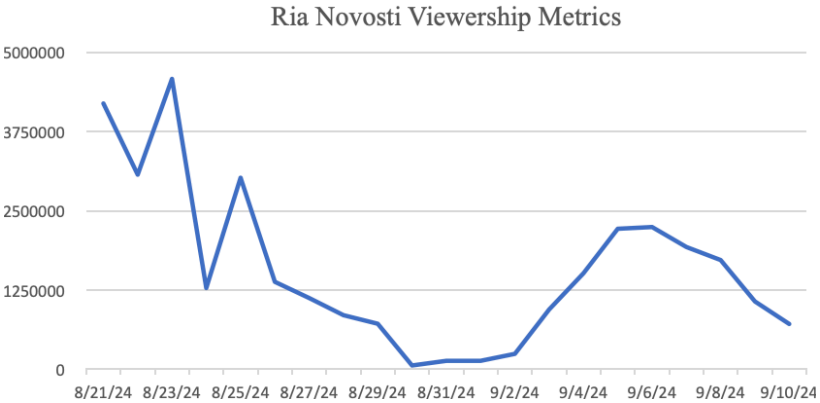


Figure 2. Viewership Metrics for Ria Novosti articles—from 20.08.2020 to 9.09.2020

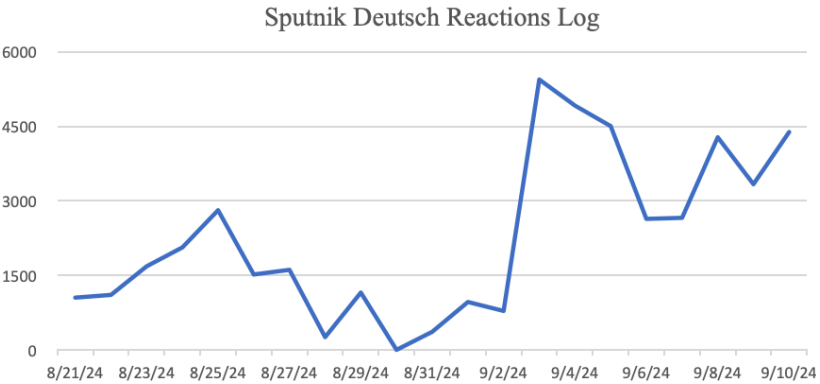


Figure 3. Reaction Log for Sputnik Deutsch articles—from 20.08.2020 to 9.09.2020

Effects

Assessing the impact and effects of a disinformation campaign run across multiple channels and platforms is difficult as it is virtually impossible to establish metrics for success.⁸² The disinformation campaign appears to have been intended to sow doubts about whether Navalny was actually poisoned and to call into question evidence implicating Russian military intelligence.

One way of gaining insight into public opinion is through survey analysis. Respondents to a survey carried out in Russia by the Levada centre from 21 to 23 December 2020⁸³ gave three versions of the event: 30% believed that there had been no poisoning or that the incident had been staged by Navalny himself—this version of events correlates with the Kremlin's narrative that Navalny had suffered a 'metabolic disorder'; 19% of respondents believed that the poisoning was a foreign special services provocation; and only 15% spoke of the possibility that the Russian government had attempted to eliminate a political opponent.⁸⁴ We can assume that by presenting multiple narratives and thereby 'fogging' the information environment, Kremlin assets had some degree of success in inducing confusion.

DISCUSSION

A comparison of our findings with the findings of the NATO StratCom COE discussions of 2016 empirically show that certain key narratives and methods of influence were still being used by the Kremlin in 2020, albeit in a different context and responding to different events. The results are summarised in *Table 3* and discussed below.

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82 Karlova and Fisher, 'A Social Diffusion Model', n. pag.

83 The sample was comprised of 1617 people aged 18 or older. The survey was conducted as a telephone interview (CATI) on a random sample (RDD) of personal phone numbers and landlines. The answer distribution is below 2.4%.

84 Levada-Center, 'Navalny's Poisoning', 1 February 2021. [Accessed 9 July 2021]

Characteristics of Kremlin Information Activities	Present in 2016	Present in 202
Use of Russian state owned media	Present	Present
Exploit Audience Vulnerabilities	Present	Present
Project a Perceived Reality	Present	Present
Master narratives e.g. 'Russia as a victim'	Present	Present
Publish Large Volumes of Articles at Strategic Moments	Not explicitly covered	Present
Leverage Specific Points in Time to Spread Narratives	Present	Present

Table 3. Comparison of Riga observations in 2016 to this study's findings from 2020

The results of our study point to an overall consistency and continuity in the methods and narratives of the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, making future analysis of such campaigns more predictable, at least in the context of the aftermath of high-profile events in which the Russian state is implicated. More importantly, our results suggest that these methods and narratives are part of the Kremlin's strategic communications methodology and not simply ad hoc tactical exercises. They are used repeatedly both domestically and internationally and are designed to achieve more or less the same long-term societal shifts each time they are used.

Our study confirmed that many of the same narratives and techniques discussed in Riga in 2016 were being used in the aftermath of the Navalny poisoning in 2020. Here we identify six recurring features of Kremlin disinformation campaigns and theorise the strategic value of each.

1. The Kremlin's disinformation campaigns are commonly disseminated through Russian state-owned media.

Both our study and the 2016 StratCom proceedings found that the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns exploit an extensive network of media outlets that are owned directly by the Russian state. Western intelligence services have observed that these well-resourced media outlets are funded by and loyal to the government and regularly disseminate its strategic communications.⁸⁵ *Strategically, maintaining a network of media outlets that act in concert ensures that disinformation and other targeted messaging are reflected and amplified within a specially constructed media environment.*

2. The narratives they promote target specific audiences and exploit societal vulnerabilities.

Participants at the 2016 StratCom proceedings observed that within the global information environment, 'there are competing sets of opposing value- and norm-based arguments working to win the hearts and minds of global audiences'.⁸⁶ 'In the current highly politicised information environment, the Kremlin has been able to exploit societal vulnerabilities and project alternative narratives intended to resonate within certain segmented audiences.'⁸⁷ Our analysis of comments and reactions to the RSOM articles published after the poisoning of Navalny suggests that the Kremlin continues to employ selective targeting to further 'divide and rule' European audiences. We have demonstrated that the content published by *RT Deutsch* and *Sputnik Deutsch* achieved a level of resonance with readers (observations can be made only with regard to the engagement of 'active' readers willing to react to article content on a public forum, but we cannot know the private reactions of 'passive' readers as they cannot be measured). The positive reception (measured by number of 'likes') of pro-Russian articles and the negative reception (measured by number of 'dislikes') of articles reporting on Western actions suggest that *RT* and *Sputnik* are addressing an already 'converted'

85 Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule'.

86 Simons and Sillanpää, 'The Kremlin and Daesh', pp. 7—8.

87 Ibid., pp. 8—9

audience with established anti-Western worldviews or pro-Russian biases. *Strategically, this practice is designed to amplify Europe's internal divisions—an observation echoed in the recent intelligence reports of several European states.*⁸⁸

3. The Kremlin projects multiple versions of reality to obscure disadvantageous truths, often with a view to distract and confuse.

The 2016 StratCom proceedings emphasised that a key aspect of manipulation involves projecting a 'perceived reality', rather than seeking to discover or agree upon what is true. Our study has empirically demonstrated that not one but at least eleven 'perceived realities', in the form of convenient stories and conspiracy theories, were disseminated by the Kremlin in the aftermath of Navalny's poisoning. The RSOM circulated a wide range of overlapping or contradicting narrative variations in an attempt to 'fog' or pollute the flow of information. Kremlin outlets do not emphasise one version of events over another, but rather seek to intrigue, distract, and/or confuse, leaving readers in what Pomerantsev dubs 'Kremlin-controlled virtual reality'.⁸⁹ On multiple occasions, the Kremlin media sought to distract readers by deflecting attention away from uncomfortable accusations of Russia's guilt and towards multiple conspiracy theories suggesting Western involvement. The tactic of 'shifting focus and attention away from areas where they are losing or vulnerable' was one of the most-used techniques of influence employed by RSOM after the poisoning of Navalny. *Strategically, 'constructed realities' can be employed for damage control, as in the Navalny case, and also more generally in service of Russia's long-term objectives, such as undermining Western organisations (e.g. NATO and the European Union) and Western countries, and legitimising Russia's aggressive foreign policy.*

.....
⁸⁸ Karlsen, 'Divide and Rule'.

⁸⁹ Pomerantsev and Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality*.

4. Most of the narratives promoted by the Kremlin reflect long-standing strategic master narratives.

The 2016 StratCom proceedings concluded that while the Kremlin has been flexible and creative in coming up with new and distracting stories, the roots of most of these can be traced back to a handful of well-rehearsed ‘master narratives’, including the portrayal of Russia as a victim of Western discrimination. In more recent years, especially since 2014 and the events in Crimea, ‘Russia as victim’ and ‘Russophobia’ narratives have become the Kremlin’s go-to excuses whenever faced by a new round of allegations.⁹⁰ In the Navalny case, the Kremlin media sought to explain the accusations of poisoning as German ‘Russophobia’ and anti-Russian ‘prejudice’ rooted in German culture. *Strategically, narratives that position Russia as a victim are particularly important as they can be used as a pretext for Russian aggression under the guise of proactive ‘self-defence’.*

5. Disinformation is disseminated at a rapid pace designed to ‘neutralise’ the flow of information from Western outlets.

Our analysis revealed that, in the three weeks following Navalny’s poisoning, the RSOM were disseminating the Kremlin’s ‘perceived realities’ at a pace of at least several articles per day. Publishing large volumes of articles that either promote pro-Russian narratives or focus on contentious social issues faced by Western countries,⁹¹ is a tactic used repeatedly by the Kremlin; this has been observed by other researchers as well.⁹² Social-psychological studies have shown that intensity and repetition of messages can result in greater acceptance.⁹³ The ‘illusory truth effect’, whereby people rate statements as more truthful, valid, and believable when they have encountered those statements previously, than when the statements are new to them, is also well documented.⁹⁴ Thus, we conclude that the

90 Peter Dickinson, ‘From the Azov Sea to Washington DC: How Russophobia Became Russia’s Leading Export’, Atlantic Council website, 1 December 2018. [Accessed 30 March 2021].

91 Simons and Sillanpää, ‘The Kremlin and Daesh’, p. 12.

92 Paul and Matthews, ‘The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood”’.

93 Robert Boleslaw Zajonc, ‘Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences’, *American Psychologist* Volume 35 (1980): 151–75; Philip G. Zimbardo, and Michael R. Leippe, *The Psychology of Attitude Change and Social Influence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

94 Paul and Matthews, ‘The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood”’.

relentless flow of articles put out by the Kremlin media is intended to boost the salience of their messages, ensuring that audiences are constantly reminded of ‘the [perceived] truth’. *Strategically, flooding the news with distracting/confusing articles reduces the influence of Western narratives, especially within Russia, but also anywhere receptive audiences can be reached.*

6. Disinformation is disseminated at crucial inflection points in an event timeline.

Confirming the messaging dynamics mentioned in 2016 StratCom proceedings, our empirical data highlights that the Kremlin was exceptionally diligent in following the developments of the Navalny investigation so that it could respond quickly to unfolding events, sending out messages to domestic and international audiences. We find that this tactic of seeking to be the first to influence an audience (or at least to reach audiences as early as possible) and leave long lasting impressions, could have been a major factor in the ability of Kremlin media to generate considerable viewership for their outputs. *Strategically, this practice improves the Kremlin’s chances of creating a lasting first impression, controlling the narrative, and increasing its persuasive power.*

Finally, whilst the effects of these recurring features of the Kremlin’s disinformation strategy are difficult to measure directly,⁹⁵ recent data from Russia provide some insight. Survey analysis carried out in 2020 and 2021 by the Levada Centre show that a higher percentage of Russians surveyed believe Alexei Navalny either staged the poisoning himself or was actually poisoned by Western intelligence services (49%), than entertain the idea that he was targeted by the Russian government (15%).⁹⁶ Although this is not enough to establish a cause-effect relationship between the Kremlin’s disinformation activities and public opinion, the survey results indicate that the narratives identified in our study as part of the Navalny disinformation campaign resonated well with certain more susceptible segments of the Russian domestic population.

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⁹⁵ Simons and Sillanpää, ‘The Kremlin and Daesh’, p. 5.

⁹⁶ Statista, ‘What Russians Think About Navalny’s Poisoning’, 5 October 2020; Levada-Center, ‘Navalny’s Poisoning’.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, Kremlin disinformation campaigns have been of significant academic and policy interest. General observations regarding Russian information activities were summarised in discussions that took place in Riga in 2016. This article tested empirically the observations of the 2016 StratCom proceedings against data collected in the aftermath of one of the most recent Kremlin assassination attempts—the poisoning of Alexei Navalny—to determine which disinformation elements might be considered as part of Russia’s long-term communications strategy. We performed an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis on 1186 articles from two domestic Russian and two foreign German-language RSOM outlets and structured our results with the help of a conceptual framework—the ‘A2E Model’. This model, designed for the systematic investigation of cases of disinformation on mainstream and social media, allowed us to classify the key aspects of this particular disinformation campaign and thus facilitated longitudinal comparisons.

Most of the highlighted Russian disinformation activities described in 2016 were still being used by the Kremlin in 2020. This consistency and continuity of disinformation methods and narratives suggest they are used to further the Kremlin’s long-term strategic objectives, and thus should be discussed in the context of Russian strategic communications, akin to their Soviet alternative—‘active measures’. We observed the continued projection of various counter-narratives and alternative explanations in large numbers, designed both to ‘neutralise’ Western reports and also to confuse and distract domestic and international audiences. This practice supports the Kremlin’s perceived long-term objective to ‘divide and rule’, aimed especially at foreign populations but also employed domestically.⁹⁷ Western intelligence services, for example in Germany, Sweden, and Estonia, have observed that Russia, as a large power, could more easily deal with a multi-fragmented Europe.⁹⁸

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⁹⁷ Karlsen, ‘Divide and Rule’.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Second, the Kremlin has managed to remodel previous ‘master narratives’, specifically those related to anti-Western sentiment, Western imperialism, and Russian victimhood, for application in drastically different new situations. The strategic re-purposing essentially confirms the Kremlin’s ability to amplify old grievances and reaffirm more traditional strategic goals, while carrying out a new disinformation campaign such as post-event ‘damage control’. This article has empirically evidenced how such tactics were used to debunk evidence, to deny responsibility, to discredit opponents, and to distract domestic and international audiences.

However, the disinformation campaigns launched by the Kremlin after 2016, following the poisonings of Sergei Skripal and Alexei Navalny, also perform a specific ‘complementary function’ in terms of when and how disinformation campaigns are used by the Russian state. On the one hand, the Kremlin is expanding and re-purposing its information activities to support active measures around the world. The disinformation campaigns following the events in Ukraine are often discussed in the context of military conflict and ‘hybrid warfare’, but the recent assassination attempts should be investigated as an extension to the Kremlin’s covert intelligence operations. On the other hand, even though two instances of poisoning have been attributed to the Kremlin in recent years, this tactic is not a new phenomenon. During the Cold War, Soviet disinformation was integrated with other active measures, including assassination and other so-called wet operations.⁹⁹ The recent use of similar tactics requires attention.

Future research can extend our results by investigating other cases and by looking at whether these observations hold for other languages and countries to get a broader picture of the reach of Russian disinformation campaigns worldwide.

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⁹⁹ Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation*.

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RHETORICAL AGENCY: CONSIDERATIONS FROM AFRICA

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Keywords—*strategic communication, strategic communications, rhetorical agency, Africa, recognition, relationality, mutuality*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of strategic communications is still often understood in a limited way that does not take rhetorical agency into consideration. This paper seeks to expand upon the narrow perceptions that are still prevalent. For strategic communications to be employed gainfully, the agency of both the speaker and the audience must be appreciated accordingly. Here, we first examine a number of terms that are useful to the practice of strategic communications. These include agency, recognition, rhetorical sovereignty, and rhetorical imperialism. We then apply these terms in relation to the story of Africa, first as has been predominantly told by non-Africans and then as

expressed by Africans themselves. We see that strategic communications remains limited when rhetorical agency is neglected. That to conduct effective strategic communications, an agent must always comprehend the range and intelligence of their own rhetorical agency and must appreciate the rhetorical agencies of their counterparts. With Africa set to increase its global role, its views and perceptions must be engaged and discerned. Only in doing so can outdated and counterproductive approaches be transcended.

I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land...I am born of a people...determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be. We are assembled here today to mark their victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be an African.

Thabo Mbeki, South African Deputy President at Parliament's acceptance of the final Constitution on 8 May 1996

INTRODUCTION

The concept of strategic communications is attracting broad interest. The debate regarding the meaning of this concept has engaged a range of actors, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. The discussion continues to evolve as strategic communications is employed in a growing array of fields and sectors. What we now think of as strategic communications is often called by myriad other names and often circumscribed by the prevailing understandings embedded in other sectors, such as business or public relations. The result is that while strategic communications is being employed, it is not always conceived of with the necessary scope and nuance. Strategic communications is a 'holistic approach to communication based on values and interests, that encompass everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment [...]'. Strategic communications is

usually directed at foreign governments and their populations [...] there is often consensus around its operational components or processes of delivery: defining a message; identifying a specific audience; intending to achieve not simply an effect but real, measurable changes.¹

Strategic communicators further their values and interests by employing rhetorical agency to exert influence over another actor or group of actors. When communicators do not appreciate their agency or that of their audience, this task remains murky and confounding. How a communication is structured and how well it achieves its ends is determined by the agency of the communicator. However, the increasingly sophisticated conversation about strategic communications has not sufficiently analysed agency in general or rhetorical agency in particular. The constitution and performance of agency, the capacity of actors to instrumentalise will in pursuit of their ends, is a fundamental precondition for any strategic communication.

This paper contributes to the conversation by examining the role and capacity of rhetorical agents in relation to their rhetorical counterparts. In particular, the paper focuses on two interrelated and underexamined terrains of agency. The first is the rhetorical nexus between speaker and audience. The second is the complex agglomeration of African agency vis-à-vis continental interlopers. While agency in general has been underexamined, agency as it is on and from the African continent has traditionally been neglected or skewed.

OF RHETORICAL AGENCY AND RECOGNITION

Strategic communications is a term used to describe an economy of persuasion.² While strategic communications is about mobilising ideas, it is also, as we will discuss here, about shutting ideas and their speakers down. From a critical approach, the debate on strategic communications has taken for granted that the speaker is able to communicate, and that

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1 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 6 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).

2 Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *'Strategic Communications: A New Field for Rhetoric'*, September 2013.

the audience is able to understand the speaker. Both of these assumptions must be assessed.

The act of strategic communications requires rhetorical agency. According to Robert Danisch, rhetorical agency refers to the capacity to articulate oneself; to conceive of rhetoric.³ 'If rhetorical power is relational power', stresses Danisch, 'then rhetorical agency is the ability to enact different kinds of relationships with others through discourse, speech, symbols, or communication'.⁴ According to Hallahan et al., 'the concept of agency aligns strategic communication and practice and focuses on power relations in the communication process. The struggle to exert power and control is inherent in all agency, as is power. It is the ability of the agent to resist power and control that is at the core of the debate about agency'.⁵ Agency, while subject to and influenced by the power relations between actors, is foremost conceived from the communicator's perspective.

Rhetorical agency occurs only as perceptible engagement between agents. So too strategic communications never takes place for its own sake and never without a counterpart. For a story to be persuasive, for an argument to be made, the audience must be able to perceive what is being communicated. Much of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is concerned with the perceptive capacity and agency of an audience. To Danisch, it is the audience that determines the outcome of discourse. This being so, the audience also possesses agency.⁶ When one side is unable to perform its role, whether for historical, cultural, or other reasons, the *dynamis*, the communicative power of the exchange, remains unrealised. The character, or ethos, of each party, the rhetor and the audience, is greatly affected by the other. It is the perceptive agency of the audience that so often determines the rhetor's communicative agency.⁷

3 Robert Danisch, 'Rhetorical Agency in a Neoliberal Age: Foucault, Power, Agency, and Ethos', in Kim Hong Nguyen, *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 64

4 Ibid., p. 78.

5 Kirk Hallahan, et al., 'Defining Strategic Communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* Volume 1 (2007): 3–35.

6 Danisch, 'Rhetorical Agency in a Neoliberal Age', p. 66.

7 Ibid., p. 68.

The capacity and willingness of an audience to engage in strategic communications is paramount. Historically, says Danisch, ‘rhetorical power did not operate from one single point or person; it existed as a potentiality in between, and within, a community of citizens. Rhetorical agency belonged to both the rhetor and the audience, constraining the freedom of both while being enacted and embodied through discursive choices.’⁸

Rhetorical agency is located in the relational dynamic between speaker and audience. Aristotle suggests that the audience’s role in determining the success of a rhetorical exchange makes for a complicated and always interactive practice. ‘Since rhetoric is concerned with making a judgement, it is necessary not only to look to the argument that it be demonstrative and persuasive, but also to [...] prepare the judge.’⁹ The audience as judge, as co-responsible for the persuasive outcome, has rhetorical power. This relates to the power of recognition, ascertaining and directly determining achievement of the rhetorical ends. Recognition is central to the strategic relations between rhetorical counterparts. It forms a critical function in influence: arguments do not follow statements of fact but are effective when their intent is internalised by rhetorical counterparts who play both the role of speaker and that of hearer.

Recognition has a rich theoretical foundation. Mutual recognition or mutuality is central in the strategic communications process. In *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel states that only by ‘understanding that the other’s actions are intentional can we also grasp our own actions and utterances as expressions of an intentional self’.¹⁰ Instead of being rigid or dependent on the other’s intentionality, the agency of the two sides (parties, actors) is interconnected. People perceive themselves, and by implication their actions, in reference to and in recognition of others. According to Hegel, an asymmetry in recognition establishes

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⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

⁹ Salazar, ‘Strategic Communications’, p. 66.

¹⁰ Mattias Iser, ‘Recognition’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 25 April 2019.

the master-slave dialectic.¹¹ Robert Brandom suggests that asymmetric recognition means ‘authority without responsibility, on the side of the Master, and responsibility without authority, on the side of the Slave’. He then goes on to say, ‘Hegel argues that unless authority and responsibility are commensurate and reciprocal, no actual normative statuses are instituted’.¹² The two sides remain locked into an incommensurable relationship. By implication, effective strategic communications cannot overlook the complementarity of the involved agents.

Erik Doxtader speaks to the gridlocked power imbalance between rhetorical agents. He describes how the end of the Cold War promised commensurate recognition for diverging views. This, he says, did not materialise.¹³ If it did, then normative statuses would have been instituted through reciprocity and mutually recognised. When recognition remains elusive, rhetorical agents, who are necessarily shaped and enabled by the recognition they give and receive, remain stunted. Charles Taylor provides insight into the effect of recognition in the communication process. ‘Identity’, writes Taylor, ‘is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.’¹⁴

When the agency of the audience does not allow and therefore does not engage the agency of the speaker, no reciprocal transfer of information, no true communication, can take place. ‘Rhetorical sovereignty’ and ‘rhetorical imperialism’ are two useful concepts to consider here. Rhetorical sovereignty, explains Richard Lyons, offers a ‘guiding story [...] by which we seek the paths to agency and power [...]’. The people want sovereignty [...] rhetorical sovereignty. As the inherent right and ability

11 In Hegel’s dialectic we see an overall consciousness that is bifurcated when one (empowered) party engages another (not empowered). The self-consciousness of one is the basis for that of the other. Each seeks recognition from the other as being the true form of consciousness. Accordingly, both are kept in their place.

12 Guido Seddone, ‘Transcription of the Interview with Robert Brandom’, 2008.

13 Erik Doxtader, ‘The Recognizability of Recognition: Fragments in the Name of a Not Yet Rhetorical Question’, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Volume 48, No 4 (2015): 379–412.

14 Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in Amy Gutmann (ed.) *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination, rhetorical sovereignty requires above all the presence of [...] voice, speaking or writing.¹⁵ Rhetorical sovereignty can therefore be regarded as the capacity to determine the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse. Rhetorical sovereignty, furthermore, is the subject's pursuit of their ideal principle. It takes place within their specific strategic situation and is based upon their goals and capacity. It also takes place in relation to others in each strategic terrain and therefore exists as relational power.

Rhetorical imperialism is a correlate to rhetorical sovereignty. Rhetorical imperialism describes the capacity of predominant powers to determine the substance of debate and thereby exhibit control. In determining the substance, these powers also establish or 'identify' the parties involved.¹⁶ Identification, in the Burkean¹⁷ way, establishes a common sense of meaning. To control this meaning-making process is a powerful pursuit. To describe, to attach meaning without going through deliberation, without the described presenting their argument, is the vestige of the kind of domination we now turn to.

OF SPEAKING AND HEARING

A central premise of cultural imperialism is that the imperialist is unable to overcome their subjective agency in relation to those outside their culturally dominant domain; the imperialist cannot internalise the perspective of or empathise with those who are culturally other. Compelled, in terms of the situation, the imperialist is fixed in their dominant role. Writers' such as Antonio Gramsci¹⁸ and Gayatri Spivak¹⁹ speak to the exclusion and subversion of what they call the subaltern—the colonial populations that were consigned to another, secondary tier of existence. It is not only that

15 Scott Richard Lyons, 'Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing', *College Composition and Communication*, Volume 51, N° 3 (2000): 447–68.

16 Ibid., p. 452.

17 Kenneth Burke, 'Rhetoric—old and new', *The Journal of General Education*, Volume 5, N° 3 (1951): 202–09.

18 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York: International Publications, 1971).

19 Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).

colonial subjugation imposed a defined, inferior status upon the subjects of the colony. The act of subjugation also restrained *the imperialist's* agency as an audience; it was fixed into rhetorical sovereignty, into perpetual description, without ever allowing its audience to exercise sovereignty.

Spivak's claim might be expressed as: It is not simply that the subaltern could not speak; it was that the imperialist could not hear. To Spivak, this master agency is the performance of Western 'worlding', the process of viewing disparate, non-Western scenarios in terms of Western norms and standards. On reflection, these modalities have remained—well after the end of the (direct) colonial projects.²⁰ Very little has been done to annul and replace the power relations and ideas they employed.

Furthermore, the dominance of liberal internationalist ideas and ways have attained hegemonic status in the recent period of globalisation, which coincided with the defeat of its erstwhile Soviet ideological counterpart. With the accompanying diminished diversity in contemporary modes of argument, the perception of legitimacy and prosperity in the modern age has been manufactured in and exported from a Western normative base. To assume a global identity has become akin to assuming a Western identity, as if there were no alternative. This perception served to maintain a singular rhetorical agency while imposing a successful naturalisation process of accordant norms and values.

Strategically, the approach of assuming a Western-defined global identity served its purpose during the Cold War's battle for the global mind. It has maintained its primacy in subsequent decades, mainly due to no comprehensive ideological challenge being raised beyond the aggressive, strictly affiliated dogmas such as those of the Islamic State Caliphate. While China has increased its internationalising project over the last decade and while mainstream Islam has maintained its proselytising campaign since the early Mohammedan conquests (622–750), it is the ways and norms of the West, which have morphed into being 'global', under which Africa has been accultured. Western 'worlding' or cultural imperialism, a notion problematic for its simplicity, nevertheless poses

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20 Ibid.

a significant challenge for contemporary Western agents. It challenges not only the extension of Western culture and ideas to the non-West—the singular rhetorical sovereignty maintained by the West denies the communicative agency of the other, and also critically denies the engagement and perceptive agency of the Western self.

To secondary states, many of which are former colonies bound to the agency imposed by rhetorical imperialism, specific imposed norms and ways have held their place beyond the direct colonial experience. Programmes with objectives such as ‘good governance’ and ‘structural adjustment’ were conceived and instituted without understanding or regarding the local context. The political-economic power of liberal internationalism did not, nor could it, strategically accommodate difference that did not submit to its norms. The strategic weakness of this approach became clear during the unrealisable campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The incapacity to assess and attend to the situation at hand, as it was and not as it was proclaimed to be, ensured that while a situation could be tactically dominated, strategic success, always based on a lucid assessment, remained unattainable for its failure to perceive the ‘other’

For an actor to truly comprehend a situation, they must first be able to perceive the views, objectives, and agency of their strategic counterpart. When denied the capacity to hear, the agent remains imperceptive to the overall strategic conditions. This sustains an unintelligent and vulnerable mode of superiority. There remain few occasions where refusing to hear is strategically astute. One example could be when illegitimate actors are denied an audience. Illegitimate actors, such as North Korea with its nuclear gambits, seek to exploit the platform of being given an audience for nefarious ends. Thus, while rarely strategic and often hubristic, the utility of refusing to hear should always be determined on a case-by-case basis. It is never strategic when applied normatively.

THE AFRICAN STORY: FROM AFAR

Despite being large, multifaceted, and composed of various rhetorical agencies, the African continent remains poorly perceived. Epistemologically, in a Western and global sense, Africa remains a dark continent; it remains unknown as it remains unheard. The “African story”, discussed here for illustrative purposes, offers an example of discordant rhetorical agencies. Rhetorical sovereignty and imperialism are useful, illustrative concepts. The ‘African story’ has largely been and continues to be influenced from afar. By foreign thought and action. Whether considering Christian missionaries, Islamic conversion, or the colonising forces of European states, the philosophies entering the African continent have entered as absolute, speaking agents. They have proselytised in the name of a superior—a King, a God, a civilisation. They came to Africa to declare. Not to listen. Africa has suffered great rhetorical imperialism.

In Africa, rhetorical imperialists have not concerned themselves with African agency. They have regarded locals as others. The African strategies of European states held foreign powers, mostly other European states, as their strategic counterparts. That their military and economic exploits took place on African soil and chiefly impacted African people was of little concern. Furthermore, the sociological and racial determinist ethnologies of European thinkers such as Arthur de Gobineau²¹ during the 19th century placed the European race as innately superior. Colonial expansion took place as a matter of European geopolitics. The infamous *Scramble for Africa*, or *New Imperialism* (1880–1914) which saw European control of Africa increase from 10% to about 90%, further consolidated the African campaign as a matter of European strategy. The Berlin Conference (1884), which regulated European colonisation, allowed the arbitrary dissection of Africa. While it served to arbitrate European ambitions, it severely unsettled local social relations and endemic ideas. Imperial forces, acting in the name of civility, performed

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²¹ Arthur de Gobineau was an influential French ethnologist and diplomat. His theories on racial determinism and the superiority of the white race held great influence in Europe during the 19th century. Erik Gergersen, ‘Arthur de Gobineau’, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2020.

brutal conquests of African peoples. Their inability to engage and hear the local populations deprived Europeans also of their capacity to feel for Africans, leading to the inhumane costs they wrought.

Foreign conquests were not only destabilising to local social affairs but contributed to the destruction of local norms and ways and undermined the dignity of the local people. Vincent Khapoya explains that when 120 000 Africans lost their lives in the German suppression of the so-called Maji Maji, the destruction was 'so thorough that the Africans lost faith in their ancestral spirits also. They had been assured by their leaders that they would be duly protected [...]. In utter dismay and despondency, following their devastating defeat, most of these people turned to Christianity.'²² In another case involving Senegal and France, the people 'began to wonder why, in this moment of critical need, their ancestral spirits would not come to their aid. Perhaps their gods were not true gods after all [...]. Christianity offered solace in the face of a great national tragedy.'²³

European colonialism's true power lay in imposing a modern socio-cultural modality, including the introduction of Christianity. It was this modality that Africans assumed or turned to when they turned away from their traditions. While various peoples refused to capitulate, these and other examples around Africa show how many peoples were physically and psychologically broken down. Many capitulated to the norms and values of the colonisers, whether European or Islamic. In turning away from their own order of meaning and doing, their guiding story, Africans forsook their rhetorical sovereignty while the Europeans affirmed their own. Surrender to the traditions of the colonizers, mostly because of superior European technology and the effects of the inhumane treatment that stemmed from a denial of agency, naturalised the master-slave bifurcation between rhetorical sovereign and subject. To the sovereign, the experience of the subject remained obscured.

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²² Vincent B. Khapoya, *The African Experience* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 144.

²³ Ibid., p. 144.

Domination did not simply correlate to direct religious conversion. The British denying the Church the right to evangelise in the Nigerian Sokoto Caliphate demonstrates that the strategic principle of not intruding upon the Muslim population was preferred to the ends of evangelism.²⁴ The government's choice not to interfere in religious affairs was a strategic decision. While the Church may have been annoyed, it was the local people in being overlooked as subjects in their own land who had their rhetorical agency disregarded. Instead, the strategic decision was made exclusively with the British State and Church as rhetorical agents.

Africans would be heard, that is to say be accommodated, only when they spoke in the language and ways of the imperialist. The power of language on the African continent, especially English and French, remains a standing testament to rhetorical imperialism and acculturation. The imperial refused to hear and thereby could not legitimise the local. Whereas the local heard, adopted, and thereby legitimised the imperial. Furthermore, Christian missions played a central role in the process of European acculturation. In much of colonial Africa, society was structured around churches. Those Africans involved in social organisation would mostly be those educated by mission schools. The imperial state would provide the funding and the mission's staff would administer the curriculum. Through education, Africans would assume the language, concepts, and ideas of the rhetorical imperialists. They would be accommodated and have access to influence only when they employed this guiding story. They could be heard only when they spoke their adopted language. As a result, the attraction of the European Christian voice was immense. Missions were powerful forces for shaping agency. They provided rare opportunities for aspiring Africans to earn respect and gain access to the realm of influence. From the imperial standpoint, an African could be influential only when legitimised by the mission, which stood at the core of society. As a result, various African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Nelson Mandela were educated in mission schools. Leaders carried with them their education and adopted ethics when they assumed

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²⁴ B.J. Dudley, *Parties and Politics in Northern Nigeria* (London: Routledge, 1968).

power in the independent era. Their adopted language, culture, and religion again gained legitimation with their rise to power.

VESTIGES OF RHETORICAL IMPERIALISM: DISTANT AND RECENT

What is and what is not spoken by the rhetorical imperialist remains the standard in the rhetorical exchange between Africa and the West. This standard is based upon established rhetorical architectures. The case of Van Riebeeck's Hedge at the Cape Colony in the 1660s provides an instructive example. A wild almond hedge planted by Jan van Riebeeck, the Dutch East Indian Company Commander at the Cape of Good Hope, symbolically marked the southern frontier of company territory. According to Richard Marback, the hedge established:

[...] a boundary separating the Dutch from indigenous Africans [... It] inscribed a civilized order on the Dutch colony by distinguishing it from the expansive, uncharted continent occupied by indigenous African populations. The boundary line of the hedge gave physical expression to colonial categories. Ordered European spaces of economic power enabled and naturalised the extraction of resources and the exploitation of labour in the unordered natural spaces of Africa [...]. Like the boundary marked by Riebeeck's hedge, the trading posts and cities of colonial South Africa were clearly delineated spaces of European control [...]. Apartheid policy was a rhetorical reordering of the physical space of colonial South Africa. The word apartheid is Afrikaans for 'separateness'. The goal of apartheid was never genocide. The ultimate goal of apartheid can more accurately be thought of as an extension of the boundary marked with Riebeeck's almond hedge.²⁵

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²⁵ Richard Marback, 'A Tale of Two Plaques: Rhetoric in Cape Town', *Rhetoric Review*, Volume 23, N°3 (2004): 253–68.

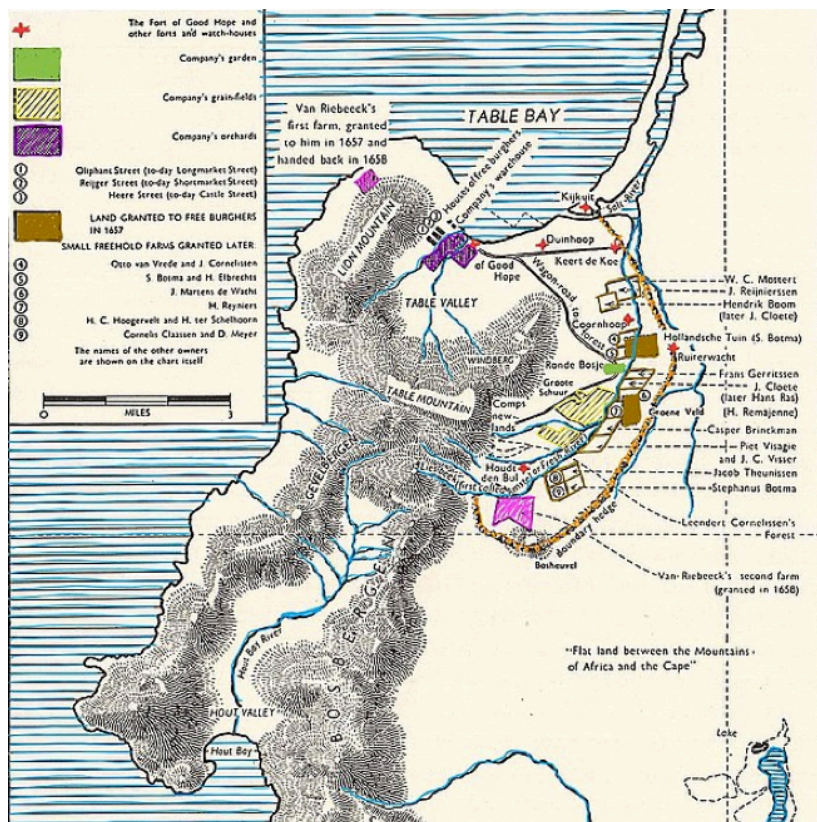


Figure 1. The boundary hedge at the Cape of Good Hope
Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Burgers

Van Riebeeck's hedge shows how settlers cut themselves off from the African land, and from its cultures and norms. The hedge did not only declare the area within the physical border as the land under law. Critically, it consigned the area beyond the hedge as an area where no law prevailed, an area of un-law. Beyond the hedge was beyond the law. Normatively, those residing beyond law could be engaged with only as the un-lawed, as savages. Their ways could have no form or signification. Simply, they could not be heard. Under these terms, Africans did not have, nor could they ever develop, rhetorical sovereignty.

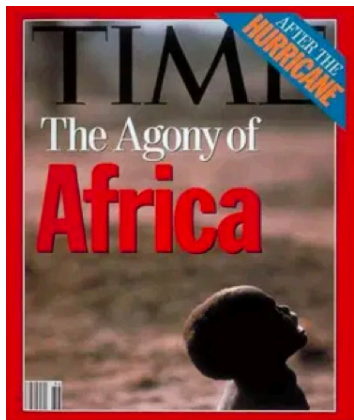


Figure 2. *Time Magazine*, Sept 1992

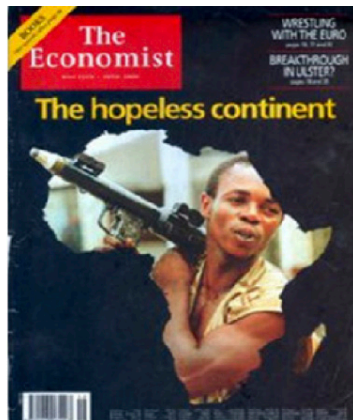


Figure 3. *The Economist*, May 2000



Figure 4. *Time Magazine*, Dec 2012



Figure 5. *The Economist*, Dec 2011

The land beyond the hedge and its peoples could exist only in reference to the imperial, only in terms of the lack of that which existed within the hedge. Structures like the hedge, imposing a normative order on a people, are what disallowed imperialist hearing. The hedge separated the imperial agency from the cognitive and normative architecture of the people and land in which it found itself.

Meaning could be recognised only when Africans entered the lawed area and abided by its norms. This self-fortifying rhetoric of the incomers exemplifies both the power and the weakness of description; consigning meaning based upon established perceptions. When an external realm is described only from within a certain logic and using endemic markers, it essentially remains unknown, or dark.

The story of Africa as told by prominent Western media outlets *Time* and *The Economist*, present an example of unyielding rhetorical imperialism. Here Africa's story is described: Africa does not have a voice; it has a reputation. When *Time's* cover image, in 1984 and 1992, told of 'Africa's Woes' and 'The Agony of Africa', and when *The Economist* in 2000 printed 'The Hopeless Continent' above an image of the African continent superimposed over that of a weapon-toting soldier, these publications defined Africa's guiding story. A decade later, in 2011 and 2012 respectively, *The Economist* and *Time*, both published colourful covers emblazoned with the words, 'Africa Rising'. Here we see the power of self-referentiality; definitional validity is based upon a previous description. The effect of the story lies in the transition, affording legitimacy to both ends. Neither side needs to be proven; the assumed truth of the former is the basis for the assumed truth of the latter.

In a further indication highlighting the power of such publications, we have seen an about turn from various commentators after *The Economist* lamented: 'Since *The Economist* regrettably labelled Africa "the hopeless continent" a decade ago, a profound change has taken hold.'²⁶ Like a magnetic polar shift, Africa went from hopeless to hopeful.

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²⁶ *The Economist*, 'The Sun Shines Bright', 3 December 2011.

Yet, regardless of the marker, ascribed character remains.

These examples of *Time* and *The Economist* demonstrate the West's power of description. Africa remains mute and its reputation is maintained by others. In this modality, both speaker and hearer are fixed in their roles. Each reinforces the other, ensuring naturalisation of their roles. Meaning is accordingly not derived through rhetorical engagement but is baked into the specific roles each party plays. The development industry provides good examples of such anchored roles: Africans the receivers, Westerners the givers — simple. Colonialism's great power was to determine these roles. Today this assumption of strength and weakness continues. It is bolstered by the prevalence of indirect over direct power, where through the effective influence of the strong, the weak assume their own weakness as inherent. While states are constitutionally independent, their reluctance or inability to execute rhetorical sovereignty means they remain impotent to challenge the rhetorical agency of others.

These underlying power dynamics continue as the basis of (especially Western) rhetorical relationships with Africa. The capacity as a descriptor and described plays itself out through associated 'African' cultural products (Black Panther) and political movements (Black Lives Matter). While such products and movements may be dynamic and grass-roots expressions in the United States, they are influential in Africa and continue the course of imposed culture and meaning. Though taking different forms, these are modern iterations of hegemonic rhetorical agency. These campaigns are not directed at nefarious ends but disturb and weaken local perceptions and political articulations. They take a similar route to that of early Pan-Africanism, which too emanated from the Americas and spoke for an African identity. These are indirect pursuits of influence ascribing meaning, value, and even identity. Africans must critically engage these campaigns from a position of rhetorical sovereignty. Not only from hearing, but from a speaking agency. An investigation into historical and contemporary rhetorical power dynamics, as introduced here, is necessary to unmask evolving power relations and to appropriately equip Africans with rhetorical sovereignty. A broader analysis of these new modes of rhetorical agency,

as described in this paper, is a necessary pursuit but is not within the ambit of this paper.

Both the 'Hopeless Continent' and 'Africa Rising' are themes that get rehashed over time. Sean Jacobs contends that these rebranding exercises are banal 'totalizing narratives of the continent'.²⁷ Instead of engaging with developments on the continent, these labels present a stagnant and imposed understanding. Alan Hirsch and Carlos Lopes present a further illustration of how perceptions of Africa are not only skewed but seldom corrected when evidence of their falsehood emerges. The authors refer to the warped depiction of the African continent on global maps that show Africa to be about the same size as Greenland, which is fourteen times smaller. This projection has remained in place since Mercator published his 1569 world map. Despite knowledge of the true scale, influential platforms such as Google continue to use it as the global map of recognition.²⁸ Why is it that when these inaccuracies are discovered, they are not corrected? Lopes and Hirsch suggest that misperceptions about Africa go much further than cartography. When regarding 'risk perceptions, levels of conflict, political stability [...] the global perception in many minds continues to be one of an Africa uniformly beset by conflict, crisis, bad governance [...] a risky place for making investments. These negative narratives persist because of the images that are embedded in mind-sets, which translate an iconic representation of Africa, thus affecting what narrative prevails.'²⁹ There is very little nuance in the dominant, iconic African narrative/description. Only when African voices speak authoritatively and are accordingly heard, will the necessary nuance be injected into the debate. An accurate African representation, therefore, depends on Africans first perceiving and defining African affairs.

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²⁷ Sean Jacobs, 'Time Magazine and the "Africa is Rising" Meme', *Africa is a Country*, 26 November 2012.

²⁸ Alan Hirsch and Carlos Lopes, 'Post-Colonial African Economic Development in Historical Perspective', *Africa Development*, Volume 45, N°1 (2020): 31–46.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

AFRICA'S AFRICAN STORY

The African story is more than the imperialist's tale. Africa's pursuit of rhetorical sovereignty is like the reconstructive guiding stories of so many colonised peoples. As suggested by Lyons, it presents the 'pursuit of self-determination, a general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect'.³⁰ The following section discusses the pursuit of a sovereign African story, in two parts. The two should not be conflated. The first looks at Africa's rejection of rhetorical imperialism. As a relational story. Rhetoric in the pursuit of independence. The second exists only after the first. It sees sovereignty not as a pursuit but as the expression of independence.

AFRICA'S RELATIONAL STORY

As detailed above, African rhetorical agency has been deeply influenced by rhetorical imperialism. During the period of colonial subjugation, the ambitions and rhetorical claims of colonised Africa were advanced as counter-narratives. The mobilisation of ideas was explicitly in relation to the colonial ruler. To advance its rhetorical-strategic aims, Africa had to ensure its voice was heard and engaged. The pursuit of independence was the pursuit of overcoming subjugation. Strategically, it employed both concepts and language emergent from and in vogue in Europe. African Nationalism was central in Africa's 20th century strategic communications. The repurposing of 'nationalism', an authoritative term in Europe in the first half of the century, together with other concepts, such as 'democracy', allowed African subjectivity to emerge. These concepts were not aspirational as much as they were tools adopted in service of a strategic end and adapted to fit the African purpose. By ascribing them local meaning, African Nationalism presented an articulation of norms, heritage, and historical experience, and established a claim. In African Nationalism, we see a 'subjective feeling of kinship or affinity shared by people of African descent. It is a feeling based on shared cultural

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³⁰ Lyons, 'Rhetorical Sovereignty', p. 449.

norms, traditional institutions, racial heritage, and a common historical experience'.³¹ African Nationalism, furthermore, was a modality through which to mobilise claims for better representation and improved opportunities.

Democracy presents a further example where rhetorical sovereignty is claimed through the repurposing of a recognised concept. Democracy as understood in the West, the state reflecting the desires of the people, was repurposed to appropriate local meaning and advance African independence. To Sunday Awoniyi, democracy is an illuminating concept as realised in the practices of groups such as the Yoruba, Nupe, and Tiv. 'Democracy cannot be said to be alien to Africa. History is replete with varying democratic practices that cut across the traditional institutions in Africa. There are existing traditional practices among African communities that are synonymous with contemporary expositions on democratic governance both in principles and practice.'³² These expressions of democracy were articulated so as to be understood by the colonial master. They were claims for recognition.

African nationalism and the mobilisation of concepts such as democracy were tactically employed to solicit independence. Here, the party from which independence is sought remains powerful in being recognised as such. By repurposing these terms, even when used in the pursuit of independence, the pursuer accepts and keeps in place the power of the colonial agent. The same holds for concepts such as 'post-colonial', and political movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall*,³³ or *Fallism*³⁴ in general. While the latter pursues rhetorical agency, it maintains the placement of the original and accordingly serves as a counter-narrative, not a narrative.

31 Khapoya, *The African Experience*, p. 139.

32 Sunday Awoniyi, 'African Cultural Values: The Past, Present and Future', *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, Volume 17, N° 1 (2015).

33 *Rhodes Must Fall* was a student protest movement started at the University of Cape Town in 2015. It initially campaigned for the removal of a statue commemorating the mining magnate and politician Cecil John Rhodes and led to a broader movement advancing the decolonization of South African universities.

34 *Fallism* is as a decolonial paradigm and movement towards comprehensively breaking down the power of entrenched colonial knowledge systems. As a public pedagogy, it pursues knowledge creation so to 'challenge the academy's epistemic deference to Euro-American knowledge. Fallists serve as pedagogues who draw on scholars such as Frantz Fanon, activists like Steve Biko, and concepts such as intersectionality.' A. Kayum Ahmed, '#Fallism as public pedagogy', *Africa is a Country*, 7 March 2017.

They persist as referential to another, dominant agent. While useful for purposes of illustration and dismantling, these concepts are inherently limited as their rhetorical legitimacy resides in a predominant master narrative not of the subjects' own making. By contrast, the privilege of the master narrative, of Cecil Rhodes or the colonial motherland, retains its place long after political colonialism ceased to exist. Counter-narratives, as bound to the inherent meaning of the master narrative, are not sovereign narratives per se. When concepts are used only because they are perceptible to another, one subjugates one's agency to the agency of the other. To be independent, one must not only have the capacity to determine and point to one's goals, but one must also form and express one's voice.

STATING THE NATION: THE AFRICAN STORY, EXPRESSED

Rhetorical sovereignty is never bestowed by or received from another. It cannot be a latent agency any more than sovereignty can be a latent capacity. Rhetorical sovereignty is active; it is an ability that must be acted upon. It does not make sense according to another. It is the expression of self. Rhetorical sovereignty determines the strategic terrain by pronouncing upon it. It exerts power over meaning. Through deploying values and principles, it is not the act of transcending, but an enactment of being. To be rhetorically sovereign is to express an independent ethos.

Abdelhai Azarkan's discussion on the speech given by Moroccan King Mohammed V on 10th April 1947 depicts an enactment of sovereignty: a speaking of the nation.³⁵ In this speech, we see not a pursuit of or claim to sovereignty, but the performance of sovereignty. In his introduction, the King situates his message, as is the procedure in Islam, in his faith in Allah, 'the true and only God'. In so doing, he acknowledges that his power is not due to and does not belong to his person but emerges from Islam as an authority. King Mohammed's leadership not only stems from his faith but is guided by the Koran. In his speech, he states that:

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³⁵ Abdelhai Azarkan, 'Statecraft and sovereignty in Mohammed V of Morocco's Tangiers Speech (1947)', *African Yearbook of Rhetoric*, Volume 10, N°1 (2020): 31–38.

The believer distinguishes himself amongst the members of humanity by the perfection of his belief, the quietude of his conscience and the fact that he trusts his God, in his activities as in his repose, in his joys as in the misfortunes of life [...]. Thus, we move into action only after firmly establishing the belief that we are truly one of Allah's faithful creatures.³⁶

After observing the origin of his power, Islam's 'first ethical principle', the King continues to describe the state of Morocco and the Muslim community at large. According to Azarkan, the King moves 'from a description of the social, religious and political situation of his believer subjects, emphasising his commitment at government level to ensure the fundamental values dictated by Islam of peace, dignity and prosperity, to describing the emancipation and progress of the subjects and the nation.'³⁷ The misfortunes of the people are not simply attributed to foreign forces, in the way of a *Fallist* philosophy. In a coalescing manner, the King places responsibility and thereby power with his people, who, he warns, have forsaken responsibility and caved to injustice, so to 'become alienated from our sacred rights due to our ignorance, and the unity of the mistakes we have made'.³⁸ This recognition, critically, situates agency with the people, their subservience being of their own doing. Their salvation would come only from their own determined claim and enaction of independence.

The King's speech, which led to him being exiled by the French state, demonstrated manifest power.³⁹ In not mentioning independence in word, the King transcends the quest for independence in the manner of post-colonialism and *Fallism* referred to earlier. Azarkan stresses that 'unlike the political movements calling for independence at the time [...] the King of Morocco is not satisfied with simply trying to attain the first step, namely national sovereignty, but also envisages the nature of the government to be constituted'.⁴⁰ Sovereignty is expressed through being sovereign, so to speak.

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³⁶ Mohammed V, Tangier speech of 10th April 1947 as translated by Azarkan, *Ibid.*, p.23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Opoku Mensah's article highlighting the rhetorical sovereignty of Kwame Nkrumah's statecraft presents another illustrative case. The author recalls Nkrumah propitiously giving shape to Ghanaian sovereignty following British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's renowned *Winds of Change* policy, first articulated in Accra in 1960. Nkrumah used the occasion to activate an independent foreign policy. He did not simply accept Macmillan's offering of decolonisation. Instead, he enacted Ghanaian independence by claiming: 'we have declared our stand in international relations: Ours is one of positive non-alignment'.⁴¹ Nkrumah's sovereign expressions, his refusal to be brought into the Western ideological sphere, dealt a severe blow to Macmillan's influence-seeking tour of Africa.

Some months after Macmillan's visit, Nkrumah exacted African independence at the United Nations General Assembly. He declared that the 'wind blowing in Africa is not an ordinary wind, it is a raging hurricane and it is impossible for [...] any other colonial power to prevent the raging hurricane of African nationalism from blowing through the oppressed and down-trodden colonies'.⁴² Nkrumah's declaration of the 'dawn of a new era', wherein 'African nationalism sweeps everything before it and constitutes a challenge to the colonial powers', presents more than a vision. It uses the evidence of African independence to proclaim a fact. Critically, the new era is not assumed or imposed, but is actualised through Nkrumah's speech. His statements, such as the claim 'there are now twenty-two of us in this Assembly and there are yet more to come', set into motion the pursuit of an expanded end. By declaring upon the matter, Nkrumah actualises African independence in the name of African Nationalism.

In the rhetoric of South Africa's former President Nelson Mandela, we see the performance and personification of the democratic South African state. His embodiment of values and ideas gave shape to a transformed and thereby legitimate order. Through his candidature and then state presidency, Mandela expressed the transcendent order.

41 Eric Opoku Mensah, 'In Response to the "Wind of Change": The Statecraft of Kwame Nkrumah', *African Yearbook of Rhetoric*, Volume 10, N°1 (2020): 85–93, p. 89.

42 Ibid., p. 90.

In recognising the injustices of the past, Mandela's rhetoric, particularly in his public speeches, enacted the construction and constitution of the South African nation.⁴³ Through word and deed, Mandela performed the foundation of the democratic society. He realised the call to action of the Constitutional preamble: 'to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values'.⁴⁴ His speech acts, embodying the principles and values of the Constitution, were an expression of 'his ability to inspire ordinary men and women with the belief that they can and should make a difference [and gave] his presidency a lustre'.⁴⁵ Mandela's praise of the values of Constitutional democracy instilled them into the national ethos. These expressions were not only employed to expedite the process of getting elected; Mandela used them throughout his rhetorical career. Before he gave shape to the reconciled nation, Mandela was an active proponent of the just application of law. In a 1986 article on Mandela, Jacques Derrida writes that it was Mandela's admiration for justice that made him legally powerful. 'Mandela becomes admirable for having known how to admire [...] for having made of his admiration a force, a power of combat, intractable and irreducible'.⁴⁶ Mandela's veneration for just law, in accordance to the judicial texts of the South African State, formed the foundation of his legal defence during the trial that led to his incarceration. Referring to documents such as the Bill of Rights, the Petition of Rights, and the Magna Carta, Mandela declared that he was an 'admirer of such a system'. He said, 'I have great respect for British political institutions, [...] the independence and impartiality of its judiciary never fail to arouse my admiration'.⁴⁷

Defending himself, Mandela did not simply respond as one accused. He used the opportunity to indict the state for upholding and applying an unjust legal system. He proposed his acquittal on this basis. According to Derrida, Mandela's passions, his admiration for the application of just

43 Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

44 South African Ministry of Justice, *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996.

45 Gaye Davis, 'No Ordinary Magic', *Mail & Guardian*, 18 July 1997.

46 Jacques Derrida, 'Admiration of Nelson Mandela, or the Laws of Reflection', *Law & Literature*, Volume 26, N° 1 (2014): 9–30.

47 Nelson Mandela, 'Statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial', 20 April 1964.

law (the separation of powers and judicial independence) show Mandela to be an heir of legitimate legal practice. An authentic heir is one who turns 'against those who pretend to be its depositaries, to the point of giving to see, against the usurpers, the very thing that, in the heritage, has never before been seen—to the point of giving birth, by the unheard of act of a reflection, to that which had never seen the light of day'.⁴⁸ Mandela, whose appeals are always first to the law, emphasises the lack of justice and calls for the creation of justice. His is an independent indictment of the state. He says that he is charged with inciting people to protest a law imposed on them. The government, says Mandela:

[...] must take into account the question of responsibility, whether it is I who is responsible or whether, in fact, a large measure of the responsibility does not lie on the shoulders of the government which promulgated that law, knowing that my people, who constitute the majority of the population of this country, were opposed to that law, and knowing further that every legal means of demonstrating that opposition had been closed to them by prior legislation, and by government administrative action.⁴⁹

Mandela justifies his indictment much in the way that he is charged: 'he gathers himself in appearing before the law, which he summons as much as it summons him'.⁵⁰ Mandela's indictment is his own, his challenge is an act of rhetorical sovereignty. His orations and actions on these values afforded him authority and brought justice and stability to the new nation. On the occasion of his first State of the Nation address in 1994, a tradition copied from the United States, Mandela truly 'stated the nation'. He realised the present (and made the future possible) by transcending the past. 'In one gesture, in one voice, the nation finds itself being "stated"; mutual confidence is affirmed, and ceremony is performed'.⁵¹

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48 Derrida, 'Admiration of Nelson Mandela', p. 12.

49 Ibid., p. 19.

50 Ibid.

51 Awoniyi, 'African Cultural Values', p. 22.

Mandela's authoritative voice, his embodiment of reconciliation, gave shape to a reconciled South Africa. This embodiment is particular to the South African case and in response to the national problem, not to the broader problems of the continent.

A final example of African rhetorical sovereignty is the celebrated *I am an African* speech given by Thabo Mbeki, then deputy President of South Africa, quoted at the beginning of this article. Mbeki's speech at Parliament's adoption of the current Constitution gives substance to modern African subjectivity. Akin to the speech given by King Mohammed V, this is not an appeal for transcendence. It is its expression of being. An enactment of the national ethos at a moment of commencement. Mbeki's poetic praise of African values, experience, and culture is an example of formative epideictic rhetoric. In his statement, he assumes representation of a variety of South African groups. 'I owe my being to the Khoi and the San [...] I am formed of the migrants who left Europe [...] In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves [...] I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsas and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle.'⁵² In speaking these words he demonstrates national accord, transcending varied struggles to realise a singular national identity. Representing a broad group of peoples, he shows how they, in their different ways, have together overcome the past and can now embody a new, unifying national order. By speaking for all national groups, his overcoming is the overcoming and the redemption of all. Not only is he an African, but so too are all those he speaks for: a nation reconciled.

Mbeki's speech not only expressed his sentiments. It echoed prior messages of the late ANC leaders Pixley ka Seme and Anton Lembede who both declared their being African as the core of their political being. Mbeki's assumption of this rhetorical rite claims authority both for their message and for his. In reflecting upon the past, he does not cede agency to rhetorical foes but instead rallies an inclusive spirit wherein all can find their place. Mbeki's speech forms the foundation of his call for

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⁵² Thabo Mbeki, 'I am an African' speech, 1996.

an African Renaissance, the overcoming of continental challenges and holistic renewal. While its mandate goes back a century to ka Seme, the claim '*I am an African*' also forms a future projection. Mbeki's confident affirmation appropriates meaning, replacing negative and external projections. While the speech does not explicitly refer to a 'renaissance', his message makes the necessary connections to encourage others to advance it. He draws inspiration from a rich cultural history and creates a bridge between that history and the renewal or rebirth of continental perceptions shaped by Africans themselves, thereby establishing the authority to transcend the foreign control exerted over continental affairs. Claiming agency for Africa, by Africans.

If we follow the development of the concept of African Renaissance, we see the emergence of several key components of African rhetorical agency. According to Elias Bongmba, the 'idea of African Renaissance is part of a long struggle to articulate and actualise an African identity and consciousness'.⁵³ Renaissance thinking invokes a critical assessment of identity, which, according to Mbeki and in line with South African reconciliation, is not based on race (blackness) or on modernist ideas. Instead, it is concerned with ownership of a multicultural vision that collapses colonial constructions and builds forward using local perspectives. The African Renaissance signals the mobilisation of African cultural ideals and values. It is a revival of African forms of thought that can be drawn on for an African form of modernisation, ways for African agents to put forth their rhetorical sovereignty. While the initial renaissance programmes did not attain advancement beyond leaders such as Mbeki, and their outcomes and effects should be viewed critically, the process of rediscovering and building upon an array of indigenous norms, akin to King Mohammed V of Morocco, is a powerful programme of action. It establishes an approach through which African voices can be found and expressed. These are not essentialised or imposed ways, but are distinctive approaches that signal a change of paradigm, a process for creating new realities expressed through local voices.

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⁵³ Elias Bongmba, 'Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 30, No 2 (2004): 291–316, p. 294.

The idea of the African Renaissance creates an essential bridge connecting history and future in an African timeline that far exceeds the colonial period.

Recently, the concept of renaissance has been catapulted into the African Union's institutional masterplan, *Agenda 2063*. This long-term, ambitious plan seeks to transcend post-colonial influences and establish systems of self-determination which, through a process of unlearning and learning, will visualise and then implement a new institutional arrangement for the continent. The *Agenda*, presented as a set of initiatives, gives expression to the goals and ideals first established in the *Solemn Declaration of the Assembly of the Union on the Situation in Mali*,⁵⁴ adopted in 2013. Notably, these goals and ideals—continental peace and security, democratic governance, and social and economic development—are to be founded upon an 'African identity and Renaissance'. The agenda for 2063, one hundred years following the establishment of the Organization of African Unity, is reminiscent of China's foremost long-term strategic goals for 2049, marking a hundred years following its revolution. The *Solemn Declaration* is an example of rhetorical agency, through which foundational African concepts are presented constructively and affirmatively.

CONCLUSION

This article has shone a light on the importance of including rhetorical agency in our understanding of strategic communications. Agency is central to any communicative practice and therefore should not be confined to theory but understood and implemented dynamically as circumstances demand. To conduct effective strategic communications, actors must comprehend the nature of their rhetorical agency and, crucially, must recognise but not depend on the rhetorical agencies of their counterparts. An independent sense of self, expressed through rhetorical sovereignty, is crucial for conveying meaning in the contemporary confluence of intersecting narratives where actors may hold multiple, legitimate identities.

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⁵⁴ African Union, *50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration*, 26 May 2013.

This is especially significant in a place such as Africa, where rhetorical agencies have not had much time to mature following the socio-cultural effects of colonialism, modernisation, and the implementation of democracy. African understandings of interposing ideational and geopolitical forces pursuing their interests on the continent are still developing. For their independence to be genuine, African politics must establish and express their rhetorical sovereignty. They must speak and thereby define themselves within the intensifying fluidity of identity and relations that comprise a networked and often oblique power order. To gain influence in the global strategic marketplace, Africa faces the demanding task of developing the rhetorical agency to engage others on its own terms, as does the global south in general. Although identifying resonant and constructive forms of expression is an intricate process, many illuminating examples of Africa finding its voice (again) light the way. Despite the violent and identity-erasing incursions it has suffered, Africa remains rich with rhetorical culture that can serve as a foundation and springboard for persuasive strategic communications.

To engage genuinely with Africa's African story, others must first overcome their own rhetorical constraints. Africa will increasingly play an important role in global affairs and, to interact effectively with the continent, others must shed their judgements and engage their perceptive abilities. They must realise that it is not Africa that is dark, but that the darkness they experience is created by their own inability to see and to hear.

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NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND HISTORY TEXTBOOKS IN POST-YUGOSLAV MONTENEGRO

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Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, history textbooks, national identity, national identity construction, Montenegro, narrative, collective memory, memory construction*

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ABSTRACT

In light of a looming national identity crisis in Montenegro, this article makes the case that changes in history textbooks of post-Yugoslav Montenegro are strategic communications in the process of national identity construction. As history textbooks are considered a primary site for the representation of nation-building myths—a key feature of national identity—this article seeks to demonstrate the paramount agency

of school textbooks in structuring national identity. The inter-dependent relationships between history, memory, identity, and narrativity, and the significance of these concepts in strategic communications theory and practice are discussed in the theoretical framework. Six history textbooks written for the seventh and eighth grades of primary school, published in the years 1997, 2001, and 2008—each a turning point in how Montenegrin national identity was viewed by the political elites in power—are examined comparatively, discursively, and thematically. The analysis demonstrates that changes to various editions of Montenegrin history textbooks were made with a view towards (re)constructing collective memory and national myths to influence the attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs of a captive audience of primary school pupils and qualify as state-projected strategic communications.

INTRODUCTION

In his novel *1984*, George Orwell wrote, ‘Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past’. In modern nation-states, the ways in which the past can be ‘controlled’ are multifaceted since political elites influence the safekeeping of records and the representation of historical events. Regardless of who is in power, history teaching in schools can be viewed as a tool for state politics. This implies neither positive influence nor negative manipulation as either judgement would depend on the context. However, historical representation that aims to (re)construct collective memory and national myths affecting the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that mould national identities should be examined through the lens of strategic communications (StratCom).

For some time, Montenegro has been a neglected part of former Yugoslavia. More recently, it has merited international attention as a national identity crisis is currently creating fertile ground for future conflicts. The question of national identity is not recent for Montenegro

but has been re-emerging continuously since the 19th century.¹ However, national and ethnic polarisation was heightened as a result of parliamentary elections held in August 2020, and ever since the country has been in flux socially, politically, and economically. The aim of this article is not to answer the question, ‘who are the Montenegrins?’. The debate over whether the Montenegrins are Serbs who merely populate the area known as Montenegro, a South Slavic people with a distinct identity, or an essential ‘part of a broader Serbian ethnic framework (“the best of the Serbs”)', as Srđa Pavlović aptly characterises it, will not be settled here.² Instead, what follows is an attempt to determine if changes in the history textbooks used in post-Yugoslav Montenegrin schools can be considered strategic communications contributing to national identity. National identity construction has attracted the attention of numerous scholars, yet no effort has been made to frame this question as one of StratCom. This article aims to inspire a broadening of our understanding of StratCom as the field develops in the social sciences.

This article first considers the definition of StratCom and frames it within broader sociological and anthropological notions of ‘memory’, ‘history’, ‘narrativity’, and ‘identity’, which form the theoretical framework of analysis. Then the interplay between history textbooks and national identities is discussed. Some conclusions from contemporary literature on history textbooks in 20th century Yugoslav Montenegro are briefly presented to provide an understanding of trends in history teaching in the country. Finally, six Montenegrin history textbooks are analysed comparatively, thematically, and discursively.

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1 Kenneth Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro* (London; Oxford; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

2 Srđja Pavlović, ‘Who are Montenegrins? Statehood, Identity, and Civic Society’ in Florian Bieber (ed.) *Montenegro in Transition: Problems of Identity and Statehood* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2003), p. 83.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS?

Siman-Tov and Fridman recognise that despite an extensive literature, there is no unified understanding of StratCom.³ Existing literature is predominantly concerned with how state or non-state actors disseminate messages through new media and information-communication technologies and with the impact of these messages. While online activity has attracted greater scholarly attention, numerous channels continue to exist through which an actor can ‘communicate’ with/to intended audiences.

Perhaps one reason a definition of StratCom remains elusive is that the term ‘strategy’ has no agreed definition.⁴ Even so, the concept has infiltrated most aspects of human life. Although the concept of ‘strategy’ has military origins, Lawrence Freedman writes that any contemporary definition should be about ‘maintaining a balance between ends, ways, and means; about identifying objectives and about the resources and methods available for meeting such objectives’.⁵ Strategy is oriented towards achieving objectives in the long-term⁶ while preserving short-term consistency and continuity and is a concept distinct from ‘tactics’.⁷ Freedman’s conception of strategy as maintaining a balance between ends, ways, and means derives from its environment, which is dynamic and hotly contested.⁸ As rapid advancements in information and communication technologies dissolve the binaries of home and abroad, government and people, this ‘balancing act’ becomes more important, and viewing strategy as a linear process toward achieving objectives grows increasingly difficult. Strategy applied to communications is about identifying target populations and clear objectives of change or influence. Any other understanding can turn StratCom simply into message

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3 David Siman-Tov and Ofer Fridman, ‘A Rose by Any Other Name? Strategic Communications in Israel’, *Defence Strategic Communications* N° 8 (2020): 17–52, p. 18.

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

5 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xi; Arthur F. Lykke Jr., ‘Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy’ in *Military Strategy: Theory and Application* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 1989), p. 3–8.

6 Neville Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications* N° 6 (2019): 3–11, p. 4.

7 Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, p. 74.

8 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

projection at audiences who neither hear nor wish to hear. Hence we may conclude that: ‘Strategic Communications is strategic because it focuses on discourse change in the long term. It is strategic because it navigates a dynamic and contested information environment. It is strategic because tactics should be coherent and consistent within a strategy that evolves once the planners’ best intentions encounter the friction of real events.’⁹

Bolt and Haiden view StratCom as ‘a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’.¹⁰ Definitions based in US foreign policy narrow the scope of StratCom. For Paul, it represents ‘coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives’.¹¹ While for Farwell, it is ‘the use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interest or policies or to achieve objectives’.¹²

Paul and Farwell categorise what a practitioner does and says to achieve objectives as StratCom, but failing to act (non-action) can convey as much as any action taken. Both actions and non-actions can be ‘StratCom deeds’. The inclusion of inaction broadens the concept of StratCom, shifting it away from the visible and measurable and reinforcing the argument that StratCom is a holistic approach to communication.

Bolt suggests that StratCom ‘entails the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies [...] 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’.¹³ At least three aspects not addressed by Farwell

9 Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications* № 6, p. 4.

10 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology*, (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 46.

11 Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 17.

12 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. xviii– xix.

13 Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications* № 6, p. 4.

and Paul can be identified here. The first is ‘temporality’. StratCom is not a tool for ‘quick fixes’ in crises, but a method of coherent and sustained shaping and shifting of societal discourses, attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs, over an extended period.

The second aspect is the quality of ‘fluidity’/‘agility’. Strategy is also about maintaining balance in a dynamic environment with fluctuating ends, ways, and means.¹⁴ Recognising that attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours are not fixed¹⁵ is essential if the goal of StratCom is to have a moulding or influential capacity. Long-term objectives require perpetual realignment to remain in sync with fluid attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of intended audiences. Otherwise StratCom becomes message projection at unreceptive audiences.

The definitions proposed by Paul and Farwell suggest that whether something can be considered StratCom depends on who deploys it and how, but as Bolt points out, StratCom is not ‘some kind of hermetically sealed message projection directed at foreign states’.¹⁶ It involves reciprocity between ‘senders’ and ‘receivers’ and is never free from cross-communications. Intended audiences internalise ‘StratCom deeds’ and can ‘possibly become new messengers as narrators and further communicate the message’.¹⁷ ‘Internalisation’ can be considered a third aspect of StratCom, which contributes to it being a holistic, or mindset-oriented, approach to communications.

Memory, History, Narrativity, and Identity

If StratCom relies on audience engagement, then understanding the mutually dependent relationships between memory, history, narrativity, and identity, and the agency of these interweaving threads in individuals is essential. To achieve an objective, a StratCom practitioner must create a narrative that remains consistent but can be adapted to changing

14 Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, p. xi; Lykke Jr., ‘Toward an Understanding’, p. 3.

15 For an overview on approaches and definitions, see Gerd Bohner and Michaela Wanke, *Attitudes and Attitude Change* (London: Psychology Press, 2002).

16 Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications* N^o 6, p. 4.

17 Jan K. Hanska, ‘Storytelling or Non-Kinetic Weaponry? Strategic Communication from a Narratological Perspective’, *Journal of Information Warfare* Volume 14 N^o 1 (2015): 24–38, p. 26.

circumstances. Hayden White argues that narrativity is a natural form of human existence.¹⁸ Jerome Bruner asserts that human experience and memory are mainly organised in the form of narrative,¹⁹ 'our preferred [...] medium for expressing human aspirations and their vicissitudes, our own and those of others'.²⁰ This view of narrative as central to human experience implies that narrative is essential to an audience-centric view of StratCom.

Consequently, the human tendency to create narratives that explain the events of our lives naturally translates into writing histories and historiography. Reviewing White's work, David Campbell observes that narrative is the preferred and pragmatic historical style.²¹ White makes the controversial claim that 'there are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another'.²² If we accept that there are no scientific or rational reasons for preferring one way of construing meaning over another, the significance of narratives in historical representations arises 'out of a desire to have real events display coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life'.²³ Hence, narratives are central to individual human experience.

History and historiography have a complex relationship with memory. Pierre Nora makes a distinction between history and memory in writing:

History [...] is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is [...] a bond trying to use the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.²⁴

18 Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* Volume 7 N°- 1 (1980): 5–27.

19 Jerome S. Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* Volume 18 N° 2 (1991): 1–21, p. 4.

20 Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 89.

21 David Campbell, 'MetaBosnia: Narratives of the Bosnian War', *Review of International Studies* Volume 24 N° 2 (1998): 261–81, p. 261.

22 White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 75.

23 White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 24.

24 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Représentations* N° 26 (1989): 7–24, p. 8.

If history is a problematic representation of the past, it can be vulnerable to manipulation since representation relies heavily on those in control of representing it. Paul Connerton endorses this view:

[C]ontrol of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power; [...] hence the organisation of collective memory [...] is [...] one directly bearing on legitimisation, the question of the control and ownership of information being a crucial political issue.²⁵

Connerton addresses the very important notion of 'collective memory', introduced by Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs rejects the idea that an individual's unconscious serves as a depository for all past experiences.²⁶ People's memories are intertwined with their relationships with others, reinforcing certain memories within the family, the workplace, or any other group to which an individual belongs.²⁷ While an individual may believe their memory is personal, Halbwachs concludes that memory is collective. Even if solitary, the individual 'is the product of social interactions and views the world through collective constructs such as language'.²⁸ Finally, furthering the argument for interdependency between the notions of memory, history, narrativity, and identity, Anthony Smith argues 'no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation',²⁹ while Susan Stanford Friedman observes that 'identity is literally unthinkable without narrative'.³⁰

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25 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Themes in the Social Sciences series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 1.

26 Jeffery K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, 'Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices', *Annual Review of Sociology* Volume 24 (1998): 105–40.

27 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, The Heritage of Sociology series, Lewis A. Coser (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

28 Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, transl. by Sheena Caldwell, 'History, Memory and Forgetting: Political Implications', *RCCS Annual Review* Volume 1, N° 1 (2009): 78–79. [Accessed 13 July 2021].

29 Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 383.

30 Susan S. Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 8.

HISTORY TEXTBOOKS AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

The relevance of history textbooks has been addressed by scholars from varying perspectives. Textbooks are ‘conceived, designed and authored by real people with real interests’ and ‘published within the political and economic constraints of markets, resources and power’.³¹ Specifically, history textbooks used for (re)constructing usable pasts have been seen as the extended ‘arm of the state’.³² Crawford describes textbook knowledge as ‘far more than mere information, being located within clear cultural contexts; its meanings are changed and are used to justify behaviours and actions designed to have specific social consequences’.³³

Knežević and Čagorović suggest that ‘history textbooks are a reliable indicator of societal changes and of the ideology of the political elites’.³⁴ Perović notes that changes in discourse, seeking national, cultural, and political identity that are brought about by changes in power structures, will lead to changes in a state’s educational curriculum and in its history textbooks.³⁵ Therefore, history textbooks are reliable indicators of broader social changes and of the ideological profiling of political elites who project their own identity/understanding onto knowledge of the past. The history taught in schools is one the state legitimises, promoting specific belief systems and regulating the social order.³⁶ This can be termed ‘the legitimised historical narrative of the state’.³⁷

History textbooks are considered the primary site of nation-building myths.³⁸ Nation-building myths are the ‘essential building block of

31 Allan Luke, *Literacy, Textbooks, and Ideology: Postwar Literacy Instruction and the Mythology of Dick and Jane* (London & New York: Falmer Press, 1988), p. 27–29.

32 Elie Podeh, ‘History and Memory in the Israeli Educational System: The Portrayal of the Arab-Israeli Conflict in History Textbooks (1948–2000)’, *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past* Volume 12 N° 1 (2000): 65–100.

33 Keith Crawford, ‘Culture Wars: Serbian History Textbooks and the Construction of National Identity’, *History Education Research Journal* Volume 3 N° 2 (2003): 43–52, p. 47.

34 Saša Knežević and Nebojša Čagorović, ‘Ideological Changes in the History Textbooks of Montenegro’ in Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (eds), *Nationhood and Politicization of History in School Textbooks* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 43–60, p. 44.

35 Radovan, Perović ‘Nacionalna istorija u udžbenicima istorije za osnovnu školu [National history in history textbooks for primary school]’ *Matica* N° 71 (Autumn 2017): 47–66.

36 Michael W. Apple and Linda Christian-Smith (eds), *The Politics of the Textbook* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

37 Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990).

38 Tamara P. Trošt, ‘Remembering the Good: Constructing the Nation Through Joyful Memories in School Textbooks in the Former Yugoslavia’, *Memory Studies* Volume 12 N° 1 (2019): 27–45, p. 27.

nations, a key feature of national identity and a core element in nationalist politics'.³⁹ Many proposed definitions of 'nation' are unsatisfactory.⁴⁰ This article favours Anthony Smith's definition of nation as 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'.⁴¹ While contentious, this definition justifies the process of consolidating national history and myths as essential for anyone attempting to mould national identity.

National identity was previously viewed as relatively static.⁴² Recently, a growing consensus suggests that it can be conceptualised as a negotiation among a variety of forces both internal and external to a nation.⁴³ Pavlović writes, 'identity is a dynamic phenomenon whose manifestations can vary over time and even more so if such an identity is positioned on the periphery of a dominant cultural/political force'.⁴⁴ Building on the arguments of Friedman, McAdam, and Peters,⁴⁵ Brudny defines national identity as 'a set of attitudes, beliefs, and commitments regarding qualification for membership, the location of territorial boundaries, and the content of political, social, economic, and cultural arrangements that are best suited for a given nation'.⁴⁶

The debate over what constitutes a nation offers many perspectives, including primordialism, instrumentalism, perennialism, and

39 Geneviève Zubrzycki, 'History and the National Sensorium: Making Sense of Polish Mythology', *Qualitative Sociology* Volume 34 N°1 (2011): 21–57, p. 22.

40 Anna Triandafyllidou, 'National Identity and the "Other"', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Volume 21 N° 4 (1998): 593–612.

41 Smith, *National Identity*, Ethnonationalism in Comparative Perspective series (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), p. 14.

42 Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 13.

43 Frank Louis Rusciano, 'The Construction of National Identity: A 23-Nation Study', *Political Research Quarterly* Volume 56 N° 3 (2003): 361–66, p. 361.

44 Srđa Pavlović, 'Literature, Social Poetics, and Identity Construction in Montenegro', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* Volume 17 N° 1 (2003): 131–65, p. 143.

45 Debra Friedman and Doug McAdam, 'Collective Identity and Activism' in Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 157; Bernhard Peters, 'A New Look at "National Identity": How should we think about 'collective' or 'national identities'? Are there two types of national identities? Does Germany have an ethnic identity, and is it different?', *European Journal of Sociology* Volume 43 N° 1 (2002): 3–32, p. 16.

46 Yitzhak M. Brudny, 'Myths and National Identity Choices in Post-Communist Russia' in Gérard Bouchard (ed.) *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents* (New York: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013): 133–56, p. 135.

modernism.⁴⁷ For primordialists, ethnic groups and identities are natural and have existed at all times in human history.⁴⁸ Instrumentalists hold that the nation is a socially constructed phenomenon.⁴⁹ Considering the emergence of nations, scholars have proposed two timeframes. Perennialists perceive them as ‘enduring, inveterate, century-long, even millennial phenomena’, but not part of the natural order,⁵⁰ while modernists see them as novel and products of the process of modernisation with no roots in the past.⁵¹ In critiquing the modernists, Smith notes the ‘systematic failure’ of the modernist approach ‘to accord any weight to the pre-existing cultures and ethnic ties of the nations that emerged in the modern epoch, thereby precluding any understanding of the popular roots and widespread appeal of nationalism’.⁵² This dissatisfaction has led to conceptualising an ethno-symbolic approach.

Ethno-symbolists claim that today’s nations are rooted in previous ethnicities and pre-modern identities. For them, the most important element of a nation is the existence of common myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of the ethnic heritages upon which modern national identities are reconstituted in each generation.⁵³ Collective memory was previously emphasised because ‘memory, almost by definition, is integral to cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities’.⁵⁴ Furthermore, as nations are a historical phenomenon, historians have played a central role in the ‘delineation of the nation and in the rediscovery, transmission and analysis of its ethnic heritage’.⁵⁵

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47 Daniele Conversi, ‘Mapping the Field: Theories of Nationalism and the Ethnosymbolic Approach’ in Athena S. Leoussi and Steven Grosby (eds) *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations* (2006): 15–30, p. 15.

48 Ibid., p. 15.

49 Michael Hechter and D. Okamoto, ‘Political Consequences of Minority Group Formation’, *Annual Review of Political Science* Volume 4 N° 1 (2001): 189–215, p. 193; Conversi, ‘Mapping the Field’, p. 17.

50 Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 5; Conversi, ‘Mapping the Field’, p. 18.

51 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Smith, *Myths and Memories*, p. 6.

52 Smith, *Myths and Memories*, p. 9.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., p. 10.

55 Ibid.

For Smith the most important factor of historical stability for a nation is its 'mythomoteur',⁵⁶ as without it a 'group cannot define itself to itself or to others, and cannot inspire or guide collective action'.⁵⁷ George Schopflin argues that myths are sets of beliefs, 'usually put forth as a narrative', that concentrate around perceptions 'about the ways in which communities regard certain propositions as normal and natural and others as perverse and alien'.⁵⁸ Duncan Bell proposes that myths are 'constructed, shaped, [perhaps] by deliberate manipulation and intentional action or perhaps through the particular resonance of works of literature and art'.⁵⁹ Consensual themes emerge despite divergent perspectives. In short, myths are selected to serve a specific purpose, reinforced through stories or narratives, and dictate what is considered normal or natural in the given social order.

National myths are affirmed through various channels, but history textbooks are often overlooked in this context. School is one of the primary environments where young people develop sentiments about nationhood. However, if textbooks can be adjusted according to the changing ideologies of political elites,⁶⁰ how national myths are represented and selected is also malleable. Any attempt to reconstruct, adjust, reshape, modify, or narrativise myths disparately should be viewed as an attempt to do the same to national identity. At least two conclusions may be derived from these assumptions. First, if national identity is 'a set of attitudes, beliefs and commitments' and StratCom entails 'changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects',⁶¹ national identity is inherently susceptible to StratCom. Second, if myths are the building blocks of national identity,⁶² their suppression or reappropriation according to a desired national present and future, must also be considered StratCom.

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56 Meaning 'their myths and symbols, their historical memories and central values' (Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p. 15).

57 Ibid., p. 24–25.

58 George Schopflin, 'The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths' in *Myths and Nationhood* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 19–35, p. 19.

59 Duncan S. A. Bell, 'Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity', *The British Journal of Sociology* Volume 54 N° 1 (2003): 63–81, p. 75.

60 Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (eds), *Nationhood and Politicization of History in School Textbooks* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 44.

61 Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* N° 6, p. 4.

62 Zubrzycki, 'History and the National Sensorium', p. 22.

A Note on History Textbooks in Yugoslav Montenegro

Following its annexation to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918, Montenegrin identity was marginalised, subordinated to a greater Yugoslav identity. Consequently, Montenegrin national history was considered to be the same as that of all Yugoslavian peoples.⁶³ After the creation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1945, socialist ideology prevailed over national identity. Attempts to create a common Yugoslav national identity resulted in the consolidation of diverging national histories and myths.⁶⁴ The slogan 'Brotherhood and Unity' was the guiding value of post-war inter-ethnic policy for the Communist Party of Yugoslavia; national history and myths coalesced around this slogan. In alignment with Smith's definition of nation and its requisite 'mythomoteur',⁶⁵ those in power sought to adjust national and ethnic histories in service of a desired sense of national and historical stability.

Even though every Yugoslav state was allowed to publish its own textbooks after the 1950s, the majority of those used in Montenegro were still being written and printed in Belgrade, Serbia. The stated aim of the Montenegrin education system was to 'develop pride, love and loyalty toward the national homeland; strengthening brotherhood and unity and the legacy of the people's anti-fascist struggle; creating hatred towards enemies of the homeland and all others who work against the legacy of the people's liberation struggle'.⁶⁶ Consequently, history teaching in Montenegro was based on communist ideology. This supports the argument that political elites play an important role in education. While the people of former Yugoslavia may not consider themselves Yugoslavs today, the fact that a Yugoslav national identity was fabricated by leaders who wanted to avoid intra-ethnic conflict among its diverse republics demonstrates the involvement of political elites in constructing national identity.

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⁶³ Knežević and Čagorović, 'Ideological Changes', p. 47.

⁶⁴ Ognjenović and Jozelić, *Nationhood and Politicization of History*, p. 11.

⁶⁵ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p. 15; Smith, *National Identity*, p. 14.

⁶⁶ Knežević and Čagorović, 'Ideological Changes', p. 46, quoting a passage from the national curriculum published by the Ministry of Education of the Peoples Republic of Montenegro in 1948 (p. 105).

METHODOLOGY

The Montenegrin education system today consists of (i) pre-school, (ii) primary, (iii) general secondary, (iv/v) upper secondary vocational or non-tertiary, (vi) and higher education.⁶⁷ Only primary education is compulsory and cost-free for all children aged 6 to 15.⁶⁸ Before the general education reform that commenced in 2000, primary education lasted eight years; in the reformed system it has been extended by a year.⁶⁹ The reform activities that went on for nine years were of a 'developmental nature' and 'an integral part of the process of [Montenegro's] social, political and economic transition'⁷⁰ in light of a decision to 'harmonise' the education system with the policies of the European Union.⁷¹ This too can be seen as politics influencing education.

To examine more closely how a country's political values are reflected in educational materials, history textbooks for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades⁷² will be analysed comparatively, thematically, and discursively. The textbooks were written in the language native to Montenegrins (and in Cyrillic script), hence any excerpts provided are my translations. In comparing these textbooks, my aim is to locate significant changes not only in substance (what is taught) but also in discourse (how it is taught). These textbooks were selected because they cover world history from the 16th to the 21st century, the period modernist theorists claim the 'idea of the nation' emerged. According to the ethnosymbolic approach, myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritage that predate modernity are also crucial to national identity construction but, given the limited scope of this article, our analysis focuses on the period mentioned.

67 European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) Eurydice Network, 'Montenegro Overview' [Accessed 7 January 2021].

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.; Anon (2005) 'Reform of educational system in Montenegro', in *Intervention by Serbia and Montenegro*, a document from the first South-East Europe sub-regional workshop on the implementation of the UNECE strategy for Education and Sustainable Development on 28 November 2005 in Athens, Greece, p. 3.

70 Eurydice, 'Montenegro Overview'; Veselin Mićanović, and Dijana Vučković, 'Some Aspects of the Primary Education Reform Process in Montenegro from the Perspective of Teachers', *Journal of Educational and Social Research* Volume 4 N° 4 (2014): 80–87.

71 Eurydice, 'Montenegro Overview'.

72 Montenegro's education system went through a series of reforms beginning in 2000, when primary school education was extended from eight to nine years. Hence the textbooks chosen for this study published in 1997 and 2001 are written for seventh- and eighth-grade pupils but the corresponding textbooks published in 2008 are for eighth- and ninth-grade pupils.

In Montenegro, the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids (ZUNS)⁷³ is the sole producer and distributor of textbooks. ZUNS generates a single textbook per subject per grade, making this process highly centralised. Until the 1999/2000 academic year, Montenegrin schools used modified editions of Serbian history textbooks.⁷⁴ The first primary school history textbook published by ZUNS was the fifth-grade textbook for the school year 2000/2001. ZUNS history textbooks for seventh and eighth grade came out the following academic year.⁷⁵ In the section that follows, the history textbooks for grade seven and grade eight that were published in 1997, 2001, and 2008 are compared and analysed. These years of publication were chosen because they represent significant changes in Montenegro's political environment.

In January 1989, capitulating to pressure from Milošević's *Anti-bureaucratic Revolution*⁷⁶ the old leadership of the League of Communists of Montenegro resigned.⁷⁷ A new cadre of young leaders—Momir Bulatović, Milo Đukanović, and Svetozar Marović—was elected to lead the party, which was renamed the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in 1991.⁷⁸ On 1st March 1992, a referendum was held on the question of independence; this resulted in Montenegro joining the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1997, Prime Minister Đukanović began to distance himself from Milošević's politics and publicly deemed him an 'obsolete politician',⁷⁹ while the President, Momir Bulatović, remained loyal to Milošević. This conflict led to a split within the DPS leadership. In October of 1997, Đukanović won against Bulatović to become the new President of Montenegro. This was the first signal of a Montenegrin

.....
73 Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva

74 Perović, 'Nacionalna istorija'.

75 Ibid.

76 In 1988–89, popular unrest in the wake of Yugoslav President Tito's death led to a series of street protests and rallies made up predominantly of industrial workers, Kosovo Serbs, and their allies, strongly supported by Slobodan Milošević, which resulted in the overthrow of the governments of the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo, and of Montenegro. These events were named the 'antibureaucratic revolution' because this was allegedly a revolt against 'corrupt' bureaucratic governing structures. It was also a counter-mobilisation against the Kosovo Albanians. See Nebojša Vladislavljević, 'Introduction: The Significance of the Antibureaucratic Revolution' in *Serbia's Antibureaucratic Revolution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), p. 1–24.

77 Established and in power in Montenegro since 1948.

78 Florian Bieber, 'Montenegrin Politics since the Disintegration of Yugoslavia', in Florian Bieber (ed.), *Montenegro in Transition: Problems of Identity and Statehood* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003), p. 11–42, p. 17.

79 Dragoslav Grujić, 'Fleksibilna britva [Flexible razor]' *Vreme [Time]*, 14 November 2002. [Accessed 8 October 2021].

separation from Serbia.⁸⁰ History textbooks published in 1997 were selected for analysis because these were the last editions approved for use before Montenegro's political course shifted away from Serbia.

Despite the independence project edging towards majority approval, it was not well-received by the international community in October 2000.⁸¹ While talks regarding future relations between Montenegrins and Serbs continued, Montenegrin parliamentary elections took place in April 2001. A coalition between the DPS and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) 'presented the program of an independent state of Montenegro and promised a referendum on this issue if re-elected'.⁸² The opposition formed a coalition offering a unionist vision of Montenegro's future.⁸³ A minority government was formed among the DPS, the SDP, and the Liberal Alliance of Montenegro (LSGC). Soon thereafter DPS announced their political goal was to integrate the Montenegrin state and society into Europe.⁸⁴ In Brussels, however, officials were advocating the creation of a union between Serbia and Montenegro and presented this as the fastest route towards EU membership.⁸⁵ With its promise of independence and EU integration, the DPS/SDP/LSCG coalition emerged triumphant from the election, so 2001 marks another crossroads in Montenegro's political path. The history textbooks published in 2001/2002 were selected for this reason.

The path to independence was suspended in March 2002 when the Belgrade Agreement was signed, initiating the creation of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Unwilling to abandon its path toward independence, Montenegro insisted on a 'temporality clause' that read: 'upon the expiration of a three-year period, the member states shall be entitled to [...] withdrawal from the state union'.⁸⁶ While officially

80 Ivan Vuković, 'The Post-communist Political Transition of Montenegro: Democratization Prior to Europeanization', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* Volume 1N° 2 (2010): 59–77, p. 64.

81 Vuković, 'The Post-communist Political Transition', p. 68; International Crisis Group, Briefing N° 42 'Montenegro's Referendum', 30 May 2006, p. 2. [Accessed 8 October 2021].

82 Vuković, 'The Post-communist Political Transition', p. 67.

83 For election results see Nohlen & Stöver, 2010.

84 Vuković, 'The Post-communist Political Transition', p. 68.

85 Timothy Edmunds, 'Illiberal Resilience in Serbia', *Journal of Democracy* Volume 20 N° 1 (2009): 128–42, p. 136.

86 *Starting Points for the Restructuring of Relations between Serbia and Montenegro (Belgrade Agreement)*, 2002, p. 1.

Belgrade acknowledged the Montenegrins' right to decide on their statehood, the reality was entirely different; there were many reports of coercion and pressure being exerted on both unionists and pro-independence activists as the three-year period neared expiration.⁸⁷ On 21st May 2006, 86.49% of Montenegro's voters cast their ballots with 55.53% choosing independence.⁸⁸ In 2008, Montenegro officially applied for EU membership, and in 2010 the Council issued a favourable opinion on Montenegro's application, confirming it as a candidate country.⁸⁹ The year 2008 marks another political crossroads in both foreign and national policy regarding a newly independent Montenegro, so the textbooks published in this year are also included in the analysis.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF 7TH- AND 8TH-GRADE MONTENEGRIN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

Seventh Grade

The 1997 textbook

The seventh-grade Montenegrin history textbook from 1997 was an adaptation of a textbook developed for the Serbian education system. Montenegrin national history makes up 18.75% of the content. The history of Europe and the rest of the world together with ideological (mostly socialist) content accounts for another 39.3%. The textbook includes only 73 visual elements—predominately black-and-white sketches—and has no real-life images of objects, people, or events. There are no illustrations of flags, emblems, or other national symbols.

The foreword states that pupils will discover how the capitalist social order came into being and how it developed throughout the 19th century and will learn about the crisis that befell it leading to World War I.⁹⁰ This introduction sets the theme for the textbook, which presents many

.....
87 International Crisis Group, Briefing N° 42, p. 4.

88 Ibid., p. 6.

89 European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, '[Montenegro: candidate membership status](#)'. [Accessed 12 January 2022].

90 Milo Strugar and Milutin Perović (eds), *Istorija 7: Za VII razred osnovne škole*, 13. izd. [History 7: For the 7th Grade of Primary School, 13th ed.] (Titograd: Zavod za Školstvo [Department of Education], 1997), p. 4

historical developments from a perspective critical of capitalism and praising socialism. The textbook features excerpts from Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*.

The authors spend fourteen pages on the First and Second Serb Uprisings, highlighting the importance of these events in the history of the 'Serb people'.⁹¹ Montenegrin national history during the reign of Petar I Petrović (1782–1830) begins on page 49; the section emphasises state-related developments but says little about the socio-cultural dimension of Montenegrin society. The reign of Petar II Petrović Njegoš (1830–1861) is covered in five pages with a similar emphasis on conflict, foreign policy, and strengthening state power. The authors write that the relationship between Montenegro and Serbia improved dramatically during this period with many Montenegrins migrating to Serbia. Njegoš is remembered for sending numerous students from Montenegro to be educated in Serbia at the expense of the Serbian government.⁹²

The textbook then goes on to discuss the '1848/49 revolutions in Europe and of South Slavs and their neighbours', 'changes in the capitalist market and society in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century', 'the First International' and 'the Second International' socialist labour organisations with ideologically loaded discourse.⁹³ In discussing the turn of the 20th century, the textbook emphasises 'the position of Serbs in Austro-Hungary', the development of a Serbian 'national culture, [the] Matica Srpska [cultural-scientific institution], and the development of education' in Serbia.⁹⁴ The Matica institution is considered Serbia's most significant cultural achievement; it was founded to nurture Serbian literature and science and to publish books in the Serbian language.⁹⁵

The language of the textbook mimics that of Serbian national mythology, using expressions such as 'the heroic defence of the Commune' and

.....
⁹¹ Ibid. (1997), p. 43.

⁹² Ibid., p. 56.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 68, 73, 77, 83.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 92–94.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 94.

praising the ‘famous Serbian patriot’ Sava Tekelija; it tells how the Serbs ‘strongly oppos[ed] inequality and national pressure from the leading strata in the Habsburg monarchy’, and how ‘despite unfavourable conditions [...] true [Serb] industrial enterprises’ began to form.⁹⁶ When recounting events relating to Serbia and Montenegro, Serbia is given primacy and its path is distinguished from events unfolding in other South Slav nations, indicating that Serbia and Montenegro represent a single entity. In the discussion of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, the participation of Serbia and Montenegro is presented as a joint enterprise, establishing that the two kingdoms went to war together and that the wars were of ‘significant importance’ for both.⁹⁷ The reign of Prince Nikola (1860–1918) is presented as the period when relations between Serbia and Montenegro deteriorated as a result of his absolutism.⁹⁸ The authors claim that relations between the two states improved around the time of Montenegro’s annexation, the Balkan Wars, and the beginning of WWI due to pressure from the ‘broadest national masses’.⁹⁹

The 2001 textbook

The first wholly Montenegrin seventh-grade history textbook was published in 2001 and approved for official use in 2002. Montenegrin national history comprises 36% of the content and the volume includes 163 visual elements of varying kinds. Unlike the 1997 edition, which emphasises the unity of Serbia and Montenegro, the 2001 textbook distinguishes Montenegrin national history from that of Serbia. By presenting many instances in which the Montenegrins overcome devastation, impoverishment, and illness in order to ‘triumph in a relentless battle for freedom’, the textbook authors establish a narrative of victimhood.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the language can be described as emotionally charged at times and there is frequent use of terms such

.....
⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 80, 94, 95, 101.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 136.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 124.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁰⁰ Jasmina Đorđević and R. Popović (eds), *Istorija 7: Za VII razred osnovne škole [History 7: For the seventh grade of primary school]* (Podgorica: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva [Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids], 2001), p. 26.

as ‘firing-up’, ‘igniting’, ‘tirelessly working’, and ‘tragic’. Although the authors have no lived memories of the events they describe, the language they use is subjectively narrative.

While the First and Second Serb Uprisings are elaborated over fourteen pages in the 1997 textbook, the 2001 textbook summarises these events in four paragraphs. Another difference is in the treatment of Prince Danilo; in 2001, the authors write that he ‘did not give up on affirming Montenegro’s sovereignty and independence’,¹⁰¹ whereas in previous textbooks his reign was not accorded the same determined character. Other topics extensively discussed in the 2001 textbook but not in the 1997 edition include the creation of Montenegrin cultural institutions and literary works and the Muslim and Catholic populations of Montenegro. These sections project a more culturally attuned sense of Montenegrin national history, which translates into a more inclusive and desirable Montenegrin national identity.

A section titled ‘The Politics of Serbia Towards Montenegro’ covers another topic that received no mention in the 1997 edition.¹⁰² The authors describe how in 1860 the Serbian government and royalty worked against Prince Nikola by sending agents to Montenegro to infiltrate influential circles and how the Prince allegedly expelled them once he realised their aim was to subordinate his country.¹⁰³ The authors contend that Prince Nikola’s autocratic style of rule served as a premise for the Serbian bourgeoisie to work for his removal and that a number of Montenegrin students educated in Serbia fell under the influence of powerful individuals whose goal was annexation. Back in Montenegro, these students disseminated ‘Serbian thought’, celebrated the ‘Nemanjić oath’,¹⁰⁴ and promoted medieval Serbian myths, the premise of which was that Montenegro was part of Greater Serbia and that Montenegrins were ‘the best of the Serbs’.¹⁰⁵

.....
101 Ibid., p. 66.

102 Ibid., p. 87.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid., p. 114.

105 Jozo Tomasevich, *The Chetniks: War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

The final chapter of the textbook portrays Montenegro's involvement in the Balkan Wars as distinct from Serbia's, and presents the Montenegrin people as dignified and glorious as they persevered in battle despite harsh conditions and a paucity of critical resources.¹⁰⁶ Throughout the book images of national symbols such as Montenegrin soldiers marching under the Montenegrin flag, multiple versions of the flag, Montenegrin money, Prince Nikola's 1905 constitution, old Montenegrin houses, the epic battle of Vučiji Do, the Montenegrin magazine *Voice of a Montenegrin*, and other illustrations serve to visualise nation-building mythology and recreate the national history of a culturally and historically distinct Montenegro.

The 2008 textbook

The 2008 textbook is the second edition of the first seventh-grade history textbook published after the independence referendum. This textbook continues the trend of increasing the number of visual elements and features 216 images—53 more than in 2001 and 143 more than in 1997. Montenegrin national history content makes up 42.1% or 6.1% more than in 2001 and 23.35% more than in the 1997 textbook. While the language used is at times descriptive, it is not as ideologically charged as the language of the 1997 textbook. In the discussion of tribal societies under Ottoman rule, Montenegrins are presented as powerful and worthy of respect as 'it was a rare occurrence that an occupied land would gain autonomy from the Ottomans'.¹⁰⁷ Events demonstrating Montenegrin bravery and resistance are repeatedly emphasised. For example, one passage describes how the Montenegrins defended themselves from Ottoman attacks, asserting their freedom and independence, offered 'fierce resistance', and scored 'magnificent Montenegrin successes [in the battle of Grahovac]'.¹⁰⁸

106 Đorđević and R. Popović, *Istorija 7* (2001), p. 122–25.

107 Andrijašević, Ž. M. et al., *Istorija. 8: Za osmi razred devetogodišnje osnovne škole*. 2. Izd. [History 8: For the eighth grade of primary school, 2nd edn] (Podgorica: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva [Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids], 2008), p. 21–22.

108 Ibid., p. 33, 75.

In previous textbooks, Montenegrin rulers from the country's Prince-Bishopric period (1516–1851) were called *vladike* [bishops]. In the 2008 textbook the authors refer to them as *mitropoliti* [archbishops], the highest-ranking official in the Orthodox Church after the patriarch, indicating that whoever ruled over the state was also head of the church. While there may be many reasons for this change in terminology, one explanation might be the desire to affirm the existence of an autocephalous Montenegrin church—to date a highly debated issue in Montenegro. In fact, the authors reiterate that from the end of 17th century the Metropolitanate of Cetinje [the historical capital of Montenegro and still an important cultural city] was 'completely independent (autocephalous), and its leaders elected by Montenegrins themselves'.¹⁰⁹

Montenegrin state affairs are discussed in all of the textbooks, but in the 2008 edition the theme of strengthening state power emerges more frequently. The authors write that 'with the adoption of [Prince Danilo's] Legal Code and the establishment of the Supreme Court [in 1855], the basis for the creation of a modern Montenegrin state was laid'.¹¹⁰ Petar II Petrović Njegoš is said to have introduced three new institutions of state power as well as the printing press in 1838.¹¹¹ The details (colours, shapes, emblems, initials) of the national symbols created during Prince Danilo's reign are discussed in detail.¹¹²

Finally, Montenegrin national history is discussed in contrast to other South Slavic countries, most frequently Serbia. There is mention of how, in 1862 'Serbia tried to use a secret agreement to oblige Montenegro to cooperate' and that Serbia, 'as a larger and more powerful state' sought to subordinate Montenegro but Prince Nikola wanted the two countries to be equal.¹¹³ The authors of the 2008 textbook include a passage describing how Belgrade newspapers published 'malicious fabrications' about Prince Nikola and his family and the circumstances in Montenegro, inciting calls 'for the violent overthrow of the Montenegrin

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¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 74.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 87, 90.

ruler' that were encouraged by the Serbian government 'pursuing an anti-Montenegrin policy'.¹¹⁴ The authors of the 2001 textbook briefly mention these events, but they are not included in the 1997 textbook. The last ten pages of the 2008 textbook feature a total of twenty-one photographs of King Nikola and his family, the construction of a new aeroplane, and the first Montenegrin railroads.¹¹⁵

Eighth Grade

The 1997 textbook

The eighth-grade Montenegrin history textbook from 1997 covers the period from WWI to the establishment of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. The visual aspect is limited to 81 illustrations. None of the 27 sections of the textbook is dedicated to Montenegrin history exclusively. The textbook presents Montenegro's national history through the principle of 'us [Serbia and Montenegro] versus them [others]'. In the section on WWI, the authors claim the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was used as a 'motive to attack Serbia', and that the state had 'nothing to do with organizing the assassination' and was accused unjustly.¹¹⁶ Montenegro is described as coming to Serbia's defence in WWI and as having fought for its freedom alongside Serbia.¹¹⁷ The soldiers of the two armies are praised as 'excellent', 'heroes', 'helping brothers', 'unstoppable', 'crushing [the enemy]', and 'patriotically defending the native [Serbian] breast'.¹¹⁸

In a section entitled 'The State in Occupied Serbia and Montenegro 1914–1918',¹¹⁹ the authors contend that the Corfu Declaration¹²⁰ asserted the 'need to free our peoples from Austro-Hungary and to unify

.....
114 Ibid., p. 120.

115 Ibid., p. 124–33.

116 D. Živković and L. Mladenović-Maksimović, *Istorija za 8. razred osnovne škole* [History for Primary School Grade 8] (Podgorica: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva [Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids], 1997), p. 8.

117 Ibid., p. 8, 13.

118 Ibid., p. 19–25.

119 Ibid., p. 25.

120 Signed on July 20th 1917, on the Greek island of Corfu, between Nikola Pašić (the prime minister of Serbia) and delegates of the Yugoslav Committee (a London-based group comprising of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, with Ante Trumbić as president), the Corfu Declaration set the premise for the creation of a unified Yugoslav state (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) after the First World War.

Montenegro with Serbia in one state' and maintain that the 'question of Montenegro' was not contemplated at the time because 'the Serbian government considered it an internal question'.¹²¹ Furthermore, the authors propose that in 1918 the Montenegrin people were dissatisfied with King Nikola's reign and set about 'freeing' themselves and uniting with Serbia.¹²² They claim this goal was facilitated by 'the homogeneity of the two peoples' and the 'natural need for them to unite';¹²³ public sentiment in favour of annexation is depicted as 'overwhelming'.¹²⁴

Belgrade is portrayed as 'the capital of the country and the centre of scientific and cultural institutions and charitable organisations', while Montenegro is simply regarded as underdeveloped¹²⁵—'Montenegro and what is Macedonia today, were falling behind in comparison to Serbia'.¹²⁶ When Yugoslavia was occupied, the authors write, its peoples, 'especially Serb and Montenegrin, not only lost their freedom and independence, but were exposed to [...] killing in the most brutal way'.¹²⁷ Such language evokes sorrow for the injustices done to the 'unprotected peoples' of Serbia and Montenegro.¹²⁸

The Independent State of Croatia is described using stern language; it is called an 'Ustasha state'¹²⁹ and a 'satellite to Germany and Italy'. Readers are reminded that the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy supported Ustasha fascist politics.¹³⁰ In a section titled 'Death Camp—Jasenovac', the Jasenovac concentration camp is described as 'the largest execution site in the Balkans', adding that 'the Serbian people called it a death camp, which it really was'.¹³¹ The execution of men, women, children, and Orthodox clergy is described in detail; this was done in 'the most ferocious ways, with knives, axes, mallets, iron rods, shot and burned

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121 D. Živković and L. Mladenović-Maksimović, *Istorija* 8 (1997), p. 29.

122 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

123 *Ibid.*

124 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

125 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

126 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

127 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

128 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

129 'Ustashe' were a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist organisation and movement, whose ideology was based on Nazi racial theory, founded in 1929 and 'formally' banned in 1945.

130 D. Živković and L. Mladenović-Maksimović, *Istorija* 8 (1997), p. 79.

131 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

in the crematorium, hanged, tortured with hunger, thirst, and cold'.¹³² Many individuals are praised as heroes and 'Serbdom saviours', 'fathers and saviours of Serbdom', evoking Serbian national myths of a dignified ancestry.¹³³

In a section on the 13th of July Uprising in Montenegro, the authors stress that the Communist Party of Yugoslavia 'was the only organizer and power that the people believed in'.¹³⁴ Draža Mihailović's Chetnik movement, a Serb royalist and guerrilla nationalist movement formed in 1941, is also discussed in detail. 'The [Chetnik organisation ...] sought to restore the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and create a "homogeneous Serbia" within it'.¹³⁵ As a Serb royalist and nationalist movement that wished to create a Greater Serbia, it naturally challenged the legitimacy of Montenegro's state status.

The statement 'NATO remained the only force (under the influence of the United States and the Security Council) that was "protecting peace", in fact only implementing US policy abroad'¹³⁶ reflects an unfavourable attitude towards Western powers. The authors add:

[I]n 1991, under pressure from a united Germany and under the pretext of providing "good services" in the Yugoslav dispute, the European Community wholeheartedly supported the violent separation of Slovenia, Croatia, and then Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus directly contributing to the wrecking of the SFRY.¹³⁷

The choice of the word 'wrecking' instead of the more neutral 'breakup' implies (un)intentional third-party involvement. The dissolution of Yugoslavia is briefly characterised as a 'well prepared "scenario" created and facilitated by some foreign actors'. The passage also mentions the injustice of casting Serbia and Serbs as aggressors and reminds readers

.....
132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., p. 81–82.

134 Ibid., p. 86.

135 Ibid., p. 92.

136 Ibid., p. 135.

137 Ibid., p. 138.

of the sanctions imposed on Serbia as repercussions of the war.¹³⁸ Wars that occurred because of the break-up escape mention.

The 2001 textbook

The eighth-grade history textbook published in 2001 contains 263 visuals, 182 more than the previous edition, including numerous Montenegrin national symbols. Montenegrin national history comprises 18.5% of the content. This textbook is more or less ideologically neutral and significantly more favourable towards traditionally Western countries than the previous edition.¹³⁹ A certain ‘distancing’ from Serbia comes across in the passage describing the onset of WWI. Here the authors write that the assassins of Franz Ferdinand were members of a ‘patriotic organisation, Young Bosnia, which was associated with certain political and military circles in Serbia’,¹⁴⁰ whereas in the 1997 textbook Serbia was portrayed as unfairly blamed for the assassination and the perpetrators as in no way affiliated with Serbia. This narrative of distancing from Serbia can be found throughout the textbook. When discussing the post-WWI Podgorica Assembly, the authors allege that members of the Main Committee for National Unification were mostly citizens of Serbia and that their task was to ‘prepare an assembly that would overthrow the Montenegrin king and declare unification’.¹⁴¹ The 1997 textbook mentions some opposition to unification, but does not state, for example, that the new authorities ‘tried to stifle resistance with terror’ and wreaked revenge on the insurgents by ‘setting houses on fire, looting the population, and imprisoning them’.¹⁴²

In the section on WWI, the Montenegrin army is portrayed as persevering, a difference from the previous textbook. The authors praise the Montenegrin army, which ‘firmly held the front in 1915’, but write that ‘the Serbian army withdrew, avoiding engagement in a decisive battle but also refusing to

.....
138 Ibid., p. 157–59.

139 Slavko Burzanović and Jasmina Đorđević (eds), *Istorija 8: Za VIII razred osnovne škole* [History 8: For the eighth grade of primary school] (Podgorica: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva [Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids], 2001), p. 19, 36, 37, 128–135.

140 Ibid., p. 8.

141 Ibid., p. 66.

142 Ibid., p. 66–68.

capitulate'.¹⁴³ In contrast to the 1997 textbook, the authors claim that the 13th of July Uprising in Montenegro was not organised solely by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia but that they were helped by 'other patriotic forces'.¹⁴⁴ The perseverance and bravery of Montenegrins is reaffirmed in the section on WWII, where the authors write that 'Montenegro's contribution to the anti-fascist struggle exceeded its size and population'—around 35,000 Montenegrin fighters participated in the final struggle to liberate Yugoslavia.¹⁴⁵

In another passage on WWI, the authors emphasise that Montenegro, its people, and King Nikola were betrayed by Serbia and its government. The betrayal narrative comes across when the authors write that 'King Nikola did not understand the intent of the Serb ruling circles for Montenegro to see the end of the war without an army', implying that the annexation had already been planned before the beginning of the war.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, they write that 'the Serbian government was against the renewal of the Montenegrin army', 'Serbian diplomacy counted on the creation of a Greater Serbia', and '[t]he Serbian government launched a propaganda offensive against the Montenegrin king and government [...and] created a special propaganda department that dealt with Montenegro'.¹⁴⁷ These interpretations did not appear in the 1997 textbook.

Regarding Montenegro's annexation, the authors write that Serbia established its own military administration in Montenegro and disarmed the People's Army, and that the *Komite* ['comitatus' or freedom fighters] financed the 'the Montenegrin Committee but kept its members away from the Yugoslav question'. They go on to say that 'in Montenegro, dissatisfaction with the manner of unification culminated in a popular uprising [the Christmas Rebellion] one month later'.¹⁴⁸ This directly challenges the claims of the 1997 edition that the desire for unification was widespread throughout Montenegrin society and that there was no significant resistance.

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143 Ibid., p. 21.

144 Ibid., p. 98.

145 Ibid., p. 103.

146 Ibid., p. 26.

147 Ibid., p. 27–32.

148 Ibid., p. 29, 32, 33.

A narrative of Montenegrin victimhood can also be found throughout the 2001 textbook: 'Montenegrin people were living in hunger and feeding themselves with tree bark, cooked nettles and other herbs' due to a lack of support from their allies; they 'lost about 20,000 people from war, famine and epidemics' with '15,000 people passing through the camps in Hungary, Austria and Albania', among them women and children; and during military occupations Montenegrin society was 'exposed to ruthless exploitation and looting by the occupation authorities'.¹⁴⁹

Another difference is that this textbook signals greater inclusivity and a more nuanced understanding of national differences in the sections on 'Albania and Albanians' and 'Cultural Opportunities for Albanians in Montenegro'.¹⁵⁰ Recognising the importance of the national question in Yugoslavia, the authors write that 'the unresolved national issue was a source of great instability', that 'those who ruled the state refused to accept the fact that the state is multinational', and that 'most national minorities in Yugoslavia were disenfranchised'.¹⁵¹ In contrast to the 1997 textbook, the 2001 textbook negatively portrays Draža Mihailović's Chetnik movement and their crimes against Muslim populations in Yugoslavia during WWII.¹⁵² Instances of ethnic cleansing that occurred during the Balkan Wars in the early 1990s are described in detail and accompanied by photographs of displaced populations.¹⁵³ An unfavourable attitude towards 1990s Yugoslavia emerges in a discussion of national minorities that states the 'school [...] had ideological goals. It was a means of creating awareness that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were three tribes of one Yugoslav people. Other South Slavic peoples are not mentioned.'¹⁵⁴

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149 Ibid., p. 28–29.

150 Ibid., p. 40, 51, 126.

151 Ibid., p. 55.

152 Ibid., p. 89.

153 Ibid., p. 122.

154 Ibid., p. 64.

The 2008 textbook

This is the third edition of the 2001 textbook approved for use in 2002. Differences in content are not as extensive as between 1997 and 2001. It features 275 visual elements, just 12 more than the 2001 edition, and Montenegrin national history comprises 18% of the content. Similar themes of Montenegrin bravery and perseverance are apparent, as is the victimhood narrative. The authors write that even though the Montenegrin *Komite* 'were not numerous, they posed a constant danger to the occupying authorities'.¹⁵⁵ Victimhood is evoked in various descriptive passages, such as 'abandoned and lonely, without the help of allies, Montenegro could not resist the attacks for long'; 'famine appeared as early as the winter of 1915/1916 largely as a result of inadequate Allied aid'; and 'the Italian army carried out reprisals against the population: shootings, hostage-taking, deportation and internment, arson'.¹⁵⁶

In the 2008 textbook, Montenegrin national history is further distanced from that of Serbia and the theme of Serbian betrayal is often reiterated. In describing the events surrounding Montenegro's annexation, the authors clearly state that 'the Serbian government did not negotiate unification with the Montenegrin king and government. Its goal was the annexation of Montenegro to Serbia'.¹⁵⁷ A favourable attitude towards Western powers is presented in the section 'The Main Institutions of the European Union' and implied in the discussion of education reform, which, among other things, had a goal of aligning the Montenegrin education system with that of the EU in anticipation of EU accession. Finally, this textbook is also more attuned to gender equality as, for example, the authors include photos of Partisan women fighting in WWII and, in the passage on the Constitution of Montenegro, note that 'for the first time in the history of Montenegrin parliamentarism, three women were elected MPs'.¹⁵⁸

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155 Burzanović and Đorđević (eds) *Istorija 9: Za deveti razred devetogodišnje osnovne škole*, 3. izd. [History 9: For the ninth grade of a nine-year elementary school, 3rd ed.] (Podgorica: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva [Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids], 2008), p. 30.

156 Ibid., p. 7, 30, 103.

157 Ibid., p. 7.

158 Ibid., p. 101, 107.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The textbook analysis confirmed many of the assumptions put forward in the theoretical framework of this article. In effect, if narrative were not the 'preferred and pragmatic historical style the textbooks would not have changed according to changing beliefs of political elites and their legitimised history'.¹⁵⁹ The fact that they were revised, not only ideologically but also discursively and thematically, confirms the hypothesis that the past serves as an extended 'arm of the state'.¹⁶⁰

When describing the same events, the authors of the various textbooks provide nearly identical factual information. However, on several occasions, the narrative form in which information is presented differs. This approach has the potential to influence the interpretation of collective memory while not distancing the generations too much from each other. As Halbwachs argues, collective memory is socially constructed.¹⁶¹ A divergence in the interpretation of collective memories among generations can lead to clashes over perceived veracity, something that can be observed in present-day Montenegro.

The representation of Montenegro's nation-building mythology also underwent revision and transformation, mostly between the 1997 and 2001 textbooks for both grades. In 1997, when Montenegro was still part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the alleged 'homogeneity' of Serbs and Montenegrins allowed the authors to narrate events that impacted Serbia and Montenegro independently as collective experiences. After 2001, a gradual separation of the presentation of the two countries' national histories and myths begins. Attention is directed to themes of Montenegrin bravery, perseverance, and victimhood, and to the Serb 'betrayal'. As nation-building myths are conveyed not only through text but also in visual and auditory representations and in physical movements such as rituals,¹⁶² the textbooks published after 2001 feature many more

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¹⁵⁹ Campbell, 'MetaBosnia', p. 261.

¹⁶⁰ Podeh, 'History and Memory in the Israeli Educational System'.

¹⁶¹ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 22.

¹⁶² Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 4, 38

Montenegrin national symbols and photographs of Montenegrin people in their daily lives and engaged in ritual performances.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, qualities associated with StratCom include 'temporality', 'fluidity/agility', and 'internalisation'. All three can be observed in the changing presentation of history in Montenegrin school textbooks. 'Temporality' means that StratCom is not about short-term message projection. Rather, it is the gradual, coherent, and continual shaping and (re)structuring of collective memory and national myths, and by extension, the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of target audiences, which is what state-approved school history textbooks claim the authority to do. The 'fluidity' and 'agility' of StratCom is also evident in the analysed textbooks; although the values of the power elites did not undergo any official changes between 2001 and 2008, the content of the history textbooks was adjusted and polished to be more in line with political, social, and cultural strides towards gender equality, EU accession, and minority rights. Finally, given that the purpose of history textbooks is for their content to be accepted as validated historical truth, 'internalisation' is also implied in the examples provided. The pupils studying the textbooks are meant to internalise the legitimised representation of history and to accept it as received collective memory, which by extension will influence their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Changes in historical narrative intended in the long term to (re)construct collective memories and national myths, both fundamental to an understanding of national identity, qualify as strategic communications projected by the state.

There are several limitations inherent in this study. The scope is necessarily narrow as it focuses on history textbooks written for only two primary school grades, excluding material taught in earlier grades and also history as it is presented in the more intellectually formative high school years. The purpose of this study was not to determine which of the competing narratives presented is the more valid but rather to illustrate how the presentation of history changes and to explore differences among the texts. Textbook history is not the sole agent constructing national identity, but it is one that is often overlooked and under-researched in

discussions regarding national identity and in StratCom literature. Since many of the institutions and agencies of the Montenegrin government are currently undergoing structural transformations, accessing the national curriculum (which might have provided additional insights) was hardly possible. Furthermore, changes in content and narrative presentation in the textbooks do not necessarily imply state influence. Considering that authorship was not a constant, it is possible some of the differences are reflections of the authors' divergent writing styles or of inherent personal biases. Finally, while history textbooks provide an important foundation, they are simply classroom teaching aids. In the end, it is the teachers who guide their pupils to understand and interpret the material.¹⁶³

CONCLUSION

This study has considered differences among primary school history textbooks published at three different moments in recent Montenegrin history through the lens of strategic communications as part of the process of national identity construction. Although the current understanding of StratCom is relatively narrow and practice-oriented, the field might yet be reconceptualised to include the premise presented here.

Interdisciplinary sociological and anthropological notions and theories of history, collective memory, identity, and narrative were drawn on for the theoretical framework of this study. It is unlikely that StratCom can be understood and practiced without reference to these notions. History textbooks were found to be pertinent to the process of constructing national identities and nation-building myths. The ethnosymbolic approach suggests that common myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritage are the most important elements upon which modern national identities are reconstituted by each generation.¹⁶⁴ Consequently, the consolidation of common myths and memories is

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163 Suzanne de Castell, 'Teaching the Textbook: Teacher/Text Authority and the Problem of Interpretation', *Linguistics and Education* Volume 2 N° 1 (1990): 75–90.

164 Smith, *Myths and Memories*, p. 9.

essential for any StratCom practitioner who aims to mould national or community identities.

In Montenegro's Yugoslav period, history textbooks were influenced by the focus on socialist ideology. The myths and collective memories presented mimicked the Yugoslav 'brotherhood and unity' slogan as the ruling elites sought to overcome inter-ethnic conflict and engender an overarching Yugoslav identity. That it was possible for a pan-Yugoslav national identity to be fabricated clearly demonstrates the involvement of political elites in the process of constructing national identity.

For this study, three seventh- and three eighth-grade history textbooks from 1997, 2001, and 2008 were compared and analysed for emerging themes and significant changes in content; the years of publication were chosen for their significance in the political development of Montenegro. The analysis demonstrated that narrative is the preferred style of historical representation and that the way historical events were narrativised changed over the years. My purpose was to show that changes in national historical narrative and representation were an attempt to legitimise an interpretation of collective memory in line with the ideology of the political elite in power when each textbook was published, which in turn would influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of intended audiences. Changes were found not only in the narrative form but also in the number of pages devoted to relevant topics; since 1997, the share of textbook content concerning Montenegro's national history and exclusively Montenegrin myths has increased. Furthermore, the idea of Montenegrin and Serb homogeneity was no longer reinforced in the more recent textbooks; historical events were increasingly portrayed as distinct in the two countries, allowing readers to perceive Montenegro as historically, culturally, and ethnically separate from Serbia, and Montenegrins as having a distinct national identity. Changes in the textbooks were shown to correspond with political trends in the country after 1997 when political elites began to seek independence from Serbia.

While this article focuses on Montenegro, similar practices can be observed in other areas of the world. For example, in Russia in 2012

Putin decreed the creation of the Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS) with the aim to ‘facilitate the study of national military history and counteract attempts to distort it, as well as to popularise the achievements of military-historical study, encourage patriotism, and raise the prestige of military service’.¹⁶⁵ In 2013, the RMHS called for new history textbooks.¹⁶⁶

Tsyrlina-Spady and Stoskopf have examined heroic representations of Stalin and Putin in two history textbooks that are currently being widely used in Russian schools

and assert that they aim to prime Russian youth for uncritical acceptance of Putin’s regime.¹⁶⁷ More recently, Putin was accused of approving history textbooks that present Russia’s annexation of Crimea ‘as “a peaceful process” which did not involve the deployment of a single Russian soldier’.¹⁶⁸ Such developments have been well documented and researched by scholars.¹⁶⁹ In the case of Montenegro and the Western Balkan region in general, the use of school textbooks as vehicles for politicisation or nationalisation remains under-researched, especially in the context of StratCom.

Recent developments in Montenegro indicate there may be new history textbooks on the horizon. Following the parliamentary elections in

165 Grigory Vaypan and Ilya Nuzov, *Russia: Crimes Against History* (FIDH, 2021), p. 34. [Accessed 10 August 2021].

166 Gabriela Baczynska, ‘Putin accused of Soviet tactics in drafting new history book’, *Reuters*, 18 November 2013. [Accessed 8 October 2021].

167 Tatyana Tsyrlina-Spady and Alan Stoskopf, ‘Russian History Textbooks in the Putin Era: Heroic Leaders Demand Loyal Citizens’, in Joseph Zajda et al. (eds.) *Globalisation and Historiography of National Leaders* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2017), p. 15–33.

168 Halya Coynash, ‘Russia did not invade Crimea in new school textbooks edited by Putin adviser’, Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group website, 20 August 2021. [Accessed 8 October 2021].

169 See Håvard Bækken and Johannes Due Enstad, ‘Identity under Siege: Selective Securitization of History in Putin’s Russia’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Volume 98 No 2 (2020): 321–44; Joseph Zajda, ‘Globalisation, Ideology and History School Textbooks: The Russian Federation’ in Joseph Zajda (ed.) *Nation-Building and History Education in a Global Culture* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2015), p. 29–50; Zajda, ‘Russian History Textbooks: An Analysis of Historical Narratives Depicting

Key Events’, *Curriculum and Teaching* Volume 28 No 2 (2013): 73–100; Joseph Zajda and Rea Zajda, ‘The Politics of Rewriting History: New History Textbooks and Curriculum Materials in Russia’, *International Review of Education/ Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* Volume 49 No 3/4 (2003): 363–84; Tsyrlina-Spady and Michael Lovorn, ‘Patriotism, History Teaching, and History Textbooks in Russia: What Was Old Is New Again’ in Zajda, *Globalisation, Ideology and Politics of Education Reforms*, p. 41–57; Miguel Vázquez Linán, ‘History as a Propaganda Tool in Putin’s Russia’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Volume 43 No 2 (2010): 167–78; Murod Ismailov and Nozima Ganieva, ‘In Search For the Russian National Identity: Do History Textbooks Hold the Answer?’, *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* Volume 5 No 2 (2013): 366–392. No

August 2020, the new political elite began to display perceptions of national identity different from those of their predecessors. Vesna Bratić, the newly appointed Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, drafted several amendments to the *Law on Education* that resulted in the dismissal of more than 500 principals and assistant principals of Montenegrin schools and kindergartens.¹⁷⁰ This provoked fears among parents and teachers that new school officials would be affiliated with political parties that deny Montenegrin identity or persist in characterising Montenegrins as ‘the best of the Serbs’.¹⁷¹ In March 2021, the Faculty of Montenegrin Language and Literature¹⁷² announced that it had not received any funding for almost three months, which threatened its continued survival.¹⁷³ Such developments in Montenegro demonstrate that it is imperative to analyse and evaluate the surrounding issues conceptually and theoretically, so they can be better understood on the practical level.

In short, if national identity is defined as ‘a set of attitudes, beliefs and commitments’ and StratCom entails ‘changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects’,¹⁷⁴ then the construction of national identity becomes consistent with the objectives of StratCom and making changes to the presentation of national history in school textbooks qualifies as a StratCom deed. When states undertake to change or reappropriate the narratives presented in school history textbooks—(re)constructing and legitimising collective memory and myths as the building blocks of national identity to deliver a unified

170 Lela Šćepanović, ‘Smjena svih direktora crnogorskih škola iz vremena DPS-a [Removal of all principals of Montenegrin schools from the time of the DPS]’, *Radio Free Europe Montenegro*, 11 June 2021. [Accessed 10 October 2021].

171 Minister Bratić is a controversial figure, strongly affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church and has described herself as a ‘Chetnik’ (term used for Serb nationalists). See Alisa Hajdarpašić and Slavko Radulović, ‘Bratićvrjedala Dežulovića: Kontekstom brani stav da je “đubre ustaško” [Bratić insults Dežulović: Defends position on “Ustaše garbage” with context]’, *Vijesti Online*, 8 November 2020. [Accessed 8 October 2021]; Predrag Vujić, ‘Parlamentarni izbori u Crnoj Gori: Izabrana nova Vlada, prvi put bez DPS-a predsjednika Mila Đukanovića [Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro: New Government Elected, for the first time without DPS President Milo Đukanović]’, BBC News na srpskom, 4 December 2020. [Accessed 8 October 2021].

172 This Faculty was founded in 2014 due to the need to study, preserve, and develop Montenegrin language and literature. See <http://www.fcjk.me/>

173 A.C., ‘Ćirgić: Fakultet za crnogorski jezik i književnost dva i po mjeseca nije dobio ni euro [Ćirgić: The Faculty of Montenegrin Language and Literature has not received a single euro for two and a half months]’, *Vijesti Online*, 3 March 2021. [Accessed 8 October 2021].

174 Bolt, ‘Foreword’, *Defence Strategic Communications* № 6, p. 4.

national narrative of the present and the future—they demonstrate the instrumentality of StratCom in facilitating nation building.

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BELLINGCAT: RAPID ADVANCES, TROUBLING RISKS

A Review Essay by Tony Esmond

We are Bellingcat an Intelligence Agency for the People,
Eliot Higgins. London: Bloomsbury, 2021.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, intelligence, OSINT, open-source, Bellingcat*

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

This review essay uses the lens of an experienced former police detective to examine the history and practices of the non-governmental organisation “Bellingcat”, in the conduct of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) and investigation. The intention is to compare and contrast both regulated and unregulated practice, and to follow the journey OSINT has been on in the two settings to the present day. Over the past thirty years, law enforcement and intelligence agencies have been subject to increasing oversight of their practice. Some might say, rightly so. Since the explosion in Open-Source Intelligence following its first major use by UK Policing during the 2012 London Olympics, it is now available to anyone with a computer, and is increasingly employed by ‘citizen journalists’ as a key research practice. While checks and balances are enforced by law and have an increasing trajectory in official roles, the actions of the citizen journalist are subject to little regulation or bureaucratic oversight. In essence, we have seen the rapid move from police surveillance to citizen surveillance with little consideration of the implications or consequences.

To set the scene for this essay, I would like to travel back along the path of my own career. In 1988 I was ‘invited upstairs’, as it was called, to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Office.¹ The role of *Detective* was for most of my career a vocation as much as a job. *Detectives* ran informants, carried multiple heavy caseloads, became part of a competitive community, and produced results. The terms *Detective* and *Investigator* were synonymous with professionalism and a dogged refusal to give up. There were no quibbles about working hours or refreshment breaks in the CID Office. You came in and worked until you finished.

In the years that followed, came radical changes in all areas of police work in the UK. Many were the result of public enquiries and increasing calls for police practice to be regulated to protect the public from injustices. Loosely formulated Judges’ Rules² for the conduct of investigations were reformed

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¹ ‘Criminal Investigation Department’, *Britannica* online. The CID Office was set apart from the Uniformed Patrol Officers and led by a different management structure of Detectives.

² T. E. St. Johnston, ‘Judges’ Rules and Police Interrogation in England Today’, *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, Volume 57, No 1, (1966): 85–92. Judge’s Rules were guidelines for police interrogations—now called interviews and evidence needed for arrest.

by Codes of Practice that grew out of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) of 1984.³ Under this legislation, interviews progressed from scribbled contemporaneous notes in a smoke-filled room, to being taped or videoed to show transparency and ensure the rights of the accused. Today we have become familiar with Body Worn Video⁴ cameras (BWV) being regularly worn by street level and community officers, and with cameras in police vehicles and all areas of custody suites. For investigators, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) of 2000,⁵ governing the use of covert surveillance and other similar tactics by public bodies, caused a significant shift in police practice. This Act applies to a long list of public authorities who, when engaged in covert investigation techniques, must show reasoning and oversight.

Thus, in the world of crime and counterterrorism, where I learnt the skills of my craft, much has changed. Investigators are no longer *Detectives* or even necessarily warranted police officers, and their working practices often adhere to a strict eight-hour day and no more. It is now common for much of the research into the most serious moments in human history to be conducted, at least in part, by those with computer skills, rather than people skills. Cases are routinely solved with what can be found on the hard drive of a computer, the memory of a phone, or in the files of a CCTV (closed-circuit television) system. Long hours are spent examining communication and digital devices for that one piece of evidence that will solve a case. Changes in digital media investigation go much deeper than a dusty property bag containing a grubby laptop. The world of Open-Source Intelligence⁶ or 'Online Open-Source Investigation' as Eliot Higgins prefers,⁷ continues to show a global evidential purpose that is being pursued with imagination and some downright cunning tactics. Except this time, it's not only the police or security services who are making the headlines; it's Bellingcat and other citizen digital investigation groups.

3 The Police and Criminal Evidence Act aka PACE is the ever-evolving set of rules regarding police arrest, detention, transport, and identification of offenders. 'Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984', Legislation.gov.uk.

4 Cameras worn by uniformed police for capture of crime and disorder. 'Body Worn Video (BWV)', London Metropolitan Police website.

5 RIPA is legislation that sets out rules for the authorisation and deployment of covert tactics. 'Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000', Legislation.gov.uk.

6 OSINT is the umbrella term for 'any information that can legally be gathered from free, public sources about an individual or organization'. 'What is Open Source Intelligence (OSINT)?', SentinelOne website.

7 'Bellingcat Founder Eliot Higgins on Navalny, Syria and Qanon', YouTube, 5 February 2021.

A CHANGE IN STEP

‘From the outset, we have had two goals: find evidence and spread this field.’⁸

In *We Are Bellingcat*, Eliot Higgins, the founder of the Bellingcat organisation, shows what information about all of us—and where, when, and how we live our lives—is available in the online public domain; and what citizen digital investigators can obtain and then do with that information. The book is laid out as a history of the origins, evolution, and successes of the organisation. It is an amusing read and manages to walk the line between a book that appeals to a casual reader picking up something for a long train journey, and something for those who want to go deeper into Bellingcat’s practices.

For a career detective, this book exemplifies just how the world has moved on from the examination of a suspect across an interview table to what they and others have posted online. Is there a need to catch someone in the act of their crime when you can catalogue evidence of their preparation, execution, and getaway using the content of their ‘digital dust’?

To rewind, in 2011 Eliot Higgins was doing ‘admin and finance work for various companies’.⁹ During his day-to-day seemingly unsatisfying and tedious work, he had taken a keen interest in the situation in Libya. Tentatively, he began to blog about it and came upon a technique for the use of still images, video, and satellite imagery to piece together an account of what was happening. Describing his actions as ‘stumbling into Geolocation’,¹⁰ Higgins had in effect found both a calling and a community: his ‘call upstairs’ moment had happened.

In recent times, Bellingcat have not been shy of the attention of either the media or the public. But that’s not how it started. Higgins describes a process of evolution from a popular BlogSpot¹¹ written and researched solely by him and named after a Frank Zappa song ‘Brown Moses’,¹²

8 Eliot Higgins, *We are Bellingcat an Intelligence Agency for the People* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 22.

9 ‘Bellingcat Founder Eliot Higgins on Navalny, Syria and Qanon’, YouTube, 5 February 2021.

10 The World of Intelligence podcast, ‘An interview with Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins’, *James*, 11 February 2020.

11 Eliot Higgins, *Brown Moses Blog*, 6 April 2012. The original Higgins blogspot site.

12 Frank Zappa, ‘Brown Moses’, YouTube, originally composed in 1984; Higgins, *We are Bellingcat*, p. 18.

to the beginnings of what is now Bellingcat. In fact, the original Blog can still be found online,¹³ the last entry dated 15 July 2014 describing the move to the new venture.

When discussing who or what he believes Bellingcat represents, in a recent 'Intelligence Squared' livestream YouTube interview,¹⁴ Higgins gave the answer: 'Everyone who participates with us is Bellingcat'. This is resonant of the catchphrase used by the Anonymous group¹⁵ and reflects the advent of the 'online community' to which he belongs, which is also somewhat 'outside' the mainstream, and counter cultural. He is keen to show that, other than in incidents of serious risk or in dealing with officially required evidence, Bellingcat does not work directly with, and is in a sense uncomfortable with, authorised intelligence agencies and law enforcement. He claims an identity that, despite Bellingcat's massive growth and notoriety, is still positioned as something of an insurgent and disruptor aligned with the world of the independent citizen journalist. To make his point, he gives his Kickstarter crowdfunding origins as proof. A quick search reveals that he has run two successful crowd funders, one in 2014¹⁶ and another in 2017,¹⁷ that between them raised £119,448 sterling. Enough at the time to get up and running, but nothing compared to the size and scope of Bellingcat in 2021. As a reader you sense the tension between Bellingcat's current success and its dearly held identity as an upstart disruptor.

ESTABLISHING A REPUTATION

After a short anecdotal origin story in the opening chapter, the book goes into the technical/social/political details of the cases Bellingcat has handled. By 2011, Higgins had already covered subjects such as the UK Phone Hacking Scandal¹⁸ as well as the events in Tahrir Square¹⁹ but as the blogger 'Brown Moses', not as Bellingcat.

13 Eliot Higgins, 'What is Bellingcat?', Brown Moses Blog, 15 July 2014. The last entry on the Brown Moses Blog.

14 'Bellingcat Founder Eliot Higgins on Navalny, Syria and Qanon', YouTube, 5 February 2021.

15 'We are Anonymous' is a phrase often used by the anarchist 'hacktivist collective' to indicate their lack of structure and leaders who might be sought by law enforcement. 'We are Anonymous—How to Join Anonymous', YouTube, 12 November 2018.

16 'Bellingcat, for and by citizen investigative journalists', Kickstarter Campaign, Round 1, 2014.

17 'Bellingcat: the home of online investigations', Kickstarter Campaign, Round 2, 2017.

18 'Phone-hacking trial explained', *BBC News*, 25 June 2014.

19 Protests in Cairo in 2011 that led to the fall of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. Colin Freeman, 'Ten years on from Egypt's Arab Spring—what has become of the Tahrir Square revolutionaries?', *The Telegraph*, 24 January 2021.

The shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17²⁰ on 17 July 2014 over Ukraine served as Higgins' and his colleagues' first significant challenge under the Bellingcat banner. He describes how the missile launcher was tracked across the country after Higgins issued a 'Gold Star challenge'. Essentially, this challenge involved the activation of crowdsourcing, inviting intelligence from the public, the reward for which was a 'gold star'. But he has since moved on to offering financial rewards on Twitter.²¹ Already sought out as a media commentator, Higgins would find his own star in the ascendant in a startling trajectory.

Recognising a wealth of investigative opportunities in videos and photographs shared online, Higgins and company looked beyond geolocation into the identification of munitions being deployed.²² This skill was learnt quickly through the necessity of keeping up with current events and led to the debunking of news items and rumours. Higgins invented a term for a type of unidentified tubular rocket—'UMLACA', standing for Unidentified Munitions Linked to Alleged Chemical Attacks. This use of homemade acronyms shows the lack of a professional background. But a useful hesitancy to jump to conclusions emerges that more broadly benefits the discipline. I was reminded of a Staff Sergeant at Hendon Police College in London in 1988 writing 'Never Assume' on a whiteboard. The core principles of investigation begin to show through in Bellingcat's stated benefits of analysis: 'Identify, Verify, Amplify'.²³

While sitting at home in Leicester and digging through video footage of inspectors in the suburbs of Damascus, Higgins noticed the use of a measuring tape. He cut and pasted it into another image to show scale and in so doing identified the rocket used as a Soviet 140mm M14 artillery rocket. Reading this description, I was reminded of valuable advice given to me when attending my first-ever murder scene. 'Think Evidence, Evidence, Evidence and never ignore the details.' Here these same principles were being transferred to a whole new digital arena.

That said, the details regarding the locating and tracking of weapons through online techniques can become a little dry on occasions.

20 'MH17 Ukraine plane crash: What we know', *BBC News*, 26 February 2020.

21 Eliot Higgins, 'Bounty Tweet', Twitter, 31 July 2018.

22 Higgins, *We are Bellingcat*, p 73.

23 *Ibid*, p. 221.

Rocket launchers travelling through Ukraine feel like they are being described at almost every intersection of their journey. Albeit interesting to OSINT users, this section began to drag.

IMPORTANCE OF RULES AND PROCESSES

One of the briefer sections in Chapter 3 of the book mentions the relationship between Europol's Child Sexual Offences initiative and Bellingcat. Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA) are often cynical towards the involvement of private organisations in criminal investigations and especially in the area of Sexual Contact Offenders. We have all seen the 'Paedophile Hunter'²⁴ vigilantes on numerous documentaries and Facebook pages. Often well-meaning, their ignorance of procedures of evidence gathering and continuity rules make it easier for suspects to escape prosecution on a technicality, or by using the Agent Provocateur²⁵ defence.

For decades, Indecent Images of Children (IIOC)²⁶ have circulated on the internet, finding homes on message boards, websites, and most notably The Dark Web²⁷ and TOR.²⁸ Media publicity around arrests that dates back to Operation Ore,²⁹ and the arrest of Luke Sadowski³⁰ has made sexual predators both knowledgeable and careful. There is rarely any meta data to be found in the images and videos they share. As a result, investigators are sometimes left only with what can be visually examined, and by close inspection of what is present in an image. Bellingcat researchers were ideally suited to help with the Europol 'Stop Child Abuse—Trace an Object'³¹ initiative and continue to assist in solving cases.

24 Stinson Hunter is one of the more famous of these vigilantes. [Stinson Hunter's YouTube Channel](#).

25 R v Looseley [2001] clarified the legal term of Agent Provocateur. One cannot instigate, incite, or procure another to commit and express breach of the law that they would not have committed anyway. House of Lords, [Judgments—Regina v Looseley](#), parliament.uk, 25 October 2001.

26 There are different levels and types of IIOCs. They are no longer referred to as 'CP' aka Child Pornography. [About indecent images of children](#), Bedfordshire Police website.

27 The 'dark web' is that part of the internet that cannot be accessed using surface net search engines. Darren Guccione, [What is the Dark Web? How to Access it and What You'll Find](#), CSO: The State of Cybersecurity, 1 July 2021.

28 Tor is an anonymised browser that hosts around 30 000 websites in the unregulated regions of the internet. [History](#), The Tor Project website.

29 Operation Ore uncovered a business run in the US that hosted a portal to sites where IIOC could be purchased online by credit card. Many thousands of people worldwide were arrested for downloading IIOC and further contact offences. Jon Kelly & Tom de Castella, [Paedophile net: Did Operation Ore change British society?](#), BBC News, 17 December 2012.

30 Arrest of Luke Sadowski (aka George Richards): 'Ex-FBI-sting paedophile George Richards jailed for life', BBC News, 14 March 2014.

31 [Stop Child Abuse—Trace an Object](#), Europol initiative launched 2017.

Which is revealing with regard to their credibility with law enforcement agencies.

Nothing is more rewarding than recovering a child from sexual abuse. Every photograph is a crime scene. The smallest detail on a rocket launcher can be a useful identifier, as in the MH17 case, and so too are everyday items in Child Sexual Offences cases, such as the type of wood used in the headboard of a bed, the wristwatch of a suspect, or plants that can be seen through the small portion of a window. It is gratifying that Bellingcat have entered this field of work so that their techniques in image examination might yield positive results.³² However, I worry about the level of publicity they then give to each success. For the victims and their parents, this may feel like an unnecessary reminder of traumatic events.

POLICIES OF NON-INTRUSION IN CHARLOTTESVILLE

Higgins writes extensively about the far-right demonstration in Charlottesville in 2017, the public disorder, violence, and subsequent murder of Heather Heyer.³³ Bellingcat trawled through footage and identified many of those involved in the violence on the day.³⁴ Bellingcat's investigation was distinguished by innovation and originality—they logged birthmarks on the neck of one rioter that led to his identification. Higgins does, nevertheless, pose important questions about OSINT and the responsibilities attached to it: Does the investigation revolve around people who could have committed a serious crime? Who holds a public position of power and may be directing the disorder? Who is threatening criminal acts on the ground and online? These are important questions in any criminal investigation and especially in public disorder.

This is an important point in the narrative and shows Bellingcat were beginning to grapple with the ethical question—Why are we doing this? Are there groups or organisations for whom we should not be working? Higgins goes on to state that he and Bellingcat had no intention of bullying people because they attended a political rally. There would be

32 Carlos Gonzales, 'Creating Impact: A Year On Stop Child Abuse—Trace An Object', *Bellingcat*, 22 April 2020.

33 Minyvyonne Burke and Marianna Sotomayor, 'James Alex Fields Found Guilty of Killing Heather Heyer During Violent Charlottesville White Nationalist Rally', *NBC News*, 8 December 2018.

34 Anc Toler, 'Database of August 12 Charlottesville Videos', *Bellingcat*, 29 August 2017.

no doxing of people merely for being with the wrong groups, or in the wrong place at the wrong time. In stating this, he was, in effect, beginning to apply aspects of the RIPA principles to his work in OSINT; namely, the principles of unnecessary collateral intrusion; and only intruding on those subjects when it was a serious case involving human rights principles of *necessity* and *proportionality*. In creating an embryonic, ethical framework for his new discipline, he was in proxy applying similar standards to those applied to public bodies. But with one key difference: no regulatory body exists for OSINT to check that such standards are being applied. Furthermore, Higgins and his collaborators could cease to apply them whenever they please.

Bellingcat make it clear that they do not consider themselves to be traditional journalists. Nevertheless, they decided to create ethical guidelines that allowed them to work in good conscience as ‘internet sleuths’. They declared that their first responsibility was to the victims, and only when their safety had been established would they act to protect the identities of anyone appearing in criminal evidence. But they bear no criminal responsibility regarding the safety of the victims.

Perhaps it is a bridge too far to suggest what might be in the minds of men and women near to those acting illegally. Can we prove *mens rea*³⁵ and *actus reus*³⁶ from a short video extract on Snapchat? We return to the question of the human element: How can we examine what is in the hearts of people through a computer screen? It is a question that becomes more relevant with every case and especially if there is a requirement then or later in a criminal case.

The second half of the book describes wider far-right movements in the US, UK, and beyond, showing the influence that online forums and videos have on actors in the real world. Higgins describes the online outrage at Gamergate,³⁷ and the move from 4chan³⁸ to 8chan³⁹—sites that increasingly became breeding grounds for hate speech and racism.

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35 The legal term for criminal intent. ‘Mens Rea’, Legal Information Institute website, Cornell Law School.

36 The legal term for the act or omission that makes up the physical part of the crime. ‘Actus Reus’, Legal Information Institute website, Cornell Law School.

37 Jay Hathaway, ‘What Is Gamergate, and Why? An Explainer for Non-Geeks’, *Gawker*, 10 October 2014.

38 Emma Grey Ellis, ‘4Chan Is Turning 15—And Remains the Internet’s Teenager’, *Wired*, 1 June 2018.

39 Mike Wendling, ‘What is 8chan?’, *BBC News*, 5 August 2019.

In March 2018, Brenton Tarrant⁴⁰ posted his final remarks on 8chan before committing mass murder at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. With widespread exclusion from or de-platforming on Twitter,⁴¹ Facebook, YouTube, and even TikTok,⁴² the far right have scrambled to secure a foothold on any commonly used platform. Even Russia's Facebook-style VK site (VKontakte) became a brief home for Tommy Robinson and Britain First before their Group Pages were deleted. When Parler lost its servers,⁴³ the UK and US far right continued with the messaging app Telegram,⁴⁴ but also looked to move to other sites such as Gab⁴⁵ and MeWe. Bellingcat's activity on these much smaller sites is intriguing, where hiding in a crowd becomes more difficult. Might they be using False Persona Profiles⁴⁶ or — commonly known in OSINT fields as 'Research Accounts'?

THAT'S A PRETTY SPIRE

Following the Salisbury Novichok poisonings in the UK in 2018, Bellingcat seems to have taken more chances and resolved to 'own' their growing reputation. Identifying two Russian agents⁴⁷ involved in the attack catapulted the organisation into the mainstream media, who were reporting extensively on Bellingcat's successes. No longer could they be dismissed as amateurs or laptop detectives. They were beginning to be noticed by the 'right' and 'wrong people'; and they played up to this. Even their podcast 'Bellingchat' would adopt a satirical introduction with a Russian accent.⁴⁸ Chapter 4 of the book reveals working practices of the Russian Secret Services and the deployments of their undercover assassins. Focus is placed on how the agents created a false identity, then on what Bellingcat did to prove the Russian Undercover Unit's tactics were flawed in our modern information age—an age where backstories and legends can be researched from a laptop.

40 Florence Keen, 'After 8chan', Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 4 December 2020.

41 'Twitter suspends Britain First leaders', *BBC News*, 18 December 2017. Twitter bans Britain First and Paul Golding.

42 'TikTok bans Britain First and Tommy Robinson for hate speech violations', *TellMAMA*, 23 April 2020.

43 Russell Brandom, 'These are the violent threats that made Amazon drop Parler', *The Verge*, 13 January 2021.

44 Kevin Collier, Anna Schecter and Ezra Kaplan, 'Telegram, a recent haven for the far right, purges extremist content', *NBC News*, 14 January 2021.

45 Danielle Abrial, 'Trump supporters flock to MeWe, Gab, and Rumble after Parler goes offline', *Fortune*, 12 January 2021.

46 False Persona Profiles are faked user profiles that can be used to penetrate closed groups and allow for the obfuscation of the true person at the keyboard. Alex Aronovich, 'How to Detect Fake Profiles—Understanding Phishing', Cybint website, 14 August 2018.

47 Elliot Higgins, 'How Bellingcat uncovered Russia's secret network of assassins', *Wired*, 4 February 2021.

48 Bellingchat Podcast, Episode 3, 'Hunting the Salisbury Poisonings Suspects', *Bellingcat*, 16 June 2020.

What is surprising is Bellingcat's move away from image investigation to using informants who received payments from the organisation for information supplied. A Russian Government worker, referred to as a 'babushka',⁴⁹ insists on payment in roubles for providing personal details of Russian citizens. Bellingcat took a chance—it proved successful. The account makes for gripping reading, but I worry about the ethics. The use of paid informants is widespread in policing and journalism, their payments scrutinised and handled with the utmost security.⁵⁰ It is a process that occasionally goes wrong with serious risks and consequences, particularly to the informant. The method of payment is not described in this book but leaves a few questions dangling. How were these payments explained and how great was her risk of exposure? Who else saw the payment or bank account? Was the staff member subject to a style of vetting that would have revealed the payment? Informants are often not the most honest of people, but they do deserve a duty of care. Had Bellingcat fully explored the serious risk this informant would face? The necessary considerations for running the babushka informant are explored further in the next section. Have Bellingcat and Higgins at this point moved outside the working sphere of 'Open Source' and into something more dangerous?

WELFARE

Bellingcat were becoming victims of their own success and were facing various threats. Robert Evans, one of their lead investigators, found a photoshopped 'Wanted' poster on 8chan offering a large reward for his head. Cyberattacks from unidentified actors were also commonplace and had been an active tactic against Higgins from his Brown Moses days. But the biggest threat came from psychological damage. Higgins describes in heart-breaking detail how Andrew Carvin, a senior fellow with Higgins at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, suffered with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from the imagery he had viewed online. Higgins describes it as 'a slow-drip effect of repeated exposure'. To Bellingcat's credit they attempted to address the problem by publishing a guide on identifying and preventing PTSD.

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⁴⁹ Higgins, *We are Bellingcat*, p. 165.

⁵⁰ The payment of police Covert Human Intelligence Sources is often a subject for conspiracy theorists and Freedom of Information requests. Sally Murrer, 'Revealed: How much money is paid out to informants by police force looking after Milton Keynes', *MKCitizen*, 30 January 2020.

As Higgins found, when searching the internet there are rarely warnings. A brief surf through certain channels on most platforms will produce upsetting material. RIPA deals with this and appoints officers whose job it is to specifically deal with the welfare of operatives and supervisors.⁵¹ In law enforcement and at the UK's National Crime Agency, those viewing extreme material are regularly screened by Occupational Health and/or independent psychologists. For those viewing material every day for long hours these appointments may be as often as each month.⁵² Discussing the IIOC Operation with Europol, Higgins mentions tweeting cropped images of the scenes of child abuse to 'a base of thousands of amateur sleuths'. The images showed rooms with the child cropped out, so they were not in themselves indecent. But my experience with victims suggests that even small details can cause anxiety, depression, and flashbacks. As Bellingcat grows, the welfare issue will continue. Others outside of law enforcement have recognised the importance of this too. Significantly, the Human Rights Centre has been working on protocols for Open-Source Investigations. They include references to safety, peer review, and respecting the dignity of operators. Perhaps not perfect and not yet conforming to the standard of Law Enforcement Agency welfare mandates, this is an excellent step forward.

PUBLICITY

Coming from a working environment where successes are rarely discussed—other than over a pint after work with colleagues—this book could be seen as 221 pages of public backslapping. However, these successes are not from police work; they don't belong to an old-fashioned age of pagers, phone boxes, and meeting with informants in the park. Rather, they take place in the modern internet age. Revealing exposés can be very damaging for someone like President Putin. When the GRU agents in the Salisbury poisoning case were revealed, the public interest required the full facts be put in front of a global audience: 'People who are making the most noise are getting the least attention', writes Higgins.⁵³

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51 This documentary series goes as far as to show interactions between Child Sexual Offence investigators and their welfare officers. 'Undercover Police: Hunting Paedophiles', *Channel 4*, n.d.

52 Neil Ralph, 'Dealing with the personal impact of crimes against children', College of Policing, 21 August 2020. Report on the implications of officers having to view IIOCs and the treatment they are offered.

53 The World of Intelligence podcast, 'An interview with Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins', *Janes*, 11 February 2020.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Coming from a law enforcement background, I am particularly concerned with one aspect of Bellingcat's operating procedures—surveillance. The following definition comes from the Parliament.uk website:⁵⁴

A literal definition of surveillance as “watching over” indicates monitoring the behaviour of persons, objects, or systems. However, surveillance is not only a visual process which involves looking at people and things. Surveillance can be undertaken in a wide range of ways involving a variety of technologies. The instruments of surveillance include closed-circuit television (CCTV), the interception of telecommunications (“wiretapping”), covert activities by human agents, heat-seeking and other sensing devices, body scans, technology for tracking movement, and many others.

Is what Bellingcat do surveillance? They certainly monitor the behaviour, movements, and contacts of individuals. In recent years, the concept of ‘more than two looks make it an act of surveillance’ circulated. This was arbitrary and excused the actions of many. But for anyone in an organisation covered by RIPA who decides to surveil a person in the real world or attempts to obtain evidence online, then that constitutes surveillance and requires the appropriate authority signed by a senior officer, and in certain cases a high-ranking government minister. As ‘citizen journalists’ Bellingcat do not currently fall under RIPA legislation. Is that badge enough to protect them when they fail to balance their work interests against the harm it may do to others?

RIPA doesn't differentiate between ‘intelligence’ and ‘evidence’. And neither should we. To go to someone's social media account to see what they are doing, whom they are speaking to, and what they are posting, represents surveillance—what you learn constitutes evidence. Bellingcat are compiling a list of best working practices and protocols to deal with emerging threats. They are also applying themselves to the evolution of Artificial

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⁵⁴ House of Lords, [Chapter 2: Overview of Surveillance and Data Collection](#), Surveillance: Citizens and the State—Constitution Committee, [parliament.uk](#).

Intelligence⁵⁵ and ‘Deepfakes’—no doubt numerous other areas too. These protocols feel like the first steps in replicating the checks and balances that RIPA, PACE, and other important legislation dictates in the public sector. As Bellingcat grows and learns, these will hopefully become a set of guidelines they can quote in court and public inquiries. To be clear, today the law that applies to the police and other agencies does not apply to them or to journalists. Or to you or me. Maybe that’s a good thing, maybe not?

VIEW FROM UPSTAIRS

As a retired detective, I always observe other people’s motivations, techniques, and abilities carefully, and often with cynicism. There is, however, no denying the many successes of Bellingcat and their refreshing enthusiasm for attacking each challenge. If only more coppers had the same attitude!

Social Media is not just the home of noisy teenagers at the back of the bus bragging about how many friends they have on Myspace. Those days are long gone. It is now an evolving source for both news and opinion. The complications described in this book regarding misinformation and disinformation, influence operations, counter-factual cyber hand grenades, and deepfakes make for an invigorating reading experience, but they also show how vulnerable we are as individuals to being manipulated. Extrapolate that beyond the single person to the town, city, organisation, and state, and you can see what a pernicious weapon the internet and social media have become. Daily headlines prove how unguarded we have allowed ourselves to be. The recent infiltration of AstraZeneca staff by North Korean cyber spies through the previously untouched networking site LinkedIn came from left field.⁵⁶

With the responsibility of welfare to operatives and the investigative processes comes the necessity to organise carefully and catalogue all evidential material. Currently, according to Law Enforcement protocols, material is stored for six years and often longer. A good researcher

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⁵⁵ AI claims to borrow concepts from Darwinian evolution and develop before our eyes. Ed Gent, *Artificial Intelligence is Evolving All By Itself*, *Science*, 13 April 2020.

⁵⁶ North Korean agents managed to infiltrate workers at AstraZeneca during the development of their COVID vaccine using LinkedIn. Jack Stubbs, ‘Exclusive: Suspected North Korean hackers targeted COVID vaccine maker AstraZeneca—sources’, *Reuters*, 27 November 2020.

will keep digital copies of their evidence and should be able to find it in minutes, no matter how long ago it was discovered. The testing of this ability to produce older work should be closely monitored by the supervisor. The extensive details that Higgins explains in his book regarding each crisis they have investigated indicates that their evidential bookkeeping is well handled.

However, numerous questions remain. How well do Bellingcat realise the importance of evidential continuity?⁵⁷ Or identification case law such as *R v Turnbull*,⁵⁸ which is as relevant to video identification as to the 'Street ID' it was originally designed to address? Or contemporaneous note-keeping, time-stamped notes, and processes of corroboration of evidence in English and especially Scottish law?⁵⁹

Running a team of operators, who may be using False Persona Profiles⁶⁰ is a sensitive sphere of operations. While not falling under RIPA legislation specifically, Bellingcat are still a group who tangentially are tasked by LEA (see the IIOC operation at Europol). If so, then oversight of psychological and logistical support is maybe not legally required, but certainly much preferred in case there are future complications. 'I wasn't given enough support' comes the scream of the operator caught doing something wrong/unlawful. A requirement protects the operator and their supervisor.

Verification of 'hands on keys',⁶¹ and seeking to confirm whose fingers were responsible for typing is tricky without the human element. Image verification is a desirable descriptor but ultimately a video can be evidentially useless if you can't prove who took it, present it in a manner acceptable to a court of law, and confirm that the video has not been tampered with.

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57 'Continuity' is the evidential principle required by a criminal court of law that can show where and with whom an exhibit is at all times. 'Continuity', Health and Safety Executive website.

58 *R v Turnbull* [1977] is important identification case law quoted in Code D of the Codes of Practice within PACE. 'Identification', The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) website, updated August 2018.

59 'Corroboration of evidence' has been an important aspect of Scottish law for centuries but also impacts covert case law in England; *R v Birtles* [1969] is an example. 'Corroboration of Evidence in Criminal Trials (Law Com. No. 202)', The Law Commission, 1991.

60 False Persona Profiles are not the same as 'Takeover Accounts' or accounts owned by criminals that are used as fishing tools by investigators. '35200 POLICY – Open Source Investigation and Research', Hampshire Constabulary, updated 8 January 2018.

61 'Hands on keys' is a phrase used in relation to proving who actually typed an online comment or posted a video. Questions such as—Who had access to the computer? Was it ever left unlocked?—are used by the defence in court.

'Lateral thinking' is something Higgins raises. He reflects on how to use it and remain unhindered by the paperwork generated by the heavy bureaucracy of law enforcement, so allowing him to act tactically and more rapidly to catch that early prize. This achieves spectacular results. Nevertheless, it's hard not to compare Bellingcat to my previous employers. They share many techniques and intentions. However, they are not analogous. Higgins grew up on a staple of John Pilger and Noam Chomsky⁶² and not early mornings of marching, saluting, and learning the Road Traffic Act 1972, by rote. This allows for imaginative thinking and brilliant out-of-the-box innovation but may also cause complications when producing their work in a way acceptable to the law courts or to future public opinion.

Using informants and the tactic of paying for information are still troubling. Not from an ethical point of view (people have been paid like this for centuries) but from that of Bellingcat's duty of care to their sources. A payment is the easiest thing in the world to discover. There is also a distance that can be easily explained when using OSINT techniques, which does not equate to dealing with Human Intelligence (HUMINT). Officers train for years to keep individuals safe. These individuals may be at extreme risk. Acting like this moves Bellingcat from being an OSINT company into something resembling an espionage agency. They are entering into territory that implicates them in what could be a criminal conspiracy or assisting, if not encouraging, a crime to obtain protected information.⁶³ This is no longer the world of research but rather an unlawful interaction where corruption of an official is occurring. This book may represent an admission of guilt.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT IN YEARS TO COME?

The use of videos and livestreaming linked to the internet is one of the business successes of the last few years. How long before something like a doorbell camera becomes hackable and part of a larger spy network? How long before this becomes an exploitable product by people on both sides of the legal fence? Being able to tell when someone isn't home is of interest to both criminals looking to steal and spies looking to creep... and so much more.

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⁶² 'Bellingcat Founder Eliot Higgins on Navalny, Syria and Qanon', YouTube, 5 February 2021.

⁶³ 'Inchoate offences', The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) website, updated 21 December 2018.

The COVID pandemic is influencing all areas of life across the world. But it can also profoundly affect covert operations. There were no doubt a few phone calls shooting between Whitehall (government) and Vauxhall (secret services) when ‘Test and Trace’⁶⁴ was announced. Perhaps a voice was heard to ask: ‘There’s a new phone app that can tell you where someone has been and who they have been speaking to? Are you mad!’ Monitoring of public and private life may open the door to further avenues of investigation and abuse in the coming years.

As Big Tech moves people considered undesirable off their platforms, we will see the rise in closed niche communities. Society and those active online have become tribal as evidenced by the far-right movements that have been gaining momentum since the US 2020 elections.⁶⁵ At the same time, COVID deniers and anti-vaccination activists⁶⁶ are being pushed off traditional platforms. A narrative is fed to people in a bubble and when applied to individuals in closed and polarised networks may prompt paranoia, activism, and conspiracy theories.⁶⁷ Infiltrating such groups necessitates moving beyond OSINT to a more involved and interactive infiltration mode, beyond simply constructing False Persona Profiles, as is done currently, and into building credible back stories and financial histories. In so doing, the field of investigation will inevitably take many dangerous turns and risk the revelation of operators.

At what point does this become fraud by impersonation? How far does a private organisation push the pretence of being someone else online before their acts become illegal? And how will we really know whom we are talking to? How will it affect our duty of care to operators and those who become involved accidentally? If the only way to monitor and capture evidence on certain sites and groups is by joining under a false name, what can prevent an operator from being arrested under a conspiracy charge? And once arrested, how can the operator mount a defence in court? How is transparency to be measured and managed? This will fundamentally affect the way research can successfully be undertaken. Throughout this book Bellingscat have shown an ability to adapt.

64 UK Health Security Agency, ‘NHS Test and Trace: what to do if you are contacted’, gov.uk website, 27 May 2020.

65 E.J. Dickson, ‘Proud Boys Channels Are Exploding on Telegram’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 January 2021.

66 Cristina Criddle, ‘Coronavirus: YouTube bans misleading Covid-19 vaccine videos’, *BBC News*, 14 October 2020.

67 Michael Butter, John Cook and Stephan Lewandowski, ‘Identifying conspiracy theories’, European Commission.

The challenges ahead will be yet another testing ground for them, as I'm sure we will discover in a second volume.

CONCLUSIONS

We are Bellingcat: An Intelligence Agency for the People is a book that tells a history that expands beyond its own evolution. In only a few years, the Bellingcat team have gone from a group of online operators to a global brand, highlighting those working behind the scenes to manipulate world events and our interpretations of them in the process. The answer remains to be seen. Bellingcat will change their approach and operational style now that they are recognised as market leaders. Their popularity has been used to spread news of the injustices they have uncovered and advertise the training they organise.

A familiar and personable style permeates Higgins's writing so that, while at moments he belabours 'then we did this, then we did that' sequences, these moments are nevertheless explained for any reader lacking in-depth technical ability. For those short on computer science or conspiracy video background, the amount of information uncoverable by those with a keen investigative nose is shocking. What we do, who we are, and where we live appears to be forever imprinted and available on the web—just occasionally for a charge. What does this mean for the balance of power? If we can't trust our governments, should we trust our neighbours with often very personal data? In Bellingcat's world view does a red line divide what they *can* do from what they *should* do? How do they distinguish between the two? And how do they decide when action is required and who gives that advice/makes that call? How will that view develop in the face of technological change?

Regulation is a tricky area. If this form of OSINT is regulated in the UK there will be another country or authority that does not fall into lockstep. And those who object to some form of registration will flock to it. Numerous parallels can be drawn with law enforcement, and also with the freedom of the press. The ability to operate in an unregulated arena has both a good side and a risky side. The passing of information from one hand to another can be accompanied by genuine peril. Bellingcat are finding out that you can learn from your successes and that you can also learn from your mistakes. Only time will tell which affects them most.

SAYING GOODBYE TO THE (POST-) SOVIET UNION?

A Review Essay by Vera Michlin-Shapir

Russian Imperialism Revisited: From Disengagement to Hegemony.
Domitilla Sagramoso. London: Routledge, 2020.

The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity.
Gulnaz Sharafutdinova. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Georgia from Autocracy to Democracy. Stephen F. Jones and Neil Macfarlane
eds. Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 2020.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Soviet Union, Russian imperialism, Georgia*

About the Author

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On the 4th of August 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of the Soviet Union, left Moscow for his summer vacation in Foros on the southern shore of Crimea. He planned to return to Moscow by 20th of August, but things did not go as planned. On 18th of August, as Gorbachev was working in his holiday residence office, a group of men demanded to see him.¹ Gorbachev quickly understood that his fears of a revanchist coup had materialised. The August Coup was underway. As British historian Archie Brown relayed it, Gorbachev's rejection of the putschists' demands condemned their actions to failure.² The attempted coup, however, set in motion a chain of events that led to the Union's demise. Politically it wounded Gorbachev beyond remedy. This was not least because events in Moscow, where Boris Yeltsin had taken centre stage, demonstrated that Russian society had already moved away from the Soviet oppressive model of obedience. Russian literary critic Irina Prokhorova wrote: 'I spent three unforgettable days on the barricades defending the Russian government's White House during the 1991 August coup attempt, and came away from that experience a free, no longer Soviet, person.'³ Yeltsin came to signify this reinvigoration as he was seen personally to have prevented the coup, immortalised by his photo on a tank in front of Russia's parliament. This won him enormous popularity and support.⁴ In December 1991 it was Yeltsin's plot that ended the Soviet Union.

The year 2021 saw the 30th Anniversary of the monumental events that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet the ghost of the USSR still seems to haunt Russia and the former Soviet states. Three decades later, prominent scholars of Russia and the independent states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union are grappling with the legacies of the Soviet state and its demise. Domitilla Sagramoso in her book *Russian Imperialism Revisited* (2020) re-examines the imperial legacies that shape the understanding of Russia's policies toward the former Soviet states. Her conclusions are enlightening, showing the evolution over time of

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1 Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 295.

2 Ibid.

3 Irina Prokhorova (ed.), *1990: Russians Remember a Turning Point* (London: MacLehose, 2013), p. 1.

4 Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, p. 299.

neo-imperial ideas in Russian foreign and defence policies. She argues in her nuanced analysis that imperial legacies did not always shape Russia's policies towards its neighbours, and that Russia was not predestined to follow neo-imperialist policies. In the 1990s, she finds 'hardly any evidence pointing to a clear and coherent project of an informal empire-building in the ex USSR'.⁵ It was 'with the advent of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency of Russia in the year 2000, designs of a more assertive Russia First policy, began to emerge', accelerating considerably after his return to a third term in office in 2012, and peaking with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁶

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova looks at how legacies of the Soviet collapse shaped Russian domestic politics, allowing Putin to divert Russia from a transition to democracy and remain in power for over two decades. She uses social psychological frameworks of social identity theory to explain how conditions of insecure identity allowed Putin to take away the freedoms that the demise of the Soviet state had granted to Russian citizens and to remain overall a popular leader despite such challenges as domestic political pressure from the opposition, economic downturn, and foreign sanctions.⁷ This importantly challenges the popular narrative of *Homo Sovieticus* that explains the slide back from enjoying the freedoms of the 1990s to Putin's repressive authoritarianism by describing such propensity to repression as having 'been predetermined by Russia's history, culture or type of "human material"'.⁸

In a volume edited by Stephen F. Jones and Neil Macfarlane, the two prominent Western scholars of Georgia provide a prestigious platform for their Georgian colleagues to evaluate the Caucasian state's thirty years of independence from the Soviet Union. This is an honourable undertaking that gives a space to authentic voices to tell the story of Georgia's successes and failures over the past three decades.

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⁵ Sagrmoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 11.

⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

These themes of recent history, that are also personal for some of the authors of the texts, raise multiple questions, some of which stem from the subjective experience of the author of this essay. Predominantly, why three decades after the collapse of the Soviet state does its spectre still haunt the people and the lands over which it ruled? And, when, if ever, can we say goodbye to the Soviet experience by reimagining these people and territories as *not post-Soviet*, but rather *not Soviet*?

In this essay I will outline three observations, offered by these important books, on where the Soviet experience still matters three decades on, and at which points its relevance diminishes. Then I will offer my own observations on major transformations in Russia and in the former Soviet space that are not tied to its Soviet legacy, but the result of global socio-economic and financial trends. This observation highlights the benefits of moving away from the Soviet paradigm and finally parting with the Soviet Union.

On Empathy

One of the most inspiring aspects of all three books is their personal and emphatic outlook on their subject of study. The role of ideas, beliefs, and sentiments became increasingly important in social sciences and international relations through constructivist theoretical frameworks. The authors of the books employ these frameworks in ways that allow readers to engage with their research in a deep and meaningful way. Sharafutdinova makes it a central theme, stating that ‘understanding Putin’s Russia, with all its contradictions and paradoxes, is only possible if we capture the important nuances of the historical, social and political context shared by the majority of Russians and if we do not impose our own normative preferences and biases...’⁹ Jones makes it the mission and *raison d’être* of his volume ‘to let Georgians speak for themselves’.¹⁰ Sagrarnoso too in her analysis sides with social constructivists when she accounts for Russians’ ‘rightly or wrongly... perceived sense of

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⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁰ Stephen F. Jones in Stephen F. Jones Neil Macfarlane (eds), *Georgia from Autocracy to Democracy* (Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 2020), p. 7.

insecurity' as a theme that informed Russian policies over the years.¹¹ This allows her to consider Russia's policies not as an ongoing march towards building a neo-empire on the ruins of the Soviet experiment, but as an intricate and dynamic process that evolved with time.

Writing about the former Soviet space in affective terms or, at the very least, respectfully is appropriate. The experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union was for many tragic and violent. The fact that those traumas are recent, with many of the authors having experienced them at first hand, makes empathy all the more important as these stories are at least partly told as personal histories. Consequently, the storytellers are obliged—similar to social anthropologists—to state where they stand in relation to their subject of study. Sharafutdinova does so in the preface to her book, confiding that 'Vladimir Putin is not the president of my choice. However, he is president by virtue of the choices made by people I care about'.¹² This makes the research not only more honest, but more insightful.

I too, as the author of this essay, should share my own Soviet experiences that shape my predispositions. Born to a Jewish family in the Ukrainian SSR, I emigrated to Israel with my parents just over a year before the Union collapsed in December 1991. I did not experience the collapse, but my upbringing was informed by the experiences of my family in the Soviet Union. My grandparents were grateful to the Soviet regime for its fight against German Nazism. After the war, however, they and their children, my parents, were subject to the oppressive Soviet regime and its institutional anti-Semitism. This is my personal, complex, and unpleasant Soviet memory. While I have not lived through this hardship, it informed my world view. At the same time, I am part of a different and new generation, the millennials who were raised to embrace ever greater global flexibility and the rapid development of information technologies. This experience distances me from the Soviet one.

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11 Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 8.

12 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. ix.

Both my historical and personal proximity as well as contemporary generational distance form my opinions of events that took place in Russia and the former Soviet space during the last 30 years. This makes this essay not a strictly academic or intellectual endeavour, but what British historian Tony Judt called a ‘personal interpretation’.¹³ Judt described intently his interpretations of post-war Europe as *opinionated*, ‘a word that has acquired undeservedly pejorative connotations’.¹⁴ My opinions make me critical of certain policies and of those who perpetrated them, and sympathetic to others with whom I feel personal or generational affinity. They make me grateful to authors who describe with empathy the stories of the people who grapple with the Soviet legacy. At the same time, they fuel my interest in researching the limits of this legacy. When and where can we finally say goodbye to Soviet and post-Soviet history and write a non-Soviet story about what is happening to the people and lands that were once part of the Soviet empire?

On Victimhood

The complex and often violent history that former Soviet citizens experienced of their not-too-distant past makes victimhood a potent and recurring theme in these books. In the post-Soviet condition, it seems, victimhood is everywhere, and everyone is a victim. Georgians’ feelings of victimhood are more intuitively understandable as they were colonial subjects of the Soviet empire. Although the Soviet Union was, as Sagramoso puts it, a ‘peculiar empire’ that tried to erase the differences between ethnic groups and to ‘blur the imperial character’, and where a Georgian, Joseph Stalin (Iosif Dzhugashvili), reigned for three decades, it was an empire nonetheless.¹⁵ Georgia’s transition from the ideal of *Homo Sovieticus*, a Soviet person, to that of *Homo Democraticus*, an active citizen in a liberal democracy, was thus a process of liberation where victims and perpetrators could easily be identified. This is reflected in the writing of the contributors to Jones and Macfarlane’s book.

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¹³ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Random House, 2007), p. xiii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹⁵ Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 11.

In *Georgia from Autocracy to Democracy*, politician David Usupashvili identifies a gap in political science education, which was a result of the perverse Soviet perception of statehood as a bourgeois institution, as a Soviet legacy that undermined Georgia's state-building in its early years of independence.¹⁶ Another contributor, Giorgi Khelashvili, pointed out the Georgian people's difficult relationship with the term 'freedom' which was interpreted as freedom from the rule of law, as a remnant of Soviet life. Or as he puts it 'the Soviet straitjacket'.¹⁷ Neil Macfarlane describes in his chapter how Russian policies worked to undermine Georgia's independence. Victimhood is evident in these accounts, and it is easily recognisable who was the perpetrator (the Soviet state and later Russia as its successor) and who were the victims (the Georgian people and state). The Russian people's feelings of victimhood in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union are less intuitively understandable, but are present, nonetheless. These feelings were often tied to the loss of international status that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet empire.

On Empire

Both Sagramoso and Sharafutdinova devote much attention to the importance of loss and victimhood in Russia's foreign and domestic politics. Sagramoso points out that in the 1990s Russians 'realised that the possession of nuclear weapons and the holding of a permanent seat at the UNSC were not enough to compensate for Russia's loss of global influence', and that 'proclamations by Russian officials that Russia was a great power indicated...serious doubt' about its status.¹⁸ This disorientation as to Russia's new place in the world was aggravated by what Sagramoso calls an 'imperial syndrome in reverse'.¹⁹ The newly independent states purposefully devised such nationalising policies that challenged Russian interests, targeting ethnic Russians and Russian speakers on their territories. These policies deepened the sense of Russian victimhood and triggered hostile Russian responses. Yet Sagramoso found that in the 1990s, for

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16 David Usupashvili in Jones and Macfarlane (eds), *Georgia*, p.xviii.

17 Giorgi Khelashvili in Jones and Macfarlane (eds), *Georgia*, p. x.

18 Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 2.

19 Ibid., p. 7.

various reasons, Russia was not trying to restore its lost status and to rebuild a looser version of its former empire, or a 'neo-empire'. Sagramoso cites the lack of a clear idea among elites of what it means to be Russian, and the weak and fragmented character of the new Russian state as further reasons for this.²⁰

Sharafutdinova's book describes in detail how these real and perceived weaknesses and Russia's loss of status in the 1990s 'impacted Russia's political community, producing specific points of psychological vulnerability'.²¹ Putin politicised these vulnerabilities, which Sharafutdinova terms emotional 'hot buttons', and used them as a legitimisation strategy for his regime.²² In this process the democratisation and neo-liberal economic reforms of the 1990s were reconstructed as an all-encompassing frame of Russian post-Soviet victimhood.²³ This frame, as Sharafutdinova puts it, plunges 'the entire decade into dark colours, pulling together various negative economic, social, and political aspects of life'.²⁴ Similarly, the Soviet experience was reimagined and reconstructed as a pleasant one with its most tragic episodes, such as Stalin's terror, gradually cleansed and rehabilitated.²⁵ In this process, unpleasant memories of Soviet terror and oppression were pushed aside, marginalised, and purged. This explanation challenges the framework of *Homo Sovieticus*. It reveals the contemporary Russian slide back to authoritarianism and the return to Soviet symbols and practices as a psychological and political manipulation by Putin of the Russian public, and not as an inherent Russian characteristic.

The manipulation of the hardship of the 1990s and the effort to cleanse Soviet memory are described by Sharafutdinova as two constitutive parts of the contemporary Russian sense of victimhood, which Putin used in his legitimisation mechanism. But this formulation also runs the risk of replicating these exact populist binaries that Putin's regime is promoting. For instance, Sharafutdinova notes that 'dissenting voices' from the

.....
20 Ibid., p. 15.

21 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 27.

22 Ibid., p. 27.

23 Ibid., p. 122.

24 Ibid., p. 123.

25 Ibid., p. 15.

opposition appeared in the form of ‘counter-mobilisation against the dominant representation of the 1990s’ but did not gain wider public appeal in Russia.²⁶ The problem is that oppositionist voices intent on reversing this manipulated negation upon which Putin rests his legitimacy, and in many cases represent the 1990s as a necessary evil on the way to building a new non-communist Russia. Such views ignore the adverse experience of many Russians who genuinely agree with Putin’s regime narrative of the 1990s. These Russian oppositionist views also close the door to a third non-binary narrative in which the collapse of the Soviet Union was a welcome historical event, but the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s that followed it were a political and economic error. These reforms were carried out without evil intent on behalf of the reformers. But they were still erroneous because they created social vulnerabilities that destroyed Russia’s chances to bring about a democratic and prosperous economic future. Such adverse outcomes of neoliberalism and the national mobilisation that followed them are hardly unique to the Russian case as they have also been observed in other societies around the world. This acknowledgment could undermine Putin’s populist construction of such an artificial negation.

Sharafutdinova’s argument about Putin’s intentional manipulation of post-Soviet feelings of victimhood to divert Russia from its transition to democracy is in line with Sagramoso’s findings about Russia’s relations with neo-imperial ideas. Sagramoso explains that in the 1990s Russia was not pursuing a project to rebuild a neo-empire, not only because of its own weaknesses, but also because such a course of action was seen by Russian leaders as detrimental to Russia’s own core national interests.²⁷ This was the prevailing attitude not only among the liberal leadership in the early 1990s, but also in the latter half of the decade under the more hard-line Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov. Russia’s interest in strengthening neo-imperial structures such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) under Primakov’s Prime Ministership was limited by the more lucrative economic opportunities

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²⁶ Ibid., p. 129.

²⁷ Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 15.

offered in the West.²⁸ Even on such relatively easy policy choices as a union with Belarus, Russia was unwilling to compromise its sovereignty to re-establish a union.²⁹

The situation altered markedly under Putin when the ‘Kremlin increasingly engaged in attempts to create a sphere of influence around its neighbouring states,’ and gradually but steadily moved to neo-imperial policies.³⁰ These policy choices were not necessarily tied to objective national interests. According to Sagramoso, they were a consequence of Putin’s personal disappointment with the West, which was accompanied by an ideological shift in the Kremlin from the mid-2000s. Since then, the Russian leadership relied on an ideology that depicted Russia at the centre of a civilisational space, one of the poles in a multipolar world, and at the heart of a ‘Russian world’, performing a messianic mission as a leader of the global conservative movement.³¹ Russia’s neo-imperial policies culminated around two seminal events in the post-Soviet space—the War in Georgia (2008) and the annexation of Crimea and war in East Ukraine (2014).

The accounts offered by Sagramoso and Sharafutdinova highlight the need to look more profoundly and intently into Putin’s individual role in Russia’s transformations and its policies in the region.

On Putin

Putin’s presidency continues to receive extensive academic and journalistic attention. Sagramoso and Sharafutdinova raise new points about his leadership that require further consideration. Both scholars agree on the pivotal place of Putin’s personal leadership in forming oppressive domestic and hostile foreign policies, and on the fact that a major shift in Russia’s policies took place when Putin returned to office for a third term in 2012. They do, however, diverge on the causal dynamics that brought him to seek such strategies.

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²⁸ Ibid., p. 70–74.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

³¹ Ibid., p. 16.

Sagramoso proposes that the reorientation of Russian foreign policy towards neo-imperialism, ‘reflected above all its disappointment with Western rhetoric and its behaviour both globally and regionally, closer to Russia’s borders’.³² Her analysis is not apologetic. She does not imply that the West, NATO, and EU policies caused Putin to pursue a neo-imperial agenda. In fact, she clearly states that even if Putin’s neo-imperialism was somehow triggered by NATO’s policies, his responses in Georgia and Ukraine were illegal and disproportionate.³³ Her argument, however, still leaves the question of causality muted—why did Putin respond in such a disproportionate way to the challenges he was facing? This question is even more intriguing, given that Sagramoso finds that neither from an objective analysis, nor from the subjective understanding of Russia’s own elite, did the pursuit of a neo-empire serve Russia’s state goals. Which begs the question—whose goals did these neo-imperial policies really serve?

Sharafutdinova’s domestic analysis is instructive in finding the answer to this pivotal question. She analyses Putin’s personal leadership within the framework of a ‘new psychology of leadership’.³⁴ This approach ‘highlights that any leadership phenomenon is really a phenomenon not of one man, but of a relationship between the leader and his/her followers’.³⁵ Within that framework Putin’s leadership was successful in four crucial ways. 1) he was seen as one of the people; 2) he was doing it for the people; and 3) he was crafting a shared sense of the people; 4) and, he was making people feel that they mattered. Then neo-imperial foreign policy was particularly important in making the people feel like they mattered in the world.³⁶ As Sharafutdinova puts it, ‘Putin’s assertive foreign policy and especially the annexation of Crimea worked to conjure a sense of pride...instilling in the Russian community a sense that “we matter”’.³⁷ This created a situation where ‘the Russian people saw Putin

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32 Ibid., p. 147.

33 Ibid., p. 321.

34 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 36.

35 Ibid., p. 38.

36 Ibid., p. 39.

37 Ibid., p. 46.

as the ultimate representative of the Russian national community'.³⁸ This was a 'calculated and psychologically grounded' strategy that benefited Putin personally, as it allowed him to 'maintain political power in the same hands'.³⁹

Sharafutdinova's analysis differentiates between serving the people (or state interests) and manipulating them for the leader's own ends. The construction of a neo-empire, the constant flagging of the Soviet past, and the endless reconstruction of the trauma of the 1990s did not assist the Russian state or serve the Russian people. In fact, one of Sharafutdinova's main conclusions is that this system drives the Russian economy towards a dead end.⁴⁰ This brings one to a conclusion that Russia's new authoritarianism and its neo-imperial project served primarily Vladimir Putin, his friends, and allies. If one considers the particular ways in which this manipulation benefitted Putin, his cronies and helpers, one might discover a story far less Soviet or even post-Soviet, rather a non-Soviet story of a new type of global oppression, corruption, and disruption.

On the non-Soviet history of Russia's corruption

In February 2021, prominent Russian and international figures nominated Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny for the Nobel Peace Prize for his courage in revealing corruption and fighting for political pluralism.⁴¹ The renowned Russian scholar Alexander Etkind explained his decision to endorse Navalny for the prize because corruption, in his words, 'is the leading threat to the global world'.⁴² According to Etkind, 'the global world is founded on adherence to certain rules, both formal and informal', which Russia's 'getting rich on the back of its own people' erodes to the extent that the global world's 'mechanisms stop working'.⁴³ Etkind's words are an urgent call to see the moral challenge that regimes

.....
38 Ibid., p. 40.

39 Ibid., p. 49.

40 Ibid., p. 176.

41 'Poland's Walesa nominates Kremlin critic Navalny for Nobel', *France24*, 4 February 2021.

42 Masha Gessen, 'The Evolution of Alexey Navalny's Nationalism', *The New Yorker*, 15 February 2021

43 Ibid.

such as Putin's Russia, which are based on manipulation and exploitation, pose to the liberal global order.

If we judge from the Kremlin's radical actions against Navalny, it is evident that Putin views Navalny's activities as a real threat to his regime. In August 2020 Navalny was poisoned with a chemical nerve agent by a group of Federal Security Services (FSB) agents, one of whom was duped by Navalny in an online interview to admit they had intended to kill the opposition leader.⁴⁴ When Navalny returned from his medical treatment in Germany, the Russian authorities shut down Vnukovo airport and diverted his flight to the capital's Sheremetyevo airport to prevent him from seeing his supporters.⁴⁵ Navalny was quickly jailed and his organisation, The Anti-Corruption Foundation, was designated an extremist organisation on a par with Islamic terrorists.⁴⁶ These radical actions taken by Putin's regime can be explained by an account provided by Arkady Ostrovsky, the Russia Editor of *The Economist*, in his book *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (2016). He writes:

Behind these political games was not a vision of Russia's future or an ambition to restore its empire but something far more primitive: a desire for personal enrichment, comforts and power...⁴⁷

Ostrovsky's account suggests that the Kremlin is so eager to destroy Navalny, not for fear of the young leader's electoral or popular support, but because of its primal fear that somebody could reveal to the Russian public and the world its true lifeline—the endemic and destructive nature of its officials' self-enrichment and corruption. This explanation of Putin's regime does not render Sagrmoso's analysis of Russia's

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44 'OPCW Issues Report on Technical Assistance Requested by Germany', OPCW website, 6 October 2020; 'FSB Team of Chemical Weapon Experts Implicated in Alexey Navalny Novichok Poisoning', *Bellingcat* website, 14 December 2020; "If it Hadn't Been for the Prompt Work of the Medics": FSB Officer Inadvertently Confesses Murder Plot to Navalny', *Bellingcat* website, 21 December 2020.

45 'As it Happened: Navalny Returns to Russia', *The Moscow Times*, 18 January 2021.

46 Grigory Levchenko, "Our friendly concentration camp" Alexey Navalny confirms that he's in custody at a notorious penitentiary in Pokrov', *Meduza*, 15 March 2021.

47 Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (London: Polity, 2016).

neo-imperial policies or Sharafutdinova's observations on the regime's psychological manipulation any less relevant. In fact, these different dimensions work hand in hand—they mask the mass corruption and grant the regime legitimacy.

The corrupt nature of Putin's Russia adds a further global-level explanation to the Russian story. It is neither Soviet nor exclusively Russian. Russia's history is rife with economic and social injustices; however, Putin's corruption is also contemporary and global. Navalny's and other independent Russian investigations into Russian officials' corrupt practices sprawl across the globe, and frequently involve European passports and homes, real estate in European countries, luxury goods bought from international designers, and tuition fees in leading Western universities. No less important, they reveal networks of money laundering that involve the global offshore finance system and Western banks. Without the world financial system, this corruption would be anathema, and Putin's regime would be deprived of its main incentives mechanism.

The financialisation of the global economy—the backbone of the neo-liberal globalisation that has emerged in past decades—opens liberal Western regimes to serious challenges from their illiberal counterparts. It allows for money, and those who have large sums of it, to move quickly and seamlessly across borders. Ideally, such a system had been intended for fast development of businesses and innovations. In reality, however, it has facilitated a dramatic rise in tax avoidance, corruption, and injustice. It has also provided a platform for illiberal leaders to challenge the Western order. Russia's Putin, former US President Donald Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and others use the global financial system to increase or hide their personal wealth. At the same time, they deride the liberal system of values of the international order and manipulate the legitimate complaints of people across the world to incite a global revolt.

This reveals systemic flaws within the Western global system of which Putin is all too aware, and these allow him to undermine the West's moral

standing. As Ostrovsky notes, ‘the Kremlin believed that there was no such thing as “truth” and that strength lay only in money, that there was no such thing as values and that the only difference between Russian and Western officials was that Western officials could hide their cynicism better’.⁴⁸ From Putin’s point of view, Western leaders are just as corrupt as he is, and Western countries are as unjust as the Russia that he has built in the last two decades. Their talk of rule of law and best practices, in his mind, are expressions of Russophobia that targets him and his friends for practices in which everybody else engages. He bets on what he calls ‘Western double standards’ and moral hypocrisy to gain absolution from the crimes his regime commits. And he might just be right.

On 14th February 2021, Valentine’s Day, Navalny’s supporters joined peaceful online and offline actions under the hashtag #LoveIsStrongerThanFear. Beyond the symbolism of protesting on the Western celebration of love, the practices of the protesters—lighting flashlights on their mobiles, posting photos online in red clothing, and holding flowers—were contemporary and global. London School of Economics professor Tomila Lankina observed that protesters in Russia showed once more that the oppressed *Homo Sovieticus* was no appropriate framework to understand Russia, just as Sharafutdinova had argued. Lankina described these young people as ‘confident, well-travelled Russians who are aware of their rights as citizens’.⁴⁹ I empathise with these non-Soviet young Russians. I use the same social media tools as they. Like them I watched Navalny’s YouTube video about Putin’s palace and the vulgar corruption that it displayed.

I understand why they detest it and how it does not fit into the new world that many of my friends and I want to live in. I also see that the global nature of what they are protesting might mean that we are partners in the same struggle, and that whether they are victorious and indeed love prevails over fear, may depend not only on them.

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⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lankina Tomila, ‘Citizen versus Strongman: Revival, Social Class, and Social Decay in Russia’s Autocracy’, *Russian Analytical Digest*, N° 266, 8 April 2021.

The ‘sad fact’, as Navalny calls it, is that ‘western law enforcement agencies treat corrupt foreign officials with kid gloves’.⁵⁰ It is indeed sad that corrupt autocratic regimes have the West’s implicit approval. As Lankina writes, ‘western leaders and businesses [should] reflect on...where they have fallen short. For far too often they have compromised their own integrity, for simple material gain...’.⁵¹ There are numerous courageous journalistic and civic enterprises in Russia, and tens of thousands of ordinary Russians who are willing to risk their liberty and wellbeing to fight this contemporary form of oppression and corruption. What liberal-minded Westerners, like myself, can offer them is a recognition that their plight is not simply local; that in the global world we are all in it together.

The Russian opposition’s struggle against Putin’s corruption reveals today’s Russia as not only a Soviet or post-Soviet story, but also as a contemporary global story. In my book *Fluid Russia—Between the National and the Global in the Post-Soviet Era* (2021) I explore the impact of neo-liberalism and globalisation on the Russian state and society. I chart a way to understand Russia’s story as that of a state and a society that grapples not only with the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also with the neo-liberal disruption to institutions, routines, and identities. Putin’s rise to power and his project to reaffirm a stronger identity are seen in this narrative, not as a uniquely Russian diversion from liberal democracy, but as a response to the global disruption and as part of a broader phenomenon of challenges to globalisation. Such a perspective acknowledges the importance of understanding the Soviet legacy and Russia but strives to see beyond its realm into the non-Soviet aspects that shape life inside Russia.

Importantly for me, my analysis recognises that Putin’s Russia is no distant ‘other’ trying to undermine the Western global order from the outside but is an integral part of the global world. This alternative perspective results from my subjective position towards the topic of my

50 Alexey Navalny, ‘Only action against corruption can solve the world’s biggest problems’, *The Guardian*, 19 August 2021.

51 Tomila Lankina, ‘Putin, Russia, and the moral imperative of the West’, LSE blog, 24 January 2021.

research—underscoring the importance of first-hand experience of life in the Soviet Union, and also the perspective of a different, younger generation, one that sees how Russia transformed along the lines of other contemporary global societies. To borrow Judt's words once more, such an affinity 'renders the dispassionate disengagement of the historian quite difficult to find'.⁵² Yet, this approach may create new opportunities to recognise affinities and start new conversations between ordinary Russians and their Western counterparts. In a global world that faces an urgent need for systemic overhaul, these recognitions may be the best chance for decency to prevail over tyranny.

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⁵² Judt, *Postwar*, p. xiii.

