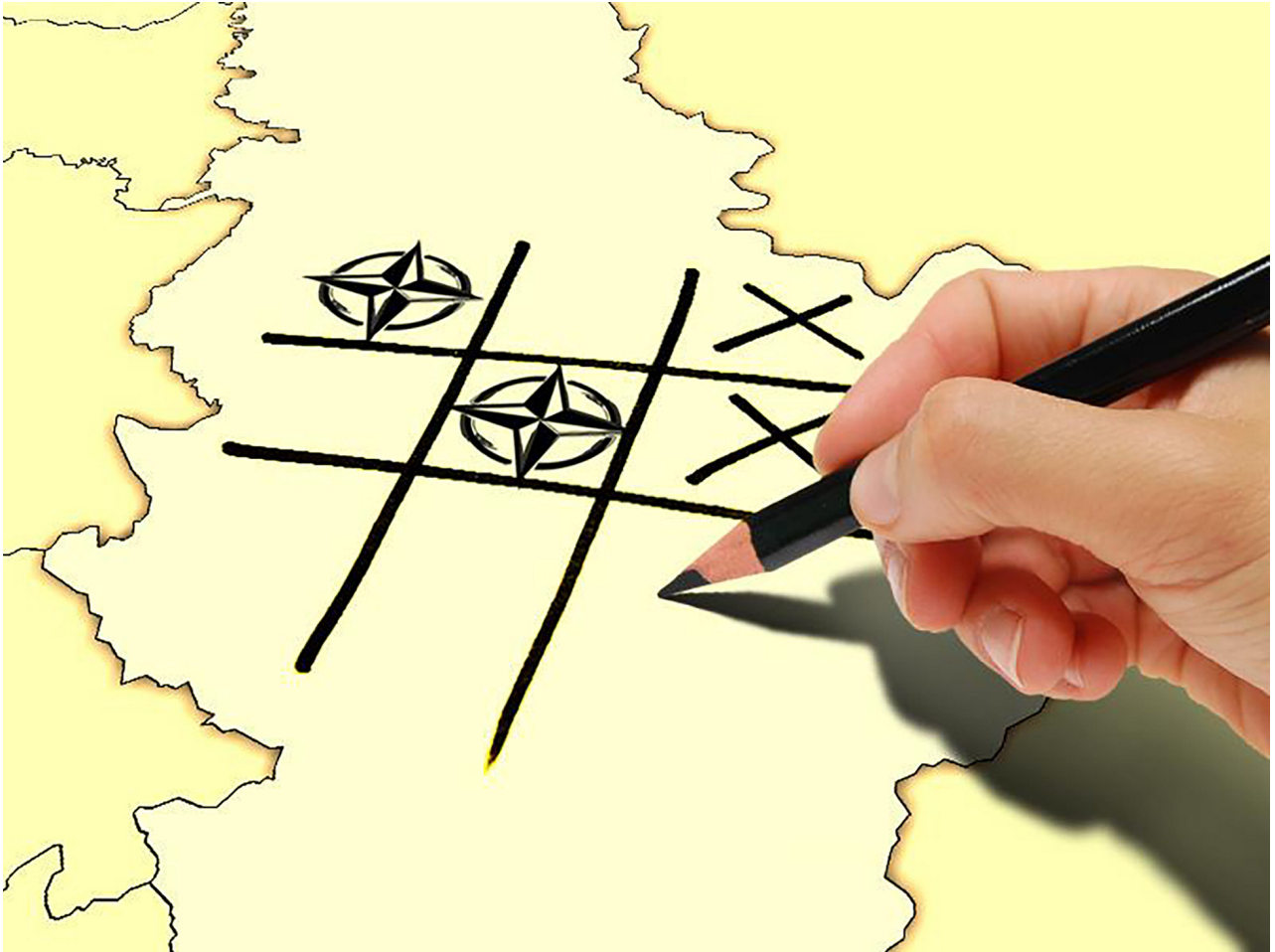




Global Strategic Narrative Wars: The Battle for Serbia



Aleksandar Mitić



Dr. Aleksandar Mitić

GLOBAL STRATEGIC NARRATIVE WARS

The Battle for Serbia

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For the Publisher

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Director

Reviewers

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Politics and Economics, Belgrade

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Sanja Balović

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PREFACE

Two key arguments form the basis of this book. First, we live in an era of transition towards multipolarity, and great powers seek legitimacy in the wars of succession by pursuing strategic narratives. The critical battle in the global war of narratives involves the fight between the Western “rules-based order” (RBO) proponents and its challengers, primarily but not exclusively the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China.

For its supporters, the RBO is the foundation of liberal internationalism and a resilience mechanism in preserving the post-Cold War order—epitomised by the US “unipolar moment”—against non-Western “autocratic transgression.”

For the challengers, the RBO incorporates a set of mechanisms that selectively lean on elements of international law, interpret them freely and creatively, and align them with the interests of the political West, using double standards and the principle of “unique”, *sui generis* cases to fit the needs, thus effectively undermining the UN system.

The second argument of the book is that Serbia has been one the primary “testing grounds” of both strategic narrative wars and the application of RBO, most notably during the NATO 1999 aggression and the EU-US masterminding of “Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence” in 2008, two flagrant violations of international law. These actions have served to propel calls for multipolarity, particularly in Moscow and Beijing, and have caused long-term consequences which underlie some of the most fundamental conflicts of the 21st century.

The book looks at global strategic narrative wars from a variety of angles. The prologue introduces the reader to the genesis of modern strategic communication and the importance of the Serbian case through the author’s personal experience as an Agence France-Presse war correspondent from Kosovo and Metohija during the 78 days of NATO bombings in 1999. The personal reflection continues in Chapter 1 with a series of anecdotes stemming from the author’s reporting days for the Tanjug news agency from the European Union and NATO headquarters in the years leading to

“Kosovo’s UDI”. In parallel, the book describes the mechanisms of “Manichean” strategic communication during the 1990s and early 2000s amid expanding calls for multipolarity.

In Chapter 2, the book argues that great powers’ strategic narratives help us understand today’s competing geopolitical interests, their arenas, and their implications. It underscores the significance of the concept of strategic narratives, connecting it to strategic framing, strategic communication, and grand strategy. Since successful strategic narratives imply connecting words and deeds, the chapter examines statecraft repertoires and shaping concepts. These concepts tie strategic narratives to action.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 analyse the crucial battlegrounds of global narrative competition. The first arena is the narrative war between NATO countries and the Russian Federation and its translation in the conflict in Ukraine. The second is between the US-led West and China, the world’s emerging superpower and critical proponent of new global non-Western initiatives, primarily the flagship Belt and Road Initiative. The third arena, related to the first two, is the “fight for the rest”, primarily for influence in the Global South, for the non-aligned and the hedgers, with implications for competition between the Western RBO and the new political, military, economic, normative and soft power of BRICS. The battle for the “rest” is analysed through the case of Serbia. The book suggests that the Republic of Serbia is a crucial theatre of the global narrative competition. The preface and the introduction paint a scene that points to the importance of events and processes related to Serbia for the global narrative wars. However, Serbia also defines four key actors as part of its “independent” foreign policy—the EU, the US, Russia, and China. After briefly introducing relations between Belgrade and these four actors, the book analyses three main strategic narrative battles fought on Serbian grounds.

The first battle relates to the RBO narrative. The issue of Kosovo and Metohija, the precedent of NATO’s 1999 aggression, the claim that the 2008 unilateral declaration of independence was a “unique case”, and the “creative” interpretations of UNSC 1244 and the Dayton Peace Accords call for a fundamental question: Will the “rules-based world order” prevail over Serbia?

The second battle refers to NATO’s “open door policy”, which is the enlargement of the Alliance to the east and its consequences for the Balkans,

in particular regarding the military neutrality of Serbia (and Republika Srpska). This battle extends the NATO-Russia conflict over the Alliance's expansion and its geopolitical and security implications. Here, we will look at the cases of the US vs Russia on NATO expansion, the portrayal of Russian-Serbian relations as a hybrid threat and Serbia's refusal to align with Western restrictive measures against Russia over the conflict in Ukraine. Thus, will the NATO alliance further expand in the Western Balkans?

Finally, the third battle relates to the issue of strategic alternatives. On one side, the West asserts that Serbia is its "backyard" and "EU membership" is its only option. On the other hand, new multipolar horizons have emerged: cooperation within initiatives (Belt and Road Initiative) and in partnership with rising Eastern and Global South partners (BRICS, SCO), or "simply" a variety of hedging options, including political neutrality. It is an extension of the broader geopolitical battle between the West and China for "the rest", for the "Global South", and generally competition over the transformation of the global world order. Beyond the slow accession talks with the EU since 2014, the upgrading of relations with Beijing to the level of "Community of Serbia and China" in 2024, and the prevalence of Serbian public support for Russia, it is only fair to ask: should EU membership be the only alternative for Serbia?

In September 2024, the US digital platform Politico, a highly influential Western mainstream media outlet, argued that Serbia is "one of the most important in-between places in the world today" and that "its fate will help determine which Great Power comes to dominate this century".

Serbia, as a military-neutral EU candidate country with Eastbound hedging strategies on the edges of the NATO umbrella, must thus face great power strategic narrative competition, including Western attempts at "de-hedging" and bandwagoning, indeed a host of "wedging" statecraft repertoire strategies—from coercion to inducement.

Its fate will signpost whether an "independent" foreign policy is possible in Europe and how far the world has advanced in building a multipolar order.

*Dedicated to the diplomats in my family – Aleksandar and Milena,
to my lifelong supporters – Mirjana and Boris,
and my hopes for a more just global future – Mina and Tea*

PROLOGUE

WHEN NATO STRIKES AGAINST INTERNATIONAL LAW

“How is this even possible?” I mumbled as I ran through the lobby of “Grand Hotel” in downtown Priština, the capital of Serbia’s southern province of Kosovo and Metohija. My colleague from the Belgrade office of Agence France-Presse (AFP) had just referred me to breaking news from the German news agency DPA stating that 100,000 Kosovo Albanians were detained at the city stadium. The stadium was almost a stone’s throw from the hotel where I had been staying from the beginning of NATO’s aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on March 24, 1999. Six days had passed since the Alliance dropped its first bombs, and I was one of the few remaining journalists working for foreign media who dared and managed to stay in Priština. In the midst of bombing in and out of the city, clashes between Serbia’s security forces and the Albanian “Kosovo Liberation Army” (KLA) in several neighbourhoods, blackouts, and chaos, it was possible to miss dozens of important news to report. But missing the sight of 100,000 people in a makeshift “concentration camp” just around the corner – that seemed incredulous.

Three minutes later, I was standing in the middle of the stadium. The grass was green and untouched. No debris or traces of anyone stepping on the premises for a long time. Let alone 100,000 people. I filed an urgent news report denying the information. The original source for the German media was Hashim Thaçi, the leader of the KLA, whose assertion glued well to the statement 48 hours earlier by Berlin’s Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping that “genocide was going on in Kosovo” (Reporters Without Borders 1999). In Washington, such accusations were backed up by US State Department Spokesman James Rubin, Thaçi’s “liaison officer” during the failed Rambouillet talks ahead of the bombings. Rubin was also the husband of Christiane Amanpour, CNN’s correspondent whose reporting during the Bosnian war had already laid the ground for the image of Serbs as “genocide-prone”. Almost in concert with Thaçi’s statement, Rubin told the March 30 press conference at the State Department that “we have very clear indicators

that genocide is unfolding in Kosovo. We are looking at a mixture of confirmed and unconfirmed reports at this time. But we don't see any need to await confirmation of genocide; clearly, there are crimes against humanity occurring in Kosovo"(US Department of State 1999a). Yet, following my report denying allegations of his "liaison" in the KLA, Rubin had to adopt a defensive posture regarding the credibility of Thaçi's information (US Department of State 1999b):

Journalist: Given the fact that he said this – maybe not to you, but he said this – and the fact of the matter is a reporter went there this morning and said that it was empty and that there was no signs that anyone in any large numbers at all had been there for the past couple days at all, that the grass was intact and undisturbed, and it was just deserted. How confident are you in the reports that you're getting from him and others, and how comfortable are you repeating them to us in this forum?

Rubin: Mr. Thaçi has been quite clear with us that he is hearing reports – he's not saying that these things are facts.

The US State Department spokesman then tried to spin the context around. But his credibility was already damaged. And so was the credibility of the narrative on Serb "genocide" in Kosovo and Metohija.

Why was the term "genocide" important?

Since the escalation of hostilities between the Yugoslav forces and the separatist KLA in the spring of 1998, Western powers had pursued a path of military solution to the crisis in the form of an armed foreign intervention in Kosovo and Metohija. Such an option was stiffly rejected by Moscow and Beijing, who had warned that any NATO intervention circumventing the UN Security Council – and thus their veto – would be an absolute breach of international law. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jianxuan said on October 9, 1998, that "military action against Yugoslavia will not only violate the UN Charter and other universally acknowledged norms of international law, but will also do nothing to help resolve the issue; it may even give rise to serious consequences"(BBC 1998).

Three months later, on January 15, 1999, I arrived in Priština on my first day at the job of Kosovo correspondent for AFP, one of the world's leading news agencies, and the starting point of my journalism career. Upon arrival to Priština, I had an unlikely welcome in the form of a hectic discussion with

a group of French journalists – Renaud Girard from Le Figaro, Christophe Châtelot from Le Monde and Pierre Lhuillery from AFP – who all seemed incredulous about versions circulating regarding an incident that had happened earlier that day.

The incident had occurred in the village of Račak, in south-central Kosovo, and it involved a Serbian police raid against a KLA stronghold in response to a series of attacks listed by the authorities as terrorist. The following morning, only five minutes after I entered for the first time the Media Center situated in the “Grand Hotel”, the head of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM), William Walker, appeared at the door. The former CIA operative in El Salvador had a notorious reputation due to his Latin American operations. However, he was the nominated chief of the KVM in Kosovo since the end of November 1998. Walker invited journalists to follow him urgently to Račak where, as he shouted, “something terrible had happened”. When journalists arrived at the village, they saw dozens of scattered bodies. At a press conference which followed, Walker said this was a “crime against humanity” committed by the Serb police against Albanian “civilians”. At that moment, listening to Walker’s mention of “crime against humanity”, I sensed for the first time that this could be the “trigger” term for NATO’s attack. The Serbian side was saying the opposite – that these victims were KLA members killed in combat. An international investigation followed, led by Finnish pathologist Helena Ranta. The results of her investigation were widely expected and clouded the February-March Rambouillet talks on finding a solution to the Kosovo crisis. As the talks collapsed, Ranta held a final press conference in Priština on March 17. During the conference, the Finnish pathologist, sitting next to Walker, was refusing to label what had happened in Račak as a “crime against humanity”. The OSCE mission chief was blushing, angrily looking at Ranta. Just as the conference was about to end without the Finnish pathologist stating what was expected from her, a Western journalist finally asked Ranta to deliver her judgment: was it, yes or no, a “crime against humanity”? Walker started making hand gestures, prompting Ranta to look at him. He then took a pencil and broke it in two. The Finnish pathologist, petrified, then answered: “This is a crime against humanity, yes”. Walker was relieved, as this was the signal which was needed for a green light, for a justification, a trigger for the beginning of NATO bombings against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

When announcing his decision to attack Belgrade on March 19, 1999, five days ahead of the launch of the bombings, US President Bill Clinton stated that “as we prepare to act, we need to remember the lessons we have learned in the Balkans. We should remember the horror of the war in Bosnia, the sounds of sniper fire aimed at children, the faces of young men behind barbed wire, the despairing voices of those who thought nothing could be done” (US Department of State 1999c). Using a Second World War analogy, Clinton justified the attack with a rhetorical question: “What if someone had listened to Winston Churchill and stood up to Adolf Hitler earlier? How many people’s lives might have been saved? And how many American lives might have been saved?” (Ash 1999).

Such a reference would not have been possible without a systematic strategic communication campaign aimed at building a narrative. Indeed, a content analysis, based on a Nexus database search and presented in the introduction of a new edition of one of the most famous studies on propaganda – “Manufacturing Consent” – Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky found that, in five most prominent US print media (Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, Washington Post, Newsweek, and Time), the term “genocide” concerning “Serbs” and the conflict in Kosovo appeared 220 times during the 1998-1999 period (Herman and Chomsky 2008). German Defence Minister Scharping argued Serbs “were playing football with decapitated heads, ripped fetuses from pregnant women and baked them”, and “killed between 100,000 and 500,000 people” (Halimi and Rimbert 2019). London’s Daily Mail, on its March 29 front page, put a picture of Albanian children in a lorry and headlined “Flight from Genocide: Their terrified and bewildered faces evoke memories of the Holocaust”; on April 1, the Daily Mirror headlined “1939 or 1999?” and reported that “Nazi-style terror came to Kosovo yesterday in a horrific echo of the wartime Holocaust”; while the same day The Sun ran the title “Nazis 1999 – Serb cruelty has chilling echoes of the Holocaust” (Hume 2000, 72). References to gas chambers, Auschwitz, and “Schindler’s List” became commonplace associations in the UK, German and French media.

However, the facts on the ground during the 1999 bombings in Kosovo did not match the “expectations”. When rumours in the Western media spread about the wounding of Kosovo Albanian political leader Ibrahim Rugova, we went to his house to interview him – he denied the information.

The story was breaking news around the world. French *Libération* wrote: “Difficult to verify rumours or will to blacken an already dark picture? Somehow, several pieces of information received a denial yesterday. Thus, an Agence France-Presse correspondent confirmed yesterday in Priština that the moderate Kosovo Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova was safe, contrary to his exiled colleagues’ worrying information” (Libération 1999a). When the political leader of the KLA, Adem Demaçi, was said to have disappeared, we found him buying a salad at the Priština open market and interviewed him. However, the rebuttal of the “Thaçi-Rubin” tandem was a particularly low point for the NATO narrative. Whether “fake news” or “alternative facts”, the debunking of this report and numerous other NATO assertions provoked fissures and doubts in Western public opinion despite the constant attempts to control the strategic narrative.

In late 1999, Wall Street Journal reporters Daniel Pearl and Robert Block concluded after investigation that the war in Kosovo “was savage, but wasn’t genocide” (Pearl and Block 1999). Some 20 years later, French journalists Ignacio Ramonet and Pierre Rimbart would call the so-called “Potkova” (“Horseshoe”) – a plan according to which the Serbs had programmed an “ethnic cleansing” of Kosovo Albanians – the “greatest lie of the end of the 20th century”, while their colleagues Jean-Arnault Dérens et Laurent Geslin would call it “an archetype of fake news diffused by Western armies and repeated by all the great European newspapers” (Ramonet and Rimbart 2019).

In a milestone article on the use of the word “genocide”, the New York Times reported on April 4, 1999, that “policy-makers in the United States and Europe are invoking the word to help provide a legal justification for their military campaign against Serbia. It is one based in part on concepts of humanitarian law, where no word is more evocative. At the same time, the public invocation of genocide (...) is itself helping to create a new model of international law that may one day be used to justify similar interventions in sovereign countries” (Lewis 1999). Indeed, “a broad spectrum of legal scholars agree that there is currently no simple, straightforward or obvious legal basis for the bombing of Serbian targets to be found in treaties, the United Nations’ charter or binding resolutions or any other written international legal code”, the New York Times wrote, quoting Harvard Law professor and former legal advisor to US State Department Abram Chayes

as saying that “the traditional view of international law would clearly prohibit what is happening” (Lewis 1999).

Indeed, just as the NATO bombing was the height of the US unipolar moment, it was one of the defining moments of the Western “rules-based world order” (RBO). Washington and the political West saw the opportunity to interpret international law to their liking or, perhaps even more precisely, to mould international law into the shape of a “rules-based world order.”

LAUNCHING 21ST CENTURY STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

It was a scene from the apocalypse. Some 30 metres from the barn, in the middle of the road, the charred body of a tractor driver was mummified; his vehicle turned into a pile of steel. The body of a headless woman sat in the ravine close to the tractor, and that of a legless girl further down the road. The smell of blood, of burned human bodies mixing with dust, was unbearable. The screams of the wounded and their families were louder than the NATO planes still circling above the area.

An hour earlier, these Albanians were riding tractors, part of a convoy carrying displaced civilians near Đakovica, in western Kosovo and Metohija, when NATO planes started striking. The Serbian police, first on the scene after the attack but hiding in a ravine, had warned us not to approach the compound as another attack could be imminent. We refused. We were the first reporters on the scene of the massacre, arriving within an hour from a radio amateur signal notifying us of the series of NATO bombings in the area. As the sounds of planes waned in the distance, the doctors joined, and we could focus on reconstructing the scene. We counted 20 bodies on and around the road and in the adjacent farm. Three survivors repeated the account of the attack. I took my satellite phone out. Shocked by the scene, I wanted the world to hear about this massacre as fast as possible. Just as I prepared to send my “urgent” on the attack, Paul Watson told me: “No, stop! ... You know they will try to deny the attack. We must provide as much evidence as possible – examine the wounds, measure the craters and write down the serial numbers of the projectiles in the craters”. I trusted Paul. I was a 25-year-old rookie reporter on my first assignment since finishing journalism school. Paul, 43, was my fellow alumni at Ottawa’s Carleton

University Journalism School, a Los Angeles Times correspondent and a Pulitzer Prize Winner.

Six years earlier, in Mogadishu, Paul had taken the photo of a Somali crowd cheering as they dragged the body of a dead US soldier from a downed Blackhawk helicopter engaged in combat with local militias. The photo had won him a Pulitzer, but Paul was a humble professional with an attention to detail and a sensitivity to the PR tricks surrounding the war. I did as he advised.

The urgent news sent through the AFP network arrived at 1428 GMT, just as the European Union leaders, many of them also leaders of NATO countries, were meeting at a Brussels summit. Faced with the urgent news and pressed by Brussels journalists, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair commented: “Knowing the Serbs, it must be them!”. CNN, ABC, and NBC evening news programs all led with the Đakovica attack. NATO and the Pentagon at first categorically denied the possibility of a NATO error, then attempted to blame “Serb artillery”, “Serb helicopters”, and, finally, “the Serbian military using tractors as human shields”. They would concede the truth only five days later.

The NATO air campaign was in trouble. The world’s mightiest power, 19 industrialised countries led by the undisputed world leader of the post-Cold War 1990s – the United States – had launched on March 24, 1999, aerial bombings against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a country made up of the former Yugoslav republics of Serbia and Montenegro. The Alliance intervened outside of its proclaimed zone of responsibility – territories of NATO member countries – and without the required UN Security Council authorisation, thus bypassing opposition by Russia and China. A pure act of aggression. The bombing campaign involved 1,045 fighter aircraft carrying 38,000 combat sorties, including 10,484 strike sorties (Lambeth 2001, 61). Yugoslavia, a state of 10 million people, was no match.

However, NATO leaders had assumed that Serbia would rapidly withdraw its security forces from Kosovo, allowing the Alliance to move in. The Serbian army was, however, well prepared for the attack, with its heritage of guerrilla warfare against the Nazis in WWII and preparations for a potential invasion by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It would dig in and avoid substantial damage by using camouflage and discreet means of transportation. With each day passing, nervousness was rising in NATO capitals. NATO planes

started bombing more aggressively. The result was a rise in “collateral damage”. More and more civilians – both Serbs and Albanians – were being killed while sleeping at home, playing outdoors or driving on the roads.

On April 12, NATO had already hit a passenger train near Leskovac, in southern Serbia, killing dozens of Serb civilians. But on April 14, the bombs killed precisely those whom they were trying to protect – displaced Albanian civilians. The world was appalled by the news from Đakovica. NATO planes had launched several attacks on the column of civilian tractors along the road. Near the village of Bistražin – same scenes, wounds, craters, and projectiles. In total, 70 people were killed in the attacks. On April 15, the day after the attack, Western reporters based in Belgrade, accompanied by the Yugoslav army, arrived on the scene. They confirmed the reports that I had sent.

At the NATO HQ in Brussels, the Alliance’s press secretary Jamie Shea had to admit that civilians were indeed hit by NATO bombs, although he tried to justify the incident by arguing that the pilot “dropped his bomb in good faith, as you would expect a trained pilot from a democratic NATO country to do” (Larson and Savych 2006, 96).

As soon as he heard Shea’s words, Paul Watson, watching the press conference on TV in Priština, took an ashtray and aimed it at the screen. He was disgusted and furious. Before the bombings, Paul thought an air campaign was a solution. But now, three weeks into the war, his anger turned against the deception from the NATO press office, which had tried to deny what he had been witnessing and reporting for the Los Angeles Times.

Back in Brussels, at 2200 GMT on April 14, Shea received a call from a National Security Council advisor to US President Bill Clinton. “Jamie, I wanted to tip you off that I’ve just been listening in to a phone call between Tony Blair and President Clinton. Their conclusion is that you need help, and your life is about to change”, the NSC advisor said (Stourton 1999).

In the aftermath of the war, the Sunday Telegraph argued that “April 14 was the defining moment in the information war (...) The Đakovica incident forced Bill Clinton and Tony Blair to recognise that NATO’s press operation could prove to be the Alliance’s Achilles heel (...) Another PR disaster like this could have catastrophic consequences” (Stourton 1999).

Shea’s NATO press office had been entirely dependent on military debriefing. It would take at least five hours to debrief pilots and a few more

to compile information and transport it physically—avoiding open communication channels—from the NATO military command SHAPE at Mons to the Brussels HQ some 45 km north. Furthermore, NATO presented pictures of targets hit as cockpit video shots, making the bombings look like a video game “virtual war”.

In contrast, the information I was sending through AFP from Kosovo was a fast-witness account depicting the horrors of the war. Pictures from Belgrade colleagues further widened the gap between reporter information from the bloody ground and NATO PR accounts from the miles-high F16 cockpits. Even NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander, US General Wesley Clark, first received news from the media. He watched the Đakovica attacks on CNN: “The way General Clark reacted to those first Serb pictures showing what seemed to be civilian victims of NATO planes, sounds suspiciously like panic” (Stourton 1999).

This was precisely the scenario NATO had been trying to avoid, according to Ignacio Ramonet, editor-in-chief of *Le Monde diplomatique*:

“Vietnam changed everything. The fact that the Pentagon had interpreted the coverage of Vietnam as demoralising the home front changed everything. The great armies learned a lesson: we must not show the war to the home front. If we show the barbarian acts committed by our soldiers, massacres of My Lai, napalm bombings of civilians (...) it’s a catastrophe. The first to learn the lesson were the British at the Falklands and then the Americans at Grenada (...) Same in Kosovo, the war has to stay invisible, what our guys are doing should not be shown. Every time there is an error, what does NATO do? It starts by denying. NATO knows that given the rich news production during the war, if it recognised only two or three days later, it will not have the same effect. What counts is day one. Afterwards, they tell the truth, but the media effect is already reached” (*Les cahiers de médiologie* 1999, 89).

Indeed, Jamie Shea admitted after the war: “After the attack on the refugee convoy near Đakovica, the first ‘accident’ of the war, public support dropped in many countries, including Germany, by 20 to 25 per cent. We had to work hard for six weeks to win back public opinion” (Henning 2001).

The urgent conversation between Clinton and Blair following the Đakovica attacks resulted in the decision to overhaul the war’s PR effort completely. Blair instructed his spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, to take the

morning Eurostar train from London to Brussels. Campbell was “bringing a blueprint for a revolution. The world’s most powerful military machine was now to be directed not by soldiers but by spin doctors” (Stourton 1999).

Campbell revamped the NATO PR effort. He summoned top military and communication experts from all corners of Europe and the US to staff his “Media Operations Centre”. The campaign was a precursor of what are today’s strategic communication campaigns - it included an adapted, flexible and coordinated structure aimed at careful real-time monitoring of information from the battlefield, spinning of Serbian official reports or journalist accounts from the ground, as well as pro-active and targeted production of PR materials (Stourton 1999).

Campbell’s strategy was a “full-scale information war”, which ultimately was successful and decisive, at least in persuading the public opinion in NATO member countries not to push for an opt-out from the war.

Four years later, in 2003, Blair’s spin doctor would repeat a similar operation. His campaign for war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq over the alleged threat of “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) was one of the most memorable moments of the build-up to war. This time, he had gone a step too far, and the deception over the “WMD” cost his political career dearly.

The “WMD” never fired off, but the era of modern strategic communication was launched.

SOWING THE SEEDS OF MULTIPOLARITY

“Are you Aleksandar Mitić?” a tall black-haired man with sunglasses asked me in Serbian with a French accent just as I finished breakfast at the hotel “Grand”.

“Yes, who’s asking?” I replied. “Régis Debray wants to meet you”, he said before introducing me to the 59-year-old moustached French philosopher.

Back in the mid-1960s, Régis Debray was an associate of Che Guevara. He studied Che’s communication practice during the 1959 Cuban revolution to develop the theory of “foquismo”, which describes how armed warfare mobilises public support in guerrilla conditions. The theory was presented in the book “Revolution in the Revolution?”, a guerrilla warfare bestseller and a blueprint for Che-inspired guerrilla movements. Arrested in Bolivia in

April 1967 as a member of Che's guerrilla group, Debray spent three years in prison before an international appeal led by Charles de Gaulle and Jean-Paul Sartre secured his release. He later became an influential advisor to French president François Mitterrand, one of the leading French intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century and the creator of the field of "mediology", a method of analysing cultural transmission in society. I had no doubt, however, that his fame as Che's associate made him enter Kosovo, which, for a foreigner, was possible only through illegal arrival or special accreditation from the authorities.

Debray was in Kosovo on a week-long eyewitness trip to Serbia. His quest of putting up eyewitness accounts from inside Kosovo versus impressions from outside Kosovo seemed logical, albeit a bit too philosophical for my daily war routine of scrambling to search and send urgent reports without getting killed. I agreed to accompany him during a four-day tour around Kosovo, during which we crossed the province north-south and east-west, including getting briefly detained by Serbian territorial defence in Peć, the historical siege of the Serb Patriarch, as we inspected a street devastated by a mix of bombing, fighting, arson and looting.

Debray was stunned by the discrepancies between what he had heard before arriving in Kosovo and the situation on the ground. Upon returning to Paris, he immediately published his travelogue and impressions on May 11, 1999, straight on the front page of *Le Monde*. The article, titled "Letter of a Traveller to the President of the Republic", was an apparent reference to "J'Accuse (I Accuse)! Letter to the President of the Republic", written as an open letter by Emile Zola in the newspaper *L'Aurore* in 1898, in which the writer accused the government of anti-Semitism and lack of evidence in the judicial case against Alfred Dreyfus.

Zola's "J'Accuse" and the "Dreyfus Affair" had become, in the meantime, universal symbols of the fight against injustice carried out by the powerful. But little did Debray know that he would face a similar fate to that of Zola, whose letter had stirred a heated debate leading to his temporary exile from France.

"Returning from Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo, I have to share with you an impression: I am afraid, Mr. President, we are on a false path", Debray wrote in his lead sentence of the article (Debray 1999a). "What I observed on the spot, in a short span of time, does not correspond to the words you are using, by far". He went on to deconstruct the war narrative used by

French President Jacques Chirac, including details of the travels through Kosovo. His main argument: NATO bombings are flawed and have aggravated the humanitarian disaster, including the plight of Kosovo Albanian civilians facing expulsions or worse.

Within 24 hours of the article's appearance, Debray, one of the country's most renowned intellectuals, was "burnt alive" in the mainstream media by a barrage of accusations of "revisionism" by politicians, journalists and intellectuals who were supporting the war.

"Adieu Debray!" ("Farewell Debray!"), wrote the following day, also in *Le Monde*, the philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy, one of the key supporters of the war in the Paris intellectual circles (Lévy 1999). The daily *Libération* went as far as to publish a special, several-page dossier devoted to analysing and deconstructing Debray's testimony "sentence-by-sentence" (Semo 1999). The amount of effort put into this anti-Debray publication was astonishing. Even I, as a young reporter on his first-ever assignment, but whom Debray had mentioned in the article, had the right to several paragraphs of biographical details.

Two thousand kilometres from Kosovo, in Paris, a "war of ideas" began and lasted, paradoxically, much longer than the actual conflict. Debray argued his motive was to "break the silence in our ranks by deconstructing the stereotypes of the official discourse" (Debray 1999b).

In responding to his critics, Debray wrote: "You incarnate, apparently, democracy, open mind, civilisation against the new barbarians. No. You are the current face of fanaticism (...) Putting someone's back to the wall with naked arms, you are fighting at 20 against one. You have behind you the State, NATO, numbers, the screen, caricatures and the big press (...) but you will never assassinate enough, morally or physically, to kill the spirit of people who are not submissive" (Debray 1999b).

French journalist Elisabeth Lévy wrote in a summary of the debate: "In the bellicose and compassionate atmosphere (surrounding the war on Kosovo in France), to refuse to be part of the choir meant signing one's order of banishment" (Lévy 2002, 284). By "running counter to the flow of the binary discourse aiming to convince that we are engaged in a just war, Debray crafted a nuanced painting on what he had seen in Kosovo" (Lévy 2002, 281), Lévy wrote, before arguing that "we can ask ourselves if, after the truth as

the victim of the war, we will see freedom of thought as the great sacrifice of peace” (Lévy 2002, 289).

On May 20, a group of 23 intellectuals and artists – such as photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and director Costa-Gavras – signed a petition to the French Prime Minister, calling for a serious debate on the war and “on the climate of intolerance in our country, where some do not hesitate to employ insults to shut up those who move away a tiny bit from stereotypes” (Le Figaro 1999).

The debate on the “pensée unique”, the “uniformity of thought” denounced by Debray and his colleagues as totalitarian, raged among intellectuals in France for months and years. Subsequently, it was labelled as one of France’s most significant intellectual debates of the second part of the 20th century.

The 1999 NATO bombings were also the first “internet war”. Of course, social networking would expand only years later. Yet, already in 1999, discussion groups, forums, mailing lists, and alternative news sites were carrying messages that were escaping strict message control. Reports from the field were quickly propagating around the world.

There was no doubt that, in the wars to come, NATO and the US Army, in particular, would learn lessons from 1999. One of them—already widely spread in Afghanistan in 2001—would be a strong focus on embedded journalism and messaging control. The second would be the rise of strategic communication, which gained particular prominence after 9/11.

However, not only the Pentagon and NATO had learned lessons. Following humiliations during the 1999 NATO bombings, both China and Russia realised that they had to change how they handled communication during conflicts and that they had to enter the global strategic communication battle.

Already in late 1999, reflecting on Jamie Shea’s statement that the Kosovo conflict “taught the organisation several lessons about the impact of the media” and the “most effective way of waging a media war”, the BBC argued that Moscow “is applying the same tactics to try to win the information war in Chechnya”:

“When the previous Chechen war started in 1994, the then-fledgling commercial station NTV showed graphic pictures from both sides of the

conflict. Now Russian broadcasters and press are much more restricted in how they report the fighting (...) The newly-created press ministry and government press centre in Moscow have been strengthened with what Western journalists are describing as ‘freshly trained spin doctors’” (Feuilherade 1999).

Coincidence or not, Moscow’s build-up of its strategic communication arsenal in the wake of the Kosovo war coincided with Vladimir Putin’s arrival to power. In the years that followed, Russia strongly expanded its strategic communication targeting worldwide audiences, including through the creation of RT and Sputnik news channels.

ON THE BRINK OF WORLD WAR III

On June 11, hours after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, ending the bombings, NATO troops stationed in the (former Yugoslav) Republic of Macedonia were getting ready to move in under the insignia of KFOR (Kosovo Force).

But in a shocking tactical manoeuvre, a column of APCs carrying 250 Russian soldiers, part of the Russian UN contingent stationed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, surprisingly crossed into Serbia and then from central Serbia into the province of Kosovo and Metohija. The Russians were promised a peacekeeping zone in Kosovo. However, the promise was broken by NATO, infuriating Moscow and triggering the deployment.

As NATO leaders watched the move with incredulity, the Russian troops arrived with their APCs to Priština in the evening, cheered by local Serbs, who saw them as a safeguard for their survival in Kosovo once NATO troops move in.

Upon crossing downtown Priština, the Russian troops stationed near Kosovo Polje, south of the city. NATO was asking Moscow to take the troops out of Kosovo. Confusion reigned for hours.

In the middle of the night, I received a call from the AFP desk: “The Russians are on the move. The Russian Defence Minister says they are moving out of Kosovo”.

I ran into the hotel hallway, where I found a Greek journalist still awake. Together, we took our car straight to the location where the Russian troops

were stationed. Soon after, the convoy of Russian APCs started to move, and we slid our car between them. Within minutes, we reached the main crossroads in Kosovo Polje. I was getting ready to file an urgent report on Russian troops taking the road east and out of Kosovo.

Except that the convoy did not turn east. It turned west.

“What the hell are the Russians doing?” I shouted.

Within half an hour, we were in front of the Priština military airport of Slatina. The Russians were about to take over the airport. I immediately reported the world exclusive of the takeover. Another shock for NATO.

The NATO Supreme Allied Commander, General Clark, called on KFOR troops, then still in Macedonia and headed by British General Mike Jackson, to use helicopters to block the airport’s runway. General Jackson refused. He feared that a helicopter operation would fail and that the Serbs and the Russians would withdraw from the agreement.

“Sir, I’m not going to start World War Three for you”, Jackson told Clark (Jackson 1999). His disobedience indeed prevented a conflict. The standoff between the Russian troops and NATO was diffused in the following days. The NATO aggression was over. The era of multipolarity was about to begin.

CHAPTER 1

HOW TO FIT A *SUI GENERIS* IN A MANICHEAN FRAME

MANUFACTURING THE “GOOD AND EVIL” ARCHETYPE

SETTING THE “BLACK AND WHITE” SCENE

The Cold War just ended. The Berlin Wall has fallen, and the Soviet Union is disintegrating. Germany is uniting, the values of liberal democracy are put on a pedestal, and the Warsaw Pact countries are rapidly transitioning to a market economy.

At the outset of the last decade of the 20th century, only Yugoslavia is still divided between two camps. On one side, “communists” and “centralists” with a history of “hegemonic” tendencies, with a “militaristic” and “hard-line” character, as well as an “oriental” cultural identity, are still advocating a “centralised economy”. On the other side, “anti-communists” and historical victims of “hegemony”, with “democratic” tendencies and “Western” values, are seeking “independence” and a “market economy”.

In such a constructed discourse, the Manichean archetype of “Good” and “Evil” is crystal clear, the accompanying narrative is straightforward, and the process of choosing the right side, policy formulation, and decision-making is intellectually and morally facilitated. The nuances of “grey” are lost, leaving space for a typical black-and-white picture.

Even before the first bullet in the Yugoslav conflict fired off, the discourse and narrative in the liberal West – which was dominating at that particular historical moment – had already brought a “moral” judgment on who deserves support and empathy versus who deserves criticism and pressure.

Discourses and narratives, however, are constructed. How were they formed at the outset of the Yugoslav crisis? How were the Serbs, their interests and values differentiated, and put against the interests and values of other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia – primarily against the Slovenians, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims?

There are two main viewpoints on how media construct a narrative on a complex issue. The first one is that the media create discourse and narratives on events autonomously, independently from political control and pressure, with an attempt to respect professional, ethical codex and practice. The second is that the media interpret events under a strong influence from organised strategic communication actors. While journalists themselves would prefer to believe in the first version, strategic communicators trust the effectiveness of the second one. However, the practice of both says that the absolute dominance of one of the two versions is impossible. A complete domination of strategic communication is only attainable in tightly controlled media conditions. On the other side, except in absolutely free media conditions, the freedom of journalists to report without external interference is impossible.

We are thus speaking about the field of “nuances of grey”, which, again, does not suit those who believe in the black-and-white propaganda division between “Good” and “Evil”.

However, is it even possible to accept such a viewpoint from the point of view of communication science? Let us look at some of the modern communication concepts, particularly those that – since the analysis period of 30 years ago – have gained substantial prominence in academic and professional fields. These concepts provide tools that could at least partially explain the events of the early 1990s. A key concept among them is “strategic communication”.

Strategic communication, a concept of organised persuasion, represents a “system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organisations in order to advance their missions, by allowing for the understanding of target groups, finding channels and methods of communication with the public, developing and implementing ideas and attitudes which, through these channels and methods, promote a particular type of behaviour or opinion”(Mitić 2016, 9).

States and organisations are using strategic communication to achieve legitimacy, given that legitimacy is based on perception and interpretation – not on actions but on perceptions of these actions. To achieve legitimacy through strategic communication, organisations need trust, social capital, and networks to project their discourse, narrative, and power (Mitić and Atlagić 2017). They do so through “framing”, which is how communicators

formulate political discourse on specific themes. From the start of their campaigns, public relations practitioners function as “frame strategists”; to achieve objectives, they seek to influence the representation of specific situations, attributes, choices, actions, questions, and responsibilities (Hallahan 1999).

“Framing”, as “selection and salience” in order “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 45), is a rational rhetorical strategy used by politicians to “angle” arguments presented to the general public as frames can provoke different reactions of the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding.

“Strategic framing” involves the “purposeful use of this technique by rhetors, social advocates, and communications professionals”, whose goals are “to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on particular portions of a message or aspects of a topic in order to gain a favorable response” (Hallahan 2008, 4855). Strategic framing is an integral part of strategic communication campaigns, which seek to “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan 2008, 4856).

Nevertheless, frames cannot be fully understood without narratives, just as narratives cannot function without frames. In the process of strategic communication, organisations thus use frames and discourse to shape strategic narratives – “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behavior of actors at home and overseas” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013, 248). These narratives are a “tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013, 3).

However, strategic narratives face limitations, from formation to projection and reception. Such processes are particularly true in international environments, where great powers must confront a complex international environment, a complex media ecology, and frequent or even permanent contestation by other actors.

The objective of each interest group is to have its narrative dominant and widely accepted as “correct”. It must thus incorporate into the existing

historical, cultural, and socio-political context: “If we hope to influence people, then we have to enable them to see that what we are saying fits with their story; or, at least, that it is not so far removed from their story that they think that what we are saying is ridiculous or that we are lying” (MacNulty 2007, 6). Thus, “narratives are not about facts, they are about how facts are framed and interpreted” (Corman 2010). As a result, it is not facts that should be corrected, but there should be an attempt to incorporate them in the frames and to seek to have them interpreted in such a manner. The focus is on the public’s perception. Whether certain information aligns with a constructed frame (for example, on the “responsibility of Serbs”) is more important than whether it is factually accurate.

It is essential to analyse how the discourse and narrative of the “Good and Evil” archetype were constructed in the early 1990s, before the beginning of the Yugoslav conflict, after which they were used throughout the decade.

A content analysis of media reporting during two essential periods of preventive diplomacy sheds light: in the case of the conflict in Slovenia and Croatia an analysis of Western European media in the first half of 1991, and in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina an analysis of the US media in the first quarter of 1992 (Mitić 1997). This analysis became an integral part of two concluding reports of the independent international commissions on the suffering in Sarajevo (ICSA 2020) and Srebrenica (ICSR 2020).

The analysis focused on four terms: “Serb/Serbia”, “Serbia”, (Slobodan) “Milošević”, and Yugoslav “Federal army”, based on the concept of “affect”. “Negative” affect indicates that the term has been depicted in a negative connotation in the context of the time (1990-91) and the readership (policymakers) (i.e. the actor represented by the term is uncooperative, threatening, manipulating). “Neutral” affect indicates that the term has been depicted in a neutral connotation (i.e. “said”, “live”, “leader of”). “Positive” affect means that the term has been depicted in a positive connotation (i.e. explanation of reasons behind the action of the actor represented by the term, depiction of the actor’s fears, suffering, and cooperation).

The analysis of the reporting in the period before the beginning of war in Slovenia and Croatia is crucial for the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina as this was a period when the discourse and the narrative about the problem and the upcoming conflict were constructed. The content analysis was first

performed on three print media outlets: “The Economist”, “The Times”, and “Le Monde” in the period of December 25, 1990 – June 25, 1991. The results showed a large prevalence of negative framing of the analysed terms. “The Economist” – 60% negative, 36.6% neutral, 3.4% positive; “The Times” – 63% negative, 33.6% neutral, 3.4% positive, “Le Monde” – 55.8% negative, 40.5% neutral, 3.7% positive.

Serbs and the Yugoslav authorities are depicted as “nationalists”, “communists”, “terrorists”, “oriental”, “dogmatic”, “hegemonic” and “autocratic”, who are “imposing a Greater Serbia” and “waging a vicious campaign against the democratically-elected government of Croatia”, while Croatian leaders are “patriots” and “anti-communists”. Rare are “positive” terms where “history has given Serbs reason to be fearful”. Thus, the “West should not oppose the secession of Slovenia and Croatia” the way it did not oppose the independence of the Baltics.

According to press coverage, the causes of the Yugoslav crisis can be summarized as a difference between Serbs, who supported a federal Yugoslavia, and Croats/Slovenes, who supported confederation or secession.

*Serbs vs Croats/Slovenes prior to the 1991 conflict,
according to the Western press*

	Serbs	Croats/Slovenes
Political differences	Hegemonic/centralist /irredentist	Want independence and freedom from hegemony
Economic differences	Want centrally-planned economy	Want market economy
Ideological differences	Communist	Anti-communist
Cultural differences	Militarist/uncooperative/ hard-line/oriental/ backward	Open to negotiation /Western/democratic/developed
Historical reasons	Serb hegemony during the inter-war and the communist era	Victims of Serb hegemony during the inter-war and communist era/their crimes are revenge attacks for Serb hegemony

The main problem of the Yugoslav crisis in 1991 was the question of the Serbs' opposition to living in an independent Croatia. According to the analysis, the press reported that Serbs in Croatia do not have anything to fear, that their fear is a result of propaganda coming from Belgrade, and that Serbs want to create a "Greater Serbia" at the expense of Croats. This narrative was intensified after the outbreak of hostilities following the declarations of independence of Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991 and served as a ground for Germany's forceful push for early recognition of independence by the end of the year.

The content analysis of US print outlets in 1992, ahead of the outbreak of hostilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, showed that the narrative had taken a solid root among Western media and policymakers. The analysis of the "New York Times" reporting indicates 55.6% of Serb/Yugoslav terms were put in negative framing, 39.6% neutral and 4.8% positive. Similarly, the combined content analysis of the "Time", "Newsweek", "National Review", and the "New Republic" indicate a 72.9% negative framing, 24.7% neutral and 2.4% positive. Victims of the wars in Yugoslavia are "targets of Serbian nationalism", led by a "hard-line communist" and "fascist leader" who "deliberately stirred and manipulated fears", resulting in the Yugoslav army "cheering as their shells slammed into the roofs". Serbs in Croatia are "irregulars", "militias", "gangs", and not "troops" or "soldiers", terms reserved for the Muslims and the Croats. Serbs were considered a "minority" in both Croatia and Bosnia, which – the Serbs argued – was not true since they were a "constituent nation" in these republics and were fighting against being treated and defined as "minorities". Serbia itself was "an aggressor", "threatening Bosnia", "threatening Macedonia", "resorting to violence in Kosovo", "stealing federal reserves", and thus, it was "good to isolate it".

On the other side, Serbs were mentioned as victims very rarely. The Muslim Chairman of Bosnia's Presidency Alija Izetbegović was introduced to the public as the only leader in the former Yugoslavia "never to be a communist". Muslims and Croats "fear staying in a Serb-led Yugoslavia", while nothing was mentioned of the Bosnian Serb fear of living in a Muslim-Croat-led Bosnia – Serbs do not fear; they only want to live in the "same state as Serbs". There was no discussion of the Bosnian Serb viewpoint, which presented the following dilemma: "If Muslims and Croats would not live with the Serbs in a multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, why would the Serbs live

with Muslims and Croats in a multi-ethnic Bosnia? “. Thus, very little was mentioned on the rationale for Serb opposition to life in an independent Bosnia. Emphasis was put on disregarding Serb claims as legitimate and considering Serb leaders as aggressive and threatening to the entire region.

Frightened by the prospect of recognizing Bosnia without a prior agreement with the Serbs, the European Community pushed for an agreement. As a result, on March 18, 1992, in Lisbon, Portuguese diplomat José Cutileiro presented the EC framework for the future of Bosnia. The proposal's objective was to keep Bosnia as a single state. It would have been divided into several “cantons” based on national and economic characteristics. Alija Izetbegović agreed to it on behalf of the Bosnian Muslims, Radovan Karadžić on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs, and Mate Boban on behalf of the Bosnian Croats. It seemed there was finally an agreement that would prevent violence in Bosnia. Nevertheless, when Izetbegović returned to Sarajevo, he changed his mind. He did so after talking with the US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmerman. The US ambassador later denied that he directly pushed Izetbegović to reject the Cutileiro plan. However, the fact is that Izetbegović revoked his signature after talking to him, thus “killing” the EC plan and dragging Bosnia and Herzegovina into four years of ethnic war and bloodshed (Glitman 1997, 69).

WHY MANICHEAN?

Why did the media report in such a biased way?

From a journalistic point of view, the fact is that many reporters covering the Yugoslav crisis were not adequately prepared. Many of them looked at Yugoslavia and its internal crisis through the prism of Cold War division. The analogy meant that support for the Yugoslav federal government indicated support for communists, while opposition to the federal government and the federation implied support for democrats and martyrs. Just as in the Baltics, the struggle for independence meant a fight for freedom from the oppressor – which in this case was the “communist” unreformed Yugoslav federation. The lack of understanding of the complexities of the Yugoslav situation pushed reporters to rely on local sources, including the already biased domestic media, the increasingly nationalist politicians, and the fearful masses.

Sylvia Poggioli, the National Public Radio correspondent in the region since 1982 and winner of several reports for her coverage of the Yugoslav conflict, summarised the problems Western reporters were facing prior to and during the Yugoslav conflicts:

“The Cold War had accustomed generations of reporters to analyse world events almost exclusively in terms of bipolar confrontation, where Good and Evil were easily defined and identified. This mindset often proved unsuitable in trying to make sense of the disorder created by the collapse of Communism. And it was an easy prey for the highly sophisticated propaganda machines that have characterised the conflicts in former Yugoslavia” (Poggioli 1993, 17).

The description of Western media reporting as focused on the struggle between “Good” and “Evil” was acknowledged by numerous journalists, linguists, and political and communication scientists.

Already in the first days following the outbreak of conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, editor and columnist of *The Washington Post*, Stephen S. Rosenfeld, in his column “Bum Rap”, published on April 10, 1992, criticised the George H.W. Bush administration for a “humiliating reversal of an earlier American dedication to Yugoslav territorial integrity”, which could lead to the spread of conflict in Bosnia (Rosenfeld 1992). He assessed that this change came after the Bush administration cracked under the pressure of the question imposed by Berlin: “Whom to blame for the violence and, on the other side, whom to recognise?”. Berlin, according to Rosenfeld, had an easy answer: “Blame the Serbs, recognise the Croats”. For Rosenfeld, “this was a one-sided oversimplification. The common media juxtaposition of ‘communist’ Serbia and ‘democratic’ Croatia was always cartoonish. Moreover, while Serbia acted brutally, Croatia, by its maltreatment of Serbs, gave arrogant provocation. American even-handedness was politically costly but more faithful to the stubborn facts” (Rosenfeld 1992).

The model under which critics of the “black and white” picture of the Yugoslav conflict were cut at the roots was immediately applied. A week later, a reply to Rosenfeld in *The Washington Post* was published by U.S. Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato, who argued that: “There was one aggressor in this dirty war. Serbia’s current aggression toward Bosnia-Herzegovina, which, as *The Post* and wire services have reported, is further evidence that Serbia is the culprit to be stopped in its tracks. Serbia’s

repression of Albanians in Kosovo and its intolerable human rights record are merely additional abuses supporting this position. That is the real world the State Department and Mr. Rosenfeld have completely misread" (D'Amato 1992). Four years later, in a review of the U.S. policy during the breakup of Yugoslavia, US ambassador Zimmermann underlined that D'Amato had been a member of the "pro-Albanian lobby", together with congressmen Joseph Dioguardi and Tom Lantos, as well as senator Bob Dole. Zimmermann then said that Kosovo was the first Yugoslav problem to which the US Congress paid attention and that the image of the Congress became "anti-Serbian" and "pro-Albanian" (Zimmermann 1996, 180).

American political scientist Michael Parenti assessed that "the propaganda campaign to demonise the Serbs began early in the decade. One of the Slovene government's first acts after declaring independence in 1991 was to create a well-equipped media center that would distribute vivid reports about non-existent battles, exaggerated casualty figures, and alleged Yugoslav (Serbian) atrocities. By depicting the brief and limited conflict in the bloodiest terms imaginable and portraying themselves as pro-West democrats struggling against Yugoslav Communist aggressors, the Slovenes hoped to marshal international support for their cause. Not long after, the Croats and Muslims did the same by conjuring up images of a dehumanised Communist Serbian threat to Europe" (Parenti 2000, 82). The image, discourse, frames, and narrative built before and at the beginning of hostilities thus spread to the entire course of the conflict, in particular in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Researcher at the Institute for Social Sciences in Belgrade Slobodan Vuković, in his book "Ethics of the Western Media", returned to the construction of the image of the Yugoslav conflict:

"The media portrayal of the Western media soon became the governing paradigm of causes and course of the Yugoslav crisis (...) The accent is on the writing of the Euro-American press at the beginning of the crisis (1990-1991), when key stances were adopted, and a basic reporting tone was given, that is – the established (imposed) paradigm on how to write about the Yugoslav crisis. Put differently, there was an establishment of a wide agreement (consensus) in the public discourse on how to write and speak about the Yugoslav crisis, that is, who were the "good" and who were the "bad" guys. If facts are found that do not agree with the

established paradigm, they are being overlooked; they do not have any meaning, and they are, purposefully or not, being avoided or shut out, hidden, and often distorted. This is being done because the widely accepted beliefs and value judgments are based on suspicious and unconfirmed facts, even lies (...) That is how these judgments, because of the interests of their purveyors, as Foucault says, have been “ideological products” of an imposed discourse, given that their exponents possessed more power (due to the global control of mass media). The individuals who would oppose such imposed and constructed “truth” were, thus, marginalised in public discourse (...) Later, things just went down this established path, and accusations against the Serbs, almost unknown in history to date, with time sharpened and multiplied to an unseen extent” (Vuković 2009, 9).

In the preface of a book on the manufacturing of public opinion written by the editor-in-chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique* Serge Halimi and his French colleagues, the editor of the Serbian version of the paper, Ivica Mladenović argued that during the 1990s, “the dominant discourse in the French public opinion supported the division between Good and Evil. The Evil were those who were not part of the camp of the Good, including the most significant number of international leftists, who were – although adversaries of any form of nationalism – relentlessly criticising both the liberal character of the European construction and the neoliberal reforms in France, as well as authoritarian leaders at the world’s periphery. But, because of the first two, all adversaries and critics of the simplistic representations of the events in Yugoslavia were put next to Milošević and other ‘tyrants’, enemies of the ‘free world’” (Alimi 2020, 19).

British journalist Mick Hume assessed that “in Bosnia, a generation of crusading journalists set the patterns for seeing the complex conflicts in the Balkans as a simple morality play, to be understood and reported in terms of Good against Evil. These war reporters urged Western governments to intervene forcefully against the Serbs at a time when none was keen to do so” (Hume 2000, 76).

American social scientist Edward Herman, the author with Noam Chomsky of the famous hypothesis on the propaganda model, heavily criticised the application of this model in the case of the Yugoslav crisis. In an essay entitled “Good versus Evil: How the Media Got it Wrong in

Yugoslavia”, he argued that “the demonising of the Serbs and making them the unique group needing punishment was the vehicle used by Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegović and his close associates, and Clinton/Albright and Kohl/Genscher and their associates, to prevent a peaceful settlement – most importantly in backing out of the 1992 Lisbon Agreement – and to work incessantly to get NATO to intervene militarily on behalf, first, of Izetbegović and the Bosnian Muslims and then the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Kosovo Albanians (...) The journalists were quickly convinced that good was fighting evil, or that it was obligatory and less risky to take this as a given, and so they joined the pack and became advocates attached to the supposed good side and their victims” (Herman 2006, 4).

French political scientist Jean Sévillia, the author of the concept of “intellectual terrorism”, shared the view: “In the face of the civil war, intellectuals and the media practically unanimously chose their side: the good were the Croats and the Muslims, and the bad were the Serbs (...) There certainly are Serb extremists and Serb crimes. However, when there are no less savage Croatian militias act, there is silence about them. When Serbs from Croatia or Bosnia are expelled from their homes, there is silence about this ethnic cleansing. When Serbs surround Sarajevo, the intellectual confusion culminates: a true legend is being constructed about a tolerant and multi-ethnic Bosnia. Muslim fundamentalism of some Bosniaks is being strangely shut out. When Bosnian Croats and Muslims fight against each other, no one anymore talks about this because it is too complicated: we do not know anymore who are the bad guys (...) as a result, there is a construction of a ‘predetermined opinion’ on who is good, and who is bad. Everyone with a different discourse is demonised” (Sévillia 2004, 239-240).

Belgian historian Anne Morelli discussed the theory of demonisation in her essay on the basic principles of war propaganda. One of them is that the “enemy has the devil’s head”: “A simple method consists of putting between quotation marks the words ‘president’ or ‘general’ when we talk about enemies, which immediately puts their legitimacy under suspicion: ‘president’ Karadžić, ‘general’ Mladić. It is necessary, as much as possible, to demonise this enemy leader, and to represent him as a hideous, last dinosaur, madman, barbarian, hellish criminal, butcher, disturber of peace, enemy of humanity, a monster” (Morelli 2001, 21).

British professor Philip Hammond discussed how far this demonisation had gone during the war: “For many, Bosnia was not so much a war to be reported as a morality play about good and evil: not a cruel local conflict but a titanic struggle on a par with the Second World War, in which the Serbs were the new Nazis” (Hammond 2007, 52).

Hammond’s colleague from the London School of Economics, Tim Allen, pointed out that “stories which challenge the narrative that they believe to be developing will be discounted and not shown”. The result, as he pointed out, is that one of the editors said that “in a war in which the Serbs had been the aggressors, stories of the murder of hapless Serbs were too emotionally confusing to be good for the public” (Allen and Seaton 1999, 58).

The New York Times journalist David Binder heavily criticised the reporting of many of his colleagues, arguing there were “outright fabrications, widespread use of dubious second-hand sources and blatantly one-sided accounts of strife involving at least two and sometimes three sets of combatants. Their common denominator was the characterisation of Serbs as the principal perpetrators of ‘ethnic cleansing’, mass murder, mass rape and ‘war crimes’ up to and including genocide” (Binder 2004, III).

The editor of Noam Chomsky’s book about the Yugoslav conflict, Davor Džalto, also referred to the propaganda model: “The second dominant approach to the conflicts followed the ‘good guys’ vs. ‘bad guys’ model. To save the image of an eschatological paradise that should have almost automatically come once the authoritarian (‘communist’) regimes were dismantled, and to make it easier for the average Western media consumer to make sense of this conflict on European soil, the ‘good guys/bad guys’ model was quickly created and would remain the dominant way of describing and interpreting the conflicts. In this model, one side in the conflict is predominantly, if not exclusively, responsible for the wars and their outcomes, whereas other sides are predominantly, if not exclusively, the victims. This theoretical framework would soon become the mainstream both in media representations of the events and in the political agendas of the time, as well as in the scholarship. The result of this synergy can also be seen in the way even the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague formulated the charges and handled the process against those accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity” (Džalto 2018, 57).

The Manichean viewpoint on the Yugoslav conflict spread to most Western countries and continued during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It served as a ground for political/diplomatic/action against Serbia and Serb actors in the region. Particularly beneficial were “trigger events”, highly mediatised acts which would provoke an immediate outcry and concrete Western reaction in the name of the so-called “international community”. What was characteristic of these events, no matter how tragic and deplorable, was that they were all accompanied by highly controversial interpretations and reconstructions. However, all had obvious political and security consequences. Such was the case with the explosion on Vase Miskina Street in Sarajevo in May 1992, which was used as a pretext to impose UN sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Two years later, the explosion on the Markale market, also in Sarajevo, was used to give a green light to the first NATO bombing against Serbs in Bosnia. In August 1995, the most extensive ethnic cleansing in Europe since World War II happened, with the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Serbs from Croatia after an attack by the Croatian Army supported by the United States Air Force. However, just as international media started to question the operation, several days later, US Ambassador Madeleine Albright disclosed for the first time satellite pictures of graves in the town of Srebrenica in Bosnia. All the attention shifted to Srebrenica, and the plight of the Croatian Serbs was ignored once again. These satellite pictures, followed by yet another explosion in Sarajevo’s Markale market in late August, initiated the final NATO bombing assault on the Bosnian Serbs, after which Bosnian Muslims and Croats, helped by NATO aviation, took a substantial part of Serb territory. The war ended soon with the Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995.

As the focus moved to Kosovo and Metohija, for the Serbs and Serbia, the battle was – once again – lost even before the first bullet was fired: Serb demands were left aside, and they were, from the outset, put in a negative context. Serb interests, viewpoints, and victims remained “unimportant” in the eyes of key Western political and media actors. The Western narrative helped sketch the picture of the causes of the conflict in Kosovo and Metohija. It facilitated yet another “trigger event” – Račak – to serve as a “green light” for NATO’s aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The conflicts in Yugoslavia subsided at the end of the 1990s. However, the one-sided viewpoint on the Yugoslav war as a “struggle between Good and Evil” persisted first as a highlight, then as a relic of the unipolar world, preventing every attempt to reach a historical compromise in the Western Balkans and serving as permanent destabilisation of the entire region, particularly in Kosovo and Metohija, whose future was yet to be determined after the UN SC Resolution 1244, authorising the presence of the UN administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the UN-mandated NATO-led KFOR military.

A KOSOVO COMPROMISE?

The presence of KFOR and UNMIK did not prevent the ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija in the aftermath of NATO’s aggression. Little, if anything, changed in Kosovo and Metohija after the departure from power of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000 and the beginning of the presidency of Vojislav Koštunica. However, in line with the prevalent strategic narrative, this was not particularly worrisome for Western powers and media. Stories about the fate of the 200,000 expelled Serbs and the violence against the 100,000 remaining inside Kosovo and Metohija were rare. The PR efforts of UNMIK, KFOR, EU, and OSCE focused on bureaucratic, optimistic press releases focusing on “constant progress”. Albanian violence was portrayed as “revenge attacks”, while ethnic cleansing became “inter-ethnic conflict” (Mitić 2006a). Instead, the focus was on Northern Kosovo, particularly Northern Kosovska Mitrovica, where most remaining Serbs concentrated. This region was portrayed immediately as a “source of destabilization”, “unruly,” and run by “criminal gangs” and “Serb paramilitaries”. At the same time, the remains of the province were considered functional even though the remaining Serbs were living in “ghettos” and “enclaves”. When, on March 17, 2004, dozens of thousands of Albanians attacked these enclaves and Northern Mitrovica in an orchestrated campaign of mass violence, NATO admiral Gregory Johnson first called it “ethnic cleansing” before fellow Western officials and media quickly shut down his discourse.

Instead of condemnations, Kosovo Albanians were rewarded with an understanding that their violence was “due to lack of progress towards

independence”. Instead of asking who were the organizers of the massive attacks, the US and the EU argued that the previously held policy of “standards before status” – meaning Kosovo and Metohija should first achieve human rights standards before talks on status could begin – should be scrapped and replaced by a policy of “standards after status”. Thus, through a strategic communication spin, violence was rewarded, and Kosovo Albanians obtained a shortcut to “negotiations” on the future status of Kosovo. From Day One, however, they made clear that “independence was the only option”. They received backing on this position, directly or indirectly, from various Western officials and media. Serbia, logically, refused such a narrative. Its position was elucidated in the “Kosovo Compromise” project, prepared by the newly-launched Brussels-based Institute 4S as Serbia’s first strategic communication project geared at the EU (Mitić 2006b), and based on previous research suggesting the possibility of dozens of solutions compatible with international law (Mitić and Oberg 2005). The project countered the Albanian/Western narrative, which had suggested that independence was the only option for Kosovo. Here is how the top anti-independence arguments and top counter-arguments for independence were summarized:

Top 10 anti-independence arguments	Top 10 pro-independence bluffs
Why should one side get it all, the other side lose it all?	Serbia has lost Kosovo in 1999
Why impose independence as the “only” solution for Kosovo?	Everything is already decided: Kosovo will be independent one way or another
Why endanger international law?	International law is passé
Why would Kosovo be an exception in the world?	Kosovo is “unique” because of civil war, foreign intervention and international administration
Why punish democratic Serbia ?	Serbia ‘s ‘progressive elite’ wants to cut off “the cancer of Kosovo”
Why reward Albanian violence?	If they do not get what they want, Albanians will explode in even more violence

Aleksandar Mitić

Why create a second Albanian state?	“Border-drawing wrongdoings of 1913 at the expense of ethnic Albanians” must be corrected today
Why create a completely new state from scratch...when integration is the keyword?	There can be no economic progress in Kosovo without independence
Why risk new instability that blocks a EU perspective?	Serbia should choose between Kosovo and the EU
Why did NATO intervene in 1999? For human rights or protectorate-building?	Human rights standards will be respected only if and when Kosovo becomes independent

Source: Kosovo Compromise project (Mitić 2006b)

Faced with the reality of international law, the Kosovo Albanian and Western narrative suggested that “Kosovo was a unique case”.

Again, the “Kosovo Compromise” project responded with a chart:

Kosovo is unique because of...	Disclaimer
Moral reasons, i.e. Slobodan Milosevic	Milosevic era is over. Given their postwar treatment of Kosovo Serbs and other minorities (235.000 IDPs, 2000+ killed or kidnapped, 4600 armed attacks, 176 churches demolished, 20.000 homes usurpated...), Kosovo Albanians have also lost all moral credit
Majority wants	Right to self-determination does not precede territorial integrity
Ten years of institutional discrimination	Kosovo Albanians have demanded independence even during Tito’s golden age period
1998-99 conflict and 6,000 victims	In 1998-99, 40 conflicts worldwide were reported with at least 1,000 victims each
NATO intervention	NATO intervention was illegal from the point of view of international law

Global Strategic Narrative Wars

Presence of peacekeepers and transitional international administration	Dozens of UN missions in crisis regions, none has brought about a new state
Fear of violence	US, NATO and EU have all the instruments to prevent any such violence
Urgency	No violation of human rights, no armed conflict, therefore no urgency, compared to other hotspots

Source: Kosovo Compromise project (Mitić 2008a)

The designation of former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, one of the architects of the deal that led to the end of NATO aggression in 1999 and a staunch supporter of Kosovo's "independence", as UN mediator for status talks was a signal that the process would be far from unbiased and balanced. Indeed, following a series of unfruitful meetings between the Belgrade authorities and Kosovo Albanian leaders, Ahtisaari prepared his "plan" suggesting a "supervised independence" and aimed to disclose it on February 1, 2007.

A few hours before Ahtisaari's scheduled meeting in Belgrade with Serbian President Boris Tadić, one of his top aides, EU envoy Stefan Lehne, received in his Brussels office the head of the Eparchy of Raška and Prizren of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop Artemije. Lehne disclosed the plan's key elements, arguing that "according to the plan, Serb monasteries would have a chance to sell honey without taxes". Bishop Artemije then took out a map of the world marked with separatist regions which could use Kosovo's case as a precedent. He raised his voice: "Mr. Lehne, do not worry about our honey, but worry about what your deeds will do to the world!". Lehne half-laughingly dismissed Bishop's argument, arguing, "The Kosovo case is a truly unique case". Bishop Artemije then rolled up his map and, before standing up and leaving, said Serbs would never accept Kosovo's independence and that, if forced through, the consequence of "Kosovo's independence" for the territorial integrity of endangered states around the world would be catastrophic.

HERALDING MULTIPOLARITY

A week after Ahtisaari presented his plan in Belgrade, at the Munich Security Conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave his historic speech, during which he argued that the era of multipolarity had arrived, that the one-sided and illegitimate use of force in world affairs by the United States was unacceptable, meaning that no problem, including Kosovo and Metohija, could be resolved solely by NATO and the EU, but should include the role of the United Nations and the Russian Federation (Putin 2007). He was directly referring to the danger of violation of UNSC Resolution 1244, the UN Charter, and international law in general in case “Kosovo” would gain independence without the consent of Serbia, in yet another bypassing of the UN Security Council, akin to the NATO 1999 aggression. Putin had arrived in power in the aftermath of the NATO aggression in 1999, an event which had deeply marked his attitude and positioning towards the West ever since. In Belgrade, the Serbian government led by Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica refused Ahtisaari’s proposal. Nevertheless, Washington, Paris, and London hinted they would push for its acceptance in the UN Security Council, prompting Koštunica to appeal to Putin to use Russia’s veto at the UNSC in case of need.

In June 2007, the Baltic Coast German resort Heilegendamm hosted the G8 Summit. In attendance of US President George W. Bush, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Putin was the central figure of attention. At the Summit, in direct talks, Putin warned Bush, Blair and Sarkozy he would veto any attempts to impose the proposal: “The Russian position is clear, based on the territorial integrity of states and on UN Security Council Resolution 1244, under which Kosovo is an undeniable part of Serbia” (...) but, “if we come to the conclusion that in today’s world the principle of the people’s right to self-determination is more important than the principle of territorial integrity of states, then it must be applicable to all the regions in the world, and not only where our partners want it to apply (...) the principles of self-determination in that case must be applied also to nations of the former Yugoslavia, and to the nations living the post-Soviet space” (Mitić 2007a). With such statement, Putin not only threatened a veto, but also rejected every attempt to treat Kosovo as a unique, “sui generis” case. Otherwise, a precedent could lead to unforeseen consequences. With NATO members

discussing the possibility to leave an “open door” for membership to neighbouring Ukraine and Georgia, the warning was clear.

In an attempt to avoid a Russian veto, following talks with Putin, Sarkozy proposed an extension of the negotiations, resulting in a “troika” made of three mediators: EU’s Wolfgang Ischinger, US’ Frank Wisner, and Russia’s Aleksandar Botsan-Harchenko. It soon became apparent, however, that this proposal was buying time to prepare a “unilateral declaration of independence”. The think-tank “International Crisis Group” (ICG), which had served for years as a mouthpiece and testing vehicle for Western policies on the Balkans, argued already in its August 2007 report: “The preferred strategy of the European Union (EU) and the US to bring Kosovo to supervised independence through the United Nations Security Council has failed, following Russia’s declared intention to veto” (International Crisis Group 2007). The key is to avoid trouble for the “credibility” of EU’s foreign policy, and thus “the sooner the EU, or a significant majority of its member states, declares itself ready to back an independent Kosovo, the better the chances of forestalling such damage to the EU”. The ICG acknowledged that with UNSCR 1244 still in force, “Serbia will continue to claim (that) sovereignty and, with Russia, will try to block Kosovo’s membership in international institutions”, while “Russia may seek to use the outcome for its own purposes in the frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus and Moldova” (International Crisis Group 2007). The report called on the EU and the US to wait until the December 10, 2007, deadline UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon set and then act.

In a rare warning in the US media, David Young wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor* that “Washington is essentially creating an innovative code, only to make the cypher publicly available. Current and future separatists merely have to manufacture the same conditions and sequencing that have compelled the West to embrace an independence Kosovo: terrorize locals, invite government crackdowns, incite a rebellion, and lure in foreign intervention and commitment to rebuild. Once militants get this far, Kosovo will no longer be unique – even by Washington’s peculiar standards – and areas that share Kosovo’s characteristics will be equally deserving of independence” (Young 2007). He argued that “Washington’s ‘unique’ talking points are actually engraving a separatist playbook in stone, blazing a glorious trail that separatists will follow with greater determination, recruits, and (in

all likelihood) success (...). The horrid irony, of course, is that declaring Kosovo's uniqueness has been Washington's deliberate attempt to prevent future separatism, but it is inadvertently teaching militants how to navigate the complex inconsistencies of geopolitics. In fact, the more thorough and persuasive Western governments are about Kosovo's 'uniqueness,' the more legitimate separatists' ambitions become, if only they follow the Kosovo model" (Young 2007).

Nevertheless, at the December 14, 2007, European Council in Brussels, EU leaders agreed to mastermind "Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence" (UDI), based on a plan by Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt (Mitić 2007b). The document, entitled "A European Strategy for Kosovo", admitted that "trying to settle the question of the status of Kosovo without being able to anchor this process in the UN Security Council will be a most challenging task both in terms of respect for international law and handling the different challenges on the ground in Kosovo, the wider Balkan region as well as elsewhere". The UNSC resolution 1244 was seen as the main obstacle given that China and Russia refuse to change it. Thus, as long as it is in force, "a full recognition of an independent state of Kosovo hardly seems possible". Yet, "we must seek to develop a European Union policy that can satisfy basic demands for independence and sovereignty while keeping a semblance of respect for international law" (Mitić 2007b).

A "semblance of respect for international law"? Here was the "rules-based world order" at its second peak, nine years after the decision to avoid the UNSC and start the 1999 NATO aggression.

Two months later, mainly following the path set by the document, the Kosovo Albanian leadership indeed proclaimed "a unilateral declaration of independence". Despite accusations from Serbia, Russia, and China, the US and most EU member countries recognized the UDI, arguing it was a "unique case". Five EU members with clear concerns about a possible precedent for their territorial integrity – Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, and Slovakia – refused to accept the "sui generis" argument and to recognize the UDI.

Indeed, the Council of the European Union paved the way for the recognition of Kosovo's secession from Serbia due to its "uniqueness": "The Council reiterates the EU's adherence to the principles of the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, inter alia the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and all UN Security Council resolutions. It underlines its

conviction that in view of the conflict of the 1990s and the extended period of international administration under SCR 1244, Kosovo constitutes a sui generis case which does not call into question these principles and resolutions” (Council of the European Union 2008).

John Laughland commented in *The Guardian* following the UDI: “Whatever trickery the West uses to override UN Security Council Resolution 1244 – which kept Kosovo in Serbia – the proclamation of the new state will have incalculable long-term consequences: on secessionist movements from Belgium to the Black Sea via Bosnia, on relations with China and Russia, and on the international system as a whole”; while Michailis Firillas in Israel’s *Haaretz* warned: “Kosovo: Coming soon to a theater near you” (InPress4S 2008).

Russian officials were clear. Moscow’s Ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, said: “The EU and the US can write in a million documents that Kosovo is a unique case; the facts on the ground worldwide will prove that mantra to be a farce” (InPress4S, 2008). His colleague, Ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin, was equally blunt: “Kosovo is Europe’s thoroughfare, and the EU is improvising at the thoroughfare. Imagine the EU is in a car, and the traffic light says red. However, the EU says it is not red but pink and decides to go through. All right, go through, but do not be disappointed or surprised if something crashes into you. We will not tolerate any improvisations regarding Kosovo” (Mitić 2008b). Indeed, President Putin said: “The precedent of Kosovo is a terrible precedent, which will de facto blow apart the whole system of international relations, developed not over decades, but over centuries (...). They have not thought through the results of what they are doing. At the end of the day, it is a two-ended stick, and the second end will come back and hit them in the face” (Agence France-Presse 2008).

Some 40 days later, Putin issued another warning, this time in Bucharest, addressing the NATO summit. The Russian president said NATO’s plan to expand to its borders was a “direct threat” (Dawar 2008) and that it would “force Russia to respond by taking measures to protect its security” (President of Russia 2008). At the Summit, the Alliance had just decided to “welcome Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO” (NATO 2008). The leaders of the Alliance did not decide to offer Ukraine and Georgia the “Membership Action Plan” (MAP), a first step towards full membership, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel feared it

might be one poke too much too soon in the eye of the “Russian bear”. However, the message was clear and understood by the Kremlin. The US and its NATO allies were well aware of Russia’s concerns, as shown in the classified cable, subsequently revealed by Wikileaks, originating from the US Embassy in Moscow, signed by US Ambassador William J. Burns (later, since 2021, head of CIA), and entitled “Nyet means nyet: Russia’s NATO Enlargement Redlines”: “Ukraine and Georgia’s NATO aspirations not only touch a raw nerve in Russia, they engender serious concerns about the consequences for stability in the region. Not only does Russia perceive encirclement, and efforts to undermine Russia’s influence in the region, but it also fears unpredictable and uncontrolled consequences which would seriously affect Russian security interests. Experts tell us that Russia is particularly worried that the strong divisions in Ukraine over NATO membership, with much of the ethnic-Russian community against membership, could lead to a major split, involving violence or at worst, civil war. In that eventuality, Russia would have to decide whether to intervene; a decision Russia does not want to have to face” (Wikileaks 2010a).

In less than two months, the West twice completely dismissed Russia’s warnings on issues it perceived as primordial not only to its national security but also to international law and order. In the years to come, it would become clear that Russia would not accept the “sui generis” case for Kosovo, based on the Western interpretation of its “rules-based order”, and neither would it accept a threat from further NATO enlargement in Georgia, and particularly in Ukraine. The ball was now in Moscow’s camp.

Two days after Bucharest, at the Brussels Forum discussing the NATO summit, the media were eager to hear the comments of the EU, US, and Russian representatives. In addition to Ukraine and Georgia’s NATO bid, the issue of Kosovo loomed over the Forum. One of the key press conferences was addressed by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, former US Secretary of State and Balkans envoy Richard Holbrooke, and Konstantin Kosachov, the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Russia’s Duma. Holbrooke argued that “Russia has to adopt an identical position to the one held by the US and the EU – that Kosovo is a unique case ... There is no precedent!” Kouchner added: “Holbrooke is absolutely right. We did not have a choice (...) when two communities cannot speak to each other but only speak through arms, there is no choice but to separate them!” As

Kosachov was about to take the microphone, Holbrooke and Kouchner stepped down the floor, hugged each other, and took a sip of coffee before heading towards the exit door, laughing, to the shock, if not disgust, of those present in the conference room. Kosachov, himself surprised, then said: "I just want to tell Mr. Kouchner and Mr. Holbrooke before they leave the room: you are absolutely wrong on Kosovo. It is a terrible precedent!". Kouchner, at the exit door, laughed out loud, shouting, "History will judge" (InPress4S 2008).

And it did. Four months later, Bernard Kouchner, now president of the EU Council of Ministers, was visiting the war zones around South Ossetia, trying to broker a ceasefire and pleading for Georgia's territorial integrity.

Reflecting on the development, French political scientist Alexis Troude commented: "The August conflict in South Ossetia and its outcome have clearly demonstrated the double standard policies regarding the issue of the respect of the territorial integrity of states. Six months after masterminding the unilateral secession of Kosovo from Serbia in a violent breach of international law, Washington and some key European capitals were quick to stand by an 'absolute support for Georgia's territorial integrity' over South Ossetia and Abkhazia" (Troude 2009).

Vienna's Die Presse lamented that "the Kosovo case has become a nightmare. The new international law which the West wanted to create with this case has now turned against its authors and their interests" (InPress4S 2008).

Sky News' Tim Marshall, a veteran reporter on the Balkans, argued, "The recognition of Kosovo was a foolhardy, poorly thought through policy which may reverberate violently all over the world for decades. This is not to defend Russia's actions in Georgia, but it does show how the Americans, British, and others want things both ways – and it also shows how the recognition of Kosovo has destroyed the hallowed concept that you do not change borders through force" (InPress4S 2008).

Two years later, at a roundtable organised by the Belgrade Fond Slobodan Jovanović, Konstantin Kosachov recalled the 2008 Brussels anecdote and underlined that "NATO expansion is leading Europe to a dead end, and sooner or later, it will be cut at some border, which means that we will get a new Berlin Wall inside Europe" (Kosachov 2010). It was evident by then that Russia was making clear it would not accept a "Western rules-based world

order”, including its features, such as “Kosovo as a sui generis case” and the expansion of NATO without considering Russia’s interests.

Four years later, in March 2014, a group of journalists discussed the contents, warnings, and title of the “Kosovo Compromise” project multimedia CD-ROM “Kosovo 2008: Unilateral Declaration of a Multilateral Crisis” (Kosovo Compromise 2008b) in front of Simferopol’s Parliament of Crimea, in Ukraine...Russia?

GLOBAL STRATEGIC NARRATIVE WARS FLARE UP

THE ERA OF GEOPOLITICAL DISRUPTION...

Four centuries ago, in 1618, the rebellion of Czech Protestants against the Habsburgs due to the collapse of religious rights turned into the “Thirty Years’ War”, which ended with the Peace of Westphalia, the new European order, the birth of sovereign states and the principle of non-interference in their internal affairs. A century ago, in 1918, Gavrilo Princip, a man inextricably linked to the beginning of the First World War, died in prison in Terezin, 60 kilometres north of the place where the war began in 1618, on the territory of what is now the Czech Republic, then Austria-Hungary, the heirs of the Habsburg Monarchy. The First World War ended that year. A new world order emerged with the disappearance of four powerful European empires, the birth of new states based on the principle of self-determination, and the growth of American power.

One hundred years later, 2018 was a popular reference point to ponder over “the end of the American century”. The US faced several drawbacks worldwide, with rivals becoming increasingly assertive and the rest of the world increasingly readjusting its hedging strategy. At home in the United States, Donald Trump’s foreign and domestic policy frustrated Washington’s interventionists. US dominance was in decline, the American “unipolar moment” was over, and the centre of gravity of world development was shifting from the Atlantic to the East. China assumed the role of a leader in economic globalisation and launched mega-projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the largest infrastructure project of the 21st century. After a period of post-Cold War stumbling, Russia returned to the world geopolitical

scene militarily and politically. The European Union, led by Germany, remained a great power but was weakened by the most severe identity crisis since its creation. After several years of economic and financial crisis, waves of illegal migrants and terrorist attacks strengthened the feeling of vulnerability and insecurity. The sentiment was already quite pronounced by Euroscepticism, by the return of identity issues to the top of the political agenda, as well as dissatisfaction with the processes of internal integration and expansion of the Union. The exit of Great Britain from the European Union and Trump's victory in the US brought to light the deep division of societies in the two leading Atlantic powers. The liberal-democratic norm and narrative of the West were losing their breath in the face of disruptions that changed the status quo and the reality of the political, economic, social, and security spheres.

However, could we talk about the "defeat" of the West? Of course not. At least not yet. Even less could we claim that a new world order had already emerged. The synergy of current disruptive processes did not reach a critical moment, that is, events – such as the Thirty Years War and the First or the Second World War – which fundamentally changed society's political and economic trajectory. We have yet to determine whether the 2014 referendum in Crimea and the 2022 beginning of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine will be akin to the "Defenestration of Prague" in 1618 or the "Sarajevo Assassination" in 1914, events causing a chain reaction that would lead to a change in the world order.

On the one hand, the globalised, interdependent world economy and the fear of using nuclear arsenals have reduced the threat of destruction, suffering, and human loss that crippled Europe and the world in the 17th or 20th centuries. On the other hand, the Western liberal-democratic order has robust mechanisms of resilience – the ability to absorb disruptive processes, carry out adequate reorganisation, and adapt, keeping its original structure, function, and identity. Finally, the transformation of the world order – the capacity to create a fundamentally new one in conditions where the existing is unsustainable – is also slowed down by potential differences in the visions and interests of the leading challengers of the current world order within the BRICS organization (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), and particularly by difficulties to sustain a high pace of de-dollarisation, despite solid advances.

The struggle for the legitimacy of the great powers is constantly present in social, economic, political, and international relations. However, it becomes increasingly pronounced in the conditions of strongly expressed urges towards the transition of the world order. Combat requires agility, sharpness and speed to monitor and analyse the risks that bring about changes, as well as to adapt and formulate a flexible strategy in response.

Battles for influence about who, to what extent, and by what means will be able to influence the creation of a new world geopolitical, economic, security, and normative order, in their intensity, do not lag behind historical predecessors. While trade, military power, and diplomacy remain the constants of these battles throughout history, one of the fundamental differences is the fact that an essential part of today's struggle for geopolitical primacy is conducted in the virtual, online sphere, i.e. on the internet. As a former head of the Chinese internet administration argued, "In the 18th century, national sovereignty extended to parts of the ocean, in the 20th century to the airspace; today it is expanding to the cyberspace as well" (Petroletti and Thibault 2015, 6).

...WELCOMES THE ERA OF INNOVATIVE DISRUPTION

It is not appropriate to compare the muskets and cannons of the 17th century or the planes and tanks of the 20th century with today's artificial intelligence and algorithms. Neither can it be said that battlefields such as the glades around Prague or the trenches around the Marne and on Kajmakčalan have today been replaced by Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok. It is unworthy to compare the dying cavalry and infantry to virtual bots and trolls or dark weapons like nerve gas to "fake news". However, the correct strategy – the key to all victories, without which even the most effective tactics and engagements lose their meaning – presupposes a correct recognition of the nature of the conflict and a comprehensive framework adapted to it that presupposes the selection of appropriate actors, tactics, and techniques. Both hegemon and their challengers must adhere, whether in geopolitical conflicts, political struggles on the domestic stage, or the internet economy.

Today, agility and adaptation require attention to disruptive innovation processes heavily based on digital and online platforms. We will draw a parallel: like challengers on the world geopolitical scene, startup companies

appear on the innovation scene and want to change the system through disruption, weaken the “big players” on the market, legitimise their products, and achieve commercial interests.

Over the last decade, disruptive challengers such as Alibaba, Uber, and AirBnB have created their own online ecosystems and placed them among the world’s most powerful brands. Chinese white goods manufacturer Haier enabled a virtually direct connection between consumers and innovative development teams through social networks, reducing the time between launching new products and better responses to consumer demands. Mobile phone maker Xiaomi, also from China, based disruption on the constant release of new, often insufficiently tested models to the market, focusing on audience response on online platforms and constant software improvements in line with those responses. The American online streaming media company Netflix, thanks to collected metadata from the internet and powerful algorithms, not only learned about what, how, and when each of its millions of users wants to watch but also started producing its high-budget media content based on this data. Using generative AI, Tesla’s self-driving cars make real-time decisions on the roads. The Maker movement, based on DIY culture and open source, has brought together millions of people who, thanks to new technologies such as 3D printers and cloud technologies, created prototypes and sold their unique products without intermediaries and mass industrial producers. The disruption of blockchain technology became practically possible in all sectors where there are data and transactions: it eliminates intermediaries in the banking and sales sectors, increases the efficiency and security of data in the areas of the health system, social protection, and the public sector. It even increases the regularity of voting because each voter is registered, verified, and his vote is counted, without the possibility of later intervention and manipulation, such as avoiding the counting of some votes or subsequent registration.

Faced with the fact that less than half of the Fortune 500 top corporations from the Forbes magazine list from the year 2000 survive today, established organizations and market leaders are investing in disruption to remain competitive and prevent “attacks” by asymmetric challengers. The traditional company concept of internal research and development is increasingly being replaced by the concept of “open innovation”, i.e., sacrificing corporate privacy and secrets to connect online with researchers

and analysts who can point out and apply upcoming innovations and keep the company competitive.

Online platforms no longer know borders, neither literally nor figuratively. As of April 2024, there were 5,44 billion internet users worldwide, or 67.1 percent of the global population; a total of 5,07 billion, or 62.6 percent of the world's population, were social media users (Statista 2024a).

We have never been more connected than today in the Internet era. We have never had a greater choice of information, destinations, services and products. We have never had more opportunities to learn about the ideas of others and to present our own to them. The global village has never been smaller. Therefore, machines and those who operate them have never known us better. We cannot escape them because we leave digital traces of our visits to websites and applications, our communications with friends, our statuses and attitudes through social networks, our desires and interests through online shopping, our physical movements through integrated GPS, our daily habits or health status through one of the 15 billion devices (double that in 2030) connected by the Internet of Things (Duarte 2024) The data we leave when we use the internet is collected through data mining and stored on cloud servers that are controlled and exploited not only by giants like GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon) and the US National Security Agency but increasingly by other companies, organisations, and states that understand the potential of big data. Through increasingly complex algorithms, these data are analysed to monitor attitudes and behaviour, personalisation, and microtargeting of product and information offerings.

The calculation for the shareholders of the Internet “giants” is clear: in a decade (2013-2023), Google's revenue quadrupled, and it doubled since 2018, from 116 billion USD to 237 billion USD (Oberlo 2024). Meta (Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram) had a revenue of 134 billion USD in 2023, up from 55 billion USD in 2018 (Macrotrends 2024).

Their business model is also evident: creating online platforms where it is possible to attract the attention of Internet and social network users, monitor and analyse their behaviour, and then deliver precisely targeted messages to them – news, ads, messages – that would lead to engagement – voting for a particular candidate, change of attitude, participation in a protest, support or criticism, purchase of a product or service.

It is clear that governments, organisations, and companies can no longer achieve their missions only in the offline world. That is why they are turning more and more to the online space and, therefore, to various hybrid forms of action in both spaces—offline and online—especially in the area of influence and persuasion, which are part of strategic communication at all levels—from political to corporate, from local and national to global.

The internet has become not only the scene of a great battle – economic, trade, security, political, and geopolitical – but with its capacities, methods, techniques, and tools, it has dramatically changed communication processes, speeding them up, expanding them and making them accessible to a level of dispersion in which even the smallest organizations see their chance on the internet. The internet and its techniques have become the most sophisticated tools in strategic communication, the process by which organizations strive to achieve active social, political, and security changes, promote ideas and products, and realize interests and goals.

However, while US tech giants remain dominant, supporting US power overall, they are being increasingly challenged by the successes of Chinese companies, such as ByteDance (TikTok) and Tencent (WeChat, QQ), opening yet another battlespace of global influence. Beyond the battle for chips and AI, great power competition over discourse and narratives is expanding on social media and online platforms worldwide.

STRATEGIC ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Such competition is not new. The crisis in Ukraine in 2014 led to a real communication war between Washington and Moscow on social networks. It was fought in real-time and on all platforms, long before the armed battles in the Donbas.

Thus, one can look with an almost “peace nostalgia” at anecdotes such as the one when the US Embassy in Moscow commented on Twitter in the spring of 2014 about the alleged participation of official Russian troops in the conflict in eastern Ukraine and misspelt the word “Russia” in the Russian language. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia immediately responded to the embassy and on Facebook, announcing that, before “spreading propaganda”, American diplomats in Moscow should learn to write the name of the country

they work in, adding sarcastically that in the future “they will be happy to help them in the preparation of propaganda material” (Walker 2014).

However, the mistake of the American embassy is more of an exception that confirms the rule, which is that Washington has the most complex and prepared policy of strategic communication in the world. Its foundations are dozens of strategic government documents in this field, the most advanced technologies and resources ever involved in communicating with a global audience, as well as thousands of actors in communication campaigns – from communications strategists in the Pentagon and the State Department to communications officers they had deployed in the mountains of Tora Bora in Afghanistan, in Anbar in Iraq or Kiev in Ukraine.

In one of the first comprehensive reports on strategic communication, the White House stated that “effective strategic communications are essential to sustaining global legitimacy and supporting our policy aims” and that success depends on the complete alignment of words and actions, a deep understanding of cultural, political, social, religious and the economic context of the people with whom it is communicated, i.e. “attitudes, opinions, grievances, and concerns of peoples – not just elites – around the world” as a prerequisite for creating coherent, consistent messages that target audiences would adequately perceive, leading to the desired changes in attitudes and actions (White House 2010).

The White House’s conclusion resulted from a decade of work, starting in 2000, on developing the concept of “strategic communication” in American government institutions—from the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon to Congress and the National Security Council.

Numerous “white papers” and studies on strategic communication have led to different definitions, scopes, and characteristics. One of the leading American experts in this field, Christopher Paul from the RAND Research Institute, summarized them by defining strategic communication as “coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives” (Paul 2011, 3).

He outlined key elements of strategic communication: the importance of information, influence and persuasion; the necessity of defining clear objectives; coordination and deconfliction among the actors who carry out

communication in order to synchronize messages; as well as the full awareness that “actions communicate” (Paul 2011, 5).

However, the term “strategic communication” is not exclusively related to communication of national interests, just as it is not the exclusive right of political communication.

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Vercic, and Sriramesh developed the expanded concept of strategic communication, defining it as “communicating purposefully to advance (an organization’s) mission”, presupposing that “people will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of organizations, causes, and social movements”(Hallahan et al. 2007, 4).

Strategic communication projects can be administrative campaigns that promote a specific type of behaviour, critical campaigns aimed at changes (interest groups) or radical changes (change of government, change of consciousness), which can be induced from the outside and be both non-violent and violent, as well as accompanied by an external force. They can also differ in the circumstances that cause the campaign: long-term, short-term or crisis problems.

Today, international, non-governmental, non-profit organisations talk about strategic communication when they discuss fundamental changes in the fight for social change, whether it is Greenpeace’s campaigns to reduce the use of carbon dioxide in Brazil or the World Health Organization’s campaign to reduce the incidence of HIV in South Africa. As strategic communication educators for the non-governmental sector, Patterson and Radtke believe that strategic communication is the key to successful social change – it is “mission-driven, audience-focused and action-oriented” (Patterson and Radtke 2009, xiii).

The fact that the concept of strategic communication has developed the most in the US may be caused by the potential and interests of the American foreign and security policy, its capacities and the self-imposed mission of the global hegemon. It is also possible that the concept itself was influenced by the context of increasing resistance to the dominance of the American news narrative, caught in flagrant cases of disinformation and violations of moral codes during the bombing of the Yugoslavia in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which gradually led to the strengthening of anti-Americanism and the precipitous fall of the global image of the US to the lowest levels in history.

However, communication scientists should also note that it was the American postpositivist theorists who, with significant delay and not without profound scepticism, accepted the understandings of their European colleagues regarding the importance of sensitivity to culture and identity, the necessity of respecting the audience's perceptions, and the production of responsive messages up to the level of interactivity.

The need for new theoretical approaches is a consequence of the different world order that emerged after the Cold War, the new information order accompanied by technological challenges, and the fact that in 1993, 14 million people had access to the Internet, while two decades later, they were 5,44 billion.

Since social theory is a human construct, the context of the time in which scientists research and write is essential. With this in mind, it is only natural that the theories and perceptions that dominated after the First and Second World Wars had to change after the end of the Cold War in 1990 and will have to change with the awakening of a new multipolar world amid increased economic and geopolitical the importance of the BRICS countries, the changes brought about by supranational organisations and armed transnational groups as a response to the interventionism of the American unipolar world. It is impossible to understand today's world without understanding communication processes. The world's complexity intertwines with the complexity of the global communication ecosystem.

It is normal and not at all unusual to see dramatic changes in mass communications at different historical intervals. If we look back, we will see the "cable revolution", then the "television revolution" before it, the "radio revolution", until the revolutions of cheap printing in the 19th century. The Internet revolution brings, however, a whole series of quantitative and qualitative changes that fundamentally change the world of communications – its types, attributes, scope, processes, organisation and consequences. Comparisons between the emergence of the Internet and the Industrial Revolution have been common. Same with the conclusion that the Internet transformed not only the world of communications but also dramatically influenced the economy, politics and the entire society. In a constellation of rapid changes, actors in the professional world of communications have responded in different ways to the integration of the Internet and its techniques. However, one conclusion is clear: those who ignored online

techniques and minimised their importance most often faced stagnation or decline in the medium term, while those who accepted them as reality and the future – even if without enthusiasm – opened up to new opportunities, perspectives, and often unexpected possibilities.

In such a context, there is less and less space for strategic communication action exclusively outside the online sphere. Although the activities on the Internet are numerous and only a part of political, social, and economic campaigns, they are increasingly using web techniques. Their influence on public opinion and the media agenda is growing, and there is an increasing number of influential figures on the public scene who are transferring their views to the web scene, using some of the existing web techniques. The centre of gravity of the strategic communication struggle for influence in the political, social and economic spheres is increasingly relocating to the web.

Therefore, the Internet is no longer only a medium through which information is distributed but also a place where actions of social and political mobilisation are carried out.

One of the reasons, but also a consequence, is the development of a series of online media techniques: from those that enrich the content (such as linking, blogs and multimedia convergence such as interactive infographics) through techniques that enable better collaboration on the creation of media content (such as collaboration tools and building online communities), to those that enable better placement and more precise audience targeting (such as SEO optimization, analytics and marketing on social networks).

On the other hand, media convergence enables unprecedented interactivity and sharing of control over communication content. The digitisation of content and technology makes it possible for the first time in history to find means for researching and preparing content in one device— a computer, tablet, or smartphone—for its production and post-production, dissemination, and, finally, payment of that content.

“Online media techniques” represent all kinds of communication channels and methods based on online platforms, the objectives of which are informing, social interaction, engagement, mobilisation, marketing, education, entertainment, sales, and user collaboration.

Users of online content can edit content themselves and share it further – it is enough that they know how and are motivated enough to do so. Unlike the period when he was a passive consumer of the one-way communication of traditional print and electronic media, today the user can choose what he wants to do with media messages – to share them, mix them with other content, comment on them, tear them out of context, use them for disinformation, to mock them, to open a debate, to (re)sell them or to transfer them to another media format – video, graph, illustration – that is, to make an original multimedia product out of them. Thus, the notion of the audience has changed so much that today's world is populated by “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen 2006; Gillmor 2004).

The concept of strategic communication is similar to that of a musical orchestra. Just as strategic communication uses many different techniques, an orchestra playing a musical melody uses various musical instruments. Depending on the desired effect, different orchestra sections use various instruments with different intensities and at distinct moments.

Therefore, a strategic communication campaign “cries out” for a multitude of instruments and modalities of influence, which the numerous web media techniques can provide: speed, efficiency, and simplicity of production and dissemination, improved visualisation, availability and durability of materials, and easier and more precise interaction with the target group.

WHOEVER TAKES A # AS A WEAPON...

Can new techniques in strategic communications be controlled only by large states like the US and by systems like the Pentagon or NATO? Are they also powerful communication tools for the hegemon and institutions of the Western world that can increasingly be used by geopolitical rivals, social movements, protests, opposition groups, or terrorist groups around the world?

Namely, in addition to the increasing profits, control and corporatization of the Internet, even a cursory look at the Western media mainstream indicates a fascination with resistance and transgressions related to online media techniques. “Post-truth” was declared the word of the year in 2016. “Fake news” was perceived as an integral part of the Brexit campaigns in the UK and Donald Trump in the US, peppered with Western narratives about

“Russian troll factories”, “hybrid wars”, “hacking”, and “disinformation” that promote “populism” in the European Union and resistance to the neoliberal system. The American Internet giants – Google, Facebook, and Twitter – have been the godfathers of tectonic world phenomena, not always of their own free will.

Online platforms played an essential role in the war created on the ruins of the US military intervention in Iraq and the government overthrow during the “Twitter Revolution” and the “Arab Spring”. When in the middle of 2014, the Islamist group Daesh (an acronym for the Arabic term “al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham”, “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”, also known as IS, ISIS, ISIL) launched a military offensive that occupied a third of Iraq and Syria, redrawing the borders of the Middle East, Twitter applications and various other online media techniques became the primary communication weapon. Daesh Islamists created an Arabic-language Twitter application, “The Dawn Tiding”, which they used to inform sympathizers of their activities and recruit activists. During Daesh’s march on Mosul, Iraq, in April 2014, its online activists produced 44,000 tweets in one day. Through a sophisticated use of “hashtags”, they made anyone who searched for “Baghdad” that day get, as the first result, an image of an armed jihadist looking at a black Daesh flag flying over the Iraqi capital, with the accompanying text “Baghdad, here we come!”, as a message of intimidation of city residents who would resist (Berger 2014).

Daesh members had developed sophisticated online techniques in their strategic communication campaigns – dispersive, polycentric, globally networked, and virtually elusive. In these actions, they managed to avoid the complex algorithms of social networks for detecting spam emails, using, for example, the Arabic version of the advanced application “Thunderclap” used by US President Obama in his election campaign (Farwell 2014a). Islamists found audiences in original ways, for example, by twisting tags like #Brazil2014, #ENG, #France and #WC2014 during the 2014 FIFA World Cup to offer potential sympathisers and activists their audio, video, graphic and textual propaganda (Farwell 2014a).

Thanks to online media techniques, as never before in history, a terrorist organisation gained direct access to hundreds of millions of potential listeners. Since its inception, the leader of this organisation, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, had used all the potential of online media, from Facebook and

Twitter to YouTube videos and instant messaging programs. At the same time, the Islamic State decentralised the production of the broadcasted material – and published materials that were autonomously prepared and sent by followers from West Africa to the Caucasus, from Bengali to Russian. Every day, on average, Daesh published 38 new materials, documentaries, photo essays, video galleries, pamphlets and other online materials using techniques and platforms that made them virtually unstoppable despite numerous attempts to control and censor them. The organisation's communication strategy was open, sacrificed privacy for publicity, and trained and coordinated "influential" Twitterers who distributed further media content and created trends that were followed.

The leading American magazine in the field of new technologies, *Wired*, published an article in which it assessed that "the Islamic State is an online media conglomerate as much as it is a military organization" and that, in fact, "ISIS is winning the social media war" even when it is losing on the front (Koerner 2016). The defeat of Daesh after the Russian intervention in Syria from 2016-2018 should not encourage the fighters against Islamic terrorism too much because it was not the first and will not be the last radical Islamist organisation to use online techniques for its strategic communication goals.

At the same time, faced with the geopolitical disruption coming from China and Russia, the US and EU member countries began to warn of the threat posed to the Western liberal-democratic system of the increasingly sophisticated use of online technologies by what they label as "authoritarian regimes".

In September 2016, in anticipation of the presidential elections in the US, the American weekly *Newsweek* warned that Russia had prepared an extensive strategic communication campaign aimed at supporting the Republican candidate Donald Trump – and that for this purpose, it had used various types of online techniques: from Internet portals like Sputnik to "cyber" operations hacking emails of the Democratic Party and its candidate Hillary Clinton. According to *Newsweek*, Russia's influence on elections and political processes in the USA has never been more significant since World War II. In a grander picture, it encompassed a broad broader strategic communication campaign that also had an impact on Brexit, on the growth of Marine Le Pen's support in France, that is, on all processes that undermine the credibility of the EU and NATO as the basic structures of the Western

liberal model in Europe. Portraying Vladimir Putin as a hacker on its front page, Newsweek concluded with a statement from the former head of Estonian intelligence service, Eerik-Niiles Kross: “Russia is effectively using our democracies and our systems of rule of law against us.... America, welcome to the war” (Matthews 2016).

Trump’s presidency was under pressure from the beginning due to allegations of alleged help from Russian hackers, “trolls”, and bots. Moreover, every subsequent election in the West was declared in advance a target of “Kremlin disinformation”. When the result went to their liking – as in the case of Emmanuel Macron’s victory in France – those accusations were later downplayed. Otherwise – as in the case of Miloš Zeman’s victory in the Czech Republic – the shadow of doubt would remain.

Ten years after the historic victory of Barack Obama in the US presidential elections with the help of online techniques and social networks and the beginning of the “Twitter revolution”, in early 2018, experts from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) assessed that Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power” – spreading influence through public diplomacy, culture, “fighting for hearts and souls” – had become inadequate when it comes to the strategies of Russia and China. According to them, “authoritarian influence is not principally about attraction or even persuasion” but “centers on distraction and manipulation”; it becomes a “sharp power” and a “syringe” that “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries” (National Endowment for Democracy 2017, 6).

It might be more appropriate to say: hashtag # is a double-edged sword.

CHAPTER 2

STRATEGIC NARRATIVES ON THE PATH OF MULTIPLICITY

THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE ARGUMENT IN A NUTSHELL

The transition towards multipolarity implies “uncertainty and the fight for the legitimacy of states in international relations” (Mitić and Matić 2022, 251). The underlying cause of this uncertainty is the tension in the assessment of the precariousness of the “rules-based world order” (RBO) between Western actors, who believe it can still be preserved—albeit slightly modified to accommodate new realities—and non-Western actors, who believe it is ripe for more profound, norm-changing challenges.

Furthermore, the transformation of orders is “most often accompanied by wider destabilisation and breaking out of a series of regional conflicts or even a global conflict” (Proroković 2018, 342). The uncertainties of the global order put a high accent on the role of “great powers” – states “with an ambition to make decisions and the resources to take action with a global impact” (Biscop 2021, 3). Great powers project their own “grand strategies” – “the vital ends that a state has to achieve in order to assure the survival of its chosen way of life, for which if necessary it will mobilise all instruments (the ways) and resources (the means) at its disposal” (Biscop 2021, 3). Based on their grand strategies, great powers compete to craft favourable “strategic environments” – “the set of global conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of all elements of (U.S.) national power” (Training and Doctrine Command 2012, 2).

In order to craft favourable environments, states vie for trust, legitimacy, and power using strategic communication through which they form, project and sustain a persuasive story about the international system, their role and action. They project military, economic, political and cultural power through strategic communication as a system of coordinated activities aimed at advancing their mission through persuasion and promotion of a particular type of behaviour (Mitić and Matić 2022, 251). To do so, states and organisations forge “strategic narratives” as “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international

relations in order to shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and abroad” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013, 248).

Strategic narratives describe the desired outcomes and seek to persuade other stakeholders to follow and assist in achieving them. Short-term objectives can be achieved by “structuring the responses of others to developing events” (Freedman 2006, 22), while long-term objectives imply that getting other actors to pick up the narrative “can shape their interests, their identity, and their understanding of how international relations works and where it is heading” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013, 3).

The strategic narrative must unveil how a political actor or state conceives the world order, its identity within the order, and the policies it intends to perform to legitimise this identity (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013).

Then, in the process of strategic communication, actors perform shaping through aligning words (geopolitical storylines/framing) and deeds (statecraft repertoires/geopolitical scripts). Shaping has been intrinsic to every global power. Through centuries, seeking to “shape the international system in accordance with its own values” (Kissinger 1994, 17), or more recently, exercising soft power “to shape the preferences of others” (Nye 2005, 5). Shaping, of course, does not exist outside the historical context. Political actors are “free to make choices, but their choices are shaped by the structures and history they and their predecessors have made”, and thus, the “interactive shaping of choices is also a sequential process” (Rasler and Thomson 1989). Alternatively, as Krasner argues, “once an historical choice is made, it both precludes and facilitates alternative future choices” (Krasner 1984, 225). Thus, for example, for current Eurasian affairs, it is vital to source current security shaping in past “imperial legacy” (Mankoff 2022). In terms of the security environment, “military shaping” is vital, and it implies “the use of military to proactively build a more favourable environment by changing military relationships, the characteristics of other militaries, or the behaviour of allies” through attraction socialisation, delegation and assurance (Wolfley 2021). Wolfley argues that “shaping relies primarily on attraction, legitimacy, persuasion, and positive incentives and less on uses or threats of force” (Wolfley 2021).

Thus, shaping requires the use of persuasion by words and deeds. In terms of words, shaping requires “geopolitical storylines” as sets of arguments which provide “a relatively coherent sense-making narrative for

a foreign policy challenge” (O’Tuathail 2002, 619). To boost these storylines, political actors apply “frames” to provoke reactions of the public on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. They do so through “strategic framing”, an integral part of strategic communication, which seeks to “use message frames to create salience for certain aspects of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan 2008, 4856). Both governments and activist groups can apply strategic framing, but at every level of the process, what is evident is intention (Mitić 2018, 123). As far as deeds are concerned, in international politics, states practice “statecraft” – “organised actions governments take to change the external environment in general or the policies and actions of other states in particular to achieve the objectives set by policymakers” (Holsti 1976, 293). States use four types of statecraft instruments – military, political, diplomatic and cultural – to “influence others in the international system – to make their friends and enemies behave in ways that they would have otherwise not” (Goddard et al. 2019, 306). Furthermore, states use “sets of repertoires” as “more limited toolkits in use, whether by particular states, in relations among specific states, or in specific settings” (Goddard et al. 2019, 310). These sets of statecraft repertoires align with what O’Tuathail calls “geopolitical scripts” – a “tacit set of rules for how foreign policy actors are to perform in certain speech situations, and how they are to yet articulate responses to policy challenges and problems” (O’Tuathail 2002, 619). These scripts need to be flexible enough to harmonise, depending on the situation, context or development, with the set of statecraft repertoire a state can employ. Furthermore, they must connect the words and the deeds, and “close the say-do gap” as one of the critical elements of successful strategic communication (Mitić 2018, 143).

IN PURSUIT OF LEGITIMACY

We live in an era of geopolitical disruption. True, the world order has not arrived at a critical juncture. However, the dependence paths are not anymore solely leading through the post-World War II Western liberal norms, even less through the rapport-de-force of the post-Cold War American-led US world order. Consensus is growing about the end of the “American century” and the “old order”. Nevertheless, despite China’s rise, Russia’s

awakening, the EU's identity crisis and the US decline, we are equally away from fully establishing a new, multipolar world. In such context, it is understandable that various players wish to legitimise their international status and leverage through political, military, economic or cultural might – and project it to the world public through strategic communication.

The first quarter of the 21st century has been a perfect storm for strategic communicators. The era of reflexive modernisation features an incessant struggle for the redefinition of values, labour, societal links, and state orders (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003). The network society, powered by the Internet as the decisive technology of the information age, empowers individualism and self-communication as it transcends the limitations of time and space for the production, distribution, and use of information (Castells 2013). The post-Cold War “unipolar moment” gives place to a transition towards multipolarity and early sketches of a future multipolar order. In these constellations of uncertain change, organisations and states vie for power, trust, and legitimacy through strategic communication about their preferred outcomes. They need to construct meaning and tell a persuasive story about the nature of the state and the international system, their identity, role, task, and sequence of action (Skoko 2021). At the same time, they need to acknowledge the opportunities and limitations of the new media ecology, including illusions of control over interpretation by recipients.

Organisations, states, companies, movements, and interest groups must fight for the legitimacy of “their stories” to realise their interests on the domestic and international stage. This is due to the confluence of social change, the digital Internet revolution, and geopolitical shifts.

In Brussels, the European Union has been facing for years the strengthening of Euroscepticism that questions its legitimacy, which culminated in the referendum on Brexit, that is, the exit from its composition of one of the leading member states – Great Britain. Despite being one of the most influential organisations in the world today, the European Union has struggled with the “democratic deficit” since the end of the 1970s. Inhabitants of the member states believe that the EU's institutions and processes do not accurately represent their ideas and perspectives. Aware of this problem, member states have repeatedly tried to carry out essential institutional reforms that would reduce the “democratic deficit”: from the Maastricht agreement in 1992, through the Amsterdam agreement in 1997

to the Lisbon agreement in 2007, the competencies of the European Parliament were expanded, as well as the role of national parliaments in the process of enacting EU legislation. However, a decade and a half later, the EU's legitimacy is still questioned. In the 2024 elections for the European Parliament, the turnout was just over 50%, and surveys found that in 2023, only 45% of Europeans had a positive view of the EU, while 60% knew they could vote in the EP elections (Castle 2023). All of the European Union's communication initiatives to boost legitimacy and trust in the EU have failed, including attempts to "sell" the EU Constitution (which was rejected in 2005 referenda in France, the Netherlands, and Ireland), efforts to make information more easily accessible to EU citizens, and initiatives to boost turnout in the European Parliament elections. The European Union is failing to move away from the problem that EU Communications Commissioner Margaret Wallstrom set well before the beginning of the economic crisis in 2007: "The EU lacks a story. For previous generations, the peace argument was a sufficient. But what story do I tell my 20-year-old son? How do I explain to him that we need the EU for the future?" (Volkery 2007). The European Union fails to calibrate its strategic communication to reverse the trend of delegitimisation and mistrust. However, issues of legitimacy and trust plague organisations around the world.

In the 2010s, in the territories it controlled in Iraq and Syria, Daesh ("Islamic State") carried out its communication campaign aimed at gaining support and mobilisation through the delegitimisation of its opponents and its legitimisation as a leading force in the Muslim world. Daesh, made up of Sunni Muslims, emerged on the territory of Iraq and Syria as a result of the delegitimisation of several actors. On the one hand, the creators of Daesh's strategic communication campaign used dissatisfaction with the Shiite government of Iraq in Baghdad, as well as with the government of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. On the other hand, they used al-Qaeda's loss of legitimacy as the leading radical Islamist organisation after the killing of Osama Bin Laden, as well as the problems with the legitimacy of the authorities in the Muslim world – from Egypt to Yemen – after the Arab Spring and the bombing of Libya. The strategy of the fight for legitimacy was reflected in the declaration of Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi as "caliph" and "leader of all Muslims of the world". On the other hand, the radical and terrorist methods used by Daesh delegitimised it in the international community. The very word "Daesh" – which is an acronym of the group's old name and has

a pejorative meaning in Arabic – was coined by the group’s opponents to challenge the legitimacy of the group, which wanted to present itself as the “Islamic State”.

In New York, Wall Street opened the question of the legitimacy of Bitcoin (BTC), a digital currency created in 2009 by an anonymous person and characterised by transactions carried out anonymously, without banks, without commissions, without national regulation, through a “cloud” of servers, mobile applications and “digital wallets”. Perceptions of Bitcoin’s legitimacy are one of the most intriguing issues in the financial market, and they range from enthusiasm to fear and back again. For Wired magazine, Bitcoin’s “acceptance” by merchants was its main obstacle. A turning point was when the electronic payment service “Pay Pal” decided in September 2014 to accept transactions using bitcoins. For Wired, “from a public relations standpoint, this is big news. PayPal is a widely trusted brand”, and “If Bitcoin continues to gain acceptance as a legitimate asset, it will be notable not only for its financial implications, but for the remarkable turnaround it will have made in public perception” (Graham 2014). Just a few months later, Microsoft and Dell accepted the use of Bitcoin, and “political legitimacy” was given in 2015 by Rand Paul, a candidate for the Republican nomination in the 2016 US presidential election, when he announced that he accepted “Bitcoin donations” for his campaign (Higgins 2015). However, the expansion of Bitcoin’s legitimacy spurred a massive creation of cryptocurrencies. After ups and downs, events such as Tesla’s acquisition of 1.5 billion USD worth of BTC fuelled its rise. By the spring of 2024, the bankruptcy of a crypto exchange FTX and the approval of the BTC exchange-traded fund (ETF) led to an all-time high price of Bitcoin at over 70,000 USD (Statista 2024b).

The ups and downs of the legitimacy of the EU, Daesh and Bitcoin are just a couple of illustrations of the fluctuations in legitimacy that organisations experience in an era of uncertainty. Legitimacy problems are characteristic of today’s “modernisation of modern society”, which was once based on nation-states, a stable welfare state and the family, supported by the economic security of regulation and low unemployment (Beck, Bonss and Lau 2003, 1).

International relations, roles of states and social relations are increasingly transformed, new boundaries are set, and a new form of world order, society,

capitalism, workforce, career and family is being created. Many social actors are losing their authority. In the increasing uncertainty that characterises the society of the late 20th and early 21st century – from the fear of job loss through the fear of terrorism to the fear of the consequences of new information technologies – organisations are trying to find their place to legitimise their existence and actions.

Through communication, organisations must explain their goals and purpose to the audience, i.e. “stakeholders”, as “individuals or groups that can affect and be affected by the actions of a corporation”: these are the media, consumers, investors, employees, community members, analysts, lobbyists, non-governmental organisations and activist groups (Argenti and Barnes 2009, 2).

Every organisation has its reputation, which refers to the sum of opinions stakeholders have had about it in the past. An organisation’s good or bad reputation depends on the quality of its relationship with stakeholders, that is, on building social capital – the network of relationships with people – that it has achieved. Social capital enables the organisation to gain a reputation as a basis for trust, that is, for stakeholders’ future expectations. Therefore, any organisation will strive to increase its social capital to gain trust.

However, an organisation cannot only rely on interpersonal social capital building to achieve trust but must also do so through public communication. Questions of the “trust process” refer to the building and loss of “public trust”. Trust factors are constructed and communicated by PR practitioners and interpreted by journalists. Public relations and journalism thus play the role of “trust brokers” who sometimes work together and sometimes oppose each other but are always connected (Bentele and Wehmeier 2009).

In order to legitimise themselves in 21st-century society, organisations are turning to strategic communication as the most appropriate approach and means for achieving this complex goal. Strategic communication can serve organisations, movements, corporations – or robust military and political systems to achieve or oppose change through persuasion and fight against domination (Leitch and Motion 2010, 103).

Therefore, the primary task of an organisation’s strategic communication is to ensure that its activity is considered legitimate and to maintain its legitimacy. The focus is on perception because “legitimacy is not a question

of how an organisation actually decides and acts—but of the way it is interpreted” (Holmström et al. 2010, 3).

GRAND STRATEGY AND THE CRAFTING OF STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTS

The environment of instability, uncertainty and pursuit of legitimacy has created a logical setting for the return of the concept of “grand strategy”. For Tata, it is an “insurance plan” against external threats (Tata 2022). Balzacq and Krebs argue that as a state’s “theory of victory”, grand strategy explains “how the state will utilise its diverse means to advance and achieve national ends” and that “a clearly articulated, well-defined, and relatively stable grand strategy is supposed to allow the ship of state to steer a steady course through the roiling seas of global politics” (Balzacq and Krebs 2021, 1). As they underline, aligning a power’s grand strategy with its foreign policy dramatically facilitates the strategic communication and effective achievement of its interests. Indeed, it is a concept that has made its comeback with the rise of multipolarity. A grand strategy defines fundamental national interests on a global scale. It analyses and addresses the strategic environment these national interests – (geo)political, military, economic, and cultural – face, including opportunities and threats, building alliances and facing competition. Furthermore, among many objectives, it prioritises them and assigns adequate importance and means accordingly.

Freedman points out two essential caveats (Freedman 2021). First, some IR scholars, particularly historians, are sceptical about whether a grand strategy can be applied as planned in documents, given various actors’ unexpected developments and competing interests. As a result, Freedman points out, the strategy followed will likely be “emergent” and should be treated as a process rather than a plan. Second, the natural domains of the grand strategy are crisis and conflict, as these circumstances distinguish grand strategy from generalisations about foreign policy and national interests. Of course, one could notice that great powers rarely take a rest from crises and conflicts, particularly in times of transition towards multipolarity and pursuit of legitimacy.

Biscop points to ten critical characteristics of a grand strategy. It must be “simple”, “comprehensive”, and “rational”; “allied”, “competitive” and “agile”; “creative” and “proactive”, but also “dirty” and “courageous” (Biscop 2021). Tata sees six essential elements which “frame grand strategy”: (1) the articulation of vital national interests; (2) the determination of likely external threats; (3) an evaluation of the overlap of the perception of external threats between a power and its allies; (4) an inventory of available military, economic and diplomatic resources; (5) a demonstration of the matching of the ends and means; and (6) an assessment of the people’s will to support the grand strategy (Tata 2022). Just as Freedman, he points to the fact that it is a process which requires recalibration within a changing context.

Indeed, the choice of grand strategy by states is logically linked to the strategic environments they face in the international arena. These environments, as noted by Ripsman and Kovac, as well as Glaser, are shaped by material forces and state power (Ripsman and Kovac 2021). On the other hand, McCourt goes beyond the material forces and emphasises the role of culture and identity in forming grand strategies. He points to the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy as an example, arguing it does more than assess the U.S. strategic environment – “it tells a story of who America is, and who it should be, in world politics” (McCourt 2021, 303). Thus, crafting strategic environments through strategic communication and narratives is essential.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

PROPAGANDA BEHIND THE TERM

More than two centuries ago, the first political campaign to promote social change was organised in London. In May 1787, a group of 12 people, led by Reverend Thomas Clarkson, founded the “Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.” At their first meeting, the group—comprised of propagandists, parliamentarians, industrialists, clergymen, ship captains, and former slaves—devised the first comprehensive information and influence campaign.

It included networking with influential actors in society at the time, a petition signed by nearly 100,000 people in a year, a boycott campaign in which 300,000 Britons refused to buy sugar produced by slaves,

development of a narrative about the horrors of slavery, organisation of public debates, placement of stories in press and comics that demonised the slave trade, publication and distribution of books, and their translation into the five “languages of the slave trade” (French, Portuguese, Danish, Dutch and Spanish), publication of children’s books, letter campaigns to kings and other rulers, designing and sticking posters across the country, distributing pamphlets and medallions (badges), involving celebrities in the campaign, fundraising and lobbying in parliament.

The twenty-year campaign resulted in the adoption of a law by the British Parliament in 1807, according to which all ships involved in the slave trade were expelled from British ports. The campaign and subsequent decisions made a historic contribution to the drastic reduction of the slave trade (Manhein 2011, 4–6).

More than 200 years later, the focus on strategic communication as a term and concept coincides with the beginning of the 21st century and the period of the American response to the “war on terror” after the terrorist attacks of al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001. The top of the American establishment, which ordered the development of this concept, became aware of the weakness of American public diplomacy and the necessity to improve it. Among the critical actors in the establishment were people who had memories of the Cold War and American efforts in the ideological struggle against the Soviet Union and the spread of communism in the world. They saw that period as the golden era of American dominance in persuasive strategies. Thus, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, under whom the strategic communication strategy was developed, assessed that his views were related to his earlier experiences as a civil servant during the Cold War, when “these tools of persuasion and inspiration were indispensable to the outcome of the defining ideological struggle of the 20th century. I believe that they are just as indispensable in the 21st century and maybe more so” (Gates 2008).

Cull believes that forms similar to public diplomacy and strategic communication, at least in the American case, have always appeared in times of severe crises and conflict hotspots. He cites the examples of the American Revolution, the American Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Cold War, which is closest to today’s vision of strategic communication (Cull 2009, 23).

Since the Cold War could not be resolved militarily due to nuclear deterrence capacity, it was fought worldwide through limited regional or local conflicts and struggles for influence and ideological supremacy. Paul believes “the Cold War was made for strategic communication and public diplomacy, and the United States was up to the task” (Paul 2011, 73).

Armstrong points out that, in the first phase of the Cold War – starting in 1948 – under the influence of George Kennan’s strategy, a plan of organised, comprehensive opposition to the spread of the USSR’s influence was developed, which assumed, in addition to military and intelligence assistance, various types of white and black propaganda. Armstrong’s description of early Cold War US communication as “public diplomacy”, engaging people and capacities at all levels, is similar to today’s concept of strategic communication (Armstrong 2009, 63–65).

Agencies such as the “Psychological Strategy Board” were formed, and “psychological operations included every significant action in the field of foreign affairs by any government agency that had an effect upon the minds and wills of men” (Schwartz 2009, 119). Three years later, the “United States Information Agency” (“USIA”) was formed, whose mission was to “understand, inform, and influence foreign publics in promotion of the US national interest” (United States Information Agency, 1996) and under whose aegis the radio stations Voice of America and Radio Free Europe were further developed.

However, as conditions during the Cold War stabilised, that is, geopolitical divisions became entrenched, in the second phase of the Cold War, during the 1960s, American public diplomacy “devolved from a comprehensive effort to both understand and affect the behaviour of individuals and groups through engagement and discourse to one of passive ‘soft power’” (Armstrong 2009, 64). This approach to “winning hearts and souls,” according to Armstrong, was almost like a “beauty contest relying on cultural exchanges and press releases in the naïve hope that increased knowledge and understanding breed love for the United States” (Armstrong 2009, 64). Despite the “softening” of communication and the shift of focus from clear political goals of influence to the more general goal of value projection, the US triumphed in the Cold War.

The victory in the “war of ideas” resulted in budget cuts for institutions focused on information and persuasion, the abolition of many cultural

exchange programs, including American libraries, and, in 1998, the USIA itself was abolished. Part of the functions of this agency were transferred to the State Department, but the integration did not bring the expected results. Instead, it confused the work of both communication experts and diplomats: “Career State Department officers consider it a good day when no one makes news—the opposite of classic public affairs (PA) and public diplomacy practice” (Johnson et al. 2005, 2).

In the post-Cold War, unipolar, “new” world order, the US, on the laurels of its victory over the ideological enemy, reduced its capacity for influence and information. However, the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, brought to the American consciousness a renewal of ideological competition.

Faced with a new threat, the US responded more or less successfully by trying to form new coordinating bodies to adopt strategies and define processes. Bodies were formed under the State Department and the National Security Agency, and all institutions dedicated to foreign policy and security issues had to prepare adequate strategies.

The emergence of the term and concept of strategic communication followed, in practice, attempts, successes and failures in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, in parallel with the operational development of the concept in institutions and theoretical development in research and scientific circles. Thus, a study by the RAND Institute in 2010 concluded, based on research related to 30 armed insurgencies that occurred in the world in the period from 1978 to 2008, that the use of strategic communication is one of the success factors of operations against insurgent forces (Paul, Clarke and Grill 2010).

In the sphere of political communication, including foreign policy and security, strategic communication strongly relies on the tradition of the practice of propaganda activities of the 20th century – if we consider propaganda as “planned and organised activities to shape, present, spread political content, win over people and ensure their support certain political content and their bearers” (Slavujević 2009, 11).

The very concept of propaganda is, admittedly, used less often. One of the main reasons for this is the “emphasised ideological approach to political propaganda” (Atlagić 2012, 8), i.e. the fact that the concept of propaganda – although it was initially associated with democratic states – is increasingly

perceived as the domain of deceptive, manipulative activities of non-democratic regimes. This practice continues today, and one of the most glaring examples is the formation of the Working Group for Strategic Communication of the European Union (“Stratcom East”) in the fall of 2015, whose goal is to fight against “Russian propaganda”. As one of the members of the working group, Jakub Kalensky, pointed out on the occasion of the program’s presentation in Prague, “the goal of our strategic communication project is to expose what Russian propaganda is doing.” So, what “we” do (i.e. EU, NATO, US) is “strategic communication”, and what “they” do (i.e. Russia) is “propaganda”.

Reductive definitions of propaganda introduce additional confusion. Marlin sees propaganda as “the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual’s adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment” (Marlin 2002, 22). Therefore, according to this definition, propaganda should exclude rational thinking, and it is manipulative at its core, which cannot be said for many strategic communication activities. Given that propaganda in the Anglo-Saxon definition is almost, as a rule, put in a negative context, it is not surprising that most definitions related to strategic communication do not mention the term “propaganda” at all.

This reduction does more harm to the term strategic communication than it does to the term propaganda. Propaganda does not have to be only one-way communication; it does not have to be only false and manipulative, nor is it only characteristic of autocratic regimes.

Therefore, strategic communication should not ignore its roots in the theories and practice of propaganda or the fact that—at least in the sphere of political communication—it clearly relies on numerous propaganda activities. Political, as well as foreign policy and security activities, like public diplomacy and information operations, represent “modern forms of political propaganda” (Atlagić 2012, 33).

WHAT DEFINES STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

Understanding and adapting

In the mountains of Afghanistan, where there is no electricity and where the majority of the population is illiterate, the narrative spreads not over the Internet but through “night letters” (*‘shabnamah’*), i.e. “flyers hung on the walls” (Archetti 2014, 9). This view of anti-terrorist narrative expert Cristina Archetti reflects well why it is essential for strategic communication to understand the external context in order to formulate targeted topics and messages.

Namely, insufficient knowledge of the historical, cultural, anthropological, sociopolitical, economic, information-communication, and security system and context threatens its functioning, and it rings particularly true for the information and communication system. Radojković and Stojković see this system as “a set of special institutions, channels and activities through which groups of specialists, based on social norms, inform the public about the actions of individuals, groups, institutions and organisations” (Radojković and Stojković 2009, 23). Its purpose is to enable mass access to information and transparency of authorities and other societal organisations. Insufficient knowledge of the information and communication system, agents and modalities of use can reduce the effectiveness of messages, particularly nowadays, with the multiplication of information channels through online media.

While not relevant in the mountains of Afghanistan, the new social media make it easier to break into a country’s information and communication system. On the other hand, which again points to the importance of sensitivity to the information and communication system, there is also a danger that, because content on the Internet is available everywhere in the world, a specific campaign will return like a boomerang in domestic conditions, especially if it is controversial and potentially irritating for part of the domestic audience. It is similar to any other propaganda material because, thanks to the digitisation of the media, everything can be recorded and transmitted on the Internet quickly and virally, with a potential counter-effect for the strategic communicator.

The cultural milieu is essential to understanding foreign audiences, particularly when cultures have divergent meanings and discourses. The

export of “Western values” to Muslim countries or China is met with resistance and is often counterproductive. Societies with different political traditions and cultures view processes of “introduction of democracy” as “imposition”. On the other hand, rivals in strategic communication can also take advantage of the insufficiently cautious use of culturally sensitive terms. Thus, bin Laden used the word “jihad” to such an extent that Western officials began to use the terms “jihadist” and “terrorist” interchangeably, thus “unwittingly transferring the religious legitimacy inherent in the concept of jihad to murderous acts that are anything but holy” (Brennan 2006).

Strategic communication presupposes understanding people’s motivations for acting the way they do and how they create meaning from the events and interactions they experience. Strategic communicators, on the one hand, must rely on the work of ethnographers, whose task is to live among foreign communities, societies, and peoples in order to understand their way of life and thinking so that, upon returning to their home countries and institutions, they could explain studied people’s motivation, and how they create meaning from events and interactions (Moerman 1992, 23).

On the other hand, strategic communicators must rely on text interpretation as a product of social interaction, regardless of whether it is the interpretation of an official leader’s speech or conversations among followers around a “hashtag”.

As the Council on Foreign Relations states, “the United States should know in advance the likely reaction and level of resistance to its policies and how America can best communicate them” (Council on Foreign Relations 2003, 10). The preparation and production of effective messages presupposes knowledge of the target audience, which today, more than ever, is possible thanks to segmentation and targeting as techniques that come from marketing (public opinion polls, focus groups, interviews, observations), but also from specific techniques used in the military-security establishment, such as “target audience analysis”. Through it, target groups are identified (cultural, psychological, social characteristics), sensitivity to influence is assessed (choice of the most sensitive group), possible influence processes are identified (including the identification of groups that are connected to the target group, and which are credible enough to potentially affect the target group), ways to measure change are identified (discovering attitudes which change can be measured) (Rowland and Tatham 2010).

Archetti, for example, believes that because each individual interprets the information he receives according to his personal narrative rooted in a network of relationships, targeting core members of a terrorist group is a waste of time, no matter how precisely those messages are crafted. The focus should be placed on the “undecided”, that is, on the non-radical networks located around the extremist core (Archetti 2014, 10).

When, at the peak of its dominance in the unipolar world order, it experienced a shocking terrorist attack on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the US had to respond to perhaps the most critical challenge to its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The task of combating terrorism has proven, since the beginning of the 21st century, to be one of the most significant challenges for US foreign policy, its objective and perceived inviolability and dominance.

The US realised that, in addition to physical power and the reality it brings, for the achievement of national goals, the perception of the audience in the world, i.e. the target group they are addressing, is often even more critical, regardless of whether it is persuading about cooperation in a conflict zone, deterrence of terrorist attacks or diplomatic support in multilateral fora. Support or resistance depends on perceptions, and the price of achieving goals depends on them. For this purpose, in the first decade of the 21st century, the American establishment formulated the basics of strategic communication to achieve foreign policy, diplomatic and security goals. The fight against terrorist narratives in the Islamic world turned out to be one of the most challenging battles in strategic communication. The formulation of strategic communication directed towards the fight against terrorism proved to be a difficult, arduous, and uncertain challenge, but it was also the only possible way.

Namely, American attempts to deal with threats of terrorism and resistance in countries where the US had sent troops with the aim of preventing the formation of bases for terrorist actions have indicated that the physical liquidation or capture of members of terrorist networks cannot achieve the goal in the long term unless a change is made in perceptions, beliefs and motives that renew the network, recruit and mobilise new network members. Despite military-technical superiority, it is difficult to win a tactical battle on the ground without changing the population’s attitudes, let alone win a long-term war.

The US State Department has acknowledged that warfare is changing – as it does throughout military history – but that a particular characteristic of today’s changes is that the public perception of military operations can be more important than the benefits obtained from actual armed combat (Paul 2011, 1).

Despite the world’s most sophisticated strategic communications program, supported by 7,000 Pentagon communicators and 3,000 State Department communicators, the US faced numerous problems. Confidence-building and perception change programs were undermined by images of American soldiers inflicting torture on prisoners in Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib, and new terrorist networks were generated both by hopelessness and economic frustration, as well as by resistance against the occupation. Even when it seemed that radical Islamist organisations would collapse after the killing of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in 2011, their multiplication and the formation of a potentially even more dangerous adversary, Daesh, took place.

Therefore, despite numerous developments, it is difficult to conclude that the US strategic communication in the fight against terrorism is effective.

Namely, the main goal of strategic communication is effectiveness, which stems from the definition of “strategic” – a term known for more than two millennia, popular both in military theory in the last two centuries and studies of business management and marketing communications in the last two decades.

Although the term “strategy” (“strategos”, “military commander” in Greek) originated in the 6th century BC, Clausewitz is most responsible for its popularisation and influence, as he developed a military theory in the early 19th century in his work “Vom Kriege” (“On War”) (Clausewitz 2007).

According to Clausewitz, the first strategic question that every strategist must answer is to correctly understand and define the nature of the conflict he is engaging in (Nothaft and Scholzel 2015, 19; Clausewitz 2007, 30). Namely, strategy is a system framework that must be aligned with the organisational logic, sufficiently thought out and equipped to adapt flexibly to the necessary tactical moves in the field. This is especially important in today’s time of growth of asymmetric conflicts, guerrilla resistance movements, terrorist organisations, and social movements launched through social networks, which use “swarming” tactics, i.e. tactics of saturating opposing forces with synchronised actions of mobile groups.

A strategy can set a superior frame but does not win a conflict or convince in a communication campaign. People, products and messages do that (Nothaft and Scholzel 2015, 22). They are the ones who participate in the engagements, that is, the one-time acts that make up the battle itself. According to Clausewitz, “tactics teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement; strategy, the use of engagements for the object of the war” (Clausewitz 2007, 74).

Understanding the difference between tactics and strategy has influenced modern business management theories. Thus, for Peter Drucker, tactics is a synonym for “efficiency” and means “the ability to do things right”, while strategy is a synonym for “effectiveness” and means “the ability to do the right things” (Drucker 2002).

Therefore, strategy stands behind a system—military or communication—that can prepare for engagement. However, the system does not carry out the fight itself; that is, it does not send messages by itself. The strategist must analyse well and prepare a sufficiently flexible and adaptable framework for tactical moves.

The strategy must also be reflected in the system structure, form, characteristics and purpose of the organisation participating in the conflict or campaign. Pointing to Clausewitz’s division of types of war into cabinet, people’s and guerrilla wars, based on the historical examples of the Napoleonic Wars, Nothaft and Scholzel conclude that one of the key reasons why Napoleon defeated the great imperial armies of his time was that his people’s army was the expression of a new political system, revolutionary ideas and a new system of organisation of the army composed of volunteers and conscripts after the French Revolution, unlike the mercenary armies that other imperial armies had, and which were less motivated for war.

Translated to the world of communications, the same strategy and tactics cannot be applied independently of the organisation’s character, structure, and topic of communication (Nothaft and Scholzel 2015, 26).

At the same time, the strategy must adapt to the character of the organisation to which it communicates; that is, it must adapt to the rules of the game. Guerrilla organisations, and therefore guerrilla marketing, do precisely that – they change the rules of the game and see their chance in that. In this context, it is also possible to observe that Napoleon’s army, which had managed to overcome the mighty armies of the emperors, lost to the

numerically much more minor and poorly equipped Spanish guerrilla army (Nothaft and Scholzel 2015, 27).

The “guerrilla” concept has been used in marketing for over three decades. The creator of the “guerrilla marketing” concept, Jay Konrad Levinson, pointed out that flexibility and success in changing the rules of the game are among the main reasons for the success of this concept in competition with traditional marketing of large corporations. “Speed and flexibility are the essence of guerrilla marketing,” Levinson argued and emphasised that flexibility allows smaller companies to “react to market changes, competitive ploys, undeveloped service niches, economic realities, new media, newsworthy events, and last-minute offers” (Levinson 2007).

Today’s new types of conflicts, new asymmetric threats, and different rules of the game in business require strategies to be adaptable and ready for tactical surprises. Strategic communication must be equipped for classic PR, guerrilla, and any other communication. Mobile-digital technologies and accompanying online techniques can help a lot.

Flexibility is, therefore, one of the main elements of strategy, and it is essential for strategic communication in the conditions of the “second modern”. Regarding strategic communication directed against insurgent radical Islamic groups, Bolt precisely points to the necessity of flexibility. According to him, the insurgencies of the 2010s in the Middle East and North Africa reflected a new phase of insurgencies characterised by “fast-moving networks”, digital technologies and “identity-ideological communities” (Bolt 2014, 6).

According to him, the new movements combine, on the one hand, the traditional patterns of local non-Western societies and, on the other, the change that occurred in Western societies, that is, the transition from hierarchical organisations to networked structures. Bolt argues that this is due to the changes in the communication environment. On one hand, digital media has introduced self-generating and ad hoc connections between previously disconnected populations. On the other, traditional clan, tribal and ethnic structures and relationships, as well as relationships with the diaspora, were maintained (Bolt 2014, 7).

Such context allows counter-messages to be formulated and disseminated exceptionally quickly on the ground and within related structures, which, for example, presents a severe challenge to strategic communicators in the West

and their efforts to control narratives and messages. Bolt believes that, in an age where government communicators focus more on information management than complete control over the process, it is important to adjust expectations to changing situations on the ground. Narratives that include excessive promises, i.e. the fulfilment of which is dependent on success in uncertain circumstances, are easy to overturn if the dynamics of the fulfilment of conditions do not take their course.

Archetti believes that state strategic communicators should learn from non-governmental organisations and foundations that know how to operate in an “unpredictable” environment. The latter have “adapted” to a practice that understands that the audience does not like hierarchical messages that traditionally come “from above” but is more receptive to messages that come “from below” from activists who distribute materials through smaller networks (Archetti 2014, 10).

In addition to adapting to the type of audience, it is also important to react promptly in case of need, considering the speed and extent of diffusion with which information is spread and narratives are constructed via online networks.

It is, therefore, no wonder that one of the main characteristics of the world’s leading companies in the IT sector – Apple, Amazon, Google and Facebook – is precisely agility.

Actions communicate

Ernesto Che Guevara developed in the 1950s and 1960s in Cuba and Bolivia the concept of “foco guerrillero”, according to which the guerrilla military operation has a dual purpose and integrates the military with the communication effect. On the one hand, the action inflicts losses on a more powerful opponent with a sudden and quick action aimed at his weak point. On the other hand, the act of action simultaneously communicates with and towards the people. It represents an “announcement” in which, by pointing to the visibility of the movement and its successes, optimism spreads that it is possible to defeat a more powerful opponent, which can lead to an increase in mobilisation (Nothaft and Scholzel 2015, 29).

Interestingly, the theory of “foquismo” was developed by one of today’s leading communication theorists, Régis Debray, who was Che’s close

associate and comrade in the 1960s. The essence of Debray's and Che's concept was that through their actions, guerrilla groups can create a "focus" ("foco" in Spanish) for popular discontent against the government or a more powerful opponent, which can cause popular rebellion.

In his book "Revolution in the Revolution?", Debray develops the theory of "foquismo" based on the case of Che's landing in Cuba in 1956 with 80 guerrillas and his tactics by which he managed with a few hundred people to not only oppose the mighty army of General Batista (about 30,000 soldiers) but also to mobilise the Cuban people for the revolution in 1959. The principle of the theory of "foquismo" is that, unlike Mao's doctrine of "people's war", it is not necessary to create objective conditions for a popular uprising, but that the conditions for an uprising can be created in parallel with the actions of a smaller group of guerrillas. Debray points out that "under present conditions, the most important form of propaganda is successful military action" (Debray 1967, 56). Debray would continue to test his theories decades later, particularly in Kosovo during the 1999 NATO aggression.

Nothaft and Scholzel believe that in today's conditions of a new type of warfare – such as "networked warfare" or "military swarming", "every maneuver is now regarded as intertwined with communication processes", and that networked war and military swarming "describe doctrines of warfare, in which the difference between war and communication is blurring because communication itself plays a decisive role in conflicts" (Nothaft and Scholtzel 2015, 30).

Therefore, for strategic communication, knowing that both words and actions communicate is crucial. Paul even believes that "actions speak louder than words" and points out that it is "absolutely central to an effective strategic communication construct" (Paul 2011, 7). For Paul, any strategic communication that only focuses on transmitting messages, even in the context of new media, cannot succeed if it does not include "signals of action". For him, "actions" include a wide range of undertakings, deeds and behaviours: "This goes double for the kinetic actions (maneuver and fires) of military forces. If a picture can be worth a thousand words, then a bomb can be worth ten thousand" (Paul 2011, 7).

US military officials state strategic communication is "80% actions and 20% words" (Murphy 2008b, 24). Actions, such as armed action or troop movements, have a vital communication effect, whether political or military.

However, the fact that actions communicate can be a double-edged sword. Namely, their effect can be as unpredictable as the outcome of actions, especially in military operations, which can have the effects of emboldening and discouraging but can also lead to innocent victims. Regardless of whether civilian casualties are called “collateral damage” or not—a term aimed more at domestic and international audiences than at populations in conflict zones—they provoke anger and a desire for a violent response.

At the same time, this outcome reduces the chances of success of the strategic communicator’s influence. Such was the case with the American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which a vast number of civilians died in the first years of the war. The population’s reaction was the desire for revenge and the mobilisation of rivals, contrary to the interests of the strategic communicator. American strategic communicators understood this message well and apparently conveyed this message to the top of the political and military establishment. In the war against Daesh in 2015, US President Obama decided not to shell targets that could cause civilian casualties, although this resulted in weaker military effects. Thus, in 2015, the international coalition led by the US that fought against Daesh carried out only 15 airstrikes each day in Iraq and Syria. During the bombing of Libya in 2011, airstrikes targeted 50 times a day; in Afghanistan in 2001, 85 times, and in Iraq in 2003, the number of attacks reached up to 800 targets per day (Vukotić 2015).

Reducing attacks on Daesh forces may have resulted in loss of credibility or a long-term “human shield” tactic. However, the consequences of specific actions can be longer-term. Thus, the American policy of supporting the Shiite government in Baghdad led to highly negative consequences for relations between Shiites and Sunnis as early as the mid-2000s: “Many Sunni Muslims are convinced that the Bush administration is subverting their faith by favouring Shiite goals in Iraq and thereby promoting Iranian influence (...) In eastern Amman, for example, people hardly knew what Shia Islam was until recently. Now the rumour is spreading that neighbouring Iraq is headed by a Shia government, and that it is America’s mistake”, wrote the London Economist in 2006 (The Economist 2006).

The consequences are well known today: errors in American strategic communication led to the perception that the Americans were bringing

Shiites to power in Iraq, which caused a Sunni revolt and the creation of Daesh in parts of Iraq and Syria.

The possible gap between words and actions (“say-do gap”), that is, the gap between what the organization says and what it actually does, represents a massive challenge for strategic communication (Defense Science Board 2008, 13). In a landmark example of the discrepancy between words and deeds, the images of Iraqi prisoners’ torture in the Abu Ghraib prison significantly undermined what American authorities intended as the perception among the Iraqi and world public of the US role in the country.

Archetti believes that no matter how effectively one communicates, consistency between words and actions is, in addition to long-term engagement with the audience, critical to strategic communication: “Could the very existence of Guantanamo Bay and the killing of civilians resulting from the increasing use of drones be undermining our own narrative? How credible, in the light of what is happening in Cuba and Afghanistan, is the claim that Western countries are democracies that value individual freedoms and human rights?” (Archetti 2014, 13).

Ecklund points out the success of strategic communication is doubtful when actions are inconsistent with words (Ecklund 2005, 7). Namely, suppose the target group recognizes inconsistency in words and actions and sees contradictions, untruths or spin. In that case, the consequence will directly threaten the strategic communicator’s future credibility. It is similar to the discrepancy between possibilities and expectations, which should be prevented at the earliest possible stage and, if possible, fenced off. As the Iraqi population complained to the US Army, given the high expectations of American technology: “You can put a man on the moon, how come you can’t fix my plumbing or electricity?” (Paul 2011, 153).

Strategic communication increasingly focuses on the issue of credibility. Without credibility, the chances of success in field operations, especially in crisis areas, are significantly reduced. Credibility presupposes an individual’s belief that a particular actor is determined and ready to carry out a specific action. That is, as James Mattis, the Secretary of Defense in the administration of Donald Trump, said when he was a major general of the US Army in Iraq: “No better friend – no worse enemy”, or, in translation: “We are here to help you”, but “shoot at us, and we will kill you” (Paul 2011, 153).

*Informing, influencing, engaging:
paths towards effective strategic communication*

In Serbia, the US strategic communication campaign focuses on Serbian-American “shared values” based on experiences from the two world wars and connections through Serbian inventors in the US, such as Nikola Tesla and Mihajlo Pupin. However, it focuses even more on “visions” of the future place of Serbia in the European, or as the US often points out, “Euro-Atlantic” (NATO) space. The Russian strategic communication focuses more on history, Russian support for Serbia’s liberation from the Ottoman occupation, its reaction to the declaration of war against Serbia by Austria-Hungary at the start of World War I or the role of the Red Army in the liberation of Belgrade. At the same time, it points to common moral and cultural values, mainly sharing the same Orthodox faith. Both actors have successfully implemented their strategic communication in this regard, as the Serbian authorities share and accentuate these narratives in public opinion.

The influence through the promotion of shared values is particularly highlighted in the strategic communication of the European Union. Given that the European Union is an organisation of states that do not always have the same particular national interests, the strategic communication of the EU focuses on shared values – “for the EU as an actor, values occupy the space that is usually in states occupied by national interests” (Toje 2009, 17). The projection of shared values is an essential tool in the strategic communication campaigns of the European Union to promote the joint policy, especially the enlargement policy.

Promoting shared values makes it easier to build trust, which can later help facilitate the more specific, persuasive goals of strategic communication. Promoting common values is part of the strategy to achieve long-term influence, which is the main task of one of the constituent parts of strategic communication – public diplomacy – on the international level.

Tufts University professor Edmund Gullion first used the term “public diplomacy” in 1965. Its task is to use public attitudes to influence the formation and execution of foreign policies (Cull 2009, 19). The programs used serve to promote the national image through information, cultural diplomacy and education. Public diplomacy, therefore, fits to a great extent in strategic communication. There is some overlap, especially in the field of

information. On the other hand, public diplomacy focuses more on information than on persuasion. Also, it contains programs that do not fall directly into strategic communication, primarily in cultural diplomacy.

In foreign policy and security, strategic communication requires more than relying on information alone, even when it includes the full spectrum of modern communication tools and multimedia.

Kelley sees information as “information management and distribution with an emphasis on short-term events and crises”; “influence” as “longer-term persuasion campaigns aiming to effect attitudinal change amongst a target population”, and “engagement” as “building relationships, also over the long term, to cultivate trust and mutual understanding between peoples, be they groups, organizations, nations” (Kelley 2009, 73).

Against authoritarian or radical groups, it is necessary to fight with campaigns of influence. Paul believes that actions should be included in the influence, that is, their communicative effect, which, on the other hand, assumes the synchronization of words and actions. At the same time, he believes that due to the inclusion of actions in strategic communication, the concept of “signals” should be included as non-verbal messages that can even be unintentional. For example, he sees signals as parts of a military manoeuvre. Thus, an armed army patrol passing through a populated area in a tension zone sends a signal regardless of whether it intended to send a message (Paul 2011, 46).

Therefore, strategic communication also includes “information operations”. It is primarily a military concept that uses information for psychological influence operations and support for electronic warfare. Psychological operations, however, have a negative reputation among the public because they are associated with spin and manipulation. Psychological operations can certainly include “black propaganda”, and the identification of psychological operations with black propaganda even forced the US authorities to abandon the term “PSYOP” (“Psychological Operations”) and replace it with a new term in 2010 “MISO” (“Military Information Support Operations”).

On the other hand, the importance of information operations for data collection on the context of action, especially in data collection on target groups, should not be underestimated. Countries like the US or Great Britain have serious Internet monitoring programs, including social networks. The

knowledge disclosed in this regard by the former associate of the National Security Agency, Edward Snowden, indicated the widespread use of surveillance technologies both on members of various extreme or terrorist organizations and on political opponents around the world (Greenwald 2009).

Paul believes the terminological triangle of “strategic communication-public diplomacy-information operations” could be resolved (Paul 2011). Unlike public diplomacy, strategic communication includes information operations and actions’ communicative significance. Also, according to him, strategic communication always strives to achieve a clear national goal, not just information and image building.

Finally, engagement presupposes a focus on an active audience and sharing meaning. Namely, if the sender of the message or signal does not sufficiently understand the context in which it functions, i.e. cultural, social and political, the group with which it communicates and the meaning the target groups could derive from the message – the possibility of influence is drastically reduced. This is precisely why engagement, as two-way communication and awareness of an active audience and meaning, is essential. This approach is additionally important because the mere insistence on strategic communication as informing with “correct” data or defending against “incorrect” data is not always enough to convince the audience. The audience may not accept the information, even if it is correct, if they do not trust the person behind the strategic communication campaign.

Thus, strategic communication implies the identification of adequate measures to achieve the effects of persuasion through information, influence and engagement.

Readiness to counter an adversary

Strategic communication, of course, takes place in an international context with many conflicting opinions and interests. Although it does not in itself necessarily presuppose the existence of “adversaries”, it is clear that it is often not possible to find “common opinion” or to instil “common meaning”. Therefore, strategic communication must be ready to react to other parties’ strategic communication or propaganda activities. For the US Department of Defense, weakening the adversary’s credibility and legitimacy

is one of the goals of strategic communication (United States Department of Defense 2010a).

To achieve such an objective, strategic communication must include adequate monitoring of the other party's communication, including understanding the perception of that communication by the local population and in the broader world context, to react quickly and precisely in at least three ways.

The first focuses on information and debunking misinformation or spin. This must include recognising "mistakes" that the adversary can exploit, including what the US and NATO call "collateral damage". Ideally, if the party to whom the strategic communicator belongs is the first to "discover" his mistake, he should admit it as soon as possible. However, having a precise coordination mechanism, including "worst-case scenarios", is necessary for such an approach. Helmus, Paul and Glenn believe that "protecting credibility and long-term shaping requirements is more important than the short-term negative consequences of whatever error is committed" (Helmus, Paul and Glenn 2007, 162).

Another way is to deconstruct the opposing side's arguments and narratives, namely, their "credibility and legitimacy". Finally, the third way would involve producing a reflexive, modified, and improved narrative focused on the positive aspects of the strategic communication campaign's arguments.

On the other hand, Paul believes it is necessary to avoid the perception of a "war of ideas" or the term "winning hearts and minds" because audiences resist them. Such perceptions create additional resistance in the audience to new ideas. Instead, he advocates for the creation of a perception of the "market of ideas", according to which the key is not to overcome "detrimental ideas" but to turn your ideas into "bestsellers" (Paul 2011, 60).

Counternarrative experts at the US National Counterterrorism Center ("NCTC"), Glowacki and Hengemuhle, distinguish between direct and indirect counternarrative messages and assess that they are used depending on the context and target group (Glowacki and Hengemuhle 2014, 17). Direct messages are used to undermine, condemn and reject extremist messages, humiliate, agitate and harass the senders of such messages. The goal of extremist groups that are not only radicalised but also mobilised for action is to create paranoia and confusion among them and to force them into

defensive arguments or to make it difficult for them to spread their ideas by reducing their attractiveness.

However, the chances of success of counter-messages among mobilised audiences committed to extremist narratives are small because, according to narrative theory, they are resistant to direct argumentation and change of attitudes, and confrontation with their efforts will instead create resistance, confirmation and additional inculcation of extremist beliefs. For mobilised but not yet radicalised groups, direct messages can cause hesitation and uncertainty in the narrative, deterring them from further action.

On the other hand, Glowacki and Hengemuhle believe that indirect messages can be more effective with radicalised audiences by creating “alternative narratives” that either sabotage or change the existing narrative. The goal is to undermine the arguments’ credibility and attractiveness, not directly confront the argumentation. Namely, the simplicity of extremist narratives is as much their strength – due to ease of understanding and dissemination – as it is a weakness – due to sensitivity to destabilisation, the introduction of complexity and uncertainty through new details. This undermines the appeal of the beliefs on which they rest, which can cast doubt on the narratives believed until then.

The most effective counternarratives are those that make the audience member feel less threatened and confronted. Such messages incorporate new information, emphasise solidarity, common goals, shared values, and narratives that admit guilt and thus create empathy, making the individual more receptive to new information. Alternative narratives focusing on positive emotions such as hope, on the other hand, are intended for audiences that have not yet made up their minds and become radicalised. Such actions deter them from radicalisation and they can become potential allies in conveying counternarratives (Glowacki and Hengemuhle 2014).

New technologies clearly provide many opportunities for monitoring and understanding rival arguments and narratives, as well as for delegitimising and modifying them through the dissemination of new content.

Countries that have participated or are participating in conflicts in the recent past have a fundamental problem with strategic communication in the form of the existence of conflicting or even clearly hostile sentiments, which can manifest themselves peacefully or violently, as well as in the form of often divided public opinion in the world. In the period after the Cold War, Serbia’s

negative image, due to the perception of its role in the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia, hindered its efforts to establish strategic communication in the West. On the other hand, in the post-Cold War era, in which it became the leading world power, the US image and messaging lost much credibility outside of the political West. The perception of the “struggle for democracy” changed from the Cold War period, when it meant support for the fight against repression. In the new context, especially in the Middle East and in part of the Balkans, US actions were seen in the context of military occupation, casting doubt on every action, no matter how benignly “packaged”. Therefore, although in possession of the most influential and organised system of strategic communication, the US also has a challenging initial position, considering its participation in a series of military interventions in the last three decades, especially in the bombing of Serbia and Libya, the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and various unconventional military operations – from those in which unmanned aerial vehicles, i.e. drones, are used, to training or arming operations of government or rebel forces.

Strong anti-Americanism in a significant part of the world, and especially in countries where the Muslim population lives, is one of the dominant characteristics of international relations in the 21st century. On the question of whether “the US is serious about encouraging the establishment of democratic systems” in their region, in 2022, only 8% of Tunisians and Palestinians, 9% of Iranians, 11% of (NATO-member) Turkish citizens and 14% of Afghans responded positively, and similar figures appeared on the question of whether “the US will allow people in this region to fashion their own political future” (Gallup 2023). The figures in the poll are slightly higher in Pakistan (18%), Jordan (24%), and Kuwait (33%), yet even these countries – long-term security partners – display a largely negative attitude.

This perception hinders US strategic communication and makes it easier for adversaries to recruit forces and promote their narrative in opposition to America’s. In addition, the practice of American interventions, both in military operations and in coups (especially in the Arab world, often with highly negative consequences such as the destruction of the social and economic fabric and the strengthening of Islamist, radical and terrorist movements), has created an “army of sceptics” regarding the motives and the means used by the US.

Therefore, the US tries to “exclude itself” during certain communication efforts, that is, to create the impression that it has nothing to do with certain informational activities, such as media financing. Paul points out that US involvement complicates the message (Paul 2011, 112). USAID aims to “maintain the perception” that radio stations are “completely independent”, while in reality, “the military operates radio stations and newspapers [in Iraq and Afghanistan] but does not disclose their American ties” (Gerth 2005, 1).

Debray’s theory of “Foquism” as a guerrilla military operation that integrates military and communication effects is more relevant today than ever. In the information society, asymmetric rivals can use their strategic communication to market narratives, influence attitudes and behaviour, recruit followers, and adapt their actions to the communication effect more than ever before. The impact, the scramble for media attention, and even the brutality accompanying these efforts are such that the frustration of one American information operations expert who says he “can’t compete with a head on a stick” (Paul 2011, 111) is understandable.

Daesh and al-Qaeda are not the only Islamist organisations that have seen the necessity of fighting for influence through communication effects. Schleifer points out that Hezbollah subordinated “virtually all its military action to its propaganda and mass media requirements” (Schleifer 2006, 5).

Islamist groups do not shy away from methods of intimidation and violence against journalists and anyone else who opposes them. Thus, Daesh executed American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and Japanese journalist Kenji Goto, showing horrifying footage of their beheadings. The dissemination of these recordings aimed to warn the West, but it also built credibility among radicalised individuals and groups living there for further mobilisation and recruitment.

On the other hand, Daesh also killed Muslim journalists who refused to obey them, thus sending a message primarily on the internal level to anyone who tried to oppose them. Thus, in 2014, near Tikrit, in Iraq, Iraqi cameraman Raad Mohamed Al-Azzawi, who worked for Sama Salah Aldeen television, was publicly executed. Al-Azzawi was killed after refusing to cooperate with Daesh, which required all journalists in territories it controls to “swear allegiance to Isis, refer to it by its official name, do no interviews for TV and send all reports for pre-approval by its media office” (Henley 2014).

On the other hand, extremist groups use digital cameras to record and efficiently distribute footage of their operations. Schleifer points out that “stills, video, and film became so central to the organisation’s military activities that it might reasonably be claimed that they dictated both its overall strategy and daily operations”. The organisation’s motto could be summarised as follows: “If you haven’t captured it on film, you haven’t fought” (Schleifer 2006, 6).

Of course, if you have not distributed it, it is as if you had never recorded it. New media, online platforms, and social networks are crucial in spreading videos virally. Their key advantages are cheap, fast and secure production, diffusion and access. In addition, radical groups, especially in the Muslim world, supplement internet production with older means of communication, such as television, radio and the distribution of compact discs with materials and recordings, but also with methods such as “word of mouth”, condemnations and fatwas (Paul 2011, 115).

Islamist groups, as well as other rebel groups around the world, have increasing experience in classic PR activities. They know the advantages of cultivating special relations with journalists and providing exclusive information. They also have an advantage over Western media because they can deal with misinformation without considering the possible consequences for the domestic public.

The public sphere is increasingly opening up to strategic communication, whose action in new conditions can be a double-edged sword. Namely, as Bentele and Nothaft point out, “strategic communication in the public sphere always means arguing that your interest is also in the interest of the public, of society in general, in some way or another” (Bentele and Nothaft 2015, 70).

Therefore, a strategic communicator can not only try to legitimise his interests as public but also delegitimise rival interests, representing them as particular, private, selfish, and opposing public interests. On the other hand, the strategic communicator himself, by directly entering the public sphere, exposes himself to potential discredit, denials, and criticism. These obstacles nowadays come not only from well-known organisations operating in the public sphere but also from any group or individual who can react and disseminate information quickly and efficiently.

Such a group can use its knowledge, experience or physical presence “on the ground” to discredit a strategic communicator if it proves his message does not correspond to reality. Moreover, the danger of a “counterattack” no longer looms only from participants in the traditional, national public sphere but also from other participants worldwide who can become involved in the capacity of witnesses, experts or commentators. In such a context, censorship and silencing dissonant voices are often futile and sometimes completely counterproductive, possibly only causing greater revolt and mobilisation of rivals.

Online disinformation: A double-edged propaganda sword

Facebook is synonymous with Barack Obama’s election victory in 2008. Twitter – for Donald Trump’s victory eight years later. When in May 2022, Fernand Marcos Jr., known by the nickname “Bongbong”, the son and namesake of the former Philippine dictator, won the presidential election, experts said it was the first significant victory based on a TikTok campaign (De Guzman 2022).

His father was overthrown in a popular uprising in 1986 after a two-decade rule during which, according to World Bank reports, he embezzled billions of dollars and terrorised political opponents. However, thanks to thousands of videos uploaded by an army of TikTokers, “Bongbong” Marcos convinced voters that security and prosperity had reigned during his father’s rule.

In Washington, they did not seem to mind despite an explicit campaign to falsify history. It was essential to them that, after the unpredictable Rodrigo Duterte, who, according to their assessments, was too anti-American and pro-Chinese, someone more cooperative came to power in Manila. Indeed, “Bongbong” Marcos and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin signed an agreement allowing US troops access to four bases in the Philippines, strategically facing the South China Sea and Taiwan (Westerman 2023).

Can TikTok play the (external) political role that Twitter played more than a decade ago? First in Moldova (the main protest hashtag #pman), then in Iran (#iranelection), Tunisia (#sidibouزيد) and Egypt (#Jan25), the so-called “Twitter revolutions” were launched, which, to a significant extent, corresponded to the interests of Washington. To the American foreign policy

establishment, it seemed that the magic wand for global influence had been found. However, it sobered up very quickly.

The revelations of Julian Assange and Edward Snowden have shown the rest of the world the advantage, but also the vulnerability, of the US in the online sphere. Russia learned its lessons in the context of “colour revolutions” and China in the context of Hong Kong’s “umbrella protests”. The terrorist formations of the Daesh took advantage of the “Arab Spring” lessons on how the online sphere contributes to the strategic communication of asymmetric actors in political and armed struggle. Faced with the adoption of online tools by rivals, NATO and the EU had to form special teams and institutions in Riga and Brussels in the mid-2010s to combat information operations on the Internet. The West was no longer on the digital offensive.

The role of Internet tools in Brexit, and especially in Donald Trump’s victory—which was met with disgust by the Western liberal-democratic establishment—shifted the focus to defensive means. Under the guise of fighting “fake news” and “post-truth,” hundreds of millions of dollars have been pumped into various “fact-checking” projects, that is, checking the veracity of information and combating disinformation.

The political-ideological array of projects focused on the fight against the authoritarian influence of “St. Petersburg trolls”. Suddenly, Russian “troll factories” seemed to be all around us, threatening the election campaigns of every liberal-democratic candidate – from Emmanuel Macron to Joseph Biden.

However, it became clear that the “defensive means” were directed in one direction, as if the disinformation had a clear ideological, national or geopolitical sign. Such an approach backfired on one of the most exposed organisations in this area, the American “Alliance for Securing Democracy”, which, as part of its “Hamilton 68” project, was trying to expose fake Russian Twitter accounts. It turned out that the “Alliance for Securing Democracy” itself was caught in a lie, that there is no evidence that the accounts were part of some Russian information operation, but that they belong mainly to American conservatives (Soave 2023).

Do these findings mean online misinformation and fake news do not exist? Of course, they do exist. However, the findings speak in favour of the necessity to be careful with the political-ideological matrices that have become the norm in the world of disinformation and the fight against it.

Propaganda and misinformation in the online world are used by both Americans and Russians, the European Union and China, conservatives and communists and liberals. It is naive to think otherwise.

Disinformation, in various forms, is not from yesterday. However, one of the novelties is that in the online world, and especially with the emergence of social networks, information is subject to numerous, often unpredictable manipulations and interpretations, and the communicator's absolute control over the message he sends is impossible. This creates greater uncertainty and nervousness among communicators, including those who deal with disinformation. However, it does not make online propaganda less effective because it has powerful methods and techniques.

Experts believe that disinformation in the online sphere spreads thanks to the "economy and politics of emotions". When we are on the Internet, we leave digital footprints, that is, data that is carefully analysed. Humans, or machines via artificial intelligence, tailor content to users – hiring "influencers", "trolls" and "bots" along the way.

The goal is to cause as significant an emotional effect as possible, including the desired reaction of the user. In the online world, such a reaction represents participation in a further chain of content dissemination. In the offline, i.e. real world, it means making concrete decisions, such as voting in elections or actively participating in protests. In such a process, the space for manipulation and disinformation is unlimited, and the tools we have to fight them, even with the best intentions and without prejudices and interests, do not allow us to close all the holes in the boat.

There is no doubt that algorithms will increasingly play with our emotions and nerves in the future, and we will, often unconsciously, play, vote, and maybe even fight wars in line with their scripts. However, who will control the algorithms and their (mis)use? Facebook and Twitter are American, and TikTok is Chinese. The war for the algorithms that will fight for our souls is heating up.

Strategic communication is a process

To be persuasive, strategic communication requires clearly defined and aligned operational and tactical goals, messages, and activities. It also

implies adequate structure and resources, especially management authority and coordination.

Strategic communication is a “process” and not a “set of capacities”. Therefore, the essence is not investing in new resources and capacities but setting up a proper process. Of course, a process without any capacity makes no sense.

Strategic communication implies a series of internal organisational processes focused on establishing a communication culture, coordinating actors and synchronising words and actions.

Based on the elements arising from the definitions of strategic communication, five steps can be determined for how it functions in the foreign political and security environment.

(1) The first step presupposes the decision to start the strategic communication process and to define a clear national objective to be achieved, aligned with a clear political orientation. These clear objectives must include subordinate goals that can be operationalised further at the tactical level, including the “desired information outcome” (for example, the communication outcome of a military action).

(2) Based on the input, the second step must include coordination between actors, institutions, and organisations, as well as synchronisation between words and deeds, with an emphasis or reminder to all actors about the communication impact of words and deeds. The focus is on efforts to avoid “informational fratricide”, that is, dissonance in sending messages, and on establishing, from the very beginning, a structure that can ensure coordination and synchronisation. This structure, at the very top of the pyramid of actors, is followed by communication experts, i.e. for information, influence and persuasion (therefore, not only for information) who inculcate “communication culture”, i.e. awareness of the communication impact of words and actions, and their connection.

(3) The third step envisages shifting the focus from the internal organisation to understanding the external context – demographic, ethnic, religious, cultural, socio-political, media and security – in which strategic communication functions. At the same time, it includes understanding the target groups and their position, perceptions, motivations and aspirations in that context through knowledge management, i.e. through media

monitoring and data obtained from previous interactions and two-way exchange. This understanding enables the development of specific content, themes and messages, as well as apparent subordinated desired effects and evaluation criteria that must be aligned with the overarching goals defined at the highest level. Those messages must be aligned with the cultural context, understanding what a particular action means in the local context and how it fits into the local cultural narrative and interpretation. Finally, messages must be developed following human dynamics, reaction and interaction, which are prerequisites for effective influence.

(4) Fourth, based on defined messages and desired effects, ways to achieve them through information, influence, persuasion and engagement are detected, including adequate channels and techniques. At this stage of the process, the strategic communication project must be ready to be proactive and analyse and predict possible communication actions of the opponent, including timely formulation of counter-narratives or finding “holes” in the opponent’s narrative.

(5) Finally, after implementing the agreed methods, effects are monitored. The expertise used to understand the context, the target group, and the relationships created through engagement and two-way communication should facilitate analysis and contribute to better calibration in future campaigns.

STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

NARRATIVE AS BACKBONE OF INFLUENCE

A focus on narrative is one of the backbones of influence. Closely related to the concept of “storytelling”, a narrative can explain complex events to the audience more receptively but also set “story” frameworks in which information and frames fit more efficiently and effectively into the strategic communicator’s goals. The concept of “narrative” means the “representation (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees” (Prince 2011, 58), while “narrative strategy” means a “set of narrative

procedures followed or narrative devices used to achieve some specific goal” (Prince 2011, 64).

Salmon points out that “storytelling” or “the art of telling a story” is a technique that connects two completely different departments – commanding in war and managing a company – and that it is present today more than ever in forms that go from oral to digital storytelling (Salmon 2007). Alluding to the accumulation of goods, Salmon speaks of today’s age as an age of “great accumulation of stories” that “should seduce us, motivate us, help us accept change, teach us how to behave in situations of crises or when, overwhelmed by the flood of information, we lose the sense of what we do” (Salmon 2011, 9). Therefore, the goal at the political level is to “offer justification and to engage the masses, to synchronise and carry individuals and evoke emotions” (Salmon 2011, 11).

In the process of strategic communication, organisations shape “strategic narratives”, which describe the desired outcomes, steps to achieve them, and aim to persuade target stakeholders to join the endeavour (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013). However, strategic narratives face limitations, from their formation to projection and reception. This is particularly true in international environments, in which great powers must face a complex international environment, a complex media ecology, and frequent or even permanent contestation by other actors.

Strategic narratives can take three main forms (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, 2013). The first is about the international system and how the political actors behind strategic communication understand it. The second concerns the identity political actors aim to project within the international order they conceived. Finally, the third is about a specific policy since the strategic narratives of political actors influence the development of policies. As Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle argue, “an actor able to align system, policy, and identity narratives has a greater chance of influence” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2017, 2-3). Research on strategic narratives can encompass any or all of these forms and stages of the communication process.

DISCOURSE AND POWER

The referendum on “Brexit”, the exit of Great Britain from the European Union, in July 2016, surprised many, except perhaps those who most believed in the power of the British Eurosceptic narrative, built over decades and effectively adapted for the campaign itself.

The narrative of a “corrupt”, “anti-democratic”, “foreign”, and “repressive” Brussels, from which the citizens of Great Britain should “take back control” of their destiny, has been built for a long time by the British print media. Whether that narrative was simplified or distorted by misinformation and other spin could be discussed further. However, the fact is that during the referendum campaign, the narrative of the British press, strengthened by the specifics of social networks and the problem of the migrant crisis, managed to impose its discourse and narrative. The campaign to remain in the EU was pushed entirely on the defensive.

Public opinion polls after the referendum showed that almost half (49%) of those who voted to leave the EU stated that the main reason for doing so was “the principle that decisions about the UK must be made in the UK”, while the main reason for a third (33%) was that for them Brexit “represents the best opportunity to regain control over immigration and borders” (Levy and Mittal 2016).

The European Union, as an organisation of 27 European member states, remains the most attractive strategic destination for the political classes in most European states that are not its members despite the growth of Euroscepticism and the long-term economic recession.

The European Union presents itself and is generally perceived as an organisation that gathers countries committed to democracy, human rights, solidarity and mutual respect, as well as an organisation that is ready to receive new members on a partnership basis. It tends to apply a similar discourse towards Serbia, especially since the political changes began after October 2000.

However, citizens of Serbia often express disappointment in the fact that the discourse of the process of accession to the European Union has been run over by political conditionality, from the conditions related to cooperation with the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia through the process of “normalisation” of relations with the

authorities in Priština to a series of social, economic and political conditions which conflict with the views of the majority of Serbian citizens. Consequently, there is a constant extension of the deadlines for the expected accession to membership and the accompanying loss of patience and dissatisfaction with the EU's positions, often perceived as "double standards". Although Serbia is in many respects a particular case in its relationship with the European Union, the public shares a similar perception in other countries that are candidates or potential candidates for membership.

In its discourse, the European Union tries to portray itself as, at the same time, a dominant and benign power. Dominant in the sense of being able to "use its asymmetrical position to make other actors in the system comply with the dominant power's requirements" and benign in the sense of striving to "deals with other actors without recourse to force, intimidation or deliberate manipulation and that aims at equality in the external relationships" (Kratochvil 2009, 6-7).

In his analysis of the EU's discourse towards candidates and potential candidates, Kratochvil observes that it wants to show its power as benign and in the discourse tries to focus on "partnerships" and "shared values", but that the discourse shows that "the principle of joint ownership is seriously eroded by the EU's belief that it is primarily the Union itself who should define the contents of partner countries' reforms and, in particular, who should decide whether the partner countries are performing badly or not" (Kratochvil 2009, 7). Discourse analysis shows that the EU makes "extreme efforts" to emphasise joint ownership of the process and avoid the term "political conditionality, which by many, especially in the South, is seen as condescending and patronising" (Kratochvil 2009, 12).

Kratochvil concludes that the "voluntary spread of EU's norms based on local ownership is clearly the most effective tool the EU has at its disposal" (Kratochvil 2009, 8). In this sense, it fits the view of power as a capacity to get someone to do something at a low cost – power increases in proportion to the extent of consent one has at a low cost (Philp 2009, 836). The European Union, therefore, by the voluntary acceptance of norms by the candidate states, essentially projects its power.

A similar view is present in non-European countries. Within Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial critical framework, Mohan Jyoti Dutta explains that the US uses "democracy promotion" terms like "sustainable

development” and “corporate social responsibility” as “rhetorical weapons” framed within Western thought. For example, the term “sustainable development” is, according to Dutta and Spivak, used to “silence resistance” (Bentele and Wehmeier 2009, 356).

Therefore, a critical analysis of the discourse of the European Union towards candidate states and potential candidates, on the one hand, can help in understanding the importance of discourse as an element of power and the propagation of foreign policy ideology. On the other hand, such analysis can also indicate discourse’s role in strategic communication: one of the basic postulates of strategic communication practice requires harmonising words and actions.

In his discussion of the crisis that engulfed the European Union, Žižek points out that the outcome of the crisis depends on the narrative which will be imposed and will determine the general perception of the crisis. A discursive ideological match occurs when there is a dramatic interruption of the “normal” state. He cites the example of Germany from the early 1930s, when, talking about a “Jewish conspiracy”, Adolf Hitler managed to win a competition of narratives about the causes of the crisis in the Weimar Republic and the way out of the crisis. Žižek believes that today, the “ruling ideologies” of the neoliberal capitalist system have the task of shifting responsibility from the basic structure of that system to the responsibility of deviations that have undermined the system, such as human irresponsibility and greed (Žižek 2009, 18).

Jessop connects narratives with strategies and points out that, in the case of crises, there are spaces where opposing “strategic intervention” tries to direct the event’s outcome. The victory of “strategy”, according to him, depends on “discursive struggles” between narratives about the nature, causes and possible solutions of the crisis (Jessop 2002, 93-94).

Such views are consistent with Foucault’s approach, which places discourse and power at the centre of research. For Foucault, discourse is embodied in utterances that form the subjects, objects, concepts and strategies they speak of (Foucault 2002). Discourses are governed by rules that decide who can speak, what can be said and from what position. Therefore, when analysing discourse, the goal is to analyse how it is formed and transformed, that is, how ideas are “put into discourse” (Foucault 1978, 11).

According to Foucault, power is positive and productive, and it produces discourses (Foucault 1980, 119). Their transformation presupposes a change in the meanings given to political, social, cultural, and economic concepts, and from all possible statements, those that are acceptable are separated. The borders of the discourse change, the subjects acquire new positions, and new forms circulate through the discourse.

In his discussion of discourse transformation based on Foucault, Fairclough talks about the “technologicalization of discourse” by which communication professionals try to influence societal changes through discourse transformation (Fairclough 1992, 8). Motion and Leitch, in a study based on Foucault and Fairclough, conclude that professional communicators facilitate achieving social goals through transforming discourse, i.e., changing its boundaries (Motion and Leitch 1996). Livesey comes to similar conclusions in his analysis of the influence of organisations’ discourse on social change (Livesey 2002).

For example, on the issue of European Union enlargement, a pro-EU strategic communicator can change the discourse map by warning of “anti-Europeans” who will lead to “economic instability” and “jeopardising jobs”. At the same time, opponents of accession to the EU can warn against “Eurofanatics” who will lead to the “sale of national resources” and the loss of “identity”.

Even though there are many definitions of power, Philp believes that the generally accepted formulation is “the ability to achieve intended goals” (Philp 2009, 836). Power is defined in line with one of the basic definitions of strategic communication: “the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan et al. 2007, 3). Power is thus an indispensable part of strategic communication. According to Berger, strategic communication produces dominant realities in society and is a process by which an ideological view of the world is constructed (Berger 1999).

According to Motion and Leitch, that process has important implications for the issue of power and makes strategic communication political because it creates and/or reinforces certain truths. Motion and Leitch, namely, point out that “conceptualised from a power/knowledge perspective, public relations shifts from the discourse domain of business, where it is understood as a commercial practice, to the discourse domain of politics,

where it is understood as a power effect that produces and circulates certain kinds of truths” (Motion and Leitch 2009, 98–99).

Organisations strive to achieve their goals by participating in the battle of arguments in the public sphere. Ihlen points out that strategic communication constitutes actors’ struggle in the public ring of meaning. The effect of that struggle is a contribution to public meaning and social reality. Organisations want to impose their interpretation, but, as Ihlen and Verhoeven underline, “combining sense giving and sense making in two-way communication processes makes room for multiple interpretations of and negotiation about the meaning that is produced in the communication process” (Ihlen and Verhoeven 2015, 133).

FROM WORDS TO DEEDS

Nevertheless, strategic communication aims to persuade and change behaviour in a way that favours the communicator. Thus, narratives only serve action if they influence decision-making. They are imposed to provide arguments in favour or against particular decisions or actions (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 3). Thus, merely enumerating possible outcome scenarios based on imposed narratives is insufficient to mobilise specific action.

One of the main mistakes in opposition political parties’ communication is their conviction that changes are imminent if they only present possible negative consequences for their rivals’ survival in power. They often fail to offer ways to bring about change and prevent possible negative consequences. It is possible to convince the audience of the correctness of a specific narrative, but this does not mean that they will act if the narrative does not result in a concrete possibility and explanation, argumentation for action – including the means to achieve the goal and the proposed course of action (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 3)

In the case of Brexit, the strategic communicators’ task was easier because the action was already clear and determined – the means to achieve the goal was a referendum, and the proposed course of action was a vote for or against leaving the EU.

Take, for example, a fictitious strategic communications campaign for national security Internet surveillance. The government could frame public support for Internet surveillance in the context of a narrative about its role

in defending against terrorist attacks and crime. The contextual premise could be a narrative about terrorists using the internet and social networks to coordinate their actions. The target premise is the prevention of terrorist actions by exposing their communication. The means to achieve the goal could be the surveillance of internet communication. The proposed course of action could be the user's consent to give the services insight into an individual's internet communication in particular cases by clicking on "consent" when using the most popular social networks. Opponents of such a campaign would place the criticism of the proposal in the context of the government's desire to control citizens, that is, as the context of a narrative about endangering freedom of expression, democracy and the fight against "Big Brother". The target premise would be the freedom of the internet from any government interference. The means to achieve the goal could be a campaign of disobedience and international delegitimation of the government. A suggested course of action could be to sign an online petition and send it to the relevant international organisation.

NARRATIVE COMPETITION

However, frames, arguments, storylines, and scripts do not appear out of nowhere. They must be formed and created in a process that might involve deliberation at the policy level or debate in the public sphere, as it includes several state and non-state stakeholders. In addition to formation, as Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle argue, the communication process around strategic narratives includes their projection and reception (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017, 9-10). Projection involves the analysis of the difficulties strategic communicators encounter in the new media ecology. Reception, too, relies strongly on the media ecology, as it might involve deliberation within society and personal interpretation of the narratives or their constituent parts. The network society plays a considerable role at this stage, as it is an individual choice on where and how to get information, how to work with it, and how to interpret or recast it further through the network. Thus, there is no certainty that reception will be positive from the point of view of the strategic communicator. There are multiple obstacles and possible contestation from other relevant stakeholders at every step of the process, from finding the right choice of frames and storylines to crafting the right tools, channels, and methods of

projection to the strategic counter-narratives of opposing state and non-state actors—a clash of narratives—up to the interpretation schemes of individual recipients.

Therefore, it is logical that conflicting narratives strive to become the “dominant narrative”, the widely accepted “correct narrative.”

The narrative, of course, must fit into the already existing historical, cultural and socio-political context: “If we hope to influence people, then we have to enable them to see that what we are saying fits with their story; or, at least, that it is not so far removed from their story that they think that what we are saying is ridiculous or that we are lying” (MacNulty 2007, 6).

Fitting into the story is at the same time easier if the narrative begins with the question “why” and a clear presentation of the motive as an introduction and moves to the answer to the question “what” (Paul 2011, 148). Corman believes it is not enough to use only the model of influence through messages and that it is impossible to change the global narrative just by correcting incorrect information: “Narratives are not about facts, they are about how facts are framed and interpreted” (Corman 2010, 1).

Therefore, one should not correct the facts but consider that they fit into the frames and see that they are interpreted that way. It is thus more important that something fits into the frame than whether it is factually correct. It is more important to be part of the frame (for example, criticism of Russian politics) than to be correct (for example, correcting some data that could threaten the frame of criticism of Russian politics). Therefore, the focus is entirely on audience perception and against exclusive reliance on old transmission methods and traditional media.

Archetti emphasises that, when it comes to fighting the extremist narrative, “we cannot rewrite their narrative” and that narratives are the sum of influences, such as the messages sent and the interpersonal relationships made, both face-to-face and through mediated technologies; therefore, “an individual narrative consists of a person’s understanding of the world and one’s role in it” (Archetti 2014, 10). Whether he will join that group depends precisely on the compatibility between the individual’s and extremist groups’ narratives.

“Competition of narratives” is one of the key struggles in the strategic communication of opposing actors. Given the asymmetry that always exists

in the “competition of narratives”, “institutional” narratives compete with those put forth by opposing organisations. States and international organisations have their own “institutional narrative” by which they want to turn the organisation’s mandate and vision into “a story of who the organisation is, what its guiding principles are, and what it aspires to achieve” (Nissen 2014, 14), with accompanying subordinate narratives related to specific areas, campaigns or operations. Because of the position of power, Nissen connects the “institutional narratives” in the fight against terrorism with the narratives of Western liberal democracies, which include the history, values and principles they proclaim.

On the other hand, opposing narratives use precisely these aspects of Western democracies to tell the story of the systematic oppression and humiliation that, for example, Islam suffers. The focus is on emphasising the principle values that the West stands for and then comparing them with concrete actions that the West carries out in their name, such as the bombing and occupation of Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya and the treatment of Islamists in the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons. The goal is to disclose hypocrisy and double standards, enhanced by the possible mismatch between words and deeds in “institutional narratives”, which entrenches attitudes. While the asymmetry is initially on the side of the Western powers, Nissen notes that in the case of a “competition of narratives” between institutional and extremist narratives, the asymmetry shifts to the other side. Namely, extremist narratives are direct and straightforward, while Western narratives are mostly “incoherent and contextualised, depending on the issue at hand”, and it is easy to exploit their incoherence (Nissen 2014, 15).

Therefore, the West’s “narrative mix” must be complex. At the same time, it must be effective in preventing radicalisation and mobilisation of sensitive groups, both at home and in the field of conflict, but also deter already radicalised groups from attacking. Also, it must reassure the domestic public by balancing between creating a perception of the terrorist threat and reassuring citizens, as well as between protecting civil rights and surveillance necessary for national security (Nissen 2014).

On the other hand, Nissen points out that terrorist groups do not have an easy task either. Their narrative must be attractive enough to attract financial resources and recruit and mobilise new members, “lone wolves” in Western countries or “foreign fighters” who come to conflict zones. The

narrative must also maintain the credibility of the organisations as dangerous to civilian populations in Western countries to put additional pressure on their governments. As Nissen emphasises, “Narratives function as competition for the perception and behaviour of strategic audiences, where they are used as organising frameworks. They are also a competition that is played out, in particular, on social network media” (Nissen 2014, 16).

MEMORY POLITICS

Nowadays’ (re)considerations and instrumentalisations of great power foreign policy require a particular role for memory politics. Political actors are fundamentally interested in making moral and utilitarian arguments to justify and solidify narratives for political purposes and intents, embedding them in political discourse to persuade domestic and foreign stakeholders, as well as the general public. Klymenko and Siddi argue that “thanks to their discursive power and access to the media, political leaders are particularly well-positioned to shape collective memories and adapt them to the pursuit of foreign policy objectives” and define “collective memory “as the “shared memories held by a community about the past, a subjective image of the past constructed by political actors in the present based on a community’s current social and historical necessities” (Klymenko and Siddi 2020, 2). Thus, as they argue, politicians often construct analogies with the past in order to justify foreign policy decisions in the present, using several mechanisms: the application of historical analogies, the construction of historical narratives, the creation of memory sites, the marginalisation and forgetting of the past, and the securitisation of historical memory (Klymenko and Siddi 2020, 3).

Mouritzen considers learning theory as an essential tool for exploring the link between historical memory and foreign policy, arguing that statesmen sometimes “make a contemporary foreign policy decision by referring to a lesson derived from an ‘analogous’ situation in the past” in order to repeat success or avoid a mistake (Mouritzen 2020, 11). These “lessons of the past “are based on “dramatic geopolitical events”, and both influence actual decisions and legitimise them in front of the public (Mouritzen 2020, 12). Looking at physical commemorative sites, Subotić argues they can “provide a lasting reservoir of traumatic memories that are easily activated, mobilised around, and weaponised in the pursuit of

contemporary foreign policy objectives” (Subotić 2020, 85). Siddi argues that “selective forgetting “is like “selective remembering”, as “dominant narratives are constructed through a selection of events that almost inevitably implies marginalising or leaving out other events that are not seen as consistent with the narrative” (Siddi 2020, 91). Makhortych underlines that the Copenhagen School increasingly recognises historical memory as an influential factor in securitisation framework, citing the case of securitisation of the conflict Ukraine from 2014, where, he argues, pro-Russian actors “instrumentalised memory to present the consequences of the existential threat (the physical destruction of Russophone population) and the way out (the use of violence against their opponents)” by representing their opponents as “successors of Nazi Germany” (Makhortych 2020, 127). On the other side, Klymenko argues that policymakers often make use of historical narratives in order to underpin their foreign policy agenda, with narratives viewed as “personal or collective subjective cognition of the events happening around us, as a sense-making of the world, and as a mode of communication that is embedded in a particular cultural and political context” (Klymenko 2020, 34). She analyses how the Ukrainian policymakers used historical narratives to legitimise their pro-Western foreign policy by Othering Russia. Thus, in these narratives referring to the Kievan Rus from the 9th-13th century, the Cossack Hetmanate from the 17th-19th century and the Soviet Union in the 20th century – Ukraine is seen as representing European values of “Christianity”, “modernisation”, “democracy” and “partnership”, as opposed to Russian “colonialism”, “aggression”, “authoritarianism” and “backwardness” (Klymenko 2020, 33). Thus, according to this narrative, for 21st-century Ukraine, the only logical way forward is joining Euro-Atlantic structures – the EU and NATO. Hence, memory is instrumentalised for strategic foreign policy preferences and decisions, and indeed to project power on the international stage.

SHAPING WORDS AND DEEDS

Narratives require actors who use discourse, including images, symbols, analogies, metaphors, history, and frames, to tell a persuasive story. They also consist of events (i.e., summits) and plots (i.e., crises), or “storylines”: “sense-making organisational devices tying the different elements of a policy

challenge together into a reasonably coherent and convincing narrative” (O’Tuathail 2002, 617). O’Tuathail sees “geopolitical storylines” as sets of arguments that provide “a relatively coherent sense-making narrative for a foreign policy challenge”, that is “refined and deepened through public argumentation and debate” (O’Tuathail 2002, 619). He distinguishes them from “geopolitical scripts”, which use arguments from storylines but are concerned with the “pragmatics of foreign policy performance” and are a “tacit set of rules for how foreign policy actors are to perform in certain speech situations and how they are to articulate responses to policy challenges and problems” (O’Tuathail 2002, 619). O’Tuathail particularly points to the fact that these sets of rules present “discursive software” of foreign policy practice, which contains “scripted elements and sequences” but is sufficiently flexible to allow for adaptation in exchanges with the media and diplomats, depending on the situation (O’Tuathail 2002, 620). Adaptation, of course, is one of the critical elements of a successful strategy. Thus, to have a coherent narrative, a foreign policy actor needs to craft a storyline through a set of arguments and a script to shield, execute, validate, and promote policy. It needs to successfully navigate through the script to achieve the desired end state of the storyline.

THE ART OF FRAMING

To “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52), politicians use “framing” as a rational rhetorical strategy to “angle” arguments presented to the public (Leimbigler and Lammert 2016), as “frames” can provoke different reactions of the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. Thus, strategic framing is an integral part of strategic communication, which seeks to “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan 2008, 4856). In turn, by punctuating some and hiding other elements, strategic framing opens a field for potential conflict and contestation among different actors promoting their frames (Fiss and Zajac 2006, 1174). However, frames cannot be fully understood without narratives, just as narratives cannot function without frames.

“Framing”—as “selection and salience” in order “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52)—is a rational rhetorical strategy used by politicians to “angle” arguments presented to the general public (Leimbigger and Lammert 2016). Frames can provoke different reactions from the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding.

Communicators use frames as either “opportunity” or “threat”. This is in line with the constructivist theory of securitisation, which implies a “securitising actor” who mobilises “an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions)” is mobilised in order to “prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of a referent object” (Balzacq 2011, 3). The actor presents it with “such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customised policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development” (Balzacq 2011, 3). Through the perception created in the process, the “securitarian actors could find the legitimacy to address an issue through the tools they present as adequate” (Balzacq et al. 2016). Thus, as Roselle argues, “a potential threat, such as the rise of China, is only seen as a threat when the audience believes it to be so and accepts this interpretation” (Roselle et al. 2014, 79).

The basic structure and the most suitable element for strategic communication analysis are the “frames” used within media reports and other online artefacts, which can influence the interpretation and perception of the audience. A frame shapes how we want the audience to interpret a topic. It is the selection of certain aspects of the topic and their emphasis in the argument to lead the audience to a specific type of thinking, i.e. interpretation. Conscious and purposeful use of frames – whether direct announcements and statements or indirectly influencing media reporting in a certain way – is an integral part of strategic communication.

Framing deals with how political discourse is formulated on specific topics. From the very beginning of their work on campaign development, public relations practitioners function as “framing strategists” -they strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, and responsibilities should be presented to achieve goals (Hallahan 1999).

According to Hallahan, framing decisions are among the most critical strategic decisions, and framing is essential for situations, risks, supporting arguments, issues, responsibilities, and stories (Hallahan 2011).

The framing process is crucial to two fundamental strategic political communication goals- campaigning and governance.

Hänggli and Kriesi highlighted three framing choices that politicians make to gain a strategic advantage during campaigns: “substantive emphasis choice” (candidates emphasise which frames they want to emphasise during the campaign), “oppositional emphasis choice” (which frames of the opponent they want to emphasise, rather only those where they can achieve a comparative advantage) and “content emphasis choice” (how much they will emphasise the rivalry in the campaign). Their research shows that candidates emphasise only one or two of their frames and pay more attention to the opponents’ frames emphasised in media coverage (Hänggli and Kriesi 2012).

In addition to campaigns, strategic political communication is vital in management. Sellers explains how US congressmen use strategic communication to emphasise and frame specific issues in media coverage to influence policy outcomes. That process involves four phases. First, members of Congress determine messages by identifying the issues, arguments, and frames they want to emphasise. In the second phase, they promote messages through their political party. Then, they engage journalists to pay attention, and finally, in the fourth phase, journalists emphasise particular messages which aim to influence public opinion (Sellers 2010).

Focus on frames and agenda

“CNN exclusive: US suspects Russian hackers planted fake news to blame for Qatar crisis”; “Secret NSA report describes Russian hacking efforts ahead of US election”; “NSA Confirms: Russia Hacked French Presidential Election”; “Russian hacking of Dutch election as warm-up for Germany”; “Russian cyberattacks and fake news worry Estonia’s president”; “Russian cyberattacks could affect German election”, “British officials now think Russia meddled in Brexit vote”...

Western media headlines since 2016 have been flooded with texts, usually based on sources from the intelligence-security and political

establishment, in which all election campaigns and other types of declarations involve alleged hacking and other types of interference in the political life of the West.

Inundating the Western public with stories about Russia's influence campaigns has nearly neutralised the effects of Edward Snowden's revelation that in previous decades, especially in the 2000s, cyber-intelligence activities had been primarily managed by the US National Security Agency. However, without getting into speculations about whether Russia is indeed conducting a pervasive online campaign in which it interferes with all the problems and decisions facing the West, the fact is that linking the words "Russia" and "hacking" is one example of the so-called "network agenda setting model", according to which "objects and attributes can also be transferred simultaneously in bundles between the agendas (...) not only can the news media tell us what to think about and how to think about it, they are also capable of telling us what and how to associate" (Vu, Guo and McCombs 2014, 669). According to this model, recent research shows that connections between elements in different agendas can influence the formation of emphasis on specific issues – the more the news media present two elements as a tandem, the greater the chances that the audience will perceive them as connected.

According to Kioussis and Strömbäck, "this can have major ramifications for how politicians and issues are portrayed and perceived in public affairs discourse. In turn, this can greatly influence outcomes in terms of campaigning and governing" (Kioussis and Strömbäck 2015, 391). They point out that the US might have reacted differently in the case of Iraq if the George W. Bush administration had failed to link Saddam Hussein with weapons of mass destruction in the political discourse.

Agenda-building and issue management

"Agenda-building" is another essential perspective of strategic political communication. Unlike "agenda-setting", which focuses on how the media highlight topics in the public sphere, agenda-building refers to the mutual influence among political actors (politicians, parties, government institutions, activists, media, and voters) in forming and exchanging influence on highlighting the topic. The primary strategy for attracting news in agenda

building is using “information subsidies” (press releases, press conferences, comments, political advertising) to reduce the price someone else has to pay for specific information, among which the three most significant forms are materials, spokespersons and events (Hallahan 2011). Press releases are used the most, and research shows that subsidies, and especially releases, generate up to 80 per cent of information content (Sweetser and Brown 2008). It is clear, of course, that there are limitations and that not all political actors, e.g. political parties, have the same influence on agenda generation through informational subsidies.

Politicians, political parties and other political groups use “issue management” to identify, prioritize, develop and communicate positions on crucial issues (Heath and Waymer 2011). Strategic communication plays a significant role in how political groups attempt to influence political discourse and decision-making. Research has shown that media influence is more prominent when focusing on issues with which the audience has little or no direct experience and on concrete issues. It decreases when focusing on issues with which the audience has had direct experience and on abstract issues (Kioussis and Strömbäck 2015, 390). The tone and frames associated with the questions are important because they influence how they are perceived, which can impact the audience.

Influence on interpretative schemes

The concept of “framing” has its theoretical foundations in the psychological tradition – primarily in the works of Kahneman and Tversky – and the sociological tradition, especially in the works of Goffman. In his 2002 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Kahneman referred to framing effects and described the choice theory he developed with Tversky by stating that “Perception is reference-dependent: the perceived attributes of a focal stimulus reflect the contrast between that stimulus and a context of prior and concurrent stimuli” (Kahneman 2002, 459). Therefore, certain information can not only be interpreted depending on the interpretive scheme of the individual, but it is also possible to influence it to provoke different interpretive schemes depending on how the same message is framed (Scheufele 2008). Kahneman addressed the question of influence on

interpretive schemes through framing, focusing on the experimental conditions of examining influence.

From a sociological aspect, Goffman's "frame analysis" dealt with social influences on interpretive schemes. According to him, even unconsciously, an individual uses "primary frameworks" to "locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences", whether these frameworks are "natural" – that is, not under intentional human influence – or "social", that is, they are influenced by the human factor's will, aim, and controlling effort" (Goffman 1974, 21–22). Goffman accepted the findings of symbolic interactionism and social constructivism, that is, the social assumption of interpretations. However, at the same time, he believed that people adapt to situations, that social life and circumstances are constantly changing, and that people are flexible and adaptable.

Frames are not fixed forever. They can be subject to change, new circumstances and influences. So, there is flexibility and adaptation on the one hand and continuity and consistency on the other. In this regard, Goffman's concept provides a framework for strategic communication itself, which represents a balance between flexibility and adaptability on the one hand and coherence on the other. Thus, the uncertainty brought about by the new modernity requires flexibility and adaptation, even though it seems to people that their attitudes remain consistent. Strategic communicators can count on this manoeuvring space, a space where they can influence people's attitudes but must follow their values, consistency, and routine.

Frames can be divided into "media" and "audience frames". Media frames are tools that help journalists, in accordance with the limitations and formats of media production, as well as the limitations of the audience's knowledge, to produce content that presents complex issues in a way that allows the audience to make sense of the information and integrate it into their existing cognitive schemes (Scheufele 2008).

When journalists use a frame, they organise topics and information by relating them to audience members' interpretive schemas, or "audience frames," which are information processing tools that allow people to categorise information according to the frame. Audience frames can be long-term political views shared by a minor or major part of society – as seen by Goffman – but also short-term views derived from the media, as seen by Pan and Kosicki (Pan and Kosicki 1993, 56-59).

Price, Tuskberry, and Powers connect media frames and audience frames, and they consider that media frames only work if they can be applied to an individual's interpretive scheme, which is either pre-existing or part of the message being sent. Thus, the effect of a frame and its strength depend on whether the interpretive scheme to which the frame refers exists in the prior knowledge of the audience members or in the message itself. A frame will not be effective if there is no interpretative scheme among audience members and it does not exist in the message (Price, Tewksbury and Powers 1997, 500–504).

Influencing frames – an opportunity for alternative groups

Tuchman argued that the way the traditional media frame events, by formally striving for objectivity as a “strategic ritual”, systematically prevents a more comprehensive view that would respect alternative views and, therefore, only strengthens established, socially acceptable views (Tuchman 1978). In his analysis of protest groups in the 1960s, Gitlin argued that they could not achieve their goals because their views were systematically downplayed or ignored (Gitlin 1980).

On the other hand, Gamson dealt with movements from the 1980s, such as the movement against nuclear weapons. He determined that communicators interested in promoting a worldview that is in their interest have a strong framing influence in news and public discourse and that there is still a chance for activist movements to market alternative frames. Namely, they would have to market them coherently, effectively, and positively to influence media professionals to transmit their frames and, through the media, the elite and the general public to accept their views. Referring to Gitlin, who believes that media frames “organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports” (Gitlin 1980, 7), Gamson viewed them as the central idea that creates meaning about events, and in that capacity, as the core of the interpretive “packages” that provide meaning through media discourse (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3). Therefore, alternative movements can influence not only through “their” alternative media but also through mainstream media if they produce sufficiently attractive, original and convincing packages. It is clear that, in the context of online media, alternative or protest groups not only have “alternative channels” but can

also use a wide range of creative online media techniques to get their messages across. Namely, they can often be more original and unrestrained in form and expression. Quite simply, activists in the online sphere have new opportunities to do what Gamson wrote about in the days of traditional media: to develop frames presented through examples, descriptions, slogans, icons and metaphors, which would “force” journalists to systematically present them positively.

Baran assessed that the theory of framing calls into question objectivity as a postulate of journalism, given the existence of a multitude of actors who can influence the construction and transmission of frames, and emphasizes that part of framing research deals with strategies of influence on media framing of events (Baran and Davis 2012, 336). Entman added that journalists do not know enough about the framing process and that, although they may be able to follow the “rules of objective reporting”, they are often influenced by professional communicators who influence them to “convey their dominant frames on the news” and to “prevent most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation” (Entman 1993, 56-57).

Considering the capacity of frames to cause different reactions from the audience depending on which elements of reality they emphasize and which they conceal, Entman, Gitlin, and Pan discuss the struggle of politicians to influence journalists’ framing and the mark that political actors leave on the produced news.

Namely, as Pan points out, news framing is a “joint operation of journalists and various other social actors”: journalists are the ones who often play a subordinate role in the process, while other actors are not only a source of information for them, but also a source of defining the problem, including the use of terminology (Pan 2008, 1869–1870).

Strategic framing

Clearly, we can talk about strategic acts at every level of the framing process.

Hallahan argues that “strategic framing involves the purposeful use of this technique by rhetors, social advocates, and communications professionals” whose goals are “to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on particular portions of a message or aspects of a topic in order to gain a favorable response” (Hallahan 2008, 4855)

Strategic framing is an integral part of strategic communication campaigns, which seek to “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan 2008, 4856). Selectively punctuating some elements and hiding others points to the importance of strategic action in framing and to the potential conflict that might arise among different actors promoting their frames (Fiss and Zajac 2006, 1174).

Yet, in the process of frame building – as a step between political actors and journalists in the process of enquiry into the influence of (political) actors on media frames (Scheufele 1999) – the power of political actors – organizations or leaders – plays a key role (Hänggli 2012). Furthermore, journalists “not only choose prominent actors as sources; they also largely accept how political actors frame campaigns” (Gerth and Siebert 2012, 296).

However, Callaghan and Schnell suggest the political status of the actor (i.e. presidents/prime ministers), his credibility and organization resources are factors contributing to the capacity of strategic framing (Callaghan and Schnell 2001, 188). Furthermore, the media appear to have a stronger influence on “contending” and “relatively long-standing” policy debates (i.e. in the case of the US – abortion or health care reform) than on foreign policy and defence issues, where the media are more likely to “index” government opinion (Callaghan and Schnell 2001, 201; Bennett 1990).

Scholarly research has revealed that “media’s independence in crafting news frames varies across political contexts”, with three emerging as fundamental: coverage of news on foreign policy and national security, coverage of domestic/social issues, and coverage of electoral campaigns (Lawrence 2010, 266-267). In the case of news about foreign policy and national security issues – following the “indexing hypothesis” – “the mainstream media generally stays within the sphere of official consensus and conflict displayed in the public statements of the key government officials who manage the policy areas and decision-making processes that make the news” (Bennett et al. 2007, 49). Thus, the media tend to rely heavily on government officials, on those “whom journalists perceive to have the most power to influence the situation, and who have the most significant institutional capacity and communications apparatus to put across their point of view” (Lawrence 2010, 269). In the case of news about domestic and social issues – the media are generally open to a wider variety of framers

and show more independence in presenting their frames. This independence particularly increases in the case of electoral campaigns, when journalists often present alternative perspectives. The contexts of social issues and electoral coverage offer journalists the possibility for “game frames”, which implies reporting on strategies by different actors to prevail, and thus offers both the opportunity for a wider variety of framers to be involved and greater journalistic autonomy in comment and interpretation of “various players’ strategic moves” (Lawrence 2010, 272).

Hallahan identifies seven models of application of framing: (1) Situational framing, which is often used in organizational communication by managers seeking to impose their vision of organizational functioning; (2) Attribute framing, used by marketers to emphasize positive elements of a product, such as quality or price, relative to competing brands; (3) Risk framing, which is used to make decisions related to the choice between two options, which include the risk factor. Such is the case with health communication, where, for example, it was found that the framing of negative consequences is more influential than the framing of positive consequences, that is, that patients are more ready to take risks if it means saving lives; (4) Action framing, which tries to emphasize the most appropriate action that the actors could take in order to achieve the desired goal, as is the case with traffic safety or with the mobilization of actors; (5) Problem framing, which refers to emphasizing the problems that should be solved, as is the case in promoting social change and mobilizing the necessary support; (6) Responsibility framing, which concerns taking credit for successes or shifting responsibility for failures; (7) News framing, already discussed, which refers to the struggle for influence and the “sponsorship” of media frames by strategic communicators (Hallahan 1999).

STATECRAFT AND ITS REPERTOIRES

In international politics, states practice “statecraft” – “organized actions governments take to change the external environment in general or the policies and actions of other states in particular to achieve the objectives set by policymakers” (Holsti 1976, 293). Combining military, diplomatic, economic and cultural instruments of power with the strategic logics of their employment forms the tools of statecraft which “state leaders can employ to influence others in the international system – to make their friends and

enemies behave in ways that they would have otherwise not” (Goddard, MacDonald and Nexon 2019, 306). There are four types of instruments: (1) Military force: threat or direct use of weapons and violence, as well as arms sales, defence pacts and other tools of military power; (2) Economic instruments: translating economic capital into social power over others through incentives such as financial assistance, regional trade agreements, currency unions or debt forgiveness, as well as punishments, such as trade sanctions or restrictions of capital flow; (3) Diplomatic instruments: use of social and political capital in cross-boundary interactions, including competitive or collaborative modes, or the use of covert or secret diplomacy; (4) Cultural instruments: symbolic instruments affecting the distribution of status, such as public diplomacy, propaganda and ideological persuasion (Goddard, MacDonald and Nexon 2019, 306).

While states have the option of using and mixing a broad range of tools in existence (use of force, alliances, sanctions), statecraft can be seen as “a set of repertoires”, with “repertoires” consisting of “more limited toolkits in use, whether by particular states, in relations among specific states, or in specific settings” (Goddard, MacDonald and Nexon 2019, 310). Repertoires “involve not only what people do when they are engaged in conflict with others but what they know how to do and what others expect them to do” (Tarrow 2011, 39). However, they can also change depending on “major fluctuations of interests, opportunities and organizations” (Tarrow 2011, 39). They are also more strategic, as they are a “tool kit of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (Swidler 1986, 273). Since statecraft implies interaction between at least two actor-states, being strategic implies the adaptability of repertoires.

Raymond Cohen argues that “the international system is like a great stage on which states are, at one and the same time, both actors and the audience (Cohen 1987, 21). He uses “theatre as a metaphor for the repertoires of visual and symbolic tools used by diplomats and statesmen”: diplomatic communication seeks cross-cultural comprehensibility; it is a product of careful deliberation; and it “cannot escape from an insatiably inquisitive audience” (Jönsson 2022, 22).

Given that states use a myriad of statecraft repertoires, they need to employ strategic communication to legitimise their international status and leverage through political, military, economic or cultural might.

CHAPTER 3

THE RUSSIAN BEAR AWAKENS

The post-Cold War era of disregarding Russia as an important geopolitical actor ended in 2008, with Moscow's military reaction in Georgia, and was reversed in 2014, following the referendum in Crimea and the beginning of the conflict in the Donbas.

For years, Russian President Vladimir Putin was increasingly vocal and active against NATO expansion to the East and the US-dominated unipolar world, calling instead for multipolarity in which great powers such as China would help create a more balanced global order.

However, as strategic communication and narratives require, actions have key communicative value, particularly when words and deeds are aligned.

Following Moscow's actions, the tone on Russia in Washington and Brussels rapidly shifted from underestimating to magnifying the "Russian hybrid threat" to liberal democracy, European values, security and Western-led RBO.

Faced with security threats that directly threaten European security—the conflict in Ukraine and the fight against Daesh in the Middle East, with the consequence of millions of refugees migrating to Europe — the two most powerful integrations of European states of the 21st century, the European Union and NATO, in the period after 2014, put a strong emphasis on strategic communication, establishing specialised departments for this area.

EU'S STRATCOM EAST

At the March 2015 Brussels summit, the heads of state of the European Union proposed the development of an Action Plan on strategic communication in the context of the crisis in Ukraine, in cooperation with EU members and institutions, to "challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns" (European Council 2015). Presented in June 2015, the EU's "Action Plan on Strategic Communication" pointed out that "the use of communication tools has played an important role in the dramatic political,

economic and security related developments that have affected the EU's eastern neighbourhood over the past year and a half", and that "strategic communication is an important tool in furthering the EU's overall policy objectives" (European External Action Service 2015a).

Under the name "StratCom East Task Force", an EU working group composed of ten communication experts with knowledge of several languages (including Russian) was given the task of developing communication products, projects and campaigns to explain the EU policy in the "Eastern Partnership" region, which included proactive strategic communication campaigns and "myth hunting" through analysis of trends, narratives and countering misinformation. The EU emphasised that the goal of the working group was not counter-propaganda but the improvement of EU strategic communication through "proactive" promotion of EU policy. In order to correct disinformation - "myth hunting" - the EU gathered a network of 400 experts, officials, journalists, analysts and non-governmental sector activists from over 30 countries to report on "Russian disinformation" through the crowdsourcing system. These reports were compiled in a weekly report ("Disinformation Review") and made available to the public to aid analytical and informational work (European External Action Service 2015b). Members of the "Stratcom East" "crowdsourcing" team of "myth hunters", in their reviews of individual cases of what they call Russian disinformation, focused on individual factual errors and the framing of specific topics. The "Stratcom East" team in Brussels – which coordinated the crowdsourcing team, compiled and presented their findings in weekly reports – under the name "trend of the week", in a reference reminiscent of Twitter trends, identified and highlighted systematic frames. The focus on frames indicated "Stratcom East" devoted itself to identifying key visible elements of strategic communication. At the end of 2015, initial reports assessed that the European audience was under high level of disinformation attacks.

However, the U.S. portal Politico reported that "even as the EU mobilizes to fight Russian propaganda, European governments are fighting each other over the best way to go about it" (Panichi 2015). Poland, in particular, was dissatisfied with the scope of "Stratcom East" work and had proposed an alternative project under the patronage of the former Polish diplomat Jerzy Pomianowski and his institute "European Endowment for Democracy. Pomianowski, who received funding for his project from the governments

of Poland and the Netherlands, believed that the EU Strategic Communication Action Plan, focused on presenting a proactive stance on the EU, was not enough but that it was necessary to form a centre for the coordinated production of content in the Russian language, including a “content factory” that would feature political talk shows. The team members also complained to the Politico portal that they lack the budget, resources, full support of individual members and enthusiasm from the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security, Federica Mogherini, to conduct an official campaign directed against Russia. An early analysis showed a lack of articles from most EU countries, including leading members such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Great Britain. From the start, the project suffered from one of the key shortcomings in the implementation of effective strategic communication – the lack of coherence. The signal was that the EU was not united in its strategic communication due to disagreements regarding specific goals, but also methods, resources and organisational structure, which at the very start, with the Polish alternative project, resulted in a kind of “informational fratricide”. In an early assessment of the “Stratcom East” work, John Haines from the Foreign Policy Research Institute quoted classical scholar Thomas Dwight Goodell: “Goodell wrote that no Greek tragedy could exist without a chorus. Its role is to describe and comment upon the main action of the play, often saying what the main characters could not say (...) If Europe’s new information warriors fulfil the role of the chorus, then the question must be asked: to whom, exactly, is that chorus speaking?” (Haines 2015). Haines argued it would be difficult for “Stratcom East” to achieve its objectives of persuasion, be it about the opinion of EU citizens on Russia, of Russian citizens of Western governments, or in the former USSR, where, despite the rhetoric, the doors of the EU and NATO remain closed (Haines, 2015). Logically, in Moscow, the EU project was harshly criticised. The Russian Foreign Ministry argued the EU plan “clearly aimed at pushing out Russia’s presence in the international media field (...) and is trying to create conditions for the total discrimination of Russian media”, while RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan said that if the EU was “still concerned with ‘losing the information war’ to Russia, perhaps the time has come for it to realize that people around the world simply no longer believe their same tired, one-sided narratives of current events” (RT 2015).

NATO CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The North Atlantic Alliance formed the “NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence” in 2014 when the NATO heads of state at the Wales summit saw the move as a significant contribution to the Alliance’s strategic communication. Located in Riga, funded by seven NATO countries (Germany, Italy, Great Britain, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland), the Centre aimed to improve NATO’s strategic communication capacity, which had become “an integral part of the efforts to achieve the Alliance’s political and military objectives”, and thus “it is increasingly important that the Alliance communicates in an appropriate, timely, accurate and responsive manner on its evolving roles, objectives and missions” (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence 2015a).

Since then, the Centre’s researchers and partner organizations conducted analyses and carried out research and experiments, using modern technologies and virtual tools to provide concrete solutions for strategic communication problems faced by NATO. At the end of 2015, the Centre launched an international scientific journal called “Defence Strategic Communication”, focusing on strategic communication in foreign policy and military-security fields. Since its establishment, the central focus of the Centre’s research has been on the cases of two conflicts that marked the middle of the second decade of the 21st century – the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the fight against Daesh in Syria and Iraq. In both cases, the NATO Centre for Excellence in Strategic Communication specifically focused on how online media techniques were integrated into the strategic communication campaigns of rival actors. In the case of Ukraine, Lange-Yonatamishvili and Svetok, analysts of the NATO Centre for Excellence in Strategic Communication, pointed out that Russia, in its strategic communication campaign in the conflict in Ukraine, used online techniques to spread influence and that the conflict was proof that the new information environment had changed the nature of warfare to such an extent that some of the critical battles are fought in the online sphere of communications, rather than – as in traditional conflicts – in the air, at sea or on land. The authors believe that Russia primarily used social networks to disseminate propaganda information, collect intelligence data, and collect psychological

information that, according to them, can be as harmful as attacks on the critical infrastructures of a state. In this context, according to the authors, the Russian campaign “generated fear, uncertainty, and doubt about the economic, cultural, and national security of Ukraine, while promoting positive messages about Russia’s role in Crimea and eastern Ukraine” (Geers 2015, 16).

Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka assessed that in terms of the use of online techniques in strategic communication, “pro-Russian forces have given the world a masterclass” (Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka 2015, 107). From the outset of the conflict, “we saw strategic communication in action”, with the release on Twitter and YouTube of an intercepted phone conversation between the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine. The famous viral, in which Nuland, while giving instructions to Pyatt, speaks extremely pejoratively about the efforts of the EU, simultaneously discredited Western policy and proved the opponent’s access to communication lines (Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka 2015, 107). A particular emphasis was placed on the tactics of “social cyber attacks”, whose goal is to manipulate crowds and propagate hysteria by promoting chaotic mass behaviour, rumours, confusion, panic and violence” (Goolsby 2015). Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka pointed out that one of the key components of any “social cyber attack” is the existence of an accompanying narrative. Using the example of the Russian organisation “Cyber Berkut”, the authors pointed to the existence of a “Russian political narrative” within which a series of actions were carried out: from propagating the narrative about the Ukrainian government as “neo-Nazi”, spreading “rumours” through social networks, to hacking NATO and Ukrainian government websites, as well as advertising billboards in the centre of Kiev before the parliamentary elections in Ukraine in October 2014, when Ukrainian politicians were depicted as “war criminals” in displayed videos (Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka 2015, 106). This type of cyber attack, which the authors call “soft” in addition to “social”, can significantly affect perception of the situation and decision-making, as well as provoke concrete action.

The Russian narrative was described as carefully prepared, written, distributed and integrated with traditional media to mutually reinforce and reach all target groups, including those with less access to new technologies.

Thanks to social networks, sharing “rumours” could spread worldwide and reach target groups within a few minutes. Due to organisation and coordination, the speed of online techniques also contributed to a more effortless influence on the perception and behaviour of the target audience.

In the case of the Russian campaign, the goal, according to the authors, was to convince Ukrainians that the “Euromaidan” movement led to political chaos that was not in the interest of the citizens, while in contrast, the case of the Crimean referendum was presented in an opposite way – as a factor that brought freedom and stability to the peninsula. Thus, social media and online techniques are used to support physical operations in the field, consistent with strategic communication characteristics. The authors predicted that these types of “black” strategic communication, i.e. creative combinations of physical and psychological operations, would be increasingly sophisticated and unpredictable in the future (Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka 2015, 111).

Goolsby argued that social cyberattacks are a new phase of “trolling,” which has evolved thanks to the development of social networks. A “troll” is considered a person who deliberately provokes the emotional reactions of other participants in the discussion with his messages and arguments on forums or social networks and diverts the course of the previous discussion (Goolsby 2015, 4-5). In another analysis, devoted to Russian techniques in Latvia, the NATO Centre for Excellence in Strategic Communication identified the concept of a hybrid troll that serves as a tool of information warfare within strategic communication. The authors of the analysis distinguish it from the “classic troll”, whose goal is emotional provocation rather than a thought-out and coordinated campaign, and identify several types depending on the target group: from the “troll” who promotes conspiracy theories with long comments but with a clear point, through those who, adapting to the environment, send simplistic comments that also have a point that is consistent with the narrative. There are also “aggressive” trolls that are closest to “classic” ones because they strive for provocation and changes in emotional state. Once again, behind the provocation is a message aligned with the desired point. The so-called “Wikipedia troll” transmits information from sites like Wikipedia and other online sources that are considered objective, without commenting, but using the information in a context that leads to the desired conclusion. Finally, there is the troll who “posts” – posts links to video

material, photos and texts – aiming to educate the audience in line with the narrative but prioritising sources on other platforms, rather than his own commentary (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence 2015a).

Speaking at the 2015 conference “International forum of public opinion leaders: Moscow-Minsk-Belgrade-Astana” at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, Igor Nezhdanov, one of Russia’s leading experts on information warfare on the Internet, argued that trolling is only one of the techniques used in the web sphere, along with discrediting, labelling, blocking, distracting, diverting resources and “bringing to absurdity”. However, he pointed out that the techniques of online information warfare were primarily developed in the US after the terrorist attacks in 2001, under the auspices of the NSA and the Pentagon, from the “Total Information Awareness” (TIA) program in 2003 to the “Social Media in Strategic Communication” program (SMISC) in 2011, and its successors (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency 2011).

RUSSIAN STRATEGIC NARRATIVE – CONSISTENT AND DIVERGENT

Three years into Western “myth busting” programs, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin argued in 2017 that “consistency of the Russian narrative indicates that in spite of the current fixation with disinformation and Russian-led information warfare, Russia has been coherent in how it has narrated its position in the world” (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017, 118). They argued that Russia’s strategic narrative focuses on Russia’s position in the power transition in the post-Cold war era. Indeed, it is a “means to seek to shape conditions to be conducive to Russian political, economic and security interests” (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017, 111). However, the strategic narrative goes beyond material conditions, and is a “core component of the Russian state itself —shaping its own self-conception and setting expectations on Russia’s role in the world and how it should be recognised”. Miskimmon and O’Loughlin argued that Moscow’ projects a narrative that “seeks to reinforce Russia’s global prestige and authority, whilst promoting multilateral legal and institutional constraints on the other more powerful actors, as a means to ensure Russia stays among the top ranking great

powers” (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017, 111). While this narrative has been consistent since the arrival in power of Vladimir Putin in 1999, “competing meanings” with the West make “narrative convergence difficult”, and “without such alignment, it is impossible for all parties to reach an alignment in narrating the recent past, present problems, and the future world order” (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017, 118).

This 2017 warning reflected well the growing narrative divergence, which only widened as the Ukrainian crisis progressed, amid clear signs of transition towards multipolarity, loss of US and EU influence and rising contestation from China.

A HYBRID THREAT NARRATIVE

Although “hybrid threat” as a form, concept and term had been present in political, security and academic discourse years before – and had been developed since the mid-2000s mainly in the US defence sector strategic documents amid the “colour revolutions” in Russia’s near abroad and during “Arab spring” – its prominence and (geo)political (mis)use has become viral after the 2014 Crimean referendum and the conflict in Donbas. Western fingers were from then on pointed mainly at Russia as the main suspect of “hybrid threat” to numerous countries, primarily in Europe. A 2018 report by the German Marshall Fund Alliance for Security Democracy argued that Russia had used disinformation campaigns, financial influence and cyberattacks in at least 27 countries, most of them NATO and/or EU members (Treverton 2018). Thus, it is no surprise that both of these institutions have adopted strategic documents and mechanisms to fight “hybrid threats”, arguing that despite international cooperation, protecting country structures and institutions remains primarily a national task.

For NATO, hybrid threats are “used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations” (NATO 2019). The EU considers they aim to “achieve specific political objectives”, “target critical vulnerabilities and seek to create confusion to hinder swift and effective decision-making” (European External Action Service 2018). The concept’s prominence has led to the foundation in 2016 of the Helsinki-based European Center for Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE).

This institution, supported by EU and NATO member countries, argued that hybrid threats are “coordinated and synchronised action, that deliberately targets democratic states’ and institutions systemic vulnerabilities” – which are created by “historical memory, legislation, old practices, geostrategic factors, strong polarisation of society, technological disadvantages or ideological differences” – to “influence different forms of decision making at the local (regional), state, or institutional level to favour and/or gain the agent’s strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target” (The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats 2017).

According to the Helsinki Center, these means exploit the thresholds of detection and attribution and the different interfaces (war-peace, internal-external, local-state, national-international, friend-enemy). They can include “influencing information; logistical weaknesses like energy supply pipelines; economic and trade-related blackmail; undermining international institutions by rendering rules ineffective; terrorism or increasing insecurity” (The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats 2017). NATO argued that they “combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces” (NATO 2019). The EU insists that these activities are “coordinated by state or non-state actors”, “multidimensional, combining coercive and subversive measures” and can range from “cyberattacks on critical information systems, through the disruption of critical services such as energy supplies or financial services, to the undermining of public trust in government institutions or the deepening of social divisions” (European External Action Service 2018).

Fighting the hybrid threat through resilience-building has thus become a prominent feature of EU/NATO political and security mechanisms. The Western Balkans – as a focal point of NATO/EU enlargement – were designated as potential primary targets of alleged Russian hybrid activities. Indeed, as a European Parliament report underlines, “hybridity is a buzzword in the field of international relations and security. However, it has been introduced in NATO and EU member states’ doctrinal corpus to depict new threats and challenges. The EU uses the concept to deal with difficulties created by the local influence of non-EU powers (Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) in the enlargement process of the Western Balkans countries” (European Parliament Policy Department for External Relations 2018).

Arguing for this perspective, various transatlantic organisations, think tanks, and officials have most prominently pointed to the examples of what they considered as Russian meddling in the 2016 parliamentary elections in Montenegro – which included an alleged involvement in a coup d'état – and interference in now Northern Macedonia over the Prespa Agreement between Skopje and Athens. As a result, NATO sent to Montenegro its first-ever mission to fight hybrid threats (Lekic 2019), while dozens of Western researchers have been monitoring and analysing “Russian hybrid threats” in the Western Balkans.

The Helsinki Center compiled what it considers a series of Russian hybrid methods, including pressure through economic leverage and the organisation of protests. One of the central roles belongs to the use of cyber tools and information operations, propaganda, strategic leaks, and fake news, and their spread through domestic media, as well as amplification through social media. The “toolkit” also involves the funding of organisations and political parties, the use of oligarchs, paramilitary organisations, and the Orthodox church (Treverton 2018).

This narrative about the Russian hybrid threat had been carefully crafted and sustained through governmental and non-governmental sources. It was particularly widely exploited in the case of “meddling” in US and Western European elections. Opponents of Donald Trump, primarily his rival Hillary Clinton, attempted to put the blame for the electoral results on Russia’s involvement. However, they missed the core of Trump’s communication success, a hybrid mix of classical methods of political communication, enhanced through new online techniques, spiced up by disruption and transgression in discourse and action, allowing his use of short and quick information, primarily through Twitter, to turn into long-term effect and emotional engagement. After arriving at the White House in 2016, Trump tried to find common ground with Russia to focus on China. However, he failed to do so for two reasons. First, the opponents from the American administration itself, the Democrats, and the neoliberal establishment, in general, were against any kind of cooperation with Russia and immediately labelled him “pro-Russian”, building up on pre-electoral claims, thus reducing his manoeuvrability as much as possible. Second, China understood American intentions and got closer to Russia. This meant that the possibility of reducing gaps in strategic narratives of global rivals would be constrained.

FRAMING FOR CONFLICT

The divergence of strategic narratives between the West and Russia increased further after the arrival of Joseph Biden at the White House in 2021. Less than 48 hours after the last US soldier left Kabul on August 30, 2021, following a humiliating albeit logical retreat from Afghanistan, Biden hosted on September 1st Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky intending to conclude talks on the “U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership” (Dickinson 2021). This agreement was signed two months later, exerting further US pressure on Moscow (US Department of State 2021).

The US narrative accentuated that the NATO “open door” policy meant Ukraine would have the right to decide on whether it wants to join the Alliance, despite Moscow’s absolute opposition. This was not surprising, as the NATO enlargement policy had been for decades an instrument of influence on potential candidates for membership – from the Balkans and Georgia to Ukraine – as well as an instrument of pressure on Russia’s national interests. On the other side, it was clear that, despite support and encouragement, NATO members were not ready to offer membership to Ukraine for two reasons: the unresolved issue of territorial integrity due to the situation in the Donbas and the fear of Russia’s reaction. However, despite the lack of official and concrete steps towards membership, Moscow closely monitored NATO’s incremental steps to pull in Ukraine: sending of military instructors, arms shipments, signals of support encouraging Kiev not to fulfil the obligations from the Minsk agreements, nor to take seriously into consideration the question of substantial autonomy for the Donbas.

To followers from Serbia, this was again a clear demonstration of Western double standards. On one side, Western powers continued to press for the dismemberment of Serbia and the recognition of “Kosovo’s UDI”. On the other side, they pushed for the reintegration of the Donbas into Ukraine, even if by the forceful scenario of the 1995 reintegration of Republika Srpska Krajina in Croatia, that is, through a military operation resulting in ethnic cleansing. The same as they did by encouraging Kosovo Albanians to integrate Serb-populated northern Kosovo into an “independent Kosovo”.

Seven years after the Minsk agreements on the conflict in Ukraine, Kiev was still refusing to honour the agreements. Instead of trying to negotiate the country’s decentralisation, its leadership insisted on violent reintegration.

The narratives placed by the US think tanks persistently encouraged Kiev not to implement the Minsk agreements. That is, to change it so that the part related to the autonomy of Donbas would be abolished. Similar to the 2013 “Brussels Agreement” between Belgrade and the Kosovo Albanian leadership in Priština under EU auspices, where Priština was trying the same – attempting to occupy northern Kosovo instead of implementing the Serb autonomy within the Association of Serbian Municipalities (“Zajednica srpskih opština”). The Western narrative also argued that Ukrainian troops should control all its external borders first, and only then should Kiev start talking about decentralisation. Again, this is similar to “Kosovo”, where Priština was encouraged to *de facto* take control of all of territory before discussing the ZSO.

However, Moscow, which had studied the cases of Republika Srpska Krajina and Kosovo and Metohija for a long time, was determined not to allow such a scenario of attack on the Donbas. Also, it was clear Moscow would not allow the supply of arms to Ukraine unhindered, thus endangering the security of Russia. Beijing joined Moscow’s warning, as China’s MFA Wang Yi told US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken that the security of one country cannot be made at the expense of the security of others and that regional security cannot be guaranteed by strengthening or expanding military blocks (Ministry of Foreign affairs of the PRC 2022a).

By the end of 2021 and early 2022, Russia’s strategic communication was clear. It was based on a long-term narrative about the conflict, which President Putin reiterated on several occasions by addressing the public or Western counterparts. On the other hand, in the field, strategic communication was reflected in sending signals such as troop movements near the border with Ukraine, pointing to its commitment to defend its positions.

In the meantime, the US wanted to fulfil several objectives. First, homogenise and mobilise remaining NATO countries, thus showing that Washington is critical for European security. Biden was trying to revive the influence of NATO in Europe following Trump’s disinterest in expanding it. He was playing the card of the neoliberal-democrat option, according to which all the West needs to do is to continue the Clintonian legacy of promoting liberal-democratic values around the world despite changes in today’s multipolar world. Second, to garner transatlantic security over

sanctions against Russia, particularly regarding ending the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which had been a target of Washington for years. At the Congress, a key role was played by the Chair of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Robert Menendez. The Democrat senator already held this function from 2013 to 2015, when he introduced the “Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014”, which President Barack Obama turned into law a few months later. In 2021, back to his function, Menendez aimed at hitting Nord Stream 2, but also Russia in general, and he was instrumental in presenting the “Defending Ukraine Sovereignty Act of 2022”, providing Ukraine \$500 million to assist its defence needs and re-imposing sanctions on Russia. Interestingly, two years later, the US Attorney officially charged Senator Menendez for participating in a years-long bribery scheme, including using the benefits of his official position to obtain from foreign countries in exchange hundreds of thousands of dollars, gold bars, luxury furnishings and cars (United States Attorney’s Office 2023). Coincidence or not, besides his strong support for anti-Russia measures, Menendez had been a long-time stringent lobbyist for an “independent Kosovo” (Kryeministri 2023).

The red lines were set. For Moscow, this meant any further moves by Kiev in the Donbas, Western shipments of arms and moves towards Ukraine’s membership in NATO. On the other side, for NATO countries, the red lines meant an “open-door” policy for Ukraine’s decision to enter the Alliance, commitment to robust material, economic and political support in deterring potential Russian attack, as well as support for territorial integrity, but with a clear “no” to engagement in direct confrontation with Russia on the Ukrainian battlefield.

The clash of narratives was inching towards an armed conflict.

Russia had hoped that its final proposals would be taken seriously by the West: security of its borders with Ukraine, diffusing of potential military threats emanating from Ukrainian territory, protection of the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas, end of NATO enlargement to the East, particularly regarding Ukraine.

Moscow’s narrative was that, since the end of the Cold War and despite oral guarantees that NATO would not expand further to the East, the enlargement never stopped. NATO, step by step, involved more and more countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the former Soviet Union. Indeed, NATO could do so on the wings of American unilateralism

and a world order in which Washington absolutely dominated. NATO leaders ignored the recommendations of George Kenan, one of the architects of NATO's fight against the Warsaw Pact, who warned in the 1990s that NATO expansion should not be continued, that it is dangerous for the Alliance itself and European security.

Initially, Russia failed to find an answer to this aggressive expansion of NATO. However, the situation changed with its strengthening after Vladimir Putin came to power. Russia started to send increasingly intense signals that it would not allow further expansion of NATO – either through admission to membership or through colour revolutions – be they “Orange” ones, as was the case in 2004, or “Euromaidan” ones, as was the case in 2014.

In parallel with all these events, several related developments took place. First, through its “Eastern Partnership”, the EU was trying to bring the countries of the former USSR into its zone of influence, indeed countries which are Russia's closest allies – from Belarus and Armenia to Kazakhstan. Second, in the Balkans, NATO continued to expand and rearrange state borders, as was the case with the support for the secession of “Kosovo's UDI”. Third, NATO was stockpiling weapons and missile systems in Poland and Romania, as well as sending additional troops to the Baltic countries, all under the pretext of a possible Russian threat. Fourth, the US terminated the key agreements on arms control – the ABM agreement in 2002, and then the Intermediate-range Missile Systems Agreement in 2019. This additionally led to physical threats for Russia.

Moscow was demanding that US nuclear weapons be moved out of Europe and that multinational NATO battalions be withdrawn from Poland and the Baltics, where they have been amassing for years under the pretext that Russia was about to attack. Russia's proposal would mean that NATO abandons the bolstering of its military activities in Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

But at the core, Russia was primarily asking for guarantees that NATO would not expand further. This view was underlined in the statement by Russian scholar Sergey Karaganov, for whom the expansion of NATO is the “cancer” of European security (Karaganov 2022).

These demands occurred in an already changing geopolitical context. The US was attempting to shift its focus from Afghanistan towards Russia and China. On the other side, cooperation between Moscow and Beijing was

by 2022 at the highest historical level in all spheres – political, economic and military. This was particularly marked by Putin’s visit to Beijing at the opening of the Winter Olympic Games on February 4th. Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping signed a “Russia-China Joint Statement on International Relations” that, even though “the world is going through momentous changes, and humanity is entering a new era of rapid development and profound transformation (...) some actors representing but the minority on the international scale continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues and resort to force; they interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontation”. They particularly pointed that “the sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches”, reaffirming that “new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era”, that “friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation” (President of Russia 2022).

Furthermore, in another signal to the West from its statecraft repertoire, Russia responded in January 2022 to the crisis in Kazakhstan by sending troops of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The short and measured operation showed that Moscow was the first address to resolve security problems in the post-Soviet Central Asian space. The timely arrival and quick departure following a successful mission gave credibility to the CSTO to repeat a similar operation in case of need. It showed the Russian resolve not to allow further “coloured revolutions” in the post-Soviet region but also support from China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This signal was a step forward for Russia and the CSTO and a step backwards for NATO. After NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the CSTO operation in Kazakhstan, the political will of countries of Central Asia to cooperate with NATO would be diminished.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The launching of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, sent shock waves around the world but was not a complete surprise. This was not only due to US intelligence warnings but

also, in particular, because the operation was in line with the Russian strategic narrative: the conflict was provoked by the expansion of NATO at the expense of Russian national security and despite not only strong warnings from Moscow but also proposals on a new European architecture. For Russia, it was absolutely unacceptable to have Ukraine as an “anti-Russian” “NATO aircraft carrier”, which furthermore was hostile to the Russian population and ready for a decisive military operation against Donetsk and Lugansk. The OSCE principles established in Helsinki in 1975, reiterated by formal commitments in Paris in 1990, Istanbul in 1999 and Astana in 2010, were broken. The pan-European organization’s legitimacy received an almost-lethal blow (Tijanić 2024).

The conflict polarised the world and caused sanctions, disruptions in the energy and food supply chains, destruction of infrastructure and households, and deaths of dozens of thousands.

Once they begin, wars terminate in three ways: through an absolute victory of one actor or the other, through an armistice, or through a peace agreement. In various phases since February 2022, officials and analysts have speculated about all three of these options. However, the situation on the battlefield and the global geopolitical and diplomatic scenes showed a complexity that left many perplexed.

In the first weeks after February 24, Western officials, analysts and the media assessed that the Russian Federation made a strategic mistake based on poor judgment. The West hoped Kiev’s strong resistance, strengthened transatlantic cohesion, and comprehensive sanctions would isolate the Russian Federation, degrade Moscow’s capacity to wage war and confront the West more seriously politically and diplomatically in the long term.

However, months into the conflict, the question arose whether the wrong assessment was made by the political West itself, taking into account the development of the situation on the ground, in international forums, on the energy market and in the public opinion of the Western countries, where the combination of fatigue with the Ukrainian issue and rising inflation represented a social challenge with visible severe political and social consequences.

A key question increasingly asked in Western expert circles was whether Kiev could realistically turn the tide of the conflict on the ground. Already in the summer of 2022, Barry Posen, director of security studies at MIT, in an

author's text in Foreign Affairs, warned that Ukrainian and Western expectations of defeating Russia "look more and more like a fantasy" and that it was time for a different turn – finding a diplomatic compromise (Posen 2022).

Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky showed no excessive interest in this sequence of events. However, in the West, there was no complete unity. Washington, London and Warsaw considered that the recipe for victory was to send additional weapons regardless of the duration of the conflict. At the same time, several European allies urged a diplomatic solution and warned of increasing geoeconomic, political and social effects of sanctions.

Those sanctions, introduced to "bring Russia to its knees" and isolate it internationally, did not achieve the expected effect. Some already had to be revised after pressure from Moscow – such as the return of the Nord Stream 1 turbine and the European Commission's "clarification" to Lithuania to abandon the blockade of the Russian railway corridor to Kaliningrad. The results of the sanctions were best expressed by the pursuit of the Russian operation, the record surplus in the second quarter of 2022 of over 70 billion dollars, the phoenix rebound of the ruble, and Moscow's capacity for further investment in strategic projects abroad.

The June 2022 agreement on Russian investments in Iran's gas and oil sector, worth 40 billion dollars, was the largest in Iranian history (Reuters 2022). It also symbolically marked the first visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin abroad since the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict. Putin's message to the West was clear: "You failed to isolate us".

Indeed, a cursory glance at the geographical map showed obvious geopolitical facts. The political West had united in sanctioning the Russian Federation, but the creation of a global "coalition of the willing" to isolate Moscow has been a complete debacle. Western diplomats – from Brussels to Washington – were wondering why they had failed to convince the "non-Western" world of the correctness of their sanctions policy. Among those who refused to sanction Moscow were NATO member Turkey, African countries which had been coordinating their policies with the EU's great powers for decades, and Middle Eastern countries that had the closest economic and security ties with the US.

Many in the West were irritated by the long-standing attitude of the creator of the concept of "offensive realism", John Mearsheimer, who blamed the expansion of NATO to the East through the "open door" policy

from 2008 for the genesis of the crisis in Ukraine (Mearsheimer 2014). Since February 24, Beijing inexorably recalled the ghosts of 2008, related to the Western sponsorship of the declaration of “independent Kosovo,” as well as those of the 1999 NATO aggression.

However, perhaps the West should be more concerned about the failure on the liberal spectrum of international politics, the soft power aspect. If we look at it as presented by the author of the concept, Joseph Nye, soft power should enable others to want the outcomes you want (Nye 2005). From that aspect, the results of the West looked more than meagre. Potentially even more devastating for the West was the second aspect of this concept: soft power should persuade by example and values. In that light, the 2022 visit of American President Joseph Biden to the Middle East was a disaster. After announcing in the 2019 election campaign that he would excommunicate Saudi Arabia for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Biden had to come in person to Riyadh and greet Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the context of the fight to reduce prices and Russian oil revenues – and to the dismay even of democratic circles favourable to him (Hawkins and Stein 2022). The side effects of the communication message were clear – human rights still only reach up to the first drop of much-needed oil. For Biden, who eight months before, in a prelude to the conflict in Ukraine, triumphantly promoted the “Summit for Democracy” dedicated to the division of the world into “good democrats” and “bad autocrats”, the effect was devastating and spoke of the complete primacy of geopolitics over the concepts of liberal-democratic criteria and values. Admittedly, the European Union should not have been the one to teach him lessons, considering how, in defiance of all rules and regulations, it granted candidate status to Ukraine out of purely geopolitical interests.

With such examples, it was not surprising that the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security, Josep Borrell, had to declare, after the meeting of the G20 foreign ministers in Indonesia, that “the global battle of narratives is in full swing and, for now, we are not winning” (Borrell 2022a).

Western leaders, on the other hand, were increasingly concerned about the struggle for the narrative at home, where UK and Italian prime ministers Boris Johnson and Mario Draghi became the first victims, while political and social turmoil shook French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Cole 2022).

Paradoxically, by banning the Russian media, the West not only collapsed its own liberal-democratic values but also scored an own goal: how can we now blame “Kremlin propaganda” for “malign influence” and interference in internal political and social turmoil? Another miscalculation?

US ACHIEVES KEY EUROPEAN OBJECTIVES

Even before the start of the conflict in Ukraine, the US set several geopolitical goals. The first was related to the collapse of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project and the beginning of the separation of EU countries from Russian energy producers. The second was related to the creation of transatlantic unity on the issue of sanctioning the Russian Federation and conducting a coordinated security policy towards it. The third was related to strengthening NATO in Europe, primarily through more significant budget allocations for defence. All three goals were related to harming Russia but also to disciplining EU countries. Especially Germany, which stood out on all these issues due to strong energy ties with Moscow, cooperation on the Nord Stream, as well as slow adaptation to the goal that by 2024, all NATO members allocate two per cent of GDP for defence, and of that, 20 per cent for military equipment. All these trends have now been reversed, and no matter the future of the conflict in Ukraine, some of the key US objectives in Europe have already been achieved. This does not mean absolute American victory or absolute dominance in Europe, but it represents a significant geopolitical gain.

Joseph Biden’s 2022 “National Security Strategy” elevated rivalry with Russia and China to new heights. It acknowledged that “the post-Cold War era is definitely over”, and a “competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next” (White House 2022, 6). However, while “the international environment has become more contested”, the US “remains the world’s leading power”, “outpacing” other large countries, and the idea that it “should compete with major autocratic powers to shape the international order enjoys broad support that is bipartisan at home and deepening abroad” (White House 2022, 7). Biden’s strategy argued that Moscow and Beijing pose different challenges: Russia poses “an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against

Ukraine has shown” (White House 2022, 8). On the other side, China is “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective” (White House 2022, 8). The US must consequently defend the “rules-based order” it has spearheaded in the last decades, which is under threat from Beijing and Moscow, who “now seek to remake the international order to create a world conducive to their highly personalized and repressive type of autocracy” (White House 2022, 9). Thus, the US “will support and strengthen partnerships with countries that subscribe to the rules-based international order” (White House 2022, 42). The phrase “rules-based order”, as an updated variant of the Western liberal international world order, has featured prominently during the Biden presidency. Examining the inflation of the use of the term in Washington’s discourse, Walt argued, half-jokingly, that “a ready ability to use the phrase ‘rules-based international order’ seems to have become a job requirement for a top position in the US foreign-policy apparatus” (Walt 2021). The “rules-based order” has been interpreted in two ways. First, as a concept based on principles of international law plus “the standards and recommendations of international standard-setting organisations and conferences and rules made by non-state actors” (Dugard 2023, 225). Second, as “the United States’ alternative to international law, an order that encapsulates international law as interpreted by the United States to accord with its national interests” (Dugard 2023, 225). Talmon considers that the term “rules-based order”, in fact, “blurs the distinction between binding and non-binding rules, giving the impression that all States and international actors are subject to this order, irrespective of whether or not they have consented to these rules” (Talmon 2019). He points to the fact that while international law is “general and universal”, the “rules-based order seems to allow for special rules in special–sui generis cases” (Talmon 2019).

EU DAZED AND CONFUSED

The EU narrative on the conflict in Ukraine is multifaceted. It attempts to show both EU and transatlantic (NATO) unity in condemning Russia, punishing Moscow through sanctions, and supporting Ukraine through economic, diplomatic and military means. For Brussels, the conflict is more than just about Ukraine; it is about defending the security and values of the European

Union. Following the “special military operation”, the EU started imposing packages of sanctions, encompassing a wide range of spheres but primarily aimed at hurting the Russian economy to hinder Moscow’s war efforts. Sanctions against Russia, of course, were nothing new. Russia had been accustomed to various types of Western sanctions for over a century, with a small and short exception in the 1990s, when it was primarily subjugated to Western influence. The 2022 sanctions, however, were particularly comprehensive. In addition, the EU published in March 2022 its “Strategic Compass for Security and Defence”, in which it sought to align with a number of views reflected by US President Biden. It particularly sought to criticize the critical aspects of Russia’s strategic visions, such as sovereigntism and multipolarity. In opposition, the EU calls for a “rules-based international order, based on human rights and fundamental freedoms, universal values and international law” (European External Action Service 2022). For the EU, “this vision of multilateralism prevailed internationally following the end of the Cold War. Today, it has come under strong questioning, through the shattering of universal values and a lopsided use of global challenges, by those promoting a strict sovereigntist approach that constitutes in reality a return to power politics” (European External Action Service 2022). Thus, Russia is seen as “aggressive and revisionist”, threatening European security and values (European External Action Service 2022). The US on the other side, are the EU’s “staunchest and most important strategic partner and are a global power contributing to peace, security, stability and democracy on our continent” (European External Action Service 2022). In practice, this strategic vision turned into a situation in which the EU mobilised its resources against Russia, pushing for militarization amid a wide-range de-industrialisation already underway and following rising energy prices due to anti-Russian sanctions on energy. The resulting economic and social outcomes led to European governments falling or being destabilised one after the other in a series of crises and protests. At the same time, the US/NATO “security umbrella” extended further with the joining of Finland and Sweden and by increasing the EU’s dependency on American arms and energy. Due to soaring prices and US subsidies, several EU giants crossed the Atlantic in pursuit of more profitable conditions.

One of the endangered European sectors has been agriculture. For example, in 2022, the European Union exempted Kiev from customs duties and quotas as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine. This allowed Ukrainian

chicken products to be mass-marketed in France but previously discreetly repackaged in Poland, Belgium and the Netherlands, where they are not required to declare their origin. Thus, Ukraine became the second largest chicken exporter in the EU, after Brazil, but with a significant advantage due to complete liberalisation. Faced with this data amid a violent “peasant revolt”, French President Emmanuel Macron, at the beginning of February 2024, demanded Brussels to find a way to limit Ukrainian exports that threaten French producers. While Macron was passing the ball to Brussels, another “dark cloud” was looming over European farmers – the possibility of final ratification of the free trade agreement with the Mercosur countries (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay). Although it has been under negotiation for 25 years, the agreement with Mercosur had become especially important for the “geopolitical European Commission” in light of the diversification of foreign trade and rapprochement with countries of the Global South that have refused to join Western sanctions against Russia. However, for French farmers, it meant potentially “unfair competition” given that agricultural giants such as Brazil and Argentina do not have to follow the same sanitary and environmental standards, especially when it comes to beef and chicken. Many environmental standards emerged from the EU’s Green Deal on the protestors’ wallpaper, as the reformed Common Agricultural Policy from 2023 makes subsidies subject to strict environmental conditions. From setting aside four per cent of arable land for biodiversity protection and 25 per cent for the production of bio-products to reducing the use of pesticides, the measures of the European Commission have an ecological justification but also severe economic consequences for farmers. In this regard, the rebellious French and European farmers received some significant concessions, either from Paris in the form of the abolition of the increase in the fuel tax for tractors or from Brussels, i.e. the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in the form of cancelling the proposal on halving the use of pesticides. These concessions, given ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections amid fear of further rise of Euroscepticism, were another indication of the dire conditions for the EU in the new geopolitical context. After the flare-up of the conflict in Gaza, the “Houthi factor” did not make things easier, with the jeopardizing of navigation through the Suez Canal, which for European agricultural exporters means not only higher transport costs around South Africa but also excess storage,

potential spoilage of goods and price dumping on the internal European market. Indeed, a “perfect storm” loomed over the European countryside.

RUSSIA PUSHES MULTIPOLARITY FORWARD

By decree of President Putin, Russia approved in March 2023 “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, reinforcing its view on challenging the Western-led order and arguing for sovereignty and multipolarity: “Russia is one of the sovereign centres of global development performing a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining global balance of power and building a multipolar international system, as well as ensuring conditions for the peaceful progressive development of humanity on the basis of a unifying and constructive agenda” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023).

This position has been consistent with the Russian narrative since the early 2000s, before the conflict in Ukraine. Furthermore, the strategic narrative has global implications, as the reaction to the conflict in Ukraine has disclosed the deep gap between the West and the rest of the world. Only about 50 countries of the “political West” – NATO, the EU and their partners in the Pacific, such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan – imposed sanctions on Russia. Three-quarters of the world refused to do so despite tremendous Western pressure. This was a major diplomatic defeat for the West and proof that it could no longer pursue interests at the expense of other great powers without severe consequences.

The “special military operation” particularly accelerated the dynamics of the transition towards multipolarity. The unipolar world – created after the Cold War and in which the US played the role of “world policeman” – is no more.

One of the most frustrating developments for the West in the aftermath of February 2022 has been the continuing strengthening of Sino-Russian strategic relations. After the February 2022 joint declaration, Moscow and China followed up in 2023 with a new one, this time amid the conflict in Ukraine (Xinhua 2023a). The declaration stated that the two powers were not creating a military-political alliance, bloc, or confrontational alliance, despite the fact that bilateral relations have reached highest historical levels. It is a direct reference to what Moscow and Beijing have been openly

advocating for two decades – “indivisible” European and world security: the non-expansion of military-political alliances, such as those directed both against the Russian Federation in Eastern Europe and against the People’s Republic of China in the Asia-Pacific. It also provided a strategic framework for action that should strengthen multipolarity in the world, clearly opposed the RBO and its double standards. Finally, the declaration emphasized the vital role of the new regional poles of power, non-Western powers, which assess that the current order of liberal-democratic hegemony has been overcome and that attempts to maintain it are the biggest threat to international security (Xinhua 2023a).

The declaration announced a series of activities outlining global economic changes. Among the most important are the implementation of BRICS decisions and the strengthening of the New Development Bank, which should contribute to new sources of funding for development projects, the absence of conditioning by international financial institutions controlled by the US, and the strengthening of the de-dollarisation process. Moscow and Beijing also expressed support for integrative development initiatives. The intersection and harmonisation of the Russia-led European Economic Union and the China-led Belt and Road Initiative create a powerful synergistic effect in Eurasia and open the possibility of connecting with markets worldwide, given that 150 countries participate in the BRI (Horváth 2023). Security cooperation extended beyond the delivery of weapons, which is the focus of Western sanctions’ threat to China. The two countries held joint naval exercises, first at the end of February 2023 with South Africa in the Indian Ocean, and then with Iran in the Gulf of Oman. On the other hand, the commitment to cooperation on land can also be seen in support of the fight against the actions of the terrorist group “East Turkestan Islamic Movement”, which carries out terrorist attacks in China’s Xinjiang. The Russian Federation showed it could play a role in the fight against this movement, considering the Russian base in the south of Tajikistan, near the Afghan border and the region where anti-Chinese terrorist groups operate.

A multipolar world does not imply all poles have approximately equal power. While the US and China are singled out as two leading global powers, Russia has shown that it will remain an indispensable world actor as the most significant global energy and nuclear power, with essential strategic relations with rising poles in the Global South. India is becoming the most populous

country in the world, but it has also been one of the critical buyers of Russia's oil following Western sanctions. Saudi Arabia is strengthening its influence by pursuing a policy of "omni-alignment", that is, developing ties with both Western and non-Western partners. While until just a few years ago, it was seen as a key security partner of the US, it is now increasingly turning towards China as its primary export market, but also towards Russia, its partner in oil price control within OPEC+. Brazil's ambitions to play an ever-increasing political role in the world are boosted as it has the second-largest army in the Western Hemisphere, after the US. Brazil is also a member of BRICS and co-sponsored with China a political plan for the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, praised by Moscow.

Russian scholars Bogdanov, Frumkin and Kobrinskaya argue that "the race for the Global South was triggered by the Special Military Operation", and that "the world community's general reaction motivated the concept of the World Majority in Russian political discourse" (Bogdanov, Frumkin and Kobrinskaya 2024). The term "implies opposition to the Western liberal order", "draws the concept of the World Majority closer to that of the Global South" and "highlights the principles of the emerging world order that differentiate it from recent periods and almost bring it back to the Westphalian era" (Bogdanov, Frumkin and Kobrinskaya). Thus, Moscow has "sharply stepped up its efforts in the Global South on a range of issues", and has "a relatively large window of opportunity, five to seven years, opened by the West's evident unreadiness to seriously address the problems of the Global South" (Bogdanov, Frumkin and Kobrinskaya). Karaganov argues that one of the goals of Russian foreign policy should be to "work together with the World Majority countries to ensure the maximally-peaceful exit of the West from its nearly five-century-old position of dominance", that the West should be "relocated to a more modest, but worthy, place in the world system": it is not necessary to "kick it out", but "to firmly deter any rearguard actions of the West's still-powerful organism" (Karaganov 2024).

*RUSSIA-WEST NARRATIVE WAR ON CONFLICT IN UKRAINE:
A SUMMARY*

Beyond the battlegrounds in Ukraine, the Russia-West narrative war has become deeply entrenched. On the source of the conflict, the Western narrative points to “Russian imperialism”, which manifestation is “Putin’s unprovoked aggression with the objective of negating Ukrainian identity and breaking up Ukraine”. The Russian narrative argues the conflict’s cause is “NATO expansion”, with the manifestation being the “building of an anti-Russian Ukraine with the objective of dismantling the rights of the Russian population and breaking up Ukraine”. The Western narrative on its reaction has been “full material and military support to the defensive war of Ukraine”, as well as the definition of the clash as “fight between democrats and autocrats”. For Russia, it has been a “preventive strike with the aim of diffusing the threat of attack on the Russian population and the respect of its choice to live with Russia”, “fight against rising Nazism” in Ukraine, as well as “elimination of the NATO threat through demilitarization”. In terms of how they view the course of the conflict, the narrative of the West points to a “Russian catastrophe”, arguing that Moscow does not have the resources to wage the war, that sanctions have an effect, and that the Russian economy is threatened. The Russian response is that “everything is going by plan” and that it is the West which will struggle in the attrition war. Furthermore, it argues that sanctions have no effect. The Russian economy is stronger than expected, and problems will cripple the West. In terms of ending the conflict, the West argues that “Russia will not win in Ukraine”, that Ukraine will stay whole and will enter NATO. For Russia, its victory is not put into question. The pro-Russian regions join RF, and Ukraine will not be a threat to Russia. Finally, in terms of international consequences, the Western argument is that “transatlantic unity has never been stronger” and that “the RF is isolated from the West”. Russia responds that the “multipolar order has never closer”, and that it is “the West which is isolated from the rest of the world”.

Global Strategic Narrative Wars

	US-WEST NARRATIVE	RUSSIA NARRATIVE
Source of conflict	Russian imperialism	NATO expansion
Manifestation	Putin's unprovoked aggression with the objective of negating Ukrainian identity and breaking up Ukraine	Building of an anti-Russian Ukraine with the objective of dismantling the rights of the Russian population and breaking up Russia
Reaction	Full material and military support to the defensive war of Ukraine, fight between democrats and autocrats	Preventive strike with the aim of diffusing the threat of attack on the Russian population and the respect of its choice to live with Russia, fight against rising Nazism, elimination of the NATO threat through demilitarisation
Conflict development	Russian catastrophe, they do not have the resources. Sanctions have an effect. The Russian economy is threatened.	Everything going by plan, the West does not have the resources. Sanctions have no effect. The Russian economy is stronger than expected. Problems in the West.
End of conflict	Russia will not win in Ukraine. Ukraine will stay whole and will enter NATO.	Russia's victory is not put into question. Pro-Russian regions join RF. Ukraine will not be a threat to Russia.
International consequences	Transatlantic unity never stronger. The RF is isolated from the West.	Multipolar order never closer. The West is isolated from the rest of the world.

CHAPTER 4

ENTER THE CHINESE DRAGON

THE EVOLUTION OF BEIJING'S STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

“This is 1999, not 1899. This is not ... the age when the Western powers plundered the [Chinese] imperial palace at will, destroyed the Old Summer Palace, and seized Hong Kong and Macao ... China is a China that has stood up; it is a China that defeated the Japanese fascists; it is a China that had a trial of strength and victory over the United States on the Korean battleground. The Chinese people are not to be bullied” (Gries 2001). This is how Beijing’s “People Daily” commented on the rage of Chinese people following the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Indeed, it was a clear reference to the refusal to repeat the “Century of Humiliation”, 110 years of suffering from Western domination, starting from the “First Opium War” in 1839 and leading to the ceding of Hong Kong, of “treaty ports” along the Chinese coast and the Yangtze River, the loss of territories to Japan and separatist movements, as well as the collapse of the internal system. It was only after the traumatising Second World War and the victory of the Communist Party of China and the Red Army over Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang that the Chinese people took complete control of their destiny. The People’s Republic of China was formed on October 1, 1949, but its leaders and people remained strongly influenced by the memory of subjugation to Western powers, laying the basis for the determination never to allow the repeat of such a scenario.

Since then, the PRC has had different approaches to world order, in line with its domestic development projects and statecraft capacities, as well as regional and global dynamics. Following the civil war and the country’s formation, Mao Zedong focused on consolidating China internally. This first meant stabilising its borders and finding ways to avoid foreign meddling in the country’s internal affairs. The 1950 “Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance” and the 1954 “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”, confirmed in a joint statement with India, provided a basis for

early stabilisation. The “Five Principles” (mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence) were subsequently included in the 1982 Constitution of the PRC. However, China’s interests, combined with Mao’s anti-imperialist, Marxist-Leninist revolutionary policies, increasingly clashed with those of global powers. From the imbroglios of the Korean War (1950-1953) and the first Taiwan crisis (1954-1955) to the Sino-Soviet split (early 1960s) and the Sino-Indian conflict (1962), Mao’s China – troubled by internal development difficulties – was not in a position to play a decisive role in world order politics (Lanteigne 2020).

On the other hand, two uneasy decades after the formation of the PRC, starting in the early 1970s, Washington saw Beijing as a partner in Soviet containment. It assisted in its economic rise through globalisation, particularly after Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “reform and opening-up” and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979. This engagement continued even after the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square. In the early 1990s, as the US boasted about its Cold War triumph and started losing interest in China as a balancing power against the Soviet Union, Beijing reached extraordinary economic growth. It settled its border disputes with Russia and the Central Asian states and hosted the signing of the formation of the “Shanghai Five” group (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) in 1996, a precursor of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization launched in 2001.

Beijing’s relations with Washington soured following the attack on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, as the US “unipolar moment” metastasised into the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the killing of three Chinese journalists and the wounding of 20 employees. The public outcry in China strengthened anti-Western sentiment and left a “scar of deep mistrust” between Beijing and Washington (Lampton 2014, 118). In the aftermath, China adopted its “New Security Concept”, which, according to Ghiselli, aimed to “improve the view towards a multipolar world order as a response to the US global dominance, especially after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 by the US aviation brought fear to the top of the Chinese civilian and military leadership of the onset of a new era of the US unilateralism” (Ghiselli 2021, 23). Officials of the People’s Liberation

Army (PLA) saw the bombing as a “lethal blow to the slowly recovering authority of the UN”, which will “negatively affect the security environment in Asia”, predicting future American unilateralism in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula (Ghiselli 2021, 51-52). In the “Sino-Russian Joint Statement” on December 10, 1999, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Russian President Boris Yeltsin proposed to “push forward the establishment of a multipolar world on the basis of the principles of the United Nations Charter and existing international laws in the 21st century” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 1999).

China became worried about the formation of US-led “coalitions of the willing” and its implications for international interference on the questions of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Pang 2005, 88). These worries increased following the election of the pro-independence leader in Taipei, Chen Shui-Bian, in 2000. Furthermore, as “colour revolutions” started to flourish around the Russian Federation (“Rose revolution” in Georgia in 2003, “Orange revolution” in Ukraine in 2004, and “Pink revolution” in Kyrgyzstan in 2005), Beijing witnessed increasing pressure of protests on its territory: in Hong Kong from 2004, in Tibet in 2008, in Xinjiang in 2009. Furthermore, despite strong warnings by Moscow and Beijing, Washington and Brussels orchestrated the “unilateral declaration of independence” by Albanian separatists in Kosovo and Metohija in 2008, nine years after the NATO aggression, in yet another violent breach of international law regarding Serbia’s southern province. Beijing saw in these events not only a “Western hand” but also Western negligence for the sanctity of international borders and international law. China’s gradual rapprochement with Russia – within BRIC(S), the SCO, bilaterally with Moscow – its rising maritime forces, agile reaction to the global financial crisis, and its strategic assessment of the nature and future of world order raised concern in Washington, fuelling a narrative of the “China threat”. Under Barack Obama and his Department of State Secretary Hillary Clinton, the Biden administration turned more hostile towards Beijing, describing the South China Sea as an issue of US national interest and laying the ground for Washington’s “Pivot to Asia”.

In the meantime, as China’s economy proliferated, the security of transportation routes became ever more critical, particularly since Beijing became dependent on oil imports from 1993 on (Erickson and Collins 2010, 90). While a more assertive positioning on the Paracel and Spratly island

chains in the South China Sea was expected, Beijing also sent its first “anti-pirate task force” to the Gulf of Aden in 2008. Part of the Suez Canal shipping route between the Arabian and Mediterranean seas, the Aden Gulf had been a scene the previous year of attacks or hijacking of more than 250 civilian ships, during which Somali pirates had taken 50 Chinese seamen hostage (Zhao 2022). Years later, it became clear that this operation also had implications for the demonstration of power projection of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) far from China’s coast (Henry 2016). In 2009, China performed its largest overseas evacuation to date by airlifting 1,300 Chinese citizens from Kyrgyzstan following deadly ethnic clashes (Xinhua 2010). Nevertheless, this operation appeared minor in size the following year, in early 2011, when China evacuated 36,000 citizens from Libya ahead of the Western bombing. In the aftermath, the People’s Liberation Army Daily published an article arguing that the events in Libya marked a “turning point for Chinese foreign policy” – a “crisis in a third country had never impacted Chinese interests abroad as much as this one” and “interest frontiers” – as “the geographical space that is defined (and constantly redefined) by the evolution of China’s interests and the threats to them – had never been so far from its geographical borders” (Ghiselli 2021, 1). Ghiselli argued that the need to protect these “interest frontiers” had become a “powerful factor in the equation of Chinese foreign policy”, causing the “transformation of the Chinese foreign and security policy machine” and “expansion of China’s security footprint overseas” (Ghiselli 2021, 1).

Chinese foreign policy scholars increasingly discussed the limits of foreign policy and security non-interference. Critics of the concept of non-interference considered that the times had changed since 1954 and that China’s global stature and interests had expanded far away from its geographic borders. Gone were the days when China was turned inwards, with limited global interests. They argued that China should be more assertive in defending its own interests and those of its allies. Chinese companies and diaspora had spread around the globe, creating both interdependence and vulnerability. Furthermore, critics argued that the rising role in the world also implied rising responsibilities and expectations, both domestically and internationally. On the other side, defenders of the concept of non-interference feared a change might be counter-productive for the fight against Western interference in China’s own internal matters

and that it might appear repulsive to its neighbours, create conflicts with the West and weaken the power of China's anti-hegemonic narrative.

During the debate on these issues, multiple solutions were presented, and a "loose consensus" was reached on the necessity of combining the maintenance of the principle of non-interference with "creative" and "flexible solutions in practice" (Chen 2019). Zhao Huasheng of Fudan University proposed the concept of "constructive engagement", and according to him, Beijing should not, despite adhering to a policy of non-interference, exclude from its tactical diplomatic arsenal the use of intervention in certain cases (Zhao 2011).

The concept of "creative participation" by Wang Yizhou from Beijing University pointed out that Beijing should use "cautious, creative and constructive mediation" when dealing with international relations and "not follow the hegemonic model of Western powers that forces other nations to accept solutions with the help of an iron fist" (Wang 2012). Wang Yizhou made a strict distinction with "Western interventionism" and insisted that "creative participation" must be based on international legitimacy, that the UN Charter must be respected, as well as the invitation or consent of the local population or the majority of political actors. At the same time, it should be used only in cases of defence of vital interests, and the approach must be diplomatic mediation and economic assistance instead of a military solution.

Chen argued that the debate led to a "loose consensus" for a "modest pragmatic adjustment of the non-interference policy", following the concepts of "constructive" and "creative" involvement that must be clearly distinguished from Western-style interventionism (Chen 2019, 90-92). Furthermore, Chen argued that the thought of Chinese realists became dominant over two other currents among Beijing's foreign policy scholars – the anti-Western view of Marxism with Chinese characteristics and the globalist view of liberalism with Chinese characteristics. In turn, the realist school divided itself between defensive and offensive realists. Defensive realists expressed worry about China's capacity to have a more active role in global hotspots. In contrast, offensive realists considered that Beijing should be more assertive in using its power and diplomatic influence to promote its own and the interests of its allies (Chen 2019, 95). One of China's most prominent foreign policy scholars, Yan Xuetong, himself an offensive realist, argued in favour of shifting from the economic profit of Deng

Xiaoping's "hide capabilities and bide time" to a policy of "striving for achievement" which allows for more political allies in the international arena. Yan argued that the difference between the two concepts was that, as opposed to the earlier policy, which focused on China's own economic gains, "striving for achievement" centred on political support and morality. These features strengthened the political legitimacy of a rising power (Yan 2014, 153). On the other side, Chen argued that the consensus on keeping the non-interference principle, albeit modified, allowed Beijing to "float above some of the world's difficult trouble spots without getting sucked into messy political disputes" (Chen 2019, 99). He mentioned the case of the conflict in Ukraine from early 2014 on, where Beijing argued for the preservation of territorial integrity and non-interference while at the same time underlying the West should take into account Moscow's legitimate concerns over Ukraine (Chen 2019, 99).

Some authors compare the prospects of maintaining a course of non-interference in internal affairs, as part of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" policy, with the fate of the American principle of "Sincere friendship for all, interference in alliances with none", which was pronounced by US President Thomas Jefferson in 1801. Lampton pointed out that "just as Jeffersonian principles yielded to the needs of growing power, expanding interests, and growing fears of vulnerability due to the birth of modern warfare, so the luxury of standing aside is proving unsustainable for Beijing" (Lampton 2014, 42).

XI'S GLOBAL VISION

Since the outset of the 21st century, one of the fundamental questions for researchers and policymakers regarding the structure and functioning of world order has been whether the rise of the People's Republic of China is a "threat" or an "opportunity", and whether it will be peaceful or not. Meanwhile, Beijing has structured a narrative of its "peaceful rise" aimed at "building a community of shared future for mankind". While deeply enshrined in the Westphalian system of national sovereignty, 21st-century China has also sought to reinvigorate its traditional values and worldviews based on Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism. Fundamental principles of Confucianism emphasised diplomacy, peaceful and mutually beneficial

external relations (ren, benevolence), as well as stability, order, international norms and conflict prevention (li, propriety); Taoist concepts of “wuwei” (nonaction) relate to the importance of dialogue and negotiation, “Yin and yang” emphasise balancing own interests with the interest of other nations; meanwhile, the Legalist concept of “tianxia” (All-Under-Heaven) puts China in the position of a central power responsible for maintaining harmony and stability (Stekić 2023a). Nevertheless, Western powers, and Washington in particular, have instead pointed to the “China threat”, increasingly arguing it is a “partner” and “competitor” but also a “systemic rival”. While there are substantial nuances among the world’s “rest”, the sheer number of participants in Beijing’s flagship “Belt and Road Initiative” (155 countries, or over two-thirds of UN members) points to the fact that its growing global clout incites largely positive connotations.

Under the presidency of Xi Jinping since 2013, China has stepped up its international power role, incrementally adding global political and security features to the world’s second-largest economy. For Yan Xuetong, the approach of “moral realism” meant that Beijing should selectively reward those who “want to have a constructive role in China’s rise” while punishing those who are hostile (Yan 2014). He argued that strategic allies are more important than economic profit. Beijing boosted the SCO and BRICS, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), particularly the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Globally, Beijing’s new policy led to the acknowledgement that the transition towards multipolarity was in higher gear. The “early days” of this transition – Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Beijing’s outstanding reaction to the 2008 global economic crisis, and the formation of BRICS (2009-2010) – were giving place to new order-changing initiatives in which China had a premier role. The first and most prominent of them – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – was launched by Xi shortly after he became president. While focused on international economic and infrastructure development, the BRI led to what Yan Xuetong had hoped for – an extended geographical network of political partnerships – and, accordingly, the expansion of Beijing’s “interest frontiers”, requiring foreign policy and security activities to protect them (Ghiselli 2021, 1).

However, China was not expanding its “interest frontiers” nor implementing the BRI, just to seek economic or global power. Beijing assessed that the new initiatives were needed to break the United States’

“first island chain” (neo)containment policy in the Asia-Pacific, provide reliable maritime and land routes through Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, and secure its ever-increasing energy imports from Russia and the Middle East.

The BRI, complemented by strategic partnerships in Europe and Asia, sought alternatives to the possible clogging of its traditional maritime routes. It also aimed to boost development projects in the Global South, which was severely threatened by the aftermath of the world economic and financial crisis and Western disinterest.

China’s BRI strategic narrative framed the initiative as a “win-win”, “mutually beneficial cooperation”, and “sharing the fruits of development” to build a “community of shared future for mankind” with respect for multipolarity and the central role of the UN (Xi 2014; Xi 2017). The BRI is, indeed, a complex narrative which can be seen as a system narrative (as it presents an alternative vision to the existing world order), an identity narrative (about the projection of China’s values and power) and an issue narrative (about specific infrastructure and investments objectives envisioned by the BRI) (Mitić 2022).

Despite gaining economic clout, China was thus facing growing challenges, to which it needed to respond by shaping the strategic environment in geographic areas of crucial importance to its interest frontiers.

However, the dominant global power can allow other international powers to achieve their objectives only as they fit its strategic narrative and the international environment it had shaped in its pursuit and maintenance of hegemony. As a result, the United States, as the leader of the post-Cold War “unipolar moment”, started to shift its policy of engagement with Beijing to the policy of containment of its rise. After a slow start of Barrack Obama’s “pivot to Asia” in the early 2010s, the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House in the mid-2010s sharpened and sped up the containment policy through tariff wars, sanctions, restrictions for investment and technological procurement, as well as strategic communication aimed at undermining Beijing’s capacities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. His successor, Joseph Biden, pursued in the early 2020s the policy of containment with bipartisan support, charged with pushing U.S. businesses and countries worldwide to “de-couple” from China and to fight for the preservation of the Western-led “rules-based order” challenged by Beijing.

For its part, China relentlessly pursued its strategic objectives: the preservation of its territorial integrity and sovereignty; breaking of the U.S. containment policy in the Indo-Pacific; securing of its transport routes and energy imports; expansion and protection of its “interest frontiers”; and challenging of the RBO through initiatives harmonised with the transition towards multipolarity.

CHINA’S SOFT POWER

Unsurprisingly, the concept of soft power attracted China’s attention early after its coining in 1990. In Nye’s words, “a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it”, as “it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions” (Nye 2005, 5). While Nye mainly focused on the effectiveness of US foreign policy, China could see in this analytical concept a reflection of its ambitions to project its attractiveness: one of the world’s oldest cultures becoming a global economic superpower. A powerhouse aiming to share economic development with the world rather than to pursue a Cold War-era mentality of confrontation or unipolar post-Cold War hegemonism depicted through the promotion of liberal democratic values, protected through “humanitarian interventions” and unilateral restrictive measures.

The concept of soft power was introduced by scholars in China in 1993 when Wang Huning of Fudan University argued that the major source of China’s soft power could be culture (Lai 2012). Rapidly, the concept expanded from academia to the broader public, entrepreneurs and officials. In 2007, at the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the concept became embedded in official rhetoric when the Secretary-General of the CCP and Chinese President Hu Jintao argued that the party should “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country” (Lai 2012, 12). Nevertheless, Chinese views of soft power did not fully reflect Nye’s definitions. Lai argued that Nye underestimated the importance of “economic resources, humanitarian foreign aid, and technological and scientific capacity for a nation’s soft power” (Lai 2012, 11).

With the rise of interest in the soft power concept in China, foreign scholars and observers started to pay more attention to the planning and implementation of the concept in China's practice. China aimed to intertwine its concept of soft power with traditional culture, ideology and development strategies. As the country grew in global economic prominence, it was expected that this development would sooner or later lead to its growing international influence as a "great soft power". One of the main reasons was the Western framing of Beijing's rise as a "China threat". Thus, it was a natural consequence that Beijing sought to overturn this negative framing and saw in the application of soft power concepts the possibility of reframing critical responses to its global economic rise.

"Who's afraid of China?" Barr asked in 2011, arguing that the way China is represented is always conditioned by the way the West represents itself: "Perhaps one reason that China is feared is that its soft campaign draws unwelcome attention to the West's own inadequacy in answering the most pressing questions of modernity" (Barr 2011, 134). Indeed, the uncertainties of the reflexive modernity, the transformations in the globalisation process, the crisis of the unipolar US system, and the global economic and financial crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s drew even more interest to China's international role and image projection. That same year, in 2011, the 17th Central Committee of the CCP devoted its whole plenary to the issue of culture. The final communiqué declared that the national goal was to "build the country into a socialist cultural superpower" (Shambaugh 2015, 99). Shortly after, in his report to the 18th CPC Congress in 2012, Hu Jintao called for a "community of common destiny" for China and its neighbours.

While the importance of soft power has reached unanimity among Chinese scholars and officials, there are differences in the discussion over the critical sources of China's soft power. On one side, most Chinese scholars place culture at the centre of soft power initiatives. This "cultural school" has led to the popularisation of the concept of "cultural soft power", albeit "culture is treated as an eclectic and fluid concept", including Chinese traditional culture (5,000 years of culture, Confucius, Sun Tzu, Daoist teachings), moral principles (harmony and community versus hegemonic cultural domination or "American exceptionalism"), and political ideology ("Socialism with Chinese Characteristics") (Repnikova 2022, 4). A second school of thought (Yan Xuetong) places politics as the essence of China's soft

power and argues that political power is necessary to mobilise culture to the nation's advantage domestically and internationally (Repnikova 2022, 5). The third, the economic development model, argues that China presents a "Chinese development model" as an alternative to the Washington Consensus. However, Repnikova argues, "the cultural, political, and developmental perspectives are fluid and interactive in Chinese analyses of soft power, with many writings featuring some interplay of all three" (Repnikova 2022, 6). In particular, she argues that China used a fusion of soft and hard power during the coronavirus pandemic. On one side, Beijing publicised success stories during the battle against the virus, and on the other, it used "mask diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy" to promote the "win-win" principles (Repnikova 2022, 10).

Like any other country, China deploys several channels to promote its soft power. Its primary focus, however, is on the following: (1) Chinese language and culture (Confucius) institutes; (2) External communication/media; (3) Educational exchanges; and (4) Large-scale public diplomacy events (Repnikova, 2022).

Confucius institutes: Since the opening of the first institutes in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004, Confucius Institutes have expanded rapidly around the globe, reaching over 500 in more than 160 countries in less than two decades. For a long time directly managed by institutions affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, they are integrated into host universities. Such structure has led to considerable results and controversial reactions, including appeals for oversight and closures in the United States and Australia due to local fears of potential "indoctrination". The main objectives of the centres are to promote the learning of the Chinese language, the understanding of Chinese culture and the encouragement of cultural exchange.

External communication: Although China had considerable interest in external promotion of its messaging even before the end of the 20th century, it mainly grew in importance in the 2000s, following accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and the "going-out" media policy in 2009, to which the government committed 6 billion dollars to outlets showing and telling China to the world, including through media outlets competing internationally with Western media (Repnikova, 2022). The result was the creation of multi-language versions of China's Central TV station, CCTV, and the transformation in 2016 into the China Global Television Network (CGTN)

– with six channels broadcasting in five languages. This was accompanied by publishing the “Global Times” in English and launching the US and African editions of the English-language newspaper “China Daily”. During Xi Jinping’s tenure, the conglomerates were centralised progressively. In 2018, China Central Television, China National Radio and China Radio International merged into the China Media Group or Voice of Choice. Conversely, China’s communication progressively opted for more partnerships with local media in regions worldwide.

Education exchanges and public diplomacy events: Taking in lessons and experiences from Western countries, China has invested heavily in both the excellence of its university programs and the promotion of exchange programs to attract the world’s leading talent. While the number of international students in 2001 was 61,869, by 2018, the number reached 492,185, spread over 1004 institutions (China Education Center 2019). Much of the focus has been on African students, whose number rose 40 times in 15 years to 81,562 in 2018. However, Asia maintained the first position, and “this trend has been consolidated with the continuous construction of the Belt and Road Initiative”, according to Chinese reports (Zhao 2019). The impact of the BRI is reflected in the fact that the majors whose popularity rose the most are science, economics and management. A focus was also put on short-term training, particularly for citizens of African countries.

In addition, one of the most prominent mechanisms of promoting Chinese soft power has been organising major public diplomacy events. These have included not only major world events, such as the 2008 and 2022 Beijing Olympics or the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, but also diplomatic summits, such as those related to the BRI – the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation or the China-Central and Eastern European Countries summit – as well as smaller trade fairs and economic summits. All these promote China’s image worldwide and attract people-to-people exchange and networking with academics, officials, entrepreneurs, and journalists worldwide.

NEW CHINESE GLOBAL INITIATIVES

Despite facing the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on one side, the threat of containment and de-coupling on the other, and the overall US policy of “shaping the strategic environment around Beijing”, China did not go on the defensive. Instead, Beijing boosted existing and launched new global initiatives, pushing its own shaping strategy, particularly in Eurasia.

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Recapitulating in September 2023 the first decade of the BRI launch, *The Economist*, not too kind to the Initiative since its inception, underlined that ten years ago, “no one predicted that the project would become a defining feature of (Xi’s) foreign policy and dramatic symbol of China’s rise as a global power”, and that “the West was in for a shock” (*The Economist* 2023a). The British magazine further underlined that “in many ways the BRI has lived up to the hype” as “more than 150 countries, accounting for almost 75% of the world’s population and more than half of its GDP, have signed on to the scheme” (*The Economist* 2023b). According to Chinese figures, the BRI has helped the GDP share of emerging and developing countries to increase by 3.6 per cent through some 3,000 projects, and it will lift 40 million people out of poverty by 2030 (Embassy of the PR of China in Grenada 2023). In Africa alone, the Initiative has led to the construction or refurbishment of “over 10,000 kilometers of railway, up to 100,000 kilometers of roads, nearly 1,000 bridges and almost 100 ports” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2022b). Through promoting BRI connectivity, China has boosted connectivity to the rest of the world for landlocked Asian countries, such as Laos, Nepal and Kazakhstan. Same in Africa, with Ethiopia, where the 2018 railway between Djibouti and Addis Ababa, constructed under the BRI, has helped the country link to the Arabian Sea and China’s maritime transport route – providing a significant boost for the country’s successful 2023 bid to join BRICS.

Throughout Eurasia, the China-Europe Railway Express has opened a new Asia-Europe land transport route, which has played a crucial role since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global supply chains. With the conflict in Ukraine intensifying since early 2022, there were worries that the corridor

linking China and Western Europe through the Russian Federation would be threatened. However, figures paint a different picture. In the first seven months of 2023, more than 1.08 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) of freight were transported between China and Europe through the route, a year-on-year increase of 27 per cent (Blair 2023). The trip from Shenyang, in northeastern China, to Duisburg in the heavily industrialised Rhine-Ruhr region, the economic heartland of Germany, lasts 12 days. Ten overseas terminal stations have been set up along the route, including Moscow. Transit countries, such as Mongolia and Belarus, have considerably profited from transportation income. Indeed, in just a few years since its 2017 launch, the route has become an essential part of China's BRI aim to reduce its dependence on potential Strait of Malacca blockage.

Another part of this strategy has been the CPEC corridor connecting China's Kashgar to Pakistan's Gwadar in the Arabian Sea. With the development of the Gwadar warm-water deep-sea port, it has become a connectivity regional hub, with benefits not only to China and Pakistan but also to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Gwadar has a crucial location at the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz, between Oman and Iran, one of the world's most important oil chokepoints, with the passage each of day of 17 million barrels of oil per day, an equivalent of 20 to 30 per cent of the world's total consumption (Strauss Center for International Security and Law 2023). Thus, it is of additional importance to China's energy security.

In Europe, BRI-affiliated projects have become showcases. As a critical hub for BRI's maritime entrance into Europe, the Piraeus port in Greece has been transformed from decaying to Mediterranean premier and one of Europe's top five, increasing its capacity from 1.5 million TEUs to 6.2 million in 13 years since China's COSCO acquired its majority stake (Xinhua 2023b). Along with successful infrastructure projects in Serbia and the perspective of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway – tying the Mediterranean to Central Europe along Corridor X – the case of Piraeus has maintained the interest for the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) format, originally the "16+1", despite the decision by the Baltic countries to exit the network under Washington's influence.

The BRI has also allowed China to demonstrate during the COVID-19 pandemic its "mask and vaccine diplomacy". China built upon its BRI-affiliated Health Silk Road (HSR) to launch the "Initiative for Belt and Road

Partnership on COVID-19 Vaccines Cooperation” with 28 countries to narrow the global immunisation gap (Liangtao et al 2022). Although geopolitical competition, Western constraints and accusations of “exploiting the pandemic” affected its total reach, the “mask and vaccine diplomacy” had a considerable positive impact on the projection of China’s soft power in the Global South in general and Asia in particular.

While not directly linked, the BRI helped China with its diplomatic battle over Taiwan. Its policy of de-recognition of Taiwan has been particularly successful since 2017, with eight countries cutting ties with Taipei—in Africa, the Pacific, and Latin America—thus leaving the number of recognisers to 13—mostly small island states, the Vatican, and Eswatini as the only remaining African recogniser.

On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the BRI, in September 2023, the State Council of the PRC published its white paper “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions”, outlining the achievements of the Initiative and the principles for the way forward. In the paper, Beijing argued that the ten years of the BRI showed that it had “nothing to do with self-interest and protectionism” but instead with “confronting the hegemonic thinking of certain countries that seek supremacy” (State Council of the PR of China 2023).

THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Despite being in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and facing increasing US pressure, Beijing launched in September 2021 the first in a series of three new global initiatives. The Global Development Initiative (GDI) was launched as a credible opportunity to encourage the achievement of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the UN Agenda 2030. Set in 2015, the SDGs were lagging worldwide due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rising geopolitical tensions and the overall crisis of the neoliberal economic model. While the BRI has appeared in the context of the global economic and financial crises, the GDI has been proposed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising geopolitical competition. While the BRI has focused on “hardware” connectivity – transportation infrastructure, industry parks and economic corridors- the GDI focuses on “software” of technology transfer, knowledge sharing, capacity building,

rules and standards. While compatible with the BRI, the GDI tackles uneven and inadequate environments. It proposes cooperation in eight areas: poverty alleviation, food security, pandemic response and vaccines, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialisation, digital economy and connectivity in the digital area (Center for International Knowledge for Development 2023). The focus is to put global development back on the agenda as a priority and solution to many of the world's problems, particularly in the Global South. In line with this objective, the objective is to renew the commitment of UN members to the SDGs. While the pace of achieving the 2030 Agenda is already slow, it is particularly worrying on some of the commitments. An increasing number of Chinese global development experts assess that some would not be achieved at pace before the end of the 21st century. There is growing fear that funding gaps in international development cooperation are rising and that de-globalisation is underway through various protectionist measures. Thus, the GDI aims to restore global development partnerships. One of the key elements is its immediate link to UN multilateralism. The GDI was presented at the UN General Assembly, and it received in a record time the support of up to 100 countries within the Group of Friends of the Initiative, followed by the meeting of the Group at the UN Headquarters in New York. By linking its Initiative to the UN from the start of the process, China showed its focus on multilateralism and the width of global support for its Initiative. Thus, it set the scene for the GDI to be perceived as an UN-centred multilateral effort rather than a geopolitical project – labelling the BRI had received from the West. On the contrary, the Western BRI-countering efforts could now be perceived as geopolitical. The Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) was inaugurated by the G7 in 2022 to compete with the BRI (Lemire and Mathiesen 2022). The EU integrated its BRI-combating Global Gateway initiative into the PGII, whose strategic narrative focused on the superiority of values over the BRI. However, as with the BRI, Western initiatives are once again a step behind the Chinese in terms of global support, scope, and pace of implementation. Thus, when he announced at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg the launch of a 10 billion US dollar special fund to implement the GDI, Xi Jinping was already able to proclaim the fruition of 200 cooperation projects in Asia, Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean island countries, as well as the launch with UNESCO of the “GDI for Africa’s future” action plan (CGTN 2023).

THE GLOBAL CIVILISATION INITIATIVE

The beginning of the post-Cold War period in the 1990s was marked by Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man" and Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations". Fukuyama claimed that the end of the Cold War marked the final triumph of "liberal democracy" (Fukuyama 1992). Huntington warned that the future "main axis of conflict" would be along civilisational lines. Thus, he advocated the expansion of the European Union and NATO to the borders of what he considered Catholic-Protestant Europe (Huntington 1993). It was at the time of the absolute expansion of the American "unipolar order".

A quarter of a century later, it turned out that the theses of both were largely rebuttable. Liberal democracy is no longer inviolable, although it remains the most impressive exponent of the interests of the "political West". The geopolitical interests of the leading Western powers do not take into account the framework of civilisation, as evidenced by the NATO expansion process that led to conflicts within the "Orthodox civilisation" in Ukraine.

Xi Jinping announced the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) in March 2023, calling for respecting the diversity of civilisations, the diversified paths to modernisation and people-to-people exchange. His arguments suggest an opposition to Westernisation as the only model of modernisation and to Western values as universal. The appeal of these ideas is high in Asia, where many countries have created sustainable development and modernisation models without necessarily aligning with Western norms of the RBO. It is the same with protecting the diversity and heritage of traditional values. In an apparent reference to the West, Xi called to "refrain from imposing their own values or models on others", "from stoking ideological confrontation", and from "feelings of superiority" (Xinhua 2023c). As with the GDI, Beijing sought and obtained support at the multilateral level, as the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, Miguel Angel Moratinos, called for close coordination between the GCI and the United Nations (UNAOC 2023). The GCI principles align with Chinese soft power principles. A particular point of focus in Chinese soft power projection has been neighbouring Central Asia, where Beijing uses the mix of buoyant nostalgia of Silk Road imagery and modern people-to-people exchanges: it opened 12 Confucius centres, broadcasts 24-hour programmes in local languages, devotes necessary resources for scholarships, technical assistance and state-

of-the-art vocational training. On the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations with the Central Asian states, Xi Jinping in January 2022 announced several initiatives aiming to boost Beijing's soft power in the region: increasing in the next half-decade the number of sister-city pairings with five Central Asian countries to 100, providing 1,200 government scholarships to their students (Xi 2023). In the security area, these efforts have included training of personnel and exercises in bilateral and multilateral formats, carefully balanced with Russia's traditional military presence in the region. They have also allowed for a more robust BRI and security presence. At the first-ever China-Central Asia summit, held in May 2023 in Xian – the origin of the ancient Silk Road route – Xi urged the Central Asian states to implement the principles of the GDI, but also to help “strengthen capacity building on law enforcement, security and defence, support their independent efforts to safeguard regional security and fight terrorism, and work with them to promote cyber-security” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2023a). In the countries of Central Asia, China has invested significant resources in tuition fees, technical assistance and vocational training through its Luban workshops, founded after Lu Ban, the father of Chinese architecture, who lived in the 6th century and was the inventor of the basis for many instruments used in buildings. As part of the programme, 5,000 seminars and workshops in various professional fields were announced for Central Asian citizens.

The first China-Central Asia summit in May 2023 was held in Xi'an for a reason. At the summit, infrastructure projects such as the China-Tajikistan highway through the Pamir Plateau, the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline, and the continuation of the development of the China-Europe railway line connecting Eurasia modelled on former caravan systems were announced.

At the beginning of 2024, football fans worldwide could enjoy images from the opening and closing of the Africa Cup of Nations, held in Abidjan, the largest city in Ivory Coast. The home team triumphed in the final and won the African Cup of Nations for the third time. However, one of the big winners was China's “Stadium Diplomacy”. Namely, Chinese companies designed and built the Epimbe Olympic Stadium in Abidjan.

Indeed, “Stadium Diplomacy” is a successful combination of Chinese initiatives, from the BRI and the GDI to the GCI, because it respects not only the passion of Africans for football and connects them with the rest of the

world but also leaves lasting positive consequences which the construction of the stadium infrastructure has for the development and economy of African countries. As part of “stadium diplomacy”, China has so far built over 100 stadiums in Africa, and just for the Ivory Coast tournament, three of the six where matches were played.

As expected, the leading American think tanks did not greet the Global Civilisation Initiative. They assessed that its goal is to threaten what they call “universal values”, their view of democracy and human rights. The Atlantic Council, in its criticism of the GCI, assessed that it is part of an effort to “threaten American global dominance”, failing to understand that the world no longer lives in the 1990s, under the obsolete ideological matrices of Fukuyama and Huntington.

THE GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE

The Global Security Initiative (GSI) has received the most public attention worldwide among China’s three new initiatives. Xi Jinping announced the GSI two months after the beginning of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine at the Boao Forum for Asia Conference in April 2022 and set outright the context of his proposal: “changes of the world, of our times and of history are unfolding in ways like never before” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2022c). China’s president received support from Moscow for the idea of the GSI, and on his first trip abroad since the COVID-19 pandemic, he presented the idea at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand, receiving support from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Freeman and Stephenson 2022). He continued to garner support at the multilateral level – proposing it at the UN level on the occasion of International Peace Day – and the G20 Bali summit. However, the main presentation of the GSI occurred on February 21, 2023, when the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its “Concept paper” with six core concepts and principles, 20 priorities of cooperation and five platforms and mechanisms of cooperation. The six core concepts and principles aligned with China’s long-standing vision of global security. First, there is a need for a new vision of security – common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable – a concept that was introduced by Xi in 2014. It calls for the respect of the security of every country, peaceful negotiation and political

dialogue, as well as coordination and cooperation in security governance. Second, the respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, firmly supported by China in its Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence. Third, deep commitment to the principles of the UN Charter, underlying that “the Cold War mentality, unilateralism, bloc confrontation and hegemonism contradict the spirit of the UN Charter and must be resisted and rejected”. Fourth, commitment to indivisible security, taking the legitimate security of all countries seriously and arguing that the “security of one country should not come at the expense of that of others”. Fifth, commitment to peaceful and negotiated solutions instead of war and unilateral sanctions, including calls to countries to “strengthen strategic communication, enhance mutual security confidence, diffuse tensions, manage differences and eliminate the root causes of crises”. Finally, the sixth is a commitment to security in traditional and non-traditional domains, which have become intertwined, particularly in terrorism, climate change, cybersecurity, and biosecurity. Furthermore, the Concept Paper outlined the “Priorities for Cooperation” – including conflict hotspots – as well as “Mechanisms of Cooperation”, focusing mainly on the UN and other multilateral initiatives and networks in which China had been participating (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2023c). In a bold strategic communication move, Beijing presented three days later, on the occasion of the first anniversary of Russia’s operation, its “Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”. The plan underlines in its first point the preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, yet adds that “double standards must be rejected”, a clear poke in the direction of the RBO and a reference to the different treatment of cases of territorial integrity of Ukraine and Serbia, which territorial integrity the West breached by masterminding the 2008 UDI of the Albanian separatists in Kosovo. The second point of the plan argues against “Cold War mentality” and security “at the expense of others”, including that “the security of a region should be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs”. The clear reference to NATO’s expansion towards Russia as the source of the conflict in Ukraine adds to Beijing’s stand on its harsh opposition to the U.S.-led China-containment policy in the Indo-Pacific through military partnerships and networks, creating the base for a future “Asian NATO”. This point and point 10 reference to opposition to “the abuse of unilateral sanctions” particularly irritated Western officials.

However, the Western states were not the primary target of China's strategic communication of the GSI. This was particularly evident when, two weeks after the Concept paper presentation, Beijing hosted a stunning shuttle diplomacy success, bringing together Iran and Saudi Arabia to re-establish diplomatic relations. While surprising, the indicators for such development could be seen in the last several years of balanced treatment and parallel inclusion of Riyadh and Teheran in the SCO and, a bit later, into BRICS. Beijing wanted to make sure that its diplomatic success was a "successful application of the GSI" (Global Times 2023a) and that it would "exert far-reaching influence on other hotspot issues" (Global Times 2023b). The Iran-Saudi Arabia deal boosted the GSI, leading to more acceptance in the Global South in the coming months. In the West, the reception of the GSI was harsh, as it was labelled "anti-US", "anti-NATO", and a "manifesto for an alternative system of international affairs to the current 'rules-based' order led by the United States and its partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific" (Schuman, Fulton and Gering 2023). China, in turn, has continued to use the GSI and harshly criticise the US and its allies for trying to create a series of China-containing alliances: from AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) to the QUAD, the U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral summit in Camp David, the deal on new US bases in the Philippines and a new 10-billion dollars package of military assistance to Taiwan. China has answered to the trend of US containment by extending further its "interest frontiers", as witnessed by the bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, the joint drills with Russia and South Africa in the Indian Ocean, as well as with Russia and Iran in the Gulf of Oman. Furthermore, the GSI allows cooperation in joint efforts to tackle the terrorist threat. This is particularly relevant for the case of the terrorist threat from the "Liberation Army of Baluchistan" on the China-CPEC corridor in Pakistan, around Gwadar, as well as from the "Islamist Movement of Eastern Turkistan" in Afghanistan's Badakhshan, affiliated with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations, and threatening to destabilise Xinjiang (Mitić 2022a).

The strategic communication process of presenting the GSI – including the global context, document wording, dynamic of international support gathering and concrete messaging – made it clear that the GSI would receive the attention of two key target groups. The first group comprises strategic partners and potential adherents to the GSI principles. The second is made

up of Western countries and potential Western allies in the containment of China's rise.

Just as with the GDI, China did not have to wait long to receive early support from a number of countries in the Global South. Only a week after Xi's inauguration speech, nine Caribbean states having diplomatic relations with China supported the GSI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2022c), followed by Laos, which emphasised "the importance of the legitimate security concerns of all countries" (The Paper 2022). Russia supported the SCO, followed by six members of the SCO at the Samarkand summit (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), as well as Mongolia, Cuba, Uruguay, Cambodia, Nicaragua and Belarus. When the GSI Concept paper was unveiled, a commentary in the People's Daily argued that the Initiative had received support "from more than 80 countries and regional organisations around the world" (People's Daily 2023). The Concept paper and the Riyadh-Teheran deal gave further impetus. President Xi received support for the GSI from Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune (Xinhua 2023d), while Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang received support from his Malaysian (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2023d) and Georgian counterparts (Xu 2023). Media from countries of the Global South mostly reiterated key messaging of the GSI, including its timeliness, need for a balanced global security architecture, respect for security concerns of all countries, cooperative, common security, opposition to double standards and unilateralism, as well as fight against non-traditional threats and terrorism. Thus, in Zimbabwe, the media called for African acceptance of the GSI as an alternative to the "double standards" and "unilateralism" of the West, as well as for them to work jointly to fight terrorism (Chavhunduka 2022). In Liberia, GSI was seen as "upholding true multilateralism and stressing that we humanity are living in an indivisible security community" (Dodoo 2022). In Pakistan, the Riyadh-Teheran deal was hailed as "the result of the Chinese vision of global security in terms of GSI" (Javed 2023).

Nevertheless, the GSI did not get unanimous support in the Global South. In particular, scepticism is present in India and several countries in the Asia-Pacific, which are seen as potential supporters of Western plans for China's containment.

Conversely, the GSI received more analytical attention in Western countries. The majority of the frames employed by Western officials, think

tanks, and media portrayed the GSI as a threat to the liberal “rules-based international order.” The following keyframes could be distinguished:

(1) The GSI presents an alternative to the Western-led security order. This frame argues that China is seeking to promote a “China-led alternative” (Freeman and Stephenson 2022); “challenging the U.S.-led liberal international world order” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2023); “a manifesto for an alternative system of international affairs to the current ‘rules-based’ order led by the United States and its partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific” (Schuman, Fulton and Gering 2023); “a roadmap and ideological framework for China’s ambition to re-shape the international order” (Legarda and Stec 2022); an attempt to “build support among countries in the global south for a narrative that positions China as the logical successor to a U.S.-led multilateralism that Beijing insists is failing to keep the peace” (Kine 2022).

(2) The GSI is aimed against the US and NATO. This frame argues that the concepts criticised by the GSI, such as “hegemonism”, “bloc politics”, and “Cold War mentality”, are “frequently-used terms to denounce US attempts at containing growing Chinese power through economic sanctions and security alliances” (Abb 2023). Thus, Beijing is “using the GSI to discredit US leadership as a source of sustainable security” (Freeman and Stephenson 2022), and “its core objective appears to be the degradation of U.S.-led alliances and partnerships” (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2023).

(3) The GSI is promoting pro-Russian concepts. This frame is particularly critical of the use of the concept of “indivisible security”, which is “redolent of language Vladimir Putin used to justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine” (Freeman and Stephenson 2022), through which Chinese leaders join Moscow “in excusing the unlawful invasion of Ukraine by blaming the US-led NATO for committing the ‘original sin’ that led to the war” (Schuman, Fulton and Gering 2023).

(4) The GSI is exploiting the UN system. This frame argues that, just as with the BRI and the GDI, Beijing will seek to incorporate the language of the GSI “into UN statements and other materials” (Freeman and Stephenson 2022) and that “China is exploiting its growing influence at international organisations such as the UN system to promote its initiatives and their

principles” (Schuman, Fulton and Gering 2023), with the “underlying aim remaining to reform the UN from within” (Ekman 2023).

(5) The GSI is expanding its internal security approach to the global level. This frame argues that GSI is being used as “a framework for promoting and normalising China’s expansive approach to domestic security globally” (Freeman and Stephenson 2022), thus signifying an “evolving Chinese worldview in which internal policies are externalised” (Schuman, Fulton and Gering 2023), with the GSI becoming “Xi’s favoured vehicle for externalising the comprehensive national security concept” (Greitens 2023)

(6) The GSI will not be able to close the gap between words and deeds. This frame argues that the GSI will not succeed in addressing some of the discrepancies observed by Western analysts between the principles of the Initiative and the policies of Beijing. There is an “apparent gap between China’s rhetoric and its behaviour” (Tiezzi 2023). “The more deeply Beijing involves itself in international diplomacy, the more obvious the inconsistencies and biases of its approach become” (Schuman, Fulton and Gering 2023), and “it would be a hard sell for China to promote the GSI in any meaningful way across Southeast Asia while simultaneously engaging in grey zone operations through the maritime militia in the South China Sea” (Fiala 2022).

(7) The GSI will (nevertheless) try to appeal to (some) European states. This frame, present among European experts, argues that although the GSI focus on the Global South, Beijing will “also try to secure buy-in from European countries” and that, although the EU is not mentioned in the document, “this does not mean that China will not open some of the GSI initiatives to the EU and several of its Member States” (Ekman 2023).

Within a year, the GSI gained considerable and growing interest, allowing for an early assessment of its strategic communication.

First, China presented the GSI not only at a timely moment, following Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, but also insisted that the unveiling of the Initiative was due to the unprecedented changes and fallacies of the existing, albeit rusting, international security architecture and mechanisms. It demonstrated the instability of the world security order and its rules/principles, thus making the case that the time was ripe for change. The length and escalation of the conflict in Ukraine accentuate these points.

Second, the GSI shows consistency and complementarity with Beijing's previous and current strategies – from the earlier comprehensive national security strategy, “community with a shared future for mankind” and BRI, up to the new GDI and GCI. Despite Western attempts to derail Beijing's strategic narrative, the wording and concepts employed show robustness and coordination, which are necessary for effective strategic communication.

Third, the Initiative's robustness does not preclude flexibility in its implementation. The GSI presented a wide range of possible fields and mechanisms, which gave Beijing multiple possibilities to choose when and how to strike diplomatic successes in the security field and tie them to the Initiative, just as it was done with the Saudi-Iranian deal.

Fourth, the Saudi-Iranian deal marked an outstanding success not only for Beijing's diplomacy but also for the strategic communication of its GSI. Through the deal, China demonstrated the communicative value of action and coherence between words and deeds, two of the key but most challenging aspects of strategic communication. The success of the deal and its tie to the GSI gave more prominence to the Initiative and attracted heightened interest in its immense possibilities.

Fifth, strategic communication is persuasive, and its aim is to expand the attractiveness of arguments, ideas, and concepts. The sheer number of countries that have supported the GSI since its inception is thus an indicator of its strategic communication success. The target group of GSI's strategic communication is mostly countries of the Global South, where the GSI has gained the most traction.

Nevertheless, the GSI faces and will continue to face numerous challenges.

First, the Western negative framing of the GSI, while fully expected, is also an indicator of the main lines of criticism of the Initiative, as it is portrayed as an attempt to dislodge the Western-based liberal democratic order with a global export of “authoritarian-made” sets of “undemocratic” or “illiberal” measures. If the path of the critical framing of the BRI is followed, this means more attacks not only on the foundational concepts but also on specific aspects/achievements and the GSI as a whole.

Second, the Initiative will have to confront the harsh limitations of its global reach as most Western stakeholders are likely to maintain negative attitudes towards the GSI. Most US/EU frames on the GSI are similar or

identical. However, some EU think tanks mention that China intends to appeal to European states with the GSI. They also attempt to look at some of the GSI mechanisms and instruments less ideologically. The US stakeholders do not mention any possible compatibility with the GSI and are more focused on the challenge the Initiative presents for the United States. These differences should be noted, although they should not be overestimated.

The growing U.S.-China strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific, the continuing conflict in Ukraine, and the overall geopolitical chessboard will continue to pose formidable obstacles and opportunities for the GSI. The transformation of the world order and the speeding up of the process of multipolarity are opening possibilities for the expansion of the concepts embodied in the GSI and its worldwide legitimacy. However, the GSI “marks a pivotal juncture where China endeavours to shape the narrative surrounding its rise and global role” (Popović and Stević 2023). The GSI success story could contribute to further legitimising the BRI and the early acknowledgement of “sister initiatives” – the GDI and the GCI.

THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION

China has seen the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a mechanism to create a Eurasian security network without Western interference, a vital platform for multilateral discussions on security matters, and a springboard for bilateral military cooperation. Furthermore, it allows Beijing to get support for its key principles during SCO summits, including unilateral sanctions, bloc and ideological confrontations (Khaliq and Latif 2023). By expanding SCO, together with Moscow, China sought to find a balancing act (Lađevac 2021). This was already the case with the 2017 expansion to India – also a member of BRICS – and Pakistan – a key country for BRI connectivity. A similar act has been taken over the expansion of Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Teheran had been in the waiting room for over a decade, it entered the SCO in 2023 only in parallel with granting the status of “dialogue partner” to Riyadh. While Beijing intensified its military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, it participated in joint naval exercises with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman. In further proof of security architecture shaping in the Middle East, the SCO officially granted dialogue partners in 2023 to Egypt and Qatar. Meanwhile, the green light for the same status was

given to Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. With the membership of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Belarus' entrance in the 2024 pipeline, the observer status for Afghanistan and Mongolia, "dialogue partner" status for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Turkey, the Maldives and Myanmar, the SCO is closing its geographic gaps in Asia and the Middle East, while at same time expanding scope and mechanisms of cooperation. It signals what Doshi would call a "strategy of displacement" of the US (Doshi 2021).

BRICS

Besides being historical, the BRICS decision on enlargement at the 2023 Johannesburg summit was a symbol of the epochal changes in the direction of multipolarity. It can be perceived as a diplomatic victory for Beijing and Moscow, which have been the key proponents of enlargement, while at the same time being considered in the West as crucial challengers to the RBO. Indeed, BRICS was founded in the context of the 2008 global economic crisis, at the outset of the transition towards multipolarity. While Western critics have accentuated the economic asymmetries and disparities among BRICS countries and the geopolitical efforts to counter the G7, Beijing's perceptions could be interpreted in Yan's "moral realist" terms of the primacy of seeking long-term political partners over immediate economic profit. The inclusion of the six new BRICS members appeared odd to some analysts. Yet, it is well grounded in China's strategic thinking and its initiatives. The inclusion of Iran and Saudi Arabia follows the SCO path of "parallel" acceptance of two key partners in the Middle East. The Saudi Arabian case is logical due to its importance as the largest oil exporter to China and a key member of OPEC+ (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries plus other oil-producing countries). However, it is also highly symbolic of the de-dollarisation process, yet another strategic interest for Beijing supported at the BRICS summit, given that the petrodollar had been founded after a 1974 deal between U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Riyadh.

Ethiopia's case is yet another showcase of China's thinking about BRICS enlargement as the country's capital is connected by the BRI-built railway to Djibouti, home to the PLAN's first African base and a strategic point for the Suez Canal and the Arabian Sea. This link gives further depth to China's entry

into Africa, where the competition over resources has dramatically increased after the West imposed sanctions on Russia. For the EU countries, which have denied access to many resources in Russia through sanctions, Africa has become especially important (Babić 2024). An indicative example is cobalt, which is key to the batteries of most electric cars and for which demand will increase 20 times by 2040. Three-quarters of the world's cobalt production comes from the Congo, from where China, as the owner or co-owner of 15 of the 19 mines, exports 80 per cent of the production of this mineral. The expansion of BRICS to Iran, the UAE and Saudi Arabia – three major sources of energy for China – also means that this organisation will become an undoubted global energy leader.

Finally, the international public attention given to BRICS and its enlargement provides a strong impetus to China's strategic narrative as a rising global power: China is against expanding security alliances but is not against challenging the RBO. It is not against the G7 *per se* but against the G7 norm-setting for the RBO.

THE US “CHINA THREAT” NARRATIVE

For US policymakers throughout the Washington establishment, containing China's rise has become a *sine qua non*. From Donald Trump to Joseph Biden, from bipartisan consensus in Congress to Treasury's sanctions against Chinese entities, from the State Department's alliance-building in the Asia-Pacific to the Pentagon's new bases and arms supplies to Beijing-wary partners in the East and South China Seas, there is overwhelming evidence the US has shifted its China containment policy to higher gear. American foreign policy scholars, to a large extent, backed up this policy concerning the Cold War cases of Soviet containment. While debating and periodically casting doubts about its effectiveness, “in the great debate over how the United States should respond to an increasingly assertive China”, many commentators have advocated a ready-made solution: containment (Mueller 2023). Brands and Gaddis argued that “it is no longer debatable” that the US and China “are entering their own new cold war” and suggested taking advantage of containment's application during the US-Soviet rivalry (Brands and Gaddis 2021, 10). Indeed, Brands underlined that to “succeed against a rising China, the US must relearn the lessons of containment”

(Brands 2021). On the other side, Nye has argued that “this is not like Cold War containment” and that “meeting the China challenge will require a more complex strategy that leverages the alliances and rules-based system we created” (Nye 2023). Nevertheless, the understanding in Beijing has been unequivocal: for Chinese President Xi Jinping, “the Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, containment and suppression on our country, bringing unprecedented severe challenges to our development” (Yiu 2023).

While Beijing’s potential has never been out of the focus of US global eyesight since the formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the perception of the “China threat” has evolved over decades. Since the outset of the 21st century, this evolution has incrementally turned Beijing from an ideological competitor, albeit an economic partner in globalisation, into a rival and menace not only to Washington’s foreign policy and security interests in the Indo-Pacific but also to the “rules-based world order” it had been dominating since World War II.

Achieving foreign policy bipartisanship in Washington can hardly be taken for granted. Nevertheless, historically, the fight for the dominant bipartisan narrative has brought some of the most extraordinary successes for US foreign policy, such as the creation and expansion of NATO or the Marshall Plan, as well as some of its most disastrous foreign involvements. It was, indeed, on a bipartisan basis that the Congress adopted the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, which became the legal basis for the US prosecution of the Vietnam War (Office of the Historian of the US Department of State 2023) before being repealed in 1971. It took half a century for another bipartisan “green light” to war to be revoked. In March 2023, the US Senate voted to repeal the 2002 Authorisation for Use of Military Force against Iraq, which had led to the US war on Iraq over the alleged threat of weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein (Jalonick 2023).

Thus, it was not surprising that some experts cast doubts about the implications of the dominant China narrative in Washington after the bipartisan vote of the US House of Representatives to establish in January 2023 the Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Committee’s objective is to examine “the status of the Chinese Communist Party’s

economic, technological, and security progress and its competition with the United States” (Aldin and Olmem 2023), a rivalry that its chairperson Mike Gallagher framed as “an existential struggle” (Al-Jazeera 2023).

In turn, the formation of the dominant “China threat” narrative inside Washington has facilitated a US strategic narrative aimed at persuading foreign stakeholders about the need to contain Beijing’s rise, primarily in the Asia-Pacific but also at the global level.

The “China threat” predominance was not always the key feature of US narratives on Beijing. True, for the first two decades since its formation in 1949, the People’s Republic of China was seen by Washington as having a “spoiler role” in Asia, and the US tried to keep Beijing at bay. However, with the US army getting more and more entangled in the Vietnam War failure and with the Soviet Union pursuing an active foreign policy and security role globally, the prominence of China’s geopolitical importance for balancing power in Asia returned to the focus of US policymakers. In 1967, Singapore’s long-standing Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew advised then-US Vice President Richard Nixon that, given the unresolved border issues between the USSR and the PRC, “there was much to be gained by engaging China” (Switzer 2015). Nixon followed up on the advice several months later in a Foreign Affairs article in which he argued that it was in the US interest to take China out of “angry isolation” (Nixon 1967). From 1969, US diplomats took steps to “move Washington and Beijing away from intense mutual animosity and towards a close, albeit wary, strategic alignment against a common foe”, resulting in US State Secretary Henry Kissinger’s visit in 1971 and President Nixon’s visit in 1972, the year in which his administration ended an effective trade embargo in place since the formation of the PRC (Friedberg 2022). From then on, Nixon and his Cold War-era successors invested in multi-faceted partnerships and engagements with Beijing. The US provided China with a plethora of tools aimed at not only balancing the “Soviet threat” but also laying the grounds for Beijing’s meteoric economic rise in the late 1970s. A number of these tools were military, from satellite imagery on Soviet troops up to non-lethal military equipment, such as transport aircraft or radar systems. Others were education and people-to-people, as dozens of thousands of Chinese were invited to study at US universities. Perhaps more prominently, there were diplomatic and economic incentives: the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 and the granting, that same

year, of the status of the most-favoured trading nation (Friedberg 2022). Combined with the early visible and successful signs of Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening-up", these incentives and interactions led the Ronald Reagan administration to suspend the prohibition of arms sales to the PRC and to treat it, in the words of US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, as a "friendly non-aligned country" (Meijer 2016). The Reagan administration's decision was viewed as "providing major lethal capability in the arsenal of the 'awakening giant'" as a result of a "highly visible psychological deterrent to overall Soviet strategic planning and as a reaffirmation of United States interest and presence in the Asian-Pacific region" (Downen 1982, 67). At the same time, there were warnings about the potential "hazards" of such a policy, including possible threats in the region from China's new military capabilities, which might prove the US policy to be "essentially destabilising" (Downen 1982, 67). Nevertheless, throughout the 1980s, Washington continued its China policy with a three-way objective. First, enhancing Beijing's military in line with the US geopolitical aim to put pressure on Moscow. Second, upgrading China's economic prowess and finding a partnership role for Beijing in the globalisation process would align with the interests of the US and its commercial powerhouses. Third, encouraging internal political reforms in China to soften its resistance to Western liberal democratic principles.

The June 1989 events in Tiananmen Square attracted harsh criticism from all US stakeholders, many of whom expressed frustration at the political direction of Chinese reforms. With the Cold War over and the Soviet threat in retreat, Washington policymakers have considerably lost geopolitical interest in China's security role. The economy was a different story, as business interests coalesced to insist on keeping trade with China as normal as possible. While the George H.G. Bush administration stopped selling arms to Beijing, it refused to revoke the status of the most-favoured trading nation. The US business push, spearheaded by the likes of Boeing, Lockheed, General Motors, Exxon, General Electric, Intel, and Coca-Cola, was instrumental in keeping strong economic ties with China, particularly since the Chinese economy, from 1991 to 1993, grew by an astounding 60 per cent (Friedberg 2022). As Friedberg argues, by the mid-1990s, the US had adopted a "dual-edged strategy", combining two-decade-long engagement and a military balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. While balancing would "preserve stability" and "deter aggression" despite China's economic

rise, engagement would reduce the possibility of confrontation with the US and Western countries “by welcoming Beijing into the US-dominated, post-Cold War international system. American policymakers hoped to persuade China’s leaders that their interests lay in preserving the existing order, adapting to its rules, and adopting its values rather than seeking to modify or overthrow it” (Friedberg 2022).

However, at the height of the US unipolar momentum—the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which killed three Chinese journalists, sparked not only a tremendous public outcry in China but also led to a strategic change of perception in Beijing over relations with the US and caused a “turning point” for the “shift in Chinese thinking on the matter of tolerance of US forces in Asia” (Kim and Lee 2002, 114). However, in parallel, China wanted to continue working at the multilateral level with the US. Only three months after the NATO aggression, in September 1999, the G20 was founded. With the green light from Washington, China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. From the point of view of Washington, despite China’s fury at the NATO violation of international law during the 1999 bombings, Beijing was still ready and interested in playing its part in the globalisation process within the US-led international liberal order.

Uneasiness, however, took hold in both capitals. In Beijing, after the series of “colour revolutions” around Russia and organised protests in Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

In the United States, the mood was changing too. Think tanks were noticing that since 2007, Beijing has undertaken a variety of actions to push its maritime claims in the East and South China Seas by increasing patrols and training exercises, laying the groundwork for development in disputed waters, and generally increasing assertiveness in disputes with Japan (Diaoyu/Senkaku islands) as well as with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei (Swaine 2013). In combination with Beijing’s deployment of anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD)-type weapons on China’s military periphery, this assertiveness was seen as an indication of China’s challenges to the so-called “first island chain” from Japan to Southeast Asia, a vital component of the US strategy to dominate the Western Pacific (Swaine 2013). Furthermore, Western policymakers, initially puzzled by the deployment of the Chinese navy’s anti-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, began to see it as a

“strategic forward deployment, contributing to the rise of Chinese sea power in the Indian Ocean” (Henry 2016). The US strategic narrative was on the brink of change. Engagement was still on, but there was an increasing push for more containment. After years of focus on the Middle East and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was time to turn back to the Asia-Pacific. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed in a 2010 speech that the South China Sea was a matter of US national interest, which the New York Times saw as “opening a new source of potential friction with China” (Landler 2010) and Beijing as “virtually an attack on China” (Huffington Post 2010). The US developed the Air-Sea Battle Doctrine in 2009-2010, an operational doctrine aimed at countering China’s growing military capabilities and possibly confronting it (Ford 2017). This, in turn, further irritated Beijing, while it did not fully reassure US allies, causing instead “strategic uncertainty” (Bitzinger and Raska 2013). The scene was set for Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia”. And for the turn towards US-China rivalry.

The election of Xi Jinping as China’s new leader in 2013 was tentatively seen in Washington as a chance for a restart, marked by an early visit and meeting with Obama. Nevertheless, while initial interactions were relatively cordial, US policymakers began to acknowledge a strategic change in Beijing.

Following this line, Beijing proposed a wide array of statecraft instruments (Mitić 2023a; Đorđević and Stekić 2022). China began its island-building in the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands in 2013, and by 2015, it had surpassed the US Navy in total size. Furthermore, Beijing increased military drills with its key strategic partner, the Russian Federation, to pursue operational experience and boosted cooperation within the BRICS and the SCO. Perhaps most visibly, China complemented the BRI with the creation of various bilateral and multilateral partnerships, including in Europe with the “16+1” cooperation format with Central and Eastern European countries, many of which are NATO and EU members (Stanojević and Zakić 2023; Mitrović 2019; Arežina 2018; Dimitrijević 2020; Vučić 2020). However, grappling with the entanglement in Afghanistan and Iraq, the resurgence of terrorist threats from the Daesh/ISIS, and the 2014 Ukraine crisis over Crimea, the Obama administration appeared distracted. The rise of the BRI was mainly left unchallenged. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), known as the “QUAD”, created as a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States in 2007, remained on hiatus.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the centrepiece of Obama's "pivot to Asia", was signed only in 2016, just months ahead of the presidential elections won by Donald Trump.

Upon his arrival in the White House, in a matter of months, Trump dramatically changed what he perceived as Obama's "too little, too late" policy towards China. His administration designated China as a "strategic competitor" at the end of 2017. Washington energised the "China threat" narrative, under which the US boosted "China watchdog" networks and started denouncing China-related initiatives, such as the BRI (Mitić 2022b). Trump's administration in early 2018 imposed a 25-per cent tariff on steel and a 10-per cent tariff on aluminium imports before pursuing a few months later a 25 per cent tariff on 818 categories of goods imported from China worth 50 billion dollars, thus effectively provoking a "tariff war" with China (Fetzer and Schwarz 2020). Washington instituted restrictions on the export of a variety of critical technologies and enhanced scrutiny of investments. Trump worked to prevent Chinese companies from taking advantage of their technological progress, both at home, where he used security concerns to ban Huawei and ZTE equipment from being used by the government (US Congress 2018), and internationally, where he put Huawei on the list of sanctions for cooperation with Iran and lobbied Central and Eastern European countries from allowing the Chinese company to build its 5G network, thus following his "Clean Network" security initiative to secure the networks from what it called "untrusted vendors" (Karásková et al. 2021). Furthermore, the US imposed restrictive measures against Chinese entities over human rights in Xinjiang, setting up the direction for the EU to follow (Trailović 2021). In the context of China's containment, the Trump administration reinvigorated the "QUAD", which had been left aside throughout Obama's administration, and increased arms sales to Taiwan worth 18 billion dollars (Forum on the Arms Trade 2023), with a particular high point being the sale of 66 F-16V fighter jets for 8 billion dollars (Browne 2019). A particularly hard-line discourse was taken against the Communist Party of China, harshly denouncing what it called the CCP's political influence operations and particularly blaming it for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Near the end of his mandate and ahead of the 2020 elections, Trump's presidential office released the "United States Strategic Approach to the

People's Republic of China" (White House 2020). In the document, the White House expressed both its disappointment with the effects of US policy towards China since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 and its grave concern about the adverse effects Beijing's regional and global ambitions could have on US interests. The US hoped that "deepening engagement would spur fundamental economic and political opening in the PRC and lead to its emergence as a constructive and responsible global stakeholder", but more than 40 years later, it had become evident that the CCP "has chosen instead to exploit the free and open rules-based order and attempt to reshape the international system in its favour" (White House 2020). Furthermore, the White House argued that "the CCP's expanding use of economic, political, and military power to compel acquiescence from nation states harms vital American interests and undermines the sovereignty and dignity of countries and individuals around the world" (White House 2020).

As Friedberg argues, Trump "produced a sharper, more rapid shift in US policy that might otherwise have occurred and accelerated the ongoing erosion of support for the old policy of engagement", while "Republicans and Democrats were able to agree on the need for a change in the US's China policy, and, for the first time, ambitious figures in both parties began to compete to see who could stake out the tougher stance" (Friedberg 2022).

The nascent bipartisan consensus was confirmed when Trump's successor, Joseph Biden, chose Rush Doshi, a Brookings Institute foreign policy expert, as the National Security Council's Director for China. Doshi's 2021 book "The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order" offered a blueprint of the Biden administration's perceptive account of China's rise and threat to US interests, which did not diverge much from the one expressed by Trump, and thus (re)confirmed a bipartisan view in Washington of the growing need to confront Beijing more decisively (Doshi 2021). In the book, Doshi argues that China aims to displace the US's position as a hegemon short of war. In the regional and global order, a hegemon owes his position to three "forms of control used to regulate the behaviour of other states: coercive capability (to force compliance), consensual inducements (to incentivise it), and legitimacy (to rightfully command it)" (Doshi 2021, 3). Indeed, the forms of control to which the US statecraft repertoire had successfully contributed for decades. However, rising states,

like China, apply strategies to displace the hegemon and pursue them in sequence. The first strategy is to “blunt the hegemon’s exercise of those forms of control, particularly those extended over the rising state”; the second is to “build forms of control over others”, particularly in the home region; and finally, when the first two are completed, the third strategy is “global expansion, which pursues both blunting and building at the global level to displace the hegemon from international leadership” (Doshi 2021, 4). Doshi argues that this template can be seen in China’s “strategies of displacement” of the US, which have evolved over time and in sequence. Its first strategy of displacement (1989-2008) aimed to blunt American power over China following Tiananmen Square, the Gulf War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second strategy (2008-2016) aimed to build regional hegemony in Asia following the Global Financial Crisis and the diminishment of US power. Finally, referring to Xi Jinping’s quotes about “great changes unseen in a century” (2018) and “time and momentum on our side” (2021), Doshi argues that, following Brexit, Donald Trump’s elections, and the coronavirus pandemic, Beijing has launched a “third strategy of displacement, one that expands its blunting and building efforts worldwide to displace the United States as the global leader” (Doshi 2021, 4).

Biden’s China policy reflected Doshi’s perceptions and aimed at building alliances and competing with Beijing. With Trump gone and some of his antagonising moves towards allies left behind, Biden was ready to upgrade his predecessors’ policies with Western multilateralism. As State Secretary Anthony Blinken said in 2022, “From day one”, Biden’s administration sought to “re-energise America’s unmatched network of alliances and partnerships and to re-engage in international institutions (...), encouraging partners to work with each other (...), and standing up new coalitions” (Blinken 2022). Blinken argued that “we cannot rely on Beijing to change its trajectory. So, we will shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system” (Blinken 2022).

Shaping was already one of the preferred US instruments of statecraft since the end of the Cold War. To shape the international environment regarding its China strategy, the Biden administration needed a strategic narrative to persuade allies and boost alliances. Thus, the Biden administration geared its strategy narrative in three directions: political, economic, and military.

In Western liberal circles, the Trump presidency and the post-Brexit era were associated with the rise of “populism” and “illiberal democracy”. Thus, it was not surprising that in his electoral campaign and upon arriving at the White House, Biden sought to promote his administration as the Trump antithesis in many areas.

One of the key features has been the assertive promotion of the RBO. As Blinken underlined, “Our purpose is not to contain China, to hold it back, to keep it down. It is to uphold this rule-based order that China is posing a challenge to” (Scott 2021). However, just because the RBO is based on creating the perception that a “rule” should be accepted, it implies that it depends on persuasion and, thus, a strategic narrative to accompany it. Thus, the Biden administration opted to use the RBO as one of the critical elements of its strategic narrative on China, although this was not a complete novelty (Breuer and Johnston 2019; Sakwa 2023a; Sakwa 2024). According to this narrative, the RBO has been threatened by illiberal actors, most notably the Russian Federation and China. The distinction between “democracies” and “authoritarian regimes” has indeed been one of the foundations of the Biden administration’s attempts to portray two opposite camps, most notably at the “Summit for Democracy”, first held in December 2021. When Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine several months later, in February 2022, the US discourse on the RBO only grew more robust and more pervasive in various Western fora, largely reproduced by various stakeholders and becoming a regular feature of declarations by organisations such as NATO.

Indeed, the discourse on the RBO has been helpful in garnering support from Western allies, particularly as it replaces a more confrontational concept of containment. The result of Washington’s efforts can be seen in the declarations of leading Western organisations. Thus, the EU points out that China has a “special responsibility in upholding the rules-based international order” (European Council 2023a); NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg is arguing that China is “increasingly challenging the rules-based international order” (Lee and Woo, 2023); the G7 Hiroshima statement underlined that a “growing China that plays by international rules would be of global interest” (White House 2023); while the Japanese media argued that the preservation of the “rules-based order” will be “the first priority of the G7 summit” (Nagy 2023), noting that “China’s global ambitions” are one of the key challenges for the RBO.

In the economic sphere, the US has promoted a strategic narrative to challenge China's technological advances as "intrusive" and "undemocratic". In addition to arguing against Beijing's investment in critical infrastructure of Western countries, as Trump had done over the 5G, the Biden administration put a particular accent on semiconductors. After banning American sales to Chinese chip manufacturers in 2022, Washington created a new alliance— "Chip 4"—uniting Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to ensure a stable supply of semiconductors and reduce Chinese involvement (Kyodo News 2023).

One of the critical elements of the US strategic narrative on China has been the "threat framing" of Beijing's policies by numerous US-financed think tanks, media, and policymaking reports (Mitić 2022). China's BRI has been a particular target of the US strategic narrative, which has evolved since 2013. In the first several years, during the Obama administration, the narrative was more focused on the identification, questioning of its strategic intent, and expression of worry, while during the Trump administration, since 2016, the focus has been on the warning about the "BRI threat" and the call to action against BRI-related projects. During the Biden administration, this narrative was pushed one step further as it began to focus on disrupting the BRI framework of cooperation per se. Thus, the closest US partners in Europe, the Baltic states, withdrew from the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) format (originally the "16+1" format).

Besides encouraging passivity and/or exit from BRI-related initiatives, the US also worked on creating alternatives. The formation of the G7 Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) and the EU Global Gateway are part of the latest phase, which aims to overperform the BRI. The US first created the Blue Dot and the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) before integrating them in 2021 into the Build Back Better World initiative during the Biden administration. The initiative was finally repackaged in 2022 with the PGII of the G7, with the objective of "competing" and "combating" the BRI (Lemire and Mathiesen 2022). Furthermore, according to key EU officials, the European Union integrated its own BRI rival version, the "Global Gateway", into the PGII (Borrell 2022b). The strategic narrative of the PGII is an alleged "superiority of values" against the BRI, with its projects being described as "environmentally-sound", "labour-responsible", "value-based", "transparent" and "democratic".

The US also expanded its economic alliances in the Indo-Pacific. In May 2022, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a significant trade initiative to expand Washington's regional economic leadership. Thirteen countries, accounting for 40 per cent of the global economy, joined the initiative, dubbed an "alternative to China's approach" (Manak, 2022). While US officials dubbed it an "alternative to China's approach," Beijing media sharply criticised it, calling the initiative "economic NATO" (Banerjee 2022).

The US has also shown adaptability, a key feature of strategic communication, by adopting the term "de-risking" proposed by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, as a more acceptable wording for the policy of "de-coupling" from the Chinese economy, which the US had been proposing (Von der Leyen 2023). The term was subsequently taken up by the G7 at the 2023 Hiroshima statement, stating that the G7 is "de-risking, not de-coupling" (White House 2023), although for Beijing, "de-risking is just de-coupling in disguise" (Xinhua 2023e).

As argued by Wolfley, providing (and upholding) assurances is one of the key elements of the military shaping of the international security environment operated by the US. For Washington, this is key to the attractiveness of US-led alliances, such as NATO (Article 5). While no "Asian NATO" exists per se, flirting with the concept and establishing mechanisms that resemble the founding blocks of a future Indo-Pacific US-led alliance have been particularly upgraded in the last several years. In that light, the February 2022 release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the Biden administration can be perceived as an "American vow" to the region (Lađevac and Stekić 2023).

One of the key elements has been the US policy towards Taiwan, which Japan and South Korea consider a vital example of assurance to Washington's partners. In that sense, for the US strategic narrative in the region, it is key to first frame the "threat" of China's military rise. This includes "China's peaceful reunification", which would dramatically change the regional security dynamics (Stekić 2023b). The second frame is the "opportunity" of US alternatives—through both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms—an update to John Foster Dulles's Korean war-era "island chain strategy" (Mitić 2023b; Stojanović 2024; Stošić 2023; Stošić 2024; Kopanja 2024). For the US narrative, it is essential to stick to the commitments to Taipei's "sufficient self-defence capacity" under the US Taiwan Relations Act (US Congress

1979). Thus, despite heightened tensions caused by the visit of Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in August 2022, Biden's administration authorised a further 10 billion dollars in military-purpose grants to Taiwan under the 2023 National Defence Authorization Act (DeLisle 2023). In the context of the Ukraine conflict, Biden repeatedly stated that the US would defend Taiwan in the event of China's attack. This position was praised by Taipei but harshly criticised by Beijing (Ni 2022). Furthermore, in February 2023, Washington updated the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement with Manila, giving the US access to four extra bases in the Philippines in addition to the previous five, with a critical geostrategic positioning overlooking the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. The US Marine Corps furthermore opened Camp Blaz, its first base in 70 years, on the US Pacific Island of Guam, which is considered a possible place for the outbreak of conflict with China (Lendon 2023). In early 2023, Washington signed agreements on boosting mobility for the 12th US Marine Littoral Regiment on the island of Okinawa and improving anti-ship capabilities in case of a Chinese attack in Taiwan, as well as the deployment of fighter jets and aircraft carriers and the expansion of combined military exercises in the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps strategically even more important was the Washington shuttle diplomacy aimed at restarting strained relations between its two strategic allies in the region, Seoul and Tokyo, which resulted several months later in a trilateral summit under Biden's auspices at Camp David (Boot and Terry 2023).

The US marked three other significant regional successes for its alliance-building strategic communication in 2023. In March, it unveiled the details of the AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) deal on nuclear-powered submarines, which is seen by analysts as key "from the standpoint of deterring Chinese aggression within the next ten years" (Townshend 2023). That same month, at the meeting of the QUAD in New Delhi, the foreign ministers of the US, India, Japan, and South Korea took a "direct shot at China", underlying that they view with concern "challenges to the maritime rules-based order, including in the South and East China Sea" (Lee 2023). Finally, in addition to Tokyo announcing a possible opening of NATO's first office in Asia, the NATO summit in Vilnius hosted Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, whose presence at the summits of the North Atlantic alliance has now been normalised, despite the initial 2022 diplomatic objections to the US initiative by some key European members.

In 50 years of relations with the People's Republic of China, the US strategic narrative has evolved through unexpected phases of world order changes, an often interconnected Sino-American rise to leadership in globalisation, and a changing perception of mutual strategic intentions. As discussed earlier, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle introduced three forms of strategic narrative: system (how an actor perceives the international order), identity (how an actor projects his identity within the order), and policy (how an actor constructs and explains his actions). In line with these forms, we can distinguish three key phases in the evolution of the US narrative. In the first period, from the late 1960s until the late 1980s, the US saw a bipolar world in which China contributed to the containment of Soviet expansion. Within this order, the US projected its narrative as both the "leader of the free world" and a contributor to the geopolitical balance of power in Asia. China was portrayed as both a partner in Soviet containment and a willing recipient of support for its entry into economic globalisation. In the second period, lasting from the early 1990s until the early 2010s, the US narrative was in line with the Washington-led "unipolar moment", in which it saw itself as the undisputed leader mopping up the rest of the post-Cold War debris and maintaining the globalisation momentum in which China was growing as a necessary yet uneasy partner and rising competitor. The narrative on US policies focused more on engagement in the 1990s before moving incrementally to containment and dispute in the late 2000s. The third period, roughly from the mid-2010s, focused on the unwilling US acknowledgement that a transition towards multipolarity was in sight and that the Western "rules-based order" was challenged by China and Russia. The US sees itself as the defender of the RBO, and the narrative is focused on shaping its policies and those of its allies around China through containment policies and an all-out rivalry, albeit short of war.

Throughout the eras, the US has successfully aligned the three forms of its strategic narrative. It has shown adaptability to change, persuasiveness directed at allies, and coherence between words and actions. This has led to the formation and strengthening of Western alliances around the US narrative on China's rise, including the need for its containment. On the other hand, Trump's administration, Doshi and Friedberg, would argue that, over the last several decades, Washington "got China wrong", with all the negative implications for its statecraft repertoire and strategic narrative, which now need a remedy.

Evolution of US narrative on China

	System	Identity	Policy
Cold War (1970s-1980s)	Bipolar world, with China playing the balancing act in Asia	The US is the leader of the “free world”, promoting China’s strengthening and partnership in Soviet containment	Engagement and support for China’s economic and military rise
Post-Cold War unipolar moment (1990s-2000s)	Unipolar world under US dominance	The US is the undisputed global leader, “mopping up” challenges to its dominance and maintaining the globalisation momentum in which China is growingly an uneasy partner and rising competitor	Balancing between engagement (particularly in the 1990s) and incremental containment (from the 2000s)
Transition towards multipolarity (2010s-2020s)	The Western “rules-based world order” is challenged	The US is the defender of the order challenged by China	Shaping of allies around China-containment policies, all-out rivalry short of war

Challenges indeed remain. First, at home in Washington, tension looms between achieved bipartisan consensus and rising competition on “China toughness”, which might entrap the White House strategic narrative. An example of this tension was Nancy Pelosi’s 2022 visit to Taipei. Nevertheless, in reference to O’Tuathail’s concepts, Pelosi’s visit can also be seen as a script that fits the “geopolitical storyline” of US containment of China and assurances to Taipei, thus showing the panoply of Washington’s strategic communication arsenal. Second, the US strategic narrative will need to secure more permanent support from the EU member countries, which will not be easy given hesitations from some key members, who are cautious about the effects of de-coupling/de-risking from China. Third, while the strategic narrative effort has been successful among Western allies and countries

interested in China-containment in the Indo-Pacific, it has not generally gained ground in the Global South. One needs to look at the examples of countries that have joined US policies but with reservations, if not opposition, from important domestic stakeholders unwilling to follow Washington's narrative. In the Philippines, Manuel Mamba, the governor of the Cagayan province, opposed Manila's decision to allow the US access to new military bases for fear of "jeopardising Chinese investment and becoming a target in a conflict over Taiwan" (Agence France-Presse 2023). In Japan, Denny Tamaki, the governor of Okinawa, also opposed the increase in US military presence, arguing that "the possibility of China's aggression into Taiwan is almost zero" and that the risk of war comes mainly from a potential declaration of independence by Taipei (Oswald 2023). Fourth, and most importantly, in terms of challenges, the US strategic narrative faces and will continue to face China's (counter-) narrative. Indeed, China has marked several vital successes related to its strategic communication. Its initiatives now constitute a solid ground for contesting the US strategic narrative and a fertile ground for the study of current and future global narrative competition.

CHAPTER 5 THE BATTLE FOR SERBIA

SERBIA'S RELATIONS WITH FOUR KEY GLOBAL ACTORS – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The geographic position of Serbia on the most advantageous route linking Central Europe with Asia Minor has determined its geopolitical importance and fate as theatre and object of great power rivalry. As such no major development in Serbia could occur without outside interference, while actions and reactions to the policies of the great powers in the region have often triggered processes and events impacting on a larger European and global scale (Stepić 2019; Proroković 2015; Troude 2006; Ković 2021; Perišić 2022; Petrović and Nikolić 2008; Petrović and Đukanović 2012; Smiljanić 2013; Glišin 2019). The 21st century is no exception.

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The Republic of Serbia has unique relations with the People's Republic of China due to its specific geopolitical identity and foreign policy orientation. Serbia has declared military neutrality and has no intention of joining NATO. It is in the process of EU integration negotiations but refuses to agree to EU declarations critical of Beijing, including any restrictive measures. Belgrade and Beijing also face the problem of defending territorial integrity: Serbia regarding Kosovo and Metohija, and China regarding Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang.

The two countries built a "Comprehensive strategic partnership" relationship in 2016 and then, following Xi Jinping's first visit to Europe since the COVID-19 pandemic, elevated it in 2024 to the level of "Community of China-Serbia for a shared future in the new era". Belgrade and Beijing mutually support each other at the bilateral level and in international forums. In the last decade, both countries intensified the processes of de-recognition of "Kosovo" and Taiwan, irritating the United States. Serbia is often

perceived as China's most reliable political partner in Europe, which is why relations are called "steel" or "iron-clad".

Serbia is located in a geographically vital position for China – at the intersection of pan-European corridors VII (Danube) and X (Athens-Budapest), which is of strategic importance for connecting the BRI from the Mediterranean Piraeus port to Central and Eastern Europe. Serbia is also interesting for Beijing as a country with agreements on free trade with the EU, the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, Turkey, and, from July 2024, also with China. Therefore, it represents the potential for duty-free exports to markets of about 2.5 billion people.

After the pilot project – the construction of the Pupin Bridge in Belgrade – China turned to infrastructure projects, such as the Belgrade-Budapest railway, parts of the highway and the Belgrade ring on the "Miloš Veliki" highway. It invested in large energy projects in the Smederevo steel mill (HBIS Group) and RTB in Bor (Zijin). These companies have become the leading exporters from Serbia in just a few years. China is also working on other energy projects in Serbia (heat pipeline TENT-Novi Beograd, Kostolac B3), in which the Power China company participates, as well as on greenfield investments such as the Linglong tyre factory in Zrenjanin. Serbia is also the first country in Europe to purchase Chinese air defence (FK-3) systems and reconnaissance drones.

On the other hand, cooperation between Serbia and China has certain limitations. First, in accordance with the requirements of Chapter 31 of the negotiation process with the EU, Serbia should gradually harmonise its foreign policy with EU declarations, and align fully upon membership. However, Brussels insists on an urgency to harmonise as soon as possible.

At the same time, Brussels and several EU members are against strengthening relations between Serbia and China and are trying to challenge the projects. In addition, they are critical of China's support for Serbia's territorial integrity regarding Kosovo and Metohija. Western officials, media and institutes negatively describe the Serbian-Chinese cooperation, considering that China wants to drag Serbia into a "debt trap", to "export illiberal, authoritarian practices", to "corrupt" the political elite in Serbia, and to "pollute" through mining and energy projects.

Finally, there are also objective economic problems, such as the unfavourable structure of Serbian exports and a large trade deficit. The

prospects for developing Serbian-Chinese relations remain highly positive, with the expected strengthening of Chinese companies in the automotive industry and high technology, which also presupposes the necessity of strengthening Serbia's energy security. Chinese investments in Serbia also include agreements to construct wind power plants, solar power plants, and hydrogen production facilities worth two billion euros. These investments aim to improve energy security and Serbia's independence and work towards achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Serbia and Russia have historically been very close for many cultural, religious, and political reasons. As such, they are subject to constant pressure from Western powers. This has been the case throughout history, long before the start of the conflict in Ukraine, which further intensified it.

Russia has traditionally been Serbia's primary support in the UN Security Council, vigorously defending its territorial integrity, military neutrality, memory culture regarding the NATO aggression, the Dayton competencies of Republika Srpska, and the individual and collective rights of the Serbian people in the region.

In addition, Russia is Serbia's primary gas source via the "Balkan Stream" and is a critical factor in Serbia's oil refinement industry. Western countries believe that dependence on Russian energy sources is one of the main reasons for Russia's "malign influence", which it sees in all fields – from political, economic and informational to religious and NGO. That is why they insisted on diversifying gas imports to Serbia (interconnection with Bulgaria, relying on the interconnection Bulgaria-Greece). In addition, the introduction of EU sanctions on Russian oil transported by sea also affected Serbia, and Western countries considered that this could also contribute to decrease dependence.

Today, Serbian-Russian relations are burdened above all by the conflict in Ukraine. Serbia does not recognise the results of the referendums in Crimea, Zaporozhye, Kherson, Lugansk and Donetsk. On several occasions, Belgrade joined the resolutions condemning the Russian operation in Ukraine. On the other hand, Serbia has not imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation and, as such, represents an exception in Europe, which Moscow

greatly appreciates. The consequences of such a position are not only more favourable gas arrangements but also increased support for Serbia in all international forums and interest in additional cooperation and transfer of knowledge in the energy field.

The connection between the events on the Ukrainian front and the level of pressure on Serbia is often emphasised. The connection certainly exists, but the pressures existed even before the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis due to the efforts of the West to legitimise NATO aggression and legalise the violation of international law when coordinating “Kosovo’s UDI”.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine will largely determine not only the future of Europe and the Russia-EU relationship but also the room for manoeuvre for developing Serbian-Russian relations.

THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Republic of Serbia has been integrating into the European Union for almost a quarter of a century. The formal negotiations on the first step, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, began in 2005 and ended in 2008. From the beginning, however, this process was accompanied by political conditions that went far beyond the scope of the Copenhagen criteria that were valid for all other candidates.

Thus, initially, the negotiations were primarily conditioned on cooperation with the Hague Tribunal to intensify the resolution of the “Kosovo issue.” The EU’s attempt to solve the issue of the status of Kosovo and Metohija by masterminding “Kosovo’s UDI” in 2008 undermined political relations, trust, and support for European integration among the Serbian people. Despite this, membership negotiations opened in 2014.

After the introduction of EU sanctions against Russia in the same year, Serbia was pressured to comply with these measures, which it refused. At the same time, due to the consequences of the economic, financial, and migrant crisis, enthusiasm for enlargement within the EU decreased, considering the strengthening of “enlargement fatigue” among the members of the Union, especially France.

Although European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker proposed setting 2025 as the tentative year for Serbia’s accession, the EU member states never supported this proposal. Instead, at France’s

suggestion, a “new methodology” was adopted, according to which the 35 negotiation chapters were divided into six clusters.

By the end of 2021, Serbia had opened 22 out of 35 chapters and temporarily closed two. Since then, no chapter had been opened by mid-2024. Serbia is criticised for failing to fulfil the criteria from Chapters 23 and 24, which relate to the rule of law, media freedom, and judicial reform. However, the essential problem resides in Serbia’s refusal to recognise “independent Kosovo”, that is, to allow the separatist Albanian authorities in Priština to become members of the UN.

At the same time, the EU, as the guarantor of the “Brussels Agreement” from 2013, failed to convince the Kosovo Albanians to implement their obligation regarding forming the “Community of Serbian Municipalities”. On the contrary, it continued to pressure Belgrade to “de facto” recognise “Kosovo” through the implementation of the so-called “French-German plan”, that is, the “Ohrid Agreement” although five EU members do not recognise “Kosovo’s UDI”. In addition, the EU firmly insists that Belgrade complies with the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation. These two issues completely diverted the focus from sectoral issues in the membership negotiations.

Nevertheless, Serbia continues to have successful economic cooperation with many EU members among the key investors and importers of Serbian goods. The European Union, aware of the geopolitical importance of influence, decided to invest more heavily in infrastructure in Serbia (the Belgrade-Niš railway) and present other regional development initiatives such as the Western Balkans Growth Plan. At the same time, the EU requires the alignment of candidate countries with its initiatives, such as “REPowerEU”, “Green Deal”, and “Green Agenda for the Western Balkans”.

THE UNITED STATES

Although Serbia and the US traditionally had solid political, economic and cultural relations throughout the 20th century, following the outset of the US-led “unipolar order” in the early 1990s and the parallel beginning of hostilities in Yugoslavia, these relations turned into open hostility that culminated with the 1999 NATO aggression.

Since then, despite various attempts at normalisation, the US continues to this day with the policy of legalising “independent Kosovo”, collapsing the Dayton Republika Srpska and pressuring Belgrade to renounce close relations with Russia and China. This approach was also manifested through various types of sanctions, open ultimatums and the conduct of a hybrid war in cooperation with leading EU members and the United Kingdom. One of Washington’s primary interests in the region is Serbia’s accession to NATO, which faces almost absolute opposition from public opinion. Despite this, US officials and ambassadors continue to agitate for joining the Alliance.

The US especially insists on eliminating Russian “malign influence”, which it tries to achieve through diversifying Serbia’s energy imports. In this regard, the US “selflessly” offers its services in mediating negotiations with neighbouring countries and suppliers. Among other options, it offers its own liquid gas as a long-term solution. In addition, the US is pushing for the construction of alternative sources of energy and is showing interest in the exploitation of critical raw materials.

THREE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

In the new geopolitical landscape and amid global narrative wars, three pivotal questions arise in the great power battle for Serbia.

First, ***will the “rules-based world order” prevail over Serbia?*** Serbia has been the primary victim of the Western rules-based world order in the cases of NATO 1999 aggression, the 2008 masterminding of Kosovo’s “unilateral declaration of independence”, the “creative interpretations” of UN SC resolution 1244 and the Dayton Peace Accords, and the selective use of justice and memory culture. This question has broader implications for other regions and the future of global order, including normative.

Second, ***will the NATO alliance expand in the Western Balkans?*** The Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina stand as the two last bastions of military neutrality in the Western Balkans. NATO countries have been trying to undermine this neutrality, including through the policy of “open doors” and labelling Serb-Russian cooperation as a “hybrid threat”. Against the backdrop of the NATO-Russia conflict in Ukraine,

this question gains a new dimension and has wider geopolitical implications for European security architecture.

Third, ***should EU membership be the only alternative for Serbia?*** While EU integration has been proclaimed as a political “strategic objective” and Serbia self-inflicted severe wounds in the process of EU integration, the fact of the matter is that the political conditionality, pressure over Kosovo and Russia, and enlargement fatigue have brought the process to a standstill. While there are geopolitical motives to boost attempts at the “artificial ventilation” of EU enlargement, Serbia is also reappraising potential alternatives. This does not necessarily include memberships in BRICS despite popular support. However, Serbia has elevated relations with China in 2024 to the level of a “community of China-Serbia for the shared future in the new era”. A status quo in the form of a “de facto political neutrality” remains also a credible alternative. Of course, the West is not keen to allow Serbia’s political cooperation to flourish with China or Russia. Again, this question has considerable implications for the region, Europe, and the world. It is one of the fundamental theatres in the battle “for the rest”, which the four leading global actors wage independently or in concert (EU-US and Russia-China).

WILL THE “RULES-BASED WORLD ORDER” PREVAIL OVER SERBIA?

LEGITIMISING THE 1999 NATO AGGRESSION AND LEGALISING THE 2008 “KOSOVO UDI”

The conflict in Ukraine from 2014 on initiated or accelerated numerous processes that are still redefining the world order. Two are most noticeable. On the one hand, the homogenisation of the “collective West” united in opposing Russia through political, economic and security mechanisms (diplomatic isolation and sanctions, membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO, and transferring weapons to Kiev). On the other hand, the refusal of non-Western countries to adhere to the mechanisms of the US and the European Union against the Russian Federation and the corresponding

strengthening of the contours of multipolarity (the strengthening of BRICS, the SCO and China-Russia partnership, de-dollarisation).

In this context, the urgent legitimisation of the NATO aggression in 1999 and the legalisation of “Kosovo’s” UDI became especially important for the West.

Since the UDI did not bring the expected results in terms of the international legitimisation of an “independent Kosovo” – due to an effective process of de-recognition and the increasingly firm stances of Moscow and Beijing – the West decided to put intense pressure through the so-called “French-German” plan which was proposed in the fall of 2022 by advisers to French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Belgrade initially rejected this proposal, but after months of intense Western pressure and open threats – more precisely, ultimatums – it accepted the consideration of implementing some of its points based on later agreed annexes.

Clearly, this agreement’s goal is for Serbia to renounce Kosovo and Metohija and allow “Kosovo” to float in “international waters” towards membership, recognition and other forms of legitimacy and legalisation. Given that it is clear to everyone that Belgrade will never formally recognize “independent Kosovo”, non-recognition would be completely relativised by implementing the “French-German” plan in a practical sense. The key is that Belgrade agrees to enter into the process leading to the signing of an agreement on “normalisation” or “good neighbourly relations” between the Republic of Serbia and the “Republic of Kosovo”.

For the West, the benefits are more than obvious. First, the agreement would legitimise the 1999 NATO aggression, which is especially important in the context of conflicts involving other non-Western world powers, such as the Russian Federation. Second, it would legalise the “Kosovo” case as a “*sui generis*” – a unique case – which would have a triple effect: it would take the argument of “double standards” out of Moscow’s hands regarding respect for territorial integrity; it would strengthen transatlantic unity by giving the non-recognisers within the EU and NATO the basis that they no longer have to fear precedent, and can therefore recognise “Kosovo”; finally, Serbia’s diplomatic activity aimed at de-recognition among the countries of the Global South would collapse. The third benefit for the West would be that Belgrade’s ties with Beijing and Moscow in the UN Security Council would be diluted. From the perspective of the West, this would further reduce the “malign influence” of China and Russia in the Balkans. This would

strengthen the possibility of integrating the entire region into NATO. In the context of the increasingly intensive development of multipolarity in the world, the West would thus counterattack by undermining the influence of rival powers in a strategically important region.

In the aftermath of the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the US Foreign Policy magazine headlined "Why Putin Keeps Talking About Kosovo", arguing that "for the Kremlin, NATO's 1999 war against Serbia is the West's original sin – and a humiliating affront that Russia must avenge" (Mc Glynn 2022). It was not something new, as Western media had already been acknowledging – even if often not fully understanding – Putin's references to NATO's 1999 aggression. Ahead of the February 24 operation, at a press conference in Moscow with the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin underlined: "Mr Chancellor just said that people of his generation (and I am a member of his generation) can hardly imagine any kind of war in Europe. . . . But you and I have witnessed a war in Europe, the war against Yugoslavia, which was unleashed, coincidentally, by NATO. It was a large-scale military operation that included air strikes against a European capital, Belgrade. That happened, didn't it?" (Gessen 2022). Putin made it clear that the aggression was launched without the UN Security Council's approval and created a precedent with longstanding consequences. Scholz replied by repeating the Western argument that Kosovo was a "unique case", not a precedent, and the bombing was pursued in order to prevent a "genocide", just as it had been argued by his fellow Social Democrat Scharping in 1999 (Stojanović 2022). The Russian rhetoric regarding the 1999 bombings had remained the same two decades later, considering it as "NATO's barbaric act of aggression" and "massive crime" and pointing regularly to the use of depleted uranium and the "poisoning" of Serbia. However, it also used the precedent of both the 1999 bombings and their consequence – the Western-orchestrated UDI of "Kosovo" – to justify its military action in Georgia and Ukraine, confer recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and legitimise the referenda by Crimea, Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporozhye regions to join the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the 1999 NATO aggression is part of the Russian strategic narrative that defines the need to change the path of the offensive thread line of US unipolarity, which, after Yugoslavia, continued in Iraq and Libya, combined with the eastward expansion of NATO aimed at using Georgia and Ukraine as launching pads against Russia itself. In that sense, Russia's strategic narrative calls for the wider non-Western

community of nations, particularly the Global South, to stand against the Western “rules-world order” to avoid repeating the 1999 scenario.

There is an impression that officials and media from NATO countries more often mention Russia’s reference to NATO bombings in the Ukrainian context than their own 1999 “victory”. When they do, they refer to it as a “bombing campaign”, “an intervention” following a “brutal crackdown”, “mass killings”, and “other war crimes” committed by Serbs against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. They also refer to it in reports about monuments and street names celebrating “saviours” of Kosovo Albanians, such as US President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair. Nevertheless, overall, media reports about 1999 remain buried, and are far below the publicity which the Western media repeats yearly on the occasion of the July 11 commemoration of the 1995 Serb massacre of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica. When discussing the continuous tensions in Kosovo, the 1999 bombings are just used as a brief background line.

For China, Kosovo and Metohija is a part of the Republic of Serbia and represents an example of the defence of territorial integrity in the conditions of the unipolar order and the transition to multipolarity. Beijing maintained this position during the Belgrade-Priština dialogue under the auspices of the EU, repeating it with every statement on the Kosovo issue in international forums and during meetings with Serbian officials. In the last few years, several processes, in particular, have strengthened China’s position on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. First, the de-recognition of Taiwan and Kosovo. Since 2017, these two processes have run in parallel despite the lack of evidence that they were coordinated. According to the Serbian government, since then, 28 states have revoked their recognition of Kosovo (Kosovo Online 2023). In the same period, nine countries de-recognised Taiwan. Second, Beijing views the Kosovo issue also through the lens of recent Western pressure and sanctions regarding Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The Western narrative argues that China does not want to recognize the independence of Kosovo “not only out of solidarity with its Serbian ally” but also “so as not to open a discussion on the secession of Taiwan and Hong Kong” (China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe 2020, 30).

Chinese officials and media make a recurrent reference to the 1999 bombings in their statements, analyses and commentaries. Every year, the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade commemorates the bombing at the site where

now sits the Chinese Cultural Center. The rhetoric about the bombing is as strong as it was a quarter of the century ago: “The Chinese people will never forget the blood and lives paid to defend truth, fairness and justice, and NATO’s barbaric crime of bombing the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia”, Beijing media report, adding it was a “brutal missile attack” and “homicidal rampage” (Global Times 2023c). U.S. and NATO moves related to the conflict in Ukraine are also put in reference to 1999. Thus, Wang Wenbin, the spokesman of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in his address regarding the 1999 bombings, underlined that “the US-led NATO should seriously reflect on its crimes and abandon its out-of-date Cold War mentality to stop stirring up conflicts, splits and chaos”, adding that “recently, NATO’s continued eastward movement into the Asia-Pacific region to provoke bloc confrontation has aroused high alert among regional countries” (Global Times 2023a). Chinese experts warn that “the US has no plan to let go of its wild ambitions” but “should not expect China to sit still”, that “the strength gap between China and the U.S. is narrowing”, and that “China is not what it used to be when the US bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999” (Global Times 2023d). Serbia has become the first European country to buy Chinese military equipment. On the occasion, Chinese media reported that “the brave resistance of China’s ironclad friend, Serbia, against NATO during its aggression against former Yugoslavia in 1999, has touched many in China” and that “the legendary achievement of the Serbian Air Force and Air Defense in shooting down a stealth fighter for the first time in human history won the respect of many Chinese people” (Hu and Fan 2023). The current tensions in Kosovo are also seen through these lenses: “It was the US and NATO that forcibly divided Serbia through bombing and despicable political tactics. This is the root of that bane” (Global Times 2023e).

On the 25th anniversary of the bombing of the Embassy, President Xi Jinping visited Belgrade during his three-country tour in early May 2024. He pointed out that “the China-Serbia friendship, forged with the blood of our compatriots, will stay in the shared memory of the Chinese and Serbian peoples” (Xinhua 2024). Indeed, memory culture, related to both the resistance and suffering during World War II in the 1940s and the NATO aggression in the 1990s, is one of the four cornerstones of China-Serbia’s “iron-clad friendship”, together with political, economic cooperation and a shared vision of the future of the multipolar world based on international law and the UN Charter, as opposed to the “rules-based world order” (Mitić 2024a).

Thus, memory politics played an essential part in NATO's crafting of the 1999 aggression against Yugoslavia, but also in the perception and reception of the bombings outside of the political West, most notably in Russia and China (Mitić 2024b). At the time, there was a clear and long-term build-up in Western rhetoric about the threat of a "genocide" in Kosovo, which served as an attempt to justify the bypassing of the UN Security Council. However, facts did not support such strategic framing, nor was it accepted in Moscow and Beijing. Instead, it was perceived as an attempt to misuse the position of the hegemon to implement yet another "rule" in the unipolar order. Such a perception was further strengthened after the 2008 EU-US masterminding of the UDI implemented by Kosovo Albanians. The "unique case" framing, in clear violation of international law, was both a repeat of the 1999 scenario and its follow-up but also a step too far. For Moscow and Beijing, the 1999 aggression had been both a humiliation and a wake-up call. However, in 2008, the times had changed, and both capitals were now ready to confront US/NATO's continuous military expansion – be it on Russia's eastern borders or around the China Sea. They were also ready to challenge the RBO on various fronts – diplomatic, economic, security, normative and informational. Ever since the decline of U.S. unipolarity, rising multipolarity, Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, U.S. containment of China's rise, shifts in perceptions and attitudes of the Global South towards Western powers have all impacted the strategic narratives of great powers. Nevertheless, the 1999 NATO aggression remains a particularly defining moment in the narratives and memory politics of those who had been "humiliated" – Russia and China. On the other side, the strategic narrative of the "victorious" NATO countries appears to be on the defensive, toned down, and mainly focuses on blaming Moscow's memory politics for the Ukrainian conflict.

UNDERMINING REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

A successful functioning of the Western ultimatum regarding Kosovo would prove that it could be copied-pasted on other issues where it wants to exercise pressure, including on relations within Bosnia and Herzegovina. This matrix of pressure on Belgrade would focus on Republika Srpska and the centralisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as the next objectives.

Faced with the disastrous consequences of a failed strategy towards Ukraine, contradictory signals towards a heated Middle East, the loss of a dominant position and resources in Africa, and the growing power of an energy mega-power in the form of an expanded BRICS, the political West is showing its “muscles” in an already tried three-decade demonstrative exercise of using “sticks” in the Balkans, over the backs of the Serbian people.

Three processes are in focus. The first is pressure on the Republic of Serbia to renounce Kosovo and Metohija by accepting and implementing the “French-German plan.”

The second is an attempt to prevent what the remnants of former Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović’s anti-Serb regime call the “Serbianisation of Montenegro”, by obstructing the democratic will of the Serbian people and the legitimate influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The third process concerns the attempt to collapse Republika Srpska by “drying up” its competencies and changing its geopolitical orientation, military neutrality and decision-making independence to bring it under the political cover of Sarajevo and the security umbrella of the NATO alliance.

All three processes are characterised by attempts to use the anti-Russian geopolitical momentum to encircle the “Euro-Atlantic, NATO space”, brutal violation of international law and appeal to the “right of the might”.

Nevertheless, both Russia and China stood up to the attempt by the Western members of the UN Security Council to nominate German opposition politician Christian Schmidt to the post of the “High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, a function which objective should have been to protect balance and order in the country, but which turned into a punishment squad for Republika Srpska and its officials, and a mechanism for the degradation of Srpska’s prerogatives under the Dayton Peace Accords.

Instead of pursuing the implementation of what had been painfully agreed in Dayton in 1995, Western countries and the Bosnian Muslim political elites in Sarajevo worked together to undermine the “letter of the agreement” and work towards the centralisation of Bosnia-Herzegovina using the principle of “spirit of the agreement”. This has been another convenient way to demonstrate the (mis)use of the “rules-based world order” – the free interpretation of a peace agreement in accordance with

geopolitical interests. Such a process indeed had weakened the Republika Srpska. However, after the 2010s, “Kosovo’s UDI”, and the strengthening of multipolarity, the leadership in Banjaluka decided to end the crawling attempts to turn the entity into an “empty shell”. In return, this has caused frustration and anger in Sarajevo and Western capitals, which have since waged numerous processes, including restrictive measures, against the leadership in Banjaluka, particularly the leading political figure in Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik. The officials in Banjaluka had been labelled as “Russian proxies”, “destroyers of the Dayton accords”, and “obstacles to EU integration”. In turn, Republika Srpska’s Assembly adopted a Resolution on military neutrality akin to the one in Serbia, thus effectively putting a break on Bosnia’s NATO integration.

The metastasis of the creative interpretations of the “rules-based world order” in Bosnia-Herzegovina grew more aggressive due to opposition by Republika Srpska, Russia and China to legitimise Schmidt as “High Commissioner”. His “appointment” itself is a product of political engineering by the West, which violated the law and procedures of the UN Security Council, in line with the “spirit” of the RBO.

Although illegal, illegitimate and unwanted in at least one of the two entities in Bosnia, since his arrival, Schmidt had shown all the malignancy not only of his actions but also of the form of “high representative”, a relic of the governor-colonising mentality for which there is increasingly less tolerance around the world. Schmidt tried to impose the confiscation of state property on Republika Srpska, thus deliberately escalating one of the most severe political crises since Dayton. He imposed unauthorised changes to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina and stipulated that disobeying the decision of the “high representative” is punishable by a sentence of six months to five years, as well as a ban on performing duties in a body financed from the budget. The democratically elected National Assembly of the Republika Srpska legally annulled the attempt of an illegal, illegitimate foreign politician/“governor” to dictate the conditions for the dissolution of authority, property, and freedom in its own country.

The trial against the President of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has been a direct blow to Republika Srpska, representing an immediate and urgent threat. The aim of the attack is to seize the property of the Republika Srpska, opening the way for the loss of the RS’s neutrality status. The further

aim is to put pressure on Banja Luka and Belgrade to integrate the entire Serbian corps into NATO.

At the global level, Schmidt, through American and British diplomacy, sometimes even manages to “sell the fog” by arguing that everything he does is “a fight against Serb, Dodik’s secessionism”. In this way, he is trying to scare many countries in the world seriously worried about the fact that – after the West violated international law by organising the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008 – the Pandora’s box of separatism is wide open.

Consciously hiding not only his true intentions—forcible integration of Bosnia into NATO and unitisation under the auspices of clientelistic political Sarajevo—Schmidt, as well as his legally delegated predecessors in the form of a “high representative,” essentially reduced the space for political coexistence of the two entities in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Indeed, the form of a “high representative” is a symbol of neo-colonialism in the 21st century, and it is unacceptable that an illegally appointed Western diplomat (without the approval and resolution of the UNSC) arbitrarily and illegitimately imposes laws on democratically elected leaders.

Therefore, the defence against the arbitrariness of Schmidt and the position of “high representative” is a defence of the United Nations (because of the way he was “appointed”), international law and the Dayton Agreement (which Schmidt interprets in the spirit of the RBO). Indeed, it is high time that the function of “high representative” disappears, the only remaining neo-colonisation in Europe ends, and the chance for the peaceful coexistence of three equal peoples in two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina survives.

However, Germany, outraged by the daring of Republika Srpska’s resistance, pushed further. Berlin, in agreement with the Bosnian Muslim elites in Sarajevo and with support from the political West in general, tacitly prepared a draft resolution of the UN General Assembly, calling for the establishment of a remembrance day for the victims of “Srebrenica genocide”, a formulation which Serbia and Republika Srpska firmly reject. Furthermore, the diplomatic manoeuvre was masterminded with the help of Bosnia’s ambassador to the UN, a Bosnian Muslim, without the approval of the presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina, consisting of representatives from all three constituent nations.

The vote passed, but both the political West and the Bosnian Muslim elites suffered a diplomatic fiasco. Only 84 out of 193 UN member countries supported the resolution (Beta 2024). The argumentation by those who publicly explained their opposition was clear: this is not a vote against war crimes, but a vote against attempts to use all of the ruses of manipulation, pressuring and “creative interpretations”, in addition to double standards and hypocrisy. The vote polarised the world, with even those expected to support the resolution fracturing – the EU (Hungary opposed, Slovakia, Greece, Cyprus abstained) and Islamic countries (Morocco, Algeria, United Arab Emirates, and Azerbaijan abstaining, among others). Russia and China voted against it, and the US and leading EU countries voted in favour. It was expected based on strategic narratives, but it was another confirmation of a deep global rift.

WILL THE NATO ALLIANCE EXPAND IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

FRAMING RUSSO-SERBIAN COOPERATION AS HYBRID THREAT

The 2008 Kosovo UDI led to the big comeback of the Russo-Serbian collaboration. Serbia strengthened its political cooperation with Moscow at the bilateral and UN levels, boosted its commitment to military neutrality, concluded a strategic energy agreement with Russia with implications on modernising oil refining and constructing a new gas pipeline, signed a free trade agreement with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Area, fostered military-technical cooperation and acquisition of Russian arms, and nurtured cultural and informational programmes. Republika Srpska turned to Moscow’s assistance against the Western tide, which had been heading towards gradually weakening its functionality. Following the Crimean referendum, Serbia refused to align with US and EU sanctions and stop cooperating with Moscow.

In turn, the political West saw Serbian-Russian cooperation as a synergetic “hybrid threat” to Western interests, particularly to NATO and EU enlargement in the region. As part of the “narrative war” between the West

and Russia, such portrayal became an integral part of strategic communication to promote the EU/NATO interests in the Western Balkans.

A strategic frame analysis (Mitić 2020) revealed the systematic building of a strategic narrative depicting Russian-Serbian cooperation as a hybrid threat.

In the political sphere, the central theme for Russian-Serbian cooperation has predominantly been the issue of Kosovo. The unresolved status of Kosovo has been seen as the primary source of instability not only in the territory concerned but also in the region. Russian-Serbian diplomatic cooperation in the international arena – which is strengthened by the Russian veto power in the United Nations Security Council – has been seen as mutually beneficial for the two countries but detrimental to Albanian aspirations and long-term Western interests of legalising Kosovo's 2008 unilateral secession, as well as in fully integrating the entire region in Western political and security arrangements. Furthermore, Russian-Serbian cooperation has been perceived as sustaining ethnic tensions within Kosovo through support to the Kosovo Serbs. The second central theme of political cooperation has been related to Republika Srpska. The Serb entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina is often perceived and sometimes labelled, as a "Russian proxy". Moscow is perceived as the leading international backer of Republika Srpska – from economic cooperation to the UN Security Council. Russo-Serbian cooperation is perceived as a source of political and ethnic tension, a threat to the territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as to its functionality and NATO and EU integration. Finally, the third theme was related to the field of general counter-balancing of EU and NATO interests in the Western Balkans since Russian support for Serbian interests over Kosovo, Republika Srpska, Montenegro and military neutrality is seen as detrimental, particularly to NATO expansion – which is in line with Moscow's objectives.

In the security field, most of the themes have been related to the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš and general defence cooperation. The centre in Niš was particularly singled out as a threat. Doubts were shed over its officially stated purpose of serving the region's humanitarian and disaster relief operations. Instead, it was either suspected or directly labelled as a potential "spy centre" for NATO activities in Kosovo and the wider region. It was also suspected of being a training centre for "paramilitary" groups. The delivery of MIG 29s, T-72s and Pantsir anti-aircraft artillery systems pointed to the fact that such cooperation increases

nervousness and tension in the region, particularly among Kosovo Albanians. Concerns over security cooperation also include Russia's provision of equipment to the police of Republika Srpska, but also suspected cooperation between Russian and Serbian intelligence services during the 2017 "storming" of the parliament in Skopje.

In the economic field, the primary threat from Russian-Serbian cooperation is in the energy sector. Serbia has been considered an important energy hub since the 2008 acquisition of the NIS refinery by Gazpromneft and a key actor in the construction of the Gazprom-led Turkish/Balkan gas pipeline. The intensification of dependency on Russian gas for the entire region, with accompanying implications for gas route diversification, is a major concern. Other issues of concern include the prospects of enlarging the Eurasian Economic Area in the region following Serbia's membership and the impact in Bosnia-Herzegovina of the Russian financial support to Republika Srpska.

In the religious sphere, the main focus has been on the cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church on various issues in the region. Furthermore, the Serbian Orthodox Church is often portrayed as a "conduit" of Russian interests, particularly as it has firm positions on the issues of Kosovo, Montenegro, Republika Srpska and NATO membership. Western think tanks put a particular focus on this cooperation in Montenegro, accentuating the role the Serb Orthodox Church and its leaders have had over various political issues – from the issue of a referendum on independence to the recognition of Kosovo's secession or NATO membership. This was, in turn, seen as divisive for the society in Montenegro, and thus an opportunity for Moscow's disruption.

In the non-governmental sector, the main focus has been on portraying cooperation between Russian and Serbian organizations as a security threat. The most prominent case is the alleged 2016 "coup" attempt in Montenegro. However, it also includes various "paramilitary" threats from organisations such as the "Night Wolves" or the "Cossacks" – which are portrayed as active in various Serb-populated areas but also close to the authorities in Republika Srpska. Russian organizations active in Serbia have been portrayed as purveyors of strong anti-NATO sentiment. Beyond the security field, Russian-Serbian NGO cooperation is also considered to produce a conservative, Eurosceptic narrative.

Finally, the Russian-Serbian cooperation in the informational sector is generally presented as a disinformation hub for the entire Western Balkans region, namely for all areas where Serbian is spoken or understood. Sputnik Serbia is considered the primary and most potent Russian-sponsored media outlet in this hub, later reinforced by the appearance of RT Balkans. However, Serbian media – including pro-governmental news agencies, TV, newspapers and tabloids, and various online outlets – are seen as a partner in the hub. Thus, Sputnik, RT and the Serb media – in Serbia, Republika Srpska, Montenegro – interchangeably serve as sources or amplifiers of narratives considered detrimental to EU and NATO interests. The German Marshall Fund would designate Serbian outlets as Russian “narrative proxies” in the Western Balkans (Metodieva 2019).

The strategic frames used in Western narratives present Russo-Serbian cooperation as uniformly negative across all spheres. While the narrative on “Russian malign interference” has been present for some time, over time, a strong narrative of Russo-Serbian cooperation as a “hybrid threat” also took root.

The strategic frames which are employed paint Russo-Serbian cooperation as firmly negative in nature and consequences. Such portrayal is present in all the spheres which were analysed. In the political sphere, cooperation is detrimental to regional security, inter-ethnic relations, conflict resolution and full integration into Western structures. In the security sphere, cooperation is perceived as conducive to militarisation, espionage and mistrust. In the economic sphere, it leads to energy monopolies and prevents diversification. In the religious sphere, it hurts inter-ethnic coexistence and promotes anti-Western agendas. In the non-governmental sector, it leads to illicit, violent actions which sow inter-ethnic discord. In the information sector, Russo-Serbian cooperation is disinformative and propagandistic, contaminating the entire regional media ecosystem.

A combination of such frames points to building a strategic narrative regarding Russo-Serbian cooperation as a “hybrid threat”. Policy implications of such strategic communication portrayal include the development of several “anti-hybrid” or resilience activities in all concerned fields. It remains, however, unclear how such strategic communication and policy could benefit long-term conflict resolution and stabilisation of the Balkans. The same is

true for other world regions, where a “cooperative hybrid threat” model has been applied to discredit cooperation between Russia and its partners.

UNDERMINING SERBIA’S MILITARY NEUTRALITY

A cursory look at numerous analyses and statements by Western and individual Serbian experts, activists, officials and journalists is enough to see the existence of a discourse challenging the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia, which the following framing can summarize:

“Serbia’s military neutrality is null and void because it is not internationally recognized. It is temporary and even unsustainable after the entry of Montenegro and North Macedonia into NATO. It is based on anti-NATO sentiments that amplify Russian disinformation and narratives. It is too expensive; it slows the entry into the European Union and the arrival of Western investments”.

Although military neutrality was confirmed by the resolution of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in 2007, strategic documents and statements of Serbian, foreign and even NATO officials, it was constantly challenged in non-governmental, party, expert and international circles.

We can observe the use of a double narrative of military neutrality in Euro-Atlantic circles. On the one hand, there is a formal and positive attitude towards Serbia’s military neutrality based on respect for the aspirations of Serbian public opinion, which overwhelmingly supports such a policy. On the other hand, discourse comes from structures often not formally connected to NATO and its member states, which challenge military neutrality. After all, the official “open door” policy promoted by NATO in its official documents represents an ideal basis for the game of narrative balancing.

The result is, on the one hand, a potential destabilisation of the concept of military neutrality. On the other hand, however, as a response to these efforts, there are urges for more active strategic communication and further normative regulation to more strongly confirm the legitimacy of this strategic commitment.

What are the roots of narrative attempts to undermine Serbia’s military neutrality?

One year after Serbia became a member of the “Partnership for Peace” programme at the NATO Heads of State Summit in Riga, on December 26, 2007, the country’s National Assembly declared “military neutrality regarding the existing military alliances until a possible referendum was called upon to reach a final decision on this issue” (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije 2007).

The “Resolution of the National Assembly on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia” was adopted immediately after the European Union Council meeting in Brussels on December 14, the last phase of coordinated action by the EU and NATO aimed at supporting the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo and Metohija by the of Kosovo Albanians, which was executed on February 17, 2008.

Even though 220 MPs voted for the parliamentary resolution, supporters of joining NATO challenged Serbia’s military neutrality from day one. According to them, the resolution’s adoption was the result of “political trade” between the then-President of Serbia, Boris Tadić, and the Prime Minister of Serbia, Vojislav Koštunica, who was a key proponent of the declaration of military neutrality. Despite his departure from power in 2008, the resolution was not repealed.

Military neutrality, however, came under pressure due to the new government’s proclaimed policy that “the EU has no alternative”. Considering the common linkage of membership in the EU and NATO and the complementarity of “Western values” promoted by these two organizations, supporters of membership in the Alliance believed that a change in strategic attitude was necessary. This attitude was encouraged by the fact that part of the Government, above all the then Minister of Defense Dragan Šutanovac, represented Euro-Atlantic positions.

Thus, at the summit in Strasbourg in 2009, the NATO heads of state, in their conclusions, supported “the Government’s stated commitment to Serbia’s integration into the Euro-Atlantic community of nations” (NATO 2009). NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated in 2010 that “The future of Serbia lies in integration into the Euro-Atlantic community – NATO and the EU” and that he will “do his maximum” in “the aim of the accession of Serbia to the Alliance through a step-by-step approach as requested by the Serbian side” (Blic 2010).

Pressure on military neutrality also arrived through informal channels. Cable 1010BELGRADE324, sent from the US Embassy in Belgrade and released thanks to WikiLeaks in 2010, provided insight into the “recipe for a NATO debate in Serbia” proposed by then-Ambassador Mary Warlick (Wikileaks 2010b).

She then assessed that the moment is suitable for the US to engage “media training funds, democracy grants and (Embassy) resources towards the topic of Euro-Atlantic integration” and that the previous activities in this direction – including in cooperation with the NATO “contact embassy” in Belgrade – “have contributed to the current re-examination of Serbia’s ‘neutrality’ stance” (Wikileaks 2010b).

On the other hand, supporters of Serbia’s military neutrality – at that moment primarily gathered around Koštunica’s opposition Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) – felt it was the right moment for a “counter strike”. They launched a petition in which they accused the government of wanting to introduce Serbia into NATO against the people’s will and away from public eyes, and they requested an urgent referendum on membership to prevent such a scenario.

In January 2010, a petition by 200 intellectuals and public figures – among whom were the Serbian Orthodox Metropolitan Amfilohije, film director Emir Kusturica, and leading Serbian writers and artists such as Matija Bećković, Dobrica Ćosić, Ljuba Popović, Mihailo Đurić, Dragoslav Mihailović and Momo Kapor – unexpectedly developed a debate about NATO.

Ambassador Warlick concluded that “the initial firestorm that resulted from (Defense Minister Šutanovac’s) comments implying Serbia might become a member appears to have led to a retreat from such public statements” and that “moving public opinion on NATO will be a long, difficult slog”, but that membership “is less a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’” given the “growing quiet consensus within the current government that Serbia’s long-term future lies in becoming not only a member of the European Union, but a part of the broader Euro-Atlantic security alliance as well” (Wikileaks 2010b). However, the repercussions of the petition, the involvement of Russian Federation officials in the debate and the fear of the general public’s reaction further slowed down this process.

In the 2012 elections, Koštunica’s DSS supported the candidate of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Tomislav Nikolić, in the second round of the

presidential elections, with an agreement that stipulated that citizens would declare “political and military neutrality in a referendum” (NSPM, 2014). Nikolić’s victory and the coming to power of the SNS weakened the positions of the advocates of joining NATO. However, the advocacy of joining NATO continued with the organisation of a series of projects, gatherings, conferences, tribunes and media programs.

The strengthening of Serbia’s “independent” foreign policy especially followed the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and its consequences. On the one hand, Serbia continued – and even intensified – cooperation with NATO, including through the signing and implementation of the Individual Partnership Program (IPAP) and numerous exercises with NATO and its members. On the other hand, military-technical cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, which announced a more substantial presence in the region with its Belt and Road Initiative, was also strengthened.

In the regional context, supporters of NATO membership were encouraged by the fact that Montenegro entered the Alliance in 2017 by voting in the Assembly without a popular referendum and despite the majority opposition of the citizens. In 2019, the Republic of Macedonia changed its name for the sake of NATO membership. On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina remained divided due to the increasingly strong resistance of Republika Srpska to further Euro-Atlantic integrations, which was confirmed in October 2017 by the adoption of the resolution of the National Assembly on military neutrality.

The ruling Serbian Progressive Party emphasized military neutrality as a principle within Serbia. For President Aleksandar Vučić, “The Serbian Armed Forces will preserve and protect military neutrality, not on paper, but real military neutrality” (Tanjug 2020), and “Serbia’s military neutrality is not put in question” (Indeks 2020). Since 2012, such messages have been regularly sent by Serbia’s prime, foreign affairs and defence ministers. However, a certain amount of confusion about SNS policy was created because some members of this party have been strong advocates of Serbia’s membership in NATO for many years. However, the impression is that these dissonant views remained a significant minority in the ruling party and coalition.

Thus, in 2019, the ruling majority in the National Assembly adopted two strategic documents that confirmed Serbia’s determination—the National

Security Strategy and the Defense Strategy. The Defense Strategy states that military neutrality is “a defence interest of the Republic of Serbia that arose from its national values and interests and international position” (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2019a, 8-9).

In the National Security Strategy, it is additionally emphasized that military neutrality “is not an obstacle for the development of partner cooperation in the Partnership for Peace programme” and that “the Republic of Serbia has no intention of becoming a member of NATO nor of any other military-political alliance, but wants to work with all partners in the world to improve mutual trust and achieve common goals” (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2019b, 21). These positions have been hailed by proponents of military neutrality in the Serbian opposition (Jovanović 2022).

At the international level, several NATO officials and ambassadors of NATO members in Belgrade emphasized that they respect Serbia’s military neutrality. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized that the Alliance respects Serbia’s military neutrality and that “as a sovereign country, Serbia has the right to choose its own path” (RTS 2021). His deputy, Mircea Geoana, added, “We can have strong relations with partners—like Austria or Finland, without them being members” (FoNet 2021).

On the front page of the NATO Military Liaison Office in Belgrade, it was pointed out that “NATO fully respects Serbia’s decision to implement a policy of military neutrality” (NATO Military Liaison Office 2021), and its head, Tommaso Vitale, emphasized that “we have always been clear and consistent on this issue at all levels, from Secretary General Stoltenberg, through various NATO officials, my predecessors, up to me now” (Đurđević and Gočanin 2020).

However, analysts, media and non-governmental organizations from NATO countries and those whose projects are financed from Euro-Atlantic sources leave a completely different impression and intentions. Their challenge to military neutrality is constant. A 2022 analysis (Mitić and Matić 2022) identified six keyframes: “Serbia’s military neutrality is null and void because it is not internationally recognized”; “Serbia’s military neutrality is unsustainable due to the geographical environment made up of NATO members”; “Serbia’s military neutrality threatens relations with the West, integration into the EU and alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU”; “Serbia’s military neutrality is economically

unprofitable and unsustainable”; “Serbia’s military neutrality disorients its foreign policy”; and “Military neutrality is a vague and/or outdated concept”.

Suppose we observe the behaviour of most NATO officials or Alliance member states. In that case, we observe a discourse that respects or at least tolerates the Republic of Serbia’s military neutrality. This approach has been dominant in public performances in recent years. The fact that it is repeated during every meeting of the highest Serbian officials with representatives of the Alliance and that such wording is found on the website of the NATO Military Liaison Office in Belgrade indicates that it is not an ad hoc position.

Somewhat rarer are more ambivalent but also potentially indicative positions, which, for example, are expressed by the Deputy Assistant Secretary General of NATO, James Appathurai, when he points out that “If you are neutral does not mean you should not defend yourself, but that you will do that on your own, and that is costly” (Fonet 2019), or the ambassador of NATO member Norway in Belgrade, Arne Sannes Bjornstad, when he assesses that Serbia’s intention to be militarily neutral brings “less security and more expense” (Maza 2018).

At the same time, contradictory views are coming from the ranks of NATO members. Just five days after, in August 2019, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted strategies on national security and defence in which the commitment to military neutrality is highlighted, Quint countries (all NATO members – USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy), in the context of the Belgrade-Priština dialogue, called on “both parties to avoid actions that will hinder a final agreement, which is necessary for both countries to achieve greater Euro-Atlantic integration and its accompanying benefits (N1 2019).

The ambassador of the Russian Federation in Belgrade, Aleksandar Botsan-Kharchenko, reacted to Quint’s statement, pointing out that “it is not clear why it relates to Euro-Atlantic integration” and that the “Quint again ignores Serbia’s position on military-political neutrality” (NSPM 2019).

NATO maintains and clearly emphasizes its “open door” policy towards possible future candidates for membership, including in the Western Balkans. This position is repeated at all summits and ministerial meetings of the member states.

Thus, although on the one hand, NATO officials “respect” the military neutrality of Serbia, on the other hand, there is a clear possibility for a change of attitude, and they clearly emphasize the advantages of “membership in the Euro-Atlantic family”.

In the non-official sector – including the media, analysts, institutes and non-governmental organizations – the discourse is more critical of Serbia’s military neutrality. It is emphasized that military neutrality is unsustainable because NATO members increasingly surround Serbia, it is incompatible with EU membership in the long term, and it collapses foreign policy orientation. The second set of frames, which concerns the conceptual challenge, points out that military neutrality is internationally unrecognized, outdated and unclear. The third set of frames focuses on the economic unsustainability of enforcing military neutrality (Mitić and Matić 2022).

Therefore, it is clear that we can talk about a “double narrative” regarding the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia in Euro-Atlantic circles: an official narrative that is mostly approving and an unofficial one that is mostly disputing.

Nevertheless, even when we go down to the unofficial level, the argumentation and discourse challenging military neutrality is noticeably more moderate than in the case of criticism of Serbian-Russian cooperation as a “hybrid threat”.

One of the reasons for a more moderate discourse in challenging military neutrality is undoubtedly the fact that the challenge is – at least partially – in collision with the “respectful” official position of NATO. A more radical criticism of Serbia’s military neutrality would have to call into question the statements of Alliance officials. At the same time, even the most prominent critics of military neutrality are increasingly aware that such policy is the long-term strategic commitment of the Republic of Serbia and that support for NATO membership among Serbian citizens is extremely low.

From the perspective of NATO’s strategic communication, the inconsistency between NATO officials – such as Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg – and the announcement of the Contact Group – which consists of leading NATO members – at first sight weakens the credibility of the Alliance’s position. However, such a statement would be relevant only if the attitude of NATO officials on military neutrality was sincere in a strategic sense and not only cunning in a tactical sense.

If the leaders of the Alliance continue to support the membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina in NATO – despite the opposition of Republika Srpska and the Resolution on Military Neutrality – and suggestions about the future membership of “Kosovo” – after the eventual agreement between Belgrade and Pristina – it is difficult to believe that Serbia’s membership is forever placed *ad acta*, which raises the question of whether it is somehow a “cooking the frog” tactic.

In this sense, unofficial sources that challenge Serbia’s military neutrality could be seen as those whose role is to “heat the pot”, even on low heat.

So, is Serbia’s military neutrality really respected, or is the Alliance itself or individual members waiting for an opportune moment to push for deeper Euro-Atlantic integration, that is, NATO membership itself, as was the case 15 years ago?

Successful strategic communication presupposes adapting messages to the target group. In this sense, respecting military neutrality—a strategic decision of the Republic of Serbia that has strong public support—is a logical move by Alliance officials and member states.

Flexibility is crucial for strategic communication, which opens up the possibility for various tactical options. With that aspect, sending “low-intensity” messages through unofficial channels – through analysts, institutes and non-governmental organizations – challenging military neutrality can be a successful communication arsenal. This approach is understandable if the goal is to destabilize the perception of the sustainability of military neutrality in Serbian public opinion. If not, the question is who, why and with what goals threaten the official NATO narrative.

Whatever the case may be, however – whether the “dual narrative” is part of the intention or not – for NATO’s strategic communication, the incoherence of the messages reaching the Serbian public can potentially be a “double-edged sword”. Namely, it can lead to “information fratricide”, that is, the phenomenon of the negative impact of information campaigns on allies and their operations. Consequences can be confusion, loss of trust and credibility.

Such confusion continued to reign after the outset of the 2022 conflict in Ukraine. Christopher Hill, one of the architects of the 1999 talks – and subsequent NATO aggression – returned to Belgrade in 2021 to become

Washington's ambassador to Serbia. Strategic ambivalence or not, he has since repeated respect for Serbia's military neutrality, but accentuating that Serbia's future lies in the West and that NATO's open-door policy remains: "But the Serbs could one day come to a different conclusion. For example, Sweden led a policy of military neutrality. This lasted 200 years. They made a change" (RTS 2024).

Hill's approach was lauded by former NATO Supreme Allied commander, Admiral James Stavridis, who argued that the US Ambassador is the "ultimate steady pair of hands to gently pull Serbia toward the West" (Stavridis 2024).

SHOULD EU MEMBERSHIP BE THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE FOR SERBIA?

PERSPECTIVES OF EU ENLARGEMENT

The European Union is in the jaws of geopolitical reality, from dismembered strategic autonomy to stuck enlargement policy.

The issue of European integration in the context of the Ukrainian crisis should be viewed from three fundamental aspects. First, from the aspect of internal dynamics in the European Union, the issue of internal cohesion. Then, from the aspect of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy towards the leading world powers and international organisations, that is the geopolitical reach of Brussels. Finally, from the aspect of relations with the Western Balkans countries and the new candidates Ukraine and Moldova, that is, from the aspect of EU enlargement.

At the dawn of the Ukrainian crisis, one of the key goals of the US was to create transatlantic cohesion. In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary to create unity within the EU itself in the wake of the Atlanticist policy focused on creating organic unity with Washington on the issue of foreign policy coordination and restrictive measures against the Russian Federation and on the issue of the global perspective of the struggle to preserve the Western vision of the RBO, including a rival attitude towards Beijing.

Considering Washington's influence on the course of the Ukrainian crisis and the policy of sanctioning the Russian Federation, this objective has been

achieved. The EU has also partially managed to close ranks, given that a consensus was reached – albeit not ideal – on a dozen packages of sanctions against the Russian Federation.

In addition, a dominant narrative has been created, especially in the mainstream media and political circles within the EU, about the causes, course and consequences of the Ukrainian conflict. According to this narrative, the future of relations with the Russian Federation is viewed in connotations ranging from the construction of a long-term “iron curtain” towards Russia to the collapse of the political order in Moscow, which would return relations to at least the level that existed at the height of Washington’s unilateral moment in the 1990s. That is, to Russia’s leaning towards RBO and abandoning efforts to overcome it. According to this American vision of “European unity” – Russia will either be isolated or disciplined on its knees.

Were these expectations grounded in reality?

The first answer must be sought regarding the effectiveness of the “united European Union” fight against the Russian Federation in the context of restrictive measures, the sending of weapons, and diplomatic and media efforts to exclude Russia from international forums. Do sanctions affect the Russian Federation? Partly yes. The growth of the Russian economy, at least shortly, will be limited and slowed down. Could the delivered weapons cause problems for Russian forces? Partly, yes, in terms of slowing the advance of Russian forces in the Donbas. Did the West manage to exclude Russia from international structures? Partly, it did, although Russia managed to maintain bilateral relations with hundreds of countries, expand BRICS and the SCO, and develop new forms of regional multilateral cooperation, particularly in Africa. However, do all these measures affect the Russian Federation to the extent that they could change its policy towards the Ukraine crisis or cause internal turmoil in Moscow? Can a “single EU” overcome Russia economically, politically, militarily and diplomatically? The development of events clearly shows – no.

Another question arises: What are the consequences for the European Union itself?

Although Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is seen as the most prominent opponent of the EU’s common policy, these divisions go much deeper within the political and social life throughout the EU and its member states.

German politics turned 180 degrees in certain spheres. In the rhetoric of the German ruling coalition, neither head nor tail can be seen anymore when it comes to its energy policy. Is the “Green Agenda” a dead letter on paper, while coal is returning from the written-off? Can Qatar replace Nord Stream 1 and 2? There is a justified fear of radicalisation and polarisation within German society, as German officials, politicians and analysts warned. From the right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to the left Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), dissatisfaction with Berlin’s policy has grown dramatically.

Emmanuel Macron’s policy has been under enormous pressure in France and challenged by both the left and the right. Although Macron has steadily become the most vocal supporter of (formal) NATO troops in Ukraine, he has suffered a backlash in opinion polls, a disaster in European elections, and a weakened position after the 2024 parliamentary elections. As in Germany, the right of Marine Le Pen’s National Rally and the left of Jean-Luc Mélanchon of La France Insoumise dismissed the government’s policy.

The European Parliament elections in June 2024, in particular, showed a strong upsurge of Eurosceptic parties, albeit with, at times, different priorities, but generally undermining Brussels’ geopolitical narrative.

Indeed, the EU has been announcing its entry into the “geopolitical elite” for a long time, defined by its strong influence on global political, economic, and security issues (Lopandić and Gordanić 2021). At the beginning of her mandate in 2019, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced a “geopolitical European Commission”. Macron persistently announced the “strategic autonomy” of the EU and the European security identity. However, with the conflict in Ukraine, instead of more autonomy within NATO, the EU got absolute dependence on the US (Ljepojević 2024). The “NATOisation” and “militarisation” trend of the European Union is clear.

We are also witnessing the loss of the specificity of German and French foreign policy, reflected in the maintenance of ties – sometimes privileged – with Moscow. Even within the European Union, Berlin and Paris can no longer prevail when faced with Washington’s determined intentions to satisfy its strategic interests in Europe. Germany and France, on the other hand, must try to compensate for the loss of influence elsewhere.

Clearly, they are not succeeding in this in relation to the “Global South”. It is a fact that no one outside the “political West” supported the policy of

sanctioning the Russian Federation and that there are increasingly intense and open voices that the Ukrainian crisis is a turning point in international relations and the transformation of the global world order. Among the threatened policies of the European powers is that towards China, in light of Beijing's attitude towards the Ukraine crisis, but also the tightening of relations between the US and China over Taiwan. Here again, the US managed to break European autonomy, after the formulation related to rivalry with China was included for the first time in a NATO strategic document adopted at the Madrid Summit, and after the invitation to Pacific countries such as Japan and South Korea to join the Summit despite the disagreement of Paris and Berlin, who express scepticism about NATO's "creeping" from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

If it lost its autonomy in relation to the US, practically destroyed relations with Russia, weakened them with China, and failed to maintain its influence on the "Global South" in Asia, Africa, and South America, where can the EU show its power?

Brussels, Berlin, and Paris believe that it could be the Western Balkans. However, it will not be easy there either. Beyond unresolved status issues and intra-regional tensions, there is the fight for influence against "third actors" (Đorić 2024; Ajzenhamer 2022; Zečević 2018; Entina 2023).

On the other hand, the process of EU integration essentially looks rusty, corroded from many years of languishing in conditions characterised by the so-called "EU enlargement fatigue."

This "enlargement fatigue", which manifested immediately after the entry of ten new members into the EU in 2004 and after the failed referendums in France and the Netherlands on the European Constitution in 2005, worsened after the numerous European crises.

Six months into Serbia's accession talks with the EU, in July 2014, at the beginning of the mandate of the new European Commission, EC President Jean-Paul Juncker said in a speech in front of the European Parliament that "in the next five years, no new members will be joining us in the European Union" (Juncker 2014). Furthermore, on August 28, in response to Juncker's five-year moratorium on enlargement, Berlin announced the creation of the "Berlin Process", an intergovernmental cooperation initiative. Linked to the future enlargement of the European Union, the "Berlin Process" aimed at revitalising the multilateral ties between EU candidate and potential

candidate countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania and selected EU member states (Berlin Process 2014). However, it was also perceived as a form of “waiting room”, an interim yet subpar substitution for genuine progress in EU enlargement. Following years of economic and financial crisis, the EU was entering a migration crisis, and enlargement fatigue among EU countries, most prominently in Western Europe, was on the rise, particularly in France.

Thus, when the European Commission adopted in February 2018 its strategy “A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, there were doubts about its acceptance and implementation (European Commission 2018). The document explained the steps Serbia and Montenegro must take to complete the accession process by 2025. EC President Juncker had indicated such a vision in a reversal of his 2014 non-enlargement policy. However, Juncker said during his subsequent visit to Belgrade, “2025 is not a promise; it’s a perspective, an indicative date, an encouragement” (EU in Serbia 2018). Three months after the proposal, it was disregarded by the EU member states when the Council of the European Union, at the May 2018 EU-Western Balkans in Sofia and further summits, refused to endorse the EC strategy, dealing a further blow to the accession process.

French President Emmanuel Macron said in Sofia that thoughts of enlargement have “weakened Europe” and that he was “not in favour of moving toward enlargement before having all the necessary certainty and before having made a real reform to allow a deepening and better functioning of the European Union” (Gray 2018).

Following France’s suggestion, the EC presented a year and a half later, in February 2020, a revised enlargement methodology to “reinvigorate the process” by compiling chapters into clusters. However, once again, it was perceived as a delaying tactic (Varhelyi 2020).

The same was true of France’s idea of a “European Political Community,” a pan-European cooperation debate club, which resembled more a “Berlin process”-type geopolitically anchoring “waiting room” than a genuine contribution to the accession process (Nemeth 2023).

Finally, with the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, a “geopolitical turn” in Brussels promised yet another fresh start for enlargement. However, this became particularly true for the geopolitical spotlight – Ukraine and Moldova

– while the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia, were left grudging about the unfairness of shortcuts for Kiev and Kishinev.

Granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova out of order and under wartime conditions seems not only unrealistic but also humiliating for the countries of the Western Balkans, which have been meeting a number of criteria for 20 years and which, for some of them, are tantamount to dramatic national humiliation.

In addition, with Ukraine’s candidacy, the EU collapsed its principle, according to which, after the experience with Cyprus, it will not accept countries with unresolved border problems. This principle was, of course, used as one of the main arguments why Belgrade should participate in the so-called “normalisation” of relations with Priština. However, can the EU ask Kiev to “normalise” relations with Russian-led Donetsk People’s Republic in the future? Or Lugansk, Zaporozhye, Kherson?

STATUS OF SERBIA’S EU NEGOTIATIONS

Almost a quarter of a century after the beginning of its “European path” and a decade into official European Union accession, Serbia’s relations with Brussels remain strained, stalled, and often only discursively self-gratifying.

Between the optimism depicted by the first EU-Western Balkans summit in November 2000 in Zagreb and the Thessaloniki Agenda in 2003, and the grim reality coated by Brussels’ geopolitically restored ambition in 2024, lay two decades of slow progress, radical political conditioning, major setbacks, enlargement fatigue, and rising Euroscepticism, all spiced by a host of pan-European crises (Zakić et al. 2024; Petrović, Kovačević and Milosavljević 2023; Stanković 2024; Milivojević 2020).

The 2005-2008 negotiations of the first step in EU integration – the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) – took place in an atmosphere of harsh conditionality policy, severely damaging the EU’s attractiveness in the Serbian public opinion. The EU required full and unconditional cooperation with the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia – largely perceived in Serbia as biased; it mediated in setting conditions favourable for Montenegro’s independence – creating a rift with the Belgrade authorities; finally, it masterminded the so-called “Kosovo UDI”

– in flagrant violation of the Constitution of Serbia and international law (Mitić 2007b).

With the beginning of Serbia's implementation of the SAA, Belgrade and Brussels shifted to the next phase, with the process aimed at opening EU accession talks. However, the next half-decade would prove to be particularly difficult due to the European economic and financial crises and Brussels' gradual abandonment of the policy stipulating that "EU talks and Kosovo status are two separate tracks" after it had served its strategic communication purpose in the May 2008 Serbian election campaign to downplay anti-EU anger in the Serbian electorate (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2008). Led by Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, the EU institutions sought to pressure Belgrade to abandon a policy of countering international recognition of an "independent Kosovo", minimise the importance of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 stipulating that Kosovo and Metohija is part of the Republic of Serbia, retire Serbia's institutions from the province, and instead enter into a "normalisation process" with the Albanian separatist political class in Priština with the goal of "legalising" the UDI and "legitimising" the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Al Jazeera 2011).

Chapter 35: Pushing for a "de facto" recognition of "Kosovo"

Over the ten years since the opening of membership talks, the relationship between Serbia and the European Union has had its ups and downs, going through the turbulent times of post-economic crisis recovery, the fallout of the post-2014 conflict in Ukraine, the 2015 migration crisis, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, political changes inside EU countries stiffening enlargement fatigue, and particularly the political and security consequences of the Kosovo issue.

The political conditionality of Serbia's EU accession with the status of Kosovo and Metohija has manifested itself in the background and at all stages of negotiations, formal or informal (Zakić et al. 2024, Stanković 2024).

The European Commission recommended to the Council of the European Union the opening of talks with the Republic of Serbia on April 22, 2013, only after the signing, three days earlier, of the "First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations", also known as the

“Brussels Agreement” between Belgrade and the provisional authorities in Priština (European Commission 2013). The Council of the European Union gave its green light two months later, on June 28, setting the stage for the beginning of talks on January 21, 2014, when the First EU-Serbia Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) opened in Brussels, marking the beginning of accession talks at the political level. At the IGC, the EU presented its negotiating framework, containing principles and procedures for accession talks. The focus was on the *acquis communautaire*, which Serbia, as a candidate state, has to adopt, divided into 35 thematic chapters, with Chapter 35 being related to the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. On one side, the negotiations framework was based on Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), arguing that the pace would depend on Serbia’s progress in meeting the requirements for membership. The EU pointed out that the shared objective of the negotiations is accession, but that “by their very nature, the negotiations are an open-ended process whose outcome cannot be guaranteed beforehand” (Council of the European Union 2014). However, unsurprisingly, a reference was included to the conditionality of EU accession talks on the “visible and sustainable improvement of relations with Kosovo*” (Council of the European Union 2014). Such a process would avoid the blocking of “European paths” of both Belgrade and Priština and would “gradually lead to the comprehensive normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, in the form of a legally binding agreement by the end of Serbia’s accession negotiations” (Council of the European Union 2014). Such formulation from the outset meant that the focus of the accession talks would, to a large extent, be based on Serbia’s readiness to accept “Kosovo” as a “separate entity” and, as such, placed an almost insurmountable obstacle.

Belgrade was dragged into the “Brussels Agreement” on two promises. First, it would pave the way for faster EU negotiations. Second, under the Agreement, a “Community of Serbian Municipalities” would be formed in Kosovo and Metohija. None of the two materialised. Throughout the decade, despite incessant discussions and alleged pressure, the Albanian authorities in Priština refused to form the “Community of Serbian Municipalities”, exposing the impotence or collaboration of the European Union, its division, incoherence and dependence on Washington’s policy. Instead, pressure was put on the five non-recognising EU states (Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Romania and Cyprus), while the plight of the Kosovo Serbs through Priština’s host of

hybrid pressures (imposition of tariffs, banning of Serbian products, press, currency, licence plates) was tolerated and normalised through statements of “appeals to all sides” (Tanjug 2024).

Furthermore, in the fall of 2022, the cabinets of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz prepared a plan for the “normalisation of relations “between Belgrade and the Priština authorities, under which Serbia is supposed to abandon its policy of preventing “Kosovo” from joining international organisations and opposing “Kosovo statehood symbols”, such as passports, diplomas, and vehicle registration plates (N1 2022a). This plan was backed by an ultimatum of EU and US envoys in Belgrade on January 20, 2023, requesting Serbia to accept the process or face political and economic consequences (RTV 2023). Although there were different interpretations of its content and its acceptance, the EU considered the plan and its roadmap as accepted (as the “Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia “and its “Implementation Annex “, also known as the “Ohrid Agreement”). Throughout 2023, it pushed for acceptance of this plan in an atmosphere of rising tensions and incidents inside Kosovo and Metohija. On the other hand, Belgrade insisted it opposed several elements of the proposal, saying it does not agree with “Kosovo” membership in the UN and its bodies. Nevertheless, in further pressure against Serbia, the Council of the European Union adopted in December 2023 conclusions requesting amendments to the benchmarks of Chapter 35 of Serbia’s accession negotiations to reflect Serbia’s obligations stemming from the “Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia” and its “Implementation Annex” (Euronews 2023). If implemented, such a process would preclude Serbia from completing talks with the EU without at least “de facto” recognising “Kosovo “as a separate entity.

Chapter 31: Aligning with EU's common foreign and security policy

Two months after the start of Serbia’s EU accession talks, in March 2014, the EU introduced sanctions against the Russian Federation over the Crimean referendum. Serbia did not align with the restrictive measures, as one of its principled foreign policies is to oppose such measures against the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, two of its main allies in the

UN Security Council over the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. However, under Article 26 of the EU negotiations position, it is stated that “in the period up to accession, Serbia will be required to progressively align its policies towards third countries and its positions within international organisations with the policies and positions adopted by the Union and its Member States” (Council of the European Union 2014). This meant that Chapter 31, regulating the issue of foreign policy alignment, would prove to be very contentious in the negotiations. As the crisis over Ukraine progressed and escalated following Russia’s operation in February 2022, so did the EU pressure on Serbia to align with sanctions packages. Serbia supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, in parallel asking Western countries to support Serbia’s territorial integrity in Kosovo and Metohija.

Nevertheless, in November 2022, the European Parliament recommended continuing accession talks with Serbia only if it aligns with the European Union sanctions policy against Russia. The European Parliament, in a resolution on the “New EU strategy for enlargement – adopted with 502 votes in favour, 75 against and 61 abstentions – recommended other EU bodies to “advance accession negotiations with Serbia only if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia and makes significant progress on the EU-related reforms” (European Parliament 2022). While the EP resolutions are not legally binding, they indicate political will and a considerable pressure point on other EU institutions. The EP decision also meant that, regardless of the support at the level of the Council and among member states, the EP would not support Serbia’s progress without sanctions against Russia. This further hardened the EP position on Serbia, as, under Chapter 31, a candidate country is nominally only obliged to fully adhere to the EU’s foreign policy declarations on the day of formal accession.

By August 2024, ten years into the EU accession process, Serbia had opened 22 negotiation chapters, temporarily closed two, and had not opened new chapters since December 2021.

A May 2024 survey by New Serbian Political Thought found that, when asked about the chances of Serbia entering the EU in the next 10 years, 10.3% answered “big,” 41.1%—“very small,” and 37.7%—“none” (NSPM 2024).

UNDERMINING CHINA-SERBIA COOPERATION

The BRI and CHINA-CEEC context

Since 2012, the expansion of China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) cooperation has attracted widespread interest in Western policy circles, enlisting reactions from awe to distrust. While the China-CEEC platform provided considerable results and brought forward unprecedented levels and channels of cooperation, its perception and portrayal in Western media and think tank reports, policy papers, and debates has turned incrementally negative, in line with the overall depiction of the BRI.

As the implementation of BRI grew in Asia and Europe, Western European and U.S. media, think tanks and officials started using a negative critical discourse on the initiative. Several frames could be distinguished in these assessments (Mitić 2017). First, the BRI is “illiberal” and “authoritarian” or promotes “illiberal” international order and values. Second, the BRI is “disruptive” – disrupting and changing the global structure of the “value chain” and thus impacting the world economy. The third set painted the BRI as “divisive”, or stirring division among countries vying for Chinese investment. The fourth set of frames depicted BRI as “geopolitical” or aiming to increase influence in Central Asia and the CEE regions. Finally, the fifth depicted BRI as “ineffective”, either arguing about a lack of concrete implementation results or predicting a dark future for the project.

Such portrayal has been at complete odds with China’s own BRI strategic narrative, as its president Xi Jinping envisaged since he revealed the initiative in Almaty and Jakarta in 2013. China has framed the initiative as a “win-win”, “mutually beneficial cooperation”, and “sharing the fruits of development”, intending to build a “community of shared future for mankind” (Xi 2014; Xi 2017). This vision, in the words of Xi Jinping, encompasses “cooperative, collective and common security”, respect for multilateralism and the complexities of multipolarity, the central role of the UN, and calls for respect of “territorial integrity”, “sovereignty”, and “non-interference in internal affairs”. Furthermore, it rules against “Cold War mentality”, “zero-sum-games”, “winner-takes-all”, “unilateralism”, and “law of the jungle”.

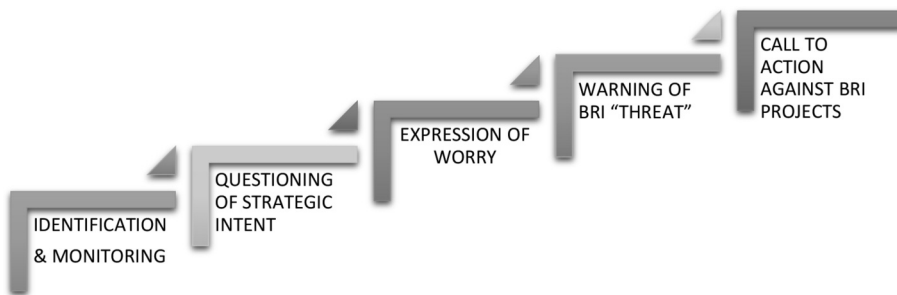
The Belt and Road Initiative is, indeed, a complex narrative that can be seen as a system narrative (as it presents an alternative vision to the existing world order), an identity narrative (about the projection of China’s values

and power), and an issue narrative (about specific infrastructure and investment objectives envisioned by the BRI).

Cooperation with CEEC countries mirrored China's efforts in other BRI regions. At the same time, it raised enthusiasm among participating countries and worry in the West about its economic, geopolitical and normative implications. As a result, China-CEEC BRI-related projects have faced intensive monitoring, increasing criticism and attempts at derailment.

Based on observation and analysis of BRI framing by critical Western media, non-governmental and policy circles, we can distinguish several phases in projecting this negative strategic narrative. These phases have evolved from the (1) original identification and early monitoring of the initiative towards (2) the questioning of its strategic intent, (3) the expression of worry about its effect, (4) warning about the "BRI threat" and, finally, (5) the call to action against BRI-related projects. While the phases of identification and questioning were more present in the project's first three years, since 2016, we have witnessed a shift towards worry, warning, and call to action against BRI projects. The BRI projects are depicted as a "concrete threat" to Western liberal democracy, as being "non-transparent", "undermining EU regulations", and supporting "illiberal regimes in Eastern Europe".

Phases of Western negative framing of the BRI



The construction of threat frames to form obstructive narratives has been particularly active and damaging concerning BRI-related initiatives in CEEC countries. Appeals have been made to apply stricter regulations of Chinese investments or altogether avoid them, with the prospect of reconsidering participation in the network.

The obstructive frames that describe China-CEEC cooperation fall primarily into two categories: crafted imageries of Beijing's "systemic ills" and "geopolitical ambition." These categories also allow us to distinguish some of the critical methods used to construct the narratives and their ramifications (Mitić 2022b).

The "systemic ills" grouping includes representations of flaws which the authors of critical frames perceive as endemic to China's political and economic structure, values, rules, norms and practices and considered as inherent and embedded in BRI-related projects. These strategic frames, thus, form a strategic narrative on China's cooperation in the CEE. According to this narrative, China (1) first identifies weak states where it can foster elite capture, (2) then promotes the illiberal and authoritarian practices of the elites, (3) profits from non-transparency, which corrupts the elites, (4) funds activities which lack regulation and endanger societies, such as problematic energy/ecological investments, and then (5) shuts down critical voices (weak civil society, media, academia).

The "geopolitical ambition" grouping includes representations considered part of China's geostrategic objectives in its rise to global leadership. Several strategic frames could be identified. These strategic frames, thus, form the following strategic narrative: China is (1) sowing division within the EU and the transatlantic community in order to obtain policy favours; (2) using malign influence to either distract candidate states from EU integration or to prepare them for Trojan horse roles if they adhere to the Union; (3) entangling partners with debt traps, and/or (4) medical and vaccine diplomacy; and (5) in case of non-cooperation, adopting an aggressive anti-Western "wolf warrior" discourse through propaganda and disinformation.

The following methods of countering Chinese influence in CEE countries could be identified: (1) creating "China watchdog" networks, which can monitor, identify soft spots and amplify threats, leading to (2) "fostering of counter-narratives on China-BRI activity, (3) "dismissing cooperation as toxic", and thus providing incentives for (4) "escalating diplomatic confrontation", (5) "raising international pressure coalitions" and (6) "providing alternative networks".

Consequences of the obstructive narrative in the CEEC have been different. Several countries have publicly boasted their disillusionment with

Chinese investments, and some have bowed to U.S. pressure over the 5G network cooperation with Huawei. Lithuania has withdrawn from the China-CEEC cooperation network. The Prague city authorities have encouraged a series of actions supporting China critics, thus attracting the ire of Beijing. On the other hand, despite pressure and criticism, countries like Hungary and Serbia continue to boost cooperation with China bilaterally and trilaterally in constructing the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway.

The following strategic narrative was formed: (1) There is a “growing disappointment with China-CEEC cooperation in CEE countries”, where (2) “China is increasingly seen as a threat”, which leads to (3) “an increasing bottom-up and activist backlash against China-related projects”, while (4) “relations with China are gradually becoming an internal political matter”, resulting in (5) “the China-CEEC cooperation network shrinking”, which means that (6) “pressure from Washington D.C. and Brussels is winning over Beijing’s soft power” (Mitić 2022b).

The argument is that the obstructive narrative fosters negative sentiment and views China-CEEC cooperation as toxic, undesirable and dangerous for the CEE countries. Such a narrative encourages repulsion of cooperation, fosters disappointment, facilitates crippling criticism and smooths the way towards backlash against cooperation and concrete projects.

Negative framing of China-Serbia energy cooperation

With the Sino-Serbian cooperation in the fast lane since 2016, Western negative framing sought to find soft spots. It particularly targeted Chinese investments in the Serbian energy sector, which began in 2016 when the HBIS Group (Hesteel at the time) bought the ailing Smederevo steel mill. After nine years of exploitation, the mill was abandoned by US Steel during the economic crisis in 2012, leaving the city in economic tatters. Within a year of acquisition, the Chinese company turned the Smederevo steel mill not only into Serbia’s largest exporter already in July 2017 but also positioned its port on the Danube firmly on the vital intersection of pan-European corridors VII (Danube) and X (Athens-Belgrade-Budapest).

A second critical Chinese acquisition in Serbia’s energy sector was Zijin Mining’s 2018 takeover of 63 per cent of shares in RTB Bor, a large copper

mining and smelting complex in eastern Serbia. The company soon joined HBIS at the helm of Serbia's largest exporters.

From the start, Chinese companies in Smederevo and Bor had to grapple with the heritage of technologically outdated and polluting systems and thus had to invest heavily in ecological upgrading. As expected, the transition did not go smoothly since intensified production meant neutralizing the progress made by ecological improvements.

In turn, beyond the ecological impact and within the context of both increased great power competition in the region and intense Sino-Serbian relations, the Chinese investments in the energy sector opened a framing opportunity for Western obstructive narratives on BRI-related projects.

Western think tanks, media, and policymakers have used six keyframes to build a negative narrative about Chinese investments in the Serbian energy sector.

First, "Chinese investments are not respecting Serbian and EU legal requirements and obligations": there is concern about "the lack of transparency and environmental and social impact assessment of Chinese investments and loans" (Hopkins 2021); Zijin "did not adhere to the stringent European environmental standards" (Vuksanović 2021); "environmental protections are cast by the wayside without repercussions" (Pantović 2020). This frame sets the tone for the narrative. The focus here is on the framing of "otherness" (Said 1978) – a "long-standing Orientalist narrative of China's cheating behavior" present in US public discourse (Ooi-D'Arcangelis 2018)

Second, "Chinese investments are excessively polluting in Serbia": "Several towns affected by high levels of pollution have one thing in common: their plants have been taken over by Chinese investors over the past half-decade" (Prelec 2021); "Chinese heavy industry investment in Serbia has taken air pollution to dramatic levels" (Emerging Europe 2021); "shortly after Zijin took over in 2018, it was reported that air pollution around the mine was more than five to ten times the allowed limit, far above the threshold allowed by Serbia's Law on Air Protection" (Buchanan Ponczek 2021). The argumentation is being set for the transition to a threat frame. Here, the focus is put on identifying the problematic action and the responsible "villain".

Third, “Chinese investments are a serious health hazard for the people”: “We came here for the peace and quiet, but that all changed when a Chinese company arrived” (Higgins 2021); “the quality of drinking water in proximity to the heavy industry plants is under threat, placing the well-being of many people in severe danger” (Emerging Europe 2021); “the air next to the factory is acidic and makes you vomit (...) we are desperate. People are coughing, you cannot open the windows and even the plants are covered in dust” (Pantović 2020). A direct threat frame is introduced, in line with the theory of securitisation. The frame points to the necessity of mobilisation and internationalisation of the problem. Indeed, “the securitising actor” presents the situation (project, initiative) with “such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development” (Balzacq 2011, 3).

The first three frames set the scene for the concrete problem related to the environment and pollution. The following three have a clear (geo)political overcoat.

Fourth, “Serbia’s steel friendship with China leads to adopting its toxic model”: “Serbia is importing environmentally damaging economic projects from China while embracing the Chinese model of politics in which the elite sacrifices environmental safety” (Vuksanović 2021); “Belgrade appears to have embraced Beijing’s ‘toxic politics’, favouring economic growth and political legitimacy while ignoring the environmental threats facing the population” (Vuksanović 2021); “The Bor complex investment is not China’s only controversial foray into Serbia: the pollution, environmental conditions, and high opaque investment conditions lacking even a clear path to repayment are part of the Sino-Serbian relationship” (Buchanan Ponczek 2021). This frame aligns with the critical framing of BRI as an instrument of imposing illiberal or authoritarian values.

Fifth, “China and the BRI are an umbrella for environmental problems”: “One of the motives behind the Belt and Road Project is outsourcing pollution and environmental degradation” (Vuksanović 2021); “critics fear that Serbia becomes a test case and model for Chinese investment in poorer, more indebted European countries” (Pantović 2020); “these investments are emblematic of China’s growing influence in Serbia and elsewhere” (Emerging Europe 2021). This frame sets the context of geopolitical competition. It insinuates that the problems in Serbia are part of a greater, global scheme.

Finally, the sixth frame relates directly to the third one – the impact on people. It points to the “people protesting against Chinese investments”: “spontaneous civic activism has arisen in response to this environmental and health hazard, especially in the period since 2018” (Prelec 2021); “the situation has worsened so much that from June 2019 to February 2020, civic activists in Bor organized four protests and two short-term blockades of the RTB Bor production site” (Novaković-Štipleja 2020); “protests around Bor have recently spilt over to the streets of Belgrade” (Marusic 2021). This frame presents both a call to action and describes the endgame – a desired consequence of a planned series of events. Indeed, “a potential threat, such as the rise of China, is only seen as a threat when the audience believes it to be so and accepts this interpretation” (Roselle et al. 2014, 79). As a result, through the created perception, the “securitarian actors could find the legitimacy to address an issue through the tools they present as adequate” (Balzacq et al. 2016).

The six frames allow us to identify the development of a strategic narrative critical of Chinese investments in Serbia’s energy sector.

According to this narrative, (1) China and the BRI are an umbrella for environmental problems, and (2) Serbia, through close relations with China, has adopted its problematic, “toxic” model. As part of this arrangement, (3) Chinese investments are not respectful of legal requirements and obligations; they are (4) excessively polluting and are a (5) serious hazard for the Serbian people, which is why (6) people protest against Chinese investments.

Here, with the protests, we can see a clear call to action against Chinese projects, which aligns with our model of the evolution of BRI contention phases.

This call to action is fortified in some reports by calls for more direct EU and US involvement to address the problems, as Serbia is considered unwilling to challenge Chinese investors. The argumentation is that environmental and governance concerns “should be much more front and centre in the policy of EU conditionality (...) and should be viewed within the host of clientelistic and kleptocratic practices that both the EU and the new Biden administration in the US have vowed to fight against” (Prelec 2021, 3). A coalition of Members of the European Parliament publicly issued its concerns over environmental and worker rights in Chinese companies in Serbia in January 2021 and has pushed for adoption of an EP resolution expressing “concern over China’s increasing influence in Serbia and across

the Western Balkans”, calling on Serbia to “strengthen its legal compliance standards for Chinese business activities” and emphasizing that “Serbian labour and environmental laws should also apply to Chinese companies operating in the country” (European Parliament 2021).

Serbian authorities and the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade harshly criticized the EP resolution. The then speaker of the Serbian Parliament, Ivica Dačić, said that “only days after the EU Council gave its approval to the opening of EU negotiations Cluster 4” focused on the environment, the European Parliament has “adopted a completely opposing resolution” which was, according to him, “another example of hypocrisy and double standards” (Tanjug 2021).

Political rhetoric withstanding, the issue of double standards points to troubling inconsistency and bias in reporting on environmental issues in Serbia.

One can ask where the “green” problem in Serbia had been before the arrival of Chinese companies. Indeed, “the problem did not occur due to Chinese investors, but it existed for many decades” (Zakić 2020, 65). Why was there a lack of media reporting or NGO concern on environmental problems in 2011, when the Smederevo still mill was in the hands of US Steel and Smederevo was by far the most polluted in Serbia? According to a World Health Organization report, during that year, Smederevo had 240 days with PM10 concentrations over 50 mg/3, way ahead of second Obrenovac – home of TENT thermal power station – with 180 (World Health Organization 2019).

Before Zijin took over RTS Bor, there was also little interest in the city’s environmental plight, despite the World Health Organization’s findings that “high levels of SO₂ and metals or metalloids, such as arsenic, lead and cadmium, were found in Bor, where copper is mined and smelted, in 2004–2015” (World Health Organization 2019, 4). Furthermore, the European Commission, in its report, pointed to a map indicating that Bor was the most polluted town in Serbia in 2018, a year before Zijin started its operations: an hourly maximum of SO₂ concentration was 2719 ug/m³, ahead of Kostolac with 1029 ug/m³ (European Commission 2020, 25).

Double standards, naturally, do not exempt either the Serbian authorities or the management of Chinese companies from responsibility.

Whether related to Chinese investments, the EU accelerated cooperation on environmental issues in the Western Balkans. In October 2020, the European Commission adopted its Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

The Commission argued that the Western Balkans is one of the regions in Europe “most heavily affected by the impact of climate change” and that air pollution was “one of the highest in Europe”, with a “direct impact on citizen’s health” (European Commission 2020). It further pointed out that “the very high concentrations of particulate matter pollution are mainly due to emissions from industrial installations (such as coal power plants), domestic heating (notably wood and coal-fired stoves and boilers as well as domestic burning of waste) and traffic (older vehicles)” (European Commission 2020). Such evaluation paints a more sober picture of environmental challenges in Serbia and the region.

A more complex and less sensationalist insight is also present in academic circles. A critical analysis of environmental challenges affecting five key Chinese projects in Southeast Europe has shown that “the negative environmental impact of these projects cannot be attributed to the commonly held perception of the Chinese as inherently ‘bad’ investors and of host states as ‘weak’ and dependent”, but rather as “a synergy of failures between investors, host states and regional institutions” (Tsimonis et al. 2020, 171).

Since 2020, Serbia has witnessed rising green activism. However, from the perspective of the Serbian public, most of the concerns were directed at the possibility of exploitation of yadarite, a white mineral containing lithium and sodium found near the Jadar River in Western Serbia by the British-Australian mining corporation Rio Tinto. Previously, Western critics of Chinese investments in Serbia commented that after “unhappy experiences with China”, a “multi-billion Western investment could be the fix”: “If the (Rio Tinto) mine does open, it will provide an interesting contrast between investment models and the ability to engage with local concerns, which may influence the debate about the value of foreign investment from Western and Chinese firms” (Buchanan-Ponczyk 2021). However, a widespread outcry led to a series of demonstrations, including roadblocks, after which the Rio Tinto project was slowed down, although it was not stopped.

In December 2021, Serbia opened EU negotiations Cluster 4, including Chapter 15 (energy) and Chapter 27 (Environment and climate change). This paved the way for a more in-depth tackling of environmental issues and further pressure on Chinese investments in the energy sector.

EU negotiations and conditionality left aside, the stakeholders in Chinese investment projects in Serbia have felt the pressure to address the environmental issue. In September 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to stop building new coal-fired power projects overseas, which, according to the president of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Jin Lique, “could enhance the reputation of the Belt and Road Initiative” (Ng, 2021).

The Serbian government has also shown increased awareness of the green transition challenge ahead. In March 2021, the Serbian Parliament adopted the Climate Change Act, a commitment to a low-carbon development strategy. However, as the energy crisis struck Europe and the world in the fall of 2021, Serbia’s president Aleksandar Vučić pledged not to make rushed decisions on coal and instead promised a careful energy transition: “If I would say, ‘ok, we are going to phase out coal within two or three years,’ I would be a liar (...) We cannot do it. And I’m not going to pledge for that – I’m not going to promise that to anyone because we need electricity in our country” (Carbonaro, 2021).

Zijin and HBIS have fully acknowledged that ecological problems exist, although they predate their arrival. HBIS paid fines for an incident in 2021, which led to higher emissions. However, it underlined that since the takeover in 2016, it had invested over 300 million euros in anti-pollution projects, leading to the decline of yearly average emission of PM10 concentrations from 85 mg/m³ in 2011 – when US Steel was in charge – to 36,8 mg/m³ in 2023 (HBIS 2024).

At the 2024 “Dialogues on China” conference in Belgrade, Zijin Mining’s General Manager for Overseas Operations, Maggie Huang, announced the company had invested 2,89 billion dollars in the green transformation of its copper and gold mines in Serbia, resulting in zero days with SO₂ transgressions in 2023 (Đorđević 2024). At the same time, two Zijin companies and HBIS have become the top 3 Serbia exporters, with 2,5 billion worth of exports in 2023 (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2024). Zijin’s production led Serbia to take an 18 per cent share of European copper output, putting the country in the continent’s second spot, with a leading position in eyesight for 2030 (Đorđević 2024). This position does not bode well with EU/US objectives – either in the race for resources or in the aim of driving away Chinese investments from Serbia. Hence, the urge for the Western empire to strike back.

CHAPTER 6

SERBIA BETWEEN STRATEGIC HEDGING AND GREAT POWER WEDGING

The global strategic narrative wars intensify and multiply in proportion to the development of multipolarity. The fight for legitimacy is being fought at home, regionally, and globally. Global powers, as well as regional powers and individual countries, seek to project their strategic narratives, align them, adapt them, or confront opponents through counter-narratives.

Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine has been both a reflection and a catalyst of a major transition in world order and of the global narrative war. On the one hand, the US and the EU strengthened their transatlantic unity and further expanded NATO but failed to motivate a Sino-Russian rift or Global South support. On the other hand, Russia and China had to find challenging yet creative ways to overcome Western sanctions, informational and financial predominance, maintain and extend bilateral strategic cooperation, and encourage the resistance of the Global South and expand BRICS. In all the processes, strategic narratives played a crucial role in gathering support, building alliances and seeking compliance (Sakwa 2023b; Janković 2023; Cvetković 2022; Proroković 2022; Trapara 2023; Petrović 2022; Antonić 2023; Petrović 2023; Kurnyshova 2023).

Through their strategic narrative and accompanying statecraft, Russia and China support a sovereign arrangement in international politics, a return to the central role of the UN Charter-based system during the transition towards multipolarity, as well as a focus on new global initiatives which acknowledge diversity in political systems and development paths (Janković and Mitić 2024). The US and the EU criticise sovereignty, attempt to slow down the transition towards multipolarity and redirect it towards upholding the primacy of the Western "rules-based world order" and liberal internationalism, which had reached a spike during the 1999 NATO aggression.

Within these narrative wars lie numerous (geo)political battles: competition over artificial intelligence, social media algorithms, semi-conductors, (dis)information, digital surveillance, energy diversification, rare minerals, biotechnology, culture wars, and arms production capacities;

effects of migration, demographic and climate changes; fights against drug and terrorism intrusion; resilience of social cohesion against polarisation and hybrid warfare, be it called “malign influence” or “colour revolutions”.

In such context, several regions have found themselves at the forefront of strategic narrative wars. The Balkans have always been, are, and will continue to be one of those. However, Serbia is not only a country at the centre of geopolitical competition but also a country through which many of the constituent themes of today’s strategic narrative wars collide. From the 1999 NATO aggression to the 2008 “Kosovo UDI”, from memory politics to hybrid warfare, from double standards and hypocrisy to the creative interpretations of the “rules-based world order”, from the height of unipolarity to the tectonic plate of multipolarity.

Thus, Serbia’s strategic orientation remains a theatre of crucial importance for the global strategic narrative war.

SERBIA’S HEDGING STRATEGY

Thinking about any foreign policy strategy assumes three critical elements. First, understanding the nature and context of challenges, partners or adversaries that the country faces, including the long-term perspective of the relationship. Then, a realistic analysis of the capacity of the state itself to tackle the challenge, including the sacrifice that the state and society are ready to make. Finally, it is vital to set a clear, realistic, enforceable goal whose outcome must advance the state’s interest and gain the legitimacy of the popular will through the electoral process and the public sphere.

The very fact that a quarter of a century has passed since Serbia started its path toward the European Union as a strategic goal indicates that such a decision was, to say the least, poorly thought out.

It was brought on by a mixture of people’s exhaustion after the 1990s and enthusiasm after the political changes in Belgrade in 2000, at the height of the EU enlargement process and the unipolar “American” world order.

It was brought—no doubt about it—with good intentions. The European Union is one of the most enviable places to live on Earth, an economic superpower, Serbia’s geographic destiny, and its closest economic partner. The problem is in the process: Serbia’s European integration process is a history of

political conditioning unprecedented in the history of the European Union and probably in the history of the integration of any country into any organisation.

From demanding compliance with the Hague Tribunal decisions and recognition of “Kosovo’s UDI”, all through the futility of Belgrade’s every attempt to point out the double standards and vulnerability of the Serbian people in the former Yugoslav republics, up to the demand that Serbia renounces its closest and traditional political ally, the Russian Federation.

Some will say, “That’s right, but that’s the price of joining the Club.” That is true, but then the question arises of whether Belgrade’s strategic assessment was correct and how sincere it was. A successful strategy assumes that words and actions must be coordinated and that coordination must exist from top to bottom, from beginning to end.

For the sake of European integration, Serbia handed over to the Hague Tribunal most of its leadership – political and security – despite the dissatisfaction of the people and with the humiliating absence of verdicts for those who committed war crimes against Serbs; signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in April 2008, even though only two months earlier, the EU actively coordinated the process of “unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo”; in 2010, moved the issue of Kosovo and Metohija from the UN – where it had the support of Russia and China – to the EU in order to obtain the status of a candidate for membership; in order to open negotiations, it signed the Brussels Agreement in 2013 – which resulted in the withdrawal of the Serbian administration from Kosovo and Metohija, but also in the non-fulfilment of the provision on the formation of the Community of Serbian Municipalities by the Kosovo Albanians.

A successful strategy implies flexibility and adaptability. However, in the case of European integration, we can only say that Serbia mostly adapted to the demands and conditions of Brussels and Washington. The political cost of European integration was enormous, and the damage in abandoning national interests, especially in Kosovo and Metohija, was immeasurable, perhaps irreversible.

In the EU integration process, Belgrade had to count on two processes. On the one hand, the process took place in conditions dominated and conditions dictated by the winners in the post-Cold War period, Germany and the US, and thus the transatlantic cohesion, which experienced its apotheosis precisely in the case of Serbia. On the other hand, the NATO

aggression in 1999, as everyone now understands, had as its goal the secession of Kosovo and Metohija, the weakening of Serbia and the pressure on the Serbian people to adhere to the Euro-Atlantic structures and make a historic departure from Russia, its traditional ally and the West's key geopolitical opponent.

Since the strategy had this kind of built-in system hardware error from the beginning, no new, adaptive software could fully correct that error.

There were indeed attempts to do so: at the same time as European integration, Serbia passed the Constitution with the Kosovo and Metohija preamble, managed to secure Russia's veto of Ahtisaari's plan in the UN, passed a parliamentary declaration on military neutrality, signed an energy agreement with the Russian Federation and thus "returned it" to the Balkans, refused to impose sanctions on Russia, opened the door wide for Chinese investments within the Belt and Road Initiative. It refuses to recognise the secession of Kosovo and vows to work on its further delegitimation.

Does EU membership have "no alternative"? Or do strategic alternatives still exist? If they do, what are they like? Twenty-five years later, this question deserves an answer and a new strategic reflection.

Western strategic communication argues that discussing alternatives to EU membership means choosing to be a member of BRICS or any other East-bound grouping/alliance. It is a logical spinning attempt. However, over the last two decades, ideas of "political neutrality" – meaning staying away from formal EU membership but also from similar organisations in the East – have been laid out. In the period when they were launched, in the aftermath of "Kosovo's UDI" and Serbia's proclamation of military neutrality, its proponents have been opposition leaders, primarily former president and prime minister Vojislav Koštunica (Koštunica 2012; Koštunica 2013; Popović 2014). A decade later, the idea of "political neutrality" is frequently mentioned by Serbia's Vice-Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin, one of the most active proponents of multipolarity, in particular since 2022 (FoNet 2022). Formally, the Serbian government and Serbia's President Vučić do not share this idea and underline that EU integration remains Serbia's strategic objective.

Thus, Serbia itself must also reflect on its position, aspirations, and the capacity of its statecraft repertoire—indeed, its strategic narrative. In the context of the homogenisation of both Western powers (US and EU) and

Eastern powers (Russia and China) regarding Serbia, Serbia will continue to face pressures against its political independence and military neutrality.

One of the key features and developments in the international arena since the beginning of Russia's 2022 military operation in Ukraine has been the split in the global arena on the imposition of sanctions and other restrictive measures against Russia-related actors and assets. In the aftermath of February 24, 2022, countries of the so-called "collective West" (members of NATO and the European Union, as well as allies in the Pacific – Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand) adopted sets of bilateral and multilateral sanctions against Moscow of unprecedented scale and scope. In the first year of the conflict, the US Treasury implemented over 2,500 sanctions, targeting the military supply chain, the metal, energy, and financial sector, wealth management-related entities, and sanctions evasion mechanisms (US Department of the Treasury 2023). Many of the measures have been agreed with partners in the G7 and the EU. The European Union itself adopted packages of sanctions and restrictive measures with the proclaimed aim of imposing "severe consequences on Russia for its actions and to effectively thwart Russian abilities to continue the aggression", including the targeting of people "responsible for supporting, financing or implementing actions which undermine the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine or who benefit from these actions" (European Council 2023b). These measures include bans and restrictions on trade, arms, technology, energy, transport and media.

Western sanctions were in stages, including caveats for member states (i.e., on Russian pipeline oil imports) and following opposition and complex negotiations (particularly with Hungary). The West has taken a relatively unified approach, demonstrating unity at the transatlantic level unseen in the last two decades. However, Western attempts to make the rest of the world align with its sanctions fell flat. Practically, no country outside of the "collective West" followed suit. This approach by three-quarters of the world surprised and disappointed Western leaders. A year into the conflict, it became clear that the non-Western world was seeing the conflict in Ukraine with different eyes. As Foreign Affairs noted, "governments and populations across much of the developing world have met gauzy 'free world' rhetoric with a series of increasingly vehement objections: about Western double standards and hypocrisy, about decades of neglect of the issues most

important to them, about the mounting costs of the war and of sharpening geopolitical tensions” (Foreign Affairs 2023). Suddenly, leaders and scholars asked what went wrong with Western soft power. Beyond economic interests, historical and ideological affiliations, authors suggest a key reason might be the developing countries’ strategy of hedging, “seeking to avoid costly entanglements with the major powers, trying to keep all their options open for maximum flexibility” since they view “the future distribution of global power as uncertain” (Spektor 2013). This has led the United States to acknowledge the need to engage with “countries that do not embrace democratic institutions but nevertheless depend upon and support a rules-based international system” (White House 2022, 8). The EU has called on the need to recalibrate its strategic compass and engage more with the rest of the world. Its foreign policy chief Josep Borell acknowledged that in developing countries, “people have memory and people have feelings” about historical relations with Europe, such as colonialism in Africa or Western support for dictatorships in Latin America (Pitel and Shazan 2023).

However, Western countries, particularly Brussels, had less understanding of the position of the Republic of Serbia, an EU candidate country that refused to harmonise with the Union’s sanctions packages. Following the launch of the Russian military operation in Ukraine, Serbia adopted its official position on the conflict as well as on the issue of sanctions. Although it condemned Russia’s move and underlined its support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity, Belgrade stated it would not sanction Moscow. Ever since, Western capitals have sought to bring Serbia on board regarding sanctions, warning the country about political, security and economic implications. Conversely, while not satisfied with Serbia’s stand on the war, Russia expressed satisfaction about its stance on sanctions and continually called for preserving such a position.

The position of the Republic of Serbia is influenced by its geopolitical code, strategic culture and historical implications, particularly those related to the Yugoslav conflict and its aftermath. There are several factors behind Serbia’s divergence from mainstream Western views and positions on European and world issues: the sanctions and NATO bombings it suffered in the 1990s; the fight for territorial integrity threatened by Western sponsorship; the threats and conflicts related to the Serb communities remaining outside Serbia’s

borders following the breakup of Yugoslavia; public support for multipolarity and its great power vehicles – Russia and China.

The characteristics of Serbia's internal challenges over territorial integrity, its foreign policy positioning and its geopolitical code presented a difficult challenge for the country's leadership following February 24, 2022 (Stojanović and Stanojević 2024; Kostić Šulejić and Blagojević 2024; Dimitrijević, Dželetović and Đorđević 2024; Zarić and Budimir 2022; Gajić 2023; Guskova 2024).

In the immediate aftermath, Serbia's National Security Council published its 15-point position paper on the conflict. According to the document, signed by Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, "the Republic of Serbia finds the violation of territorial integrity of any country, including Ukraine, very wrong"; "provides full and principled support to observation of principles of the territorial integrity of Ukraine", which is "in accordance with its so-far policy of striving for consistent and principled respect for principles of international law and inviolability of borders"; commits to humanitarian aid to Ukraine and warns Serbian citizens that participation in the conflict would be sanctioned (National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia 2022). In the document, the National Security Council underlined on several occasions that Serbia's position is consistent with its particular situation regarding breaching its territorial integrity in Kosovo. It reiterated its commitment to international law, the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, arguing that it "paid dearly its commitment to principles and rules of international law, including also the principle of territorial integrity, because due to its strivings to preserve its territorial integrity, in the end of the 20th century, it was exposed not only to restrictive measures but also to aggression of 19 NATO member states" (National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia 2022). It also addressed the question of sanctions against the Russian Federation. The National Security Council underlined that the decision on restrictive measures or sanctions "will be guided exclusively by protection of its vital economic and political interests": "as a country that experienced sanctions of the West in the recent past and whose compatriots in Republika Srpska are suffering from sanctions today, the Republic of Serbia believes that it is not its vital political and economic interest to impose sanctions against any country at this moment, nor to representatives or business entities of the respective" (National Security Council of the Republic of Serbia 2022).

Such a position of the National Security Council was met with ambivalence in the country, the West, and Russia. Inside the country, pro-Western forces deplored the lack of commitment to sanctions, which was also reflected in the position of Western capitals. European Parliament rapporteur for Serbia Vladimir Bilčík argued that not joining EU sanctions was a “defining foreign policy decision for much broader relations between the EU and Serbia” (N1 2022b). Russian Ambassador to Belgrade, Aleksandar Botsan-Kharchenko, argued that the West did not care about the interests of Serbia, its people and the consequences of imposing sanctions, adding that “Moscow does not ask anything from Belgrade” given Serbia’s principled foreign policy attitudes, and expressed expectations that all joint projects would be realised “without obstacles” (Srna 2022).

In the subsequent series of voting in UN bodies – such as the General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council – Serbia aligned with Western-sponsored condemnations of Russia’s move. To many Western observers, this came as a surprise. However, media sources reported that “EU ambassadors had previously informed the Belgrade authorities that the UN vote would strongly impact the future of the country’s European integration” (Popović 2022).

Nevertheless, Belgrade continued to refuse to align with any restrictive measures and sanctions imposed by the European Union, a position which came under increasing criticism from Western capitals. Pressures on Serbia’s position coincided with the campaign for general elections on April 3, 2022. During the campaign, ruling parties and President Vučić reiterated the positions of the National Security Council, while pro-Russian parties warned against the change of position. Pro-Western parties were cautious not to press too much on the issue for two main reasons. One was that they knew that pushing openly for sanctions would harm their chances, given that it was unpopular with Serbian voters. The other was their discourse, backed by some media and analysts, that Vučić would change his position on sanctions and align with the EU “the day after elections”.

Following the victory of Vučić in the presidential elections and his coalition in the parliamentary elections, EU officials and Western leaders called on Belgrade to harmonise with the Union’s sanctions, with their discourse ranging from expectations to threats (Cvetković and Miletić 2022).

With the conflict continuing and Western sanctions intensifying, pressure on Serbia was sustained. Belgrade maintained its position during the five-month procedure of forming a new government. Again, expectations from Western capitals were put on the “day after”. Media speculations proliferated about the decision date on the imposition of sanctions (Milovančević 2022; Cvetković 2022). Western officials also carefully watched Serbia’s signalling towards Russia. When, in June 2022, Serbia’s neighbours Bulgaria, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia closed their air space and prevented Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov from visiting Belgrade, Moscow’s top diplomat called it “unprecedented”, arguing that “a sovereign country has been deprived of its right to conduct a foreign policy” and that “international activities of Serbia, related to Russia, have been blocked” (Marušić 2022). Three months later, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selaković signed a technical plan of consultations on bilateral and multilateral activities with Lavrov, which sparked an outcry among Western officials and embassies in Belgrade. US Ambassador to Belgrade Christopher Hill called the move “a step in the wrong direction”, while European Commission spokesman Peter Stano said Serbian-Russian relations cannot continue to be “business as usual” (Al-Jazeera 2022).

Following the formation of the new Serbian government—a repetition of a previous one in terms of party constituents and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić —Serbian pro-Western opposition leaders and media again started urging the imposition of sanctions.

However, in parallel with the urging on sanctions, following the elections, Serbia had to face another long-standing pressure – regarding Kosovo- this time pre-packaged under the name of the “French-German proposal”. The main characteristic of the “normalisation” process, as envisaged by Western countries which have recognised Kosovo as an independent state, is that it would mean Serbia should give up on its province. Belgrade always saw this as utterly unacceptable.

In parallel, despite evident legitimacy, President Vučić had to face growing dissatisfaction of the Eurosceptic Serbian public opinion, which for long viewed his policies, primarily on Kosovo and Metohija, as too accommodating towards Western, particularly US pressure (Đurković 2023; Ivanović 2024; Samardžić 2024; Reljić 2016; Mirović 2024).

Upon receiving the French-German proposal in October 2022, Vučić hinted that changing the government's position on sanctions was possible. However, he maintained this would not be the case "as long as we can resist, without endangering our most vital and state interests (...) when we can't, we will turn to our people, the citizens, and we will show them why Serbia can no longer resist the imposition of sanctions" (Taylor 2022). Some perceived the statement as a "change of discourse" on sanctions (Anđelković 2022).

In parallel, opinion polls showed Serbian citizens were vehemently opposed to the imposition of sanctions. In an October 2022 poll, 81% were against, with only 8% favouring sanctions. Meanwhile, 53% favoured the Eurasian Economic Union, with 46% favouring joining the EU (Blic 2022).

On the defensive, Russia, understandably, has all along argued against the imposition of sanctions, showing respect for Serbia's position and disdain for Western pressure while occasionally criticising openly political forces that were calling for the revision of Belgrade's position.

Serbia did not change its position despite new media speculations and Western warnings. However, by January 2023, it was under intense pressure on its critical national issue – Kosovo. On January 20, 2023, EU and US envoys, backed by the authors of the "French-German plan", arrived in Belgrade and presented Vučić with an ultimatum. As Vučić himself explained in the aftermath, "I was told in the second sentence that we must accept this plan" or Serbia would be faced with the stopping of European integrations and investments, as well as "comprehensive political and economic measures" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2023).

Indeed, Vučić has since on numerous occasions referred to systematic hybrid warfare against Serbia with the aim of undermining its positions and strategic choices (Beta 2022; Tanjug 2022). Hybrid warfare, as a new form of low-intensity conflict and subversion (Vuković 2024), includes "weaponized narratives" (Krieg 2023; Parezanović and Proroković 2024). In order to achieve their subversive objectives, weaponised narratives "require a level of orchestration and strategic effect to undermine a socio-political consensus or status quo" (Krieg 2023, 2).

By mid-2023, talks on the Kosovo proposal were stalled despite initial advances and Serbia's EU negotiations continued to be blocked. The Serbian government remained firm on its position regarding sanctions against Russia.

Serbia's public opinion continued to show overwhelming opposition to sanctions. A public opinion poll in April 2023 showed 83.7% of polled were opposed to sanctions against Russia, while 7.9% were in favour. The same poll showed that 83.5% of the people polled would oppose Serbia's entry into the EU if the condition were to recognise Kosovo, and 8.1% would be in favour (NSPM 2023). The concurrence of stances on Kosovo's recognition and sanctions against Russia could point to the Serbian public's rejection of what it considers as double standards regarding the Western approach to the territorial integrity of Serbia and Ukraine. It signals that the Western narrative on the conflict did not take hold.

With the weakening of the US "unipolar moment" and the rise of multipolarity since the 2000s, the concept of "hedging" has gained prominence in IR scholarship, albeit at times criticised for vagueness or blurriness. The concept is defined as an "alignment strategy, undertaken by one state toward another, featuring a mix of cooperative and confrontational elements" (Ciorcari and Haacke); to ensure "against sudden changes in the behaviour of great powers and general insecurities in the international system", that is, to strengthen strategic autonomy and reduce at the same time vulnerability through "diversification of political, economic, and security relations" (Gerstl 2022).

While some more restrictive understandings of the concept focus only on one of the areas—political, security, or economic (Lim and Cooper 2015)—a mixed policy approach calls for combining policies of the three to mitigate risks and maximise opportunities comprehensively (Gerstl 2022; Goh 2005; Kuik 2008; Koga 2018).

In his assessment of why states hedge, Gerstl points to the perception of risks (territorial integrity, economic dependency, autonomous decision-making) and opportunities (increased security, exchange and legitimacy due to socioeconomic development), as well as the perception of the strategic value of other great powers and international organisations (Gerstl 2022).

An essential element is trust. As argued by Stiles, hedging is "strategy common to states and other actors that may be willing to commit to substantial agreements involving such fundamental issues as security and human rights but also want to protect themselves from too open-ended or permanent a commitment" (...) a stand which stems "from uncertainty about the future conditions of the world or the fact that the agreement itself

is resistant to enforcement, but a key element is almost certainly a fear that your partners will betray you” (Stiles 2018, 12).

The concept of “hedging” originated in the application of cases of China’s neighbourhood (Goh 2005), and this area remains relevant today (Kim 2023; Nedić 2022; Gerstl 2022). Nevertheless, it has also applied to the Middle East (Salman and Geeraerts 2015; El-Dessouki and Mansour 2020; Fulton 2020) and the Caucasus (Jović-Lazić and Bošković 2024). Recently, “hedging” has been increasingly mentioned as a feature of Serbia’s foreign policy (Ejdus 2023; Bechev 2023; Vuksanović 2024; Nikolić 2023; Dettmer 2023).

Risk-prone contingencies have slowed Serbia’s EU accession (dialogue on Kosovo and Metohija, CFSP harmonisation, EU enlargement fatigue) and opened the door for Belgrade’s “eastbound hedging”. With the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis and the rising confrontation between the collective West and the Russian Federation, Belgrade refused to bandwagon and sanction Moscow. However, it also had to face severe limitations in its cooperation with Moscow since 2022 (oil, military, level of political interaction, transportation, worry to avoid sanctions over export of dual-use equipment). Such a position gave a more prominent “hedging role” to Beijing. Serbia comprehensively boosted cooperation with China, resulting in unprecedented levels of political interaction, the signing of the FTA, and the elevation of the partnership status to the level of “China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era” in 2024.

DE-HEDGING AND WEDGING

Nevertheless, for a country surrounded by EU and NATO members, in the middle of global tectonic geopolitical tensions and transitions, strategic hedging has its limits. Regarding Kosovo and Metohija, Beijing remains as firm as ever in supporting Serbia’s territorial integrity, fully supports UNSC resolution 1244 and condemns the unilateral escalation moves of the Kosovo Albanian authorities in Priština. However, it cannot do more on the ground given the Kosovo Albanian animosity towards China’s presence and the local constellation of international organisations, which are almost exclusively Western-staffed. Furthermore, the EU and the US continue to perceive Beijing’s presence in the Balkans as a “third-actor malign influence”. They

have thus boosted through their influence assets the negative strategic framing towards China's political and economic role and its investments in the energy and mining sector.

Western calls to Serbia for de-hedging, alignment and bandwagoning are multiplying. Whether purely rhetorical or part of official declarations, policies and white papers, these calls impact the expectations and the trust of local and regional actors. Among these are the signing of the deals with France over the purchase of 12 Rafale warplanes (while Serbia previously focused on Russian MIGs and Chinese anti-aircraft) (Ruitenbergh 2024); the European Commission's offer to partially finance the Corridor X Belgrade-Niš high-speed railway (while the Belgrade-Subotica railway, on the same Corridor X and BRI route, has been completed with Russia and China) (Kovačević 2023); as well as the EU-Serbia agreement on strategic partnership regarding sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles (with the EU's aim to limit Belgrade's energy dependence on Russia and China's access to lithium and other critical minerals in Serbia) (Hodgson 2024). For the EU and the US, these initiatives are part of the process of rooting out strategic rivals from the Balkans. Brussels would call it a return to the "normal" incentives for EU accession: positive signals to investors, motivation for internal political reforms, and gradual and partial integration into the Union's sectoral policies.

There is a clear Western intention to use "wedging" strategies. Such strategies use statecraft repertoires to "move or keep a potential adversary out of an opposing alliance": "Coercive ones rely chiefly on threats and punishment to influence the target state's alignment", while "accommodative ones emphasise inducements" (Crawford 2021). In particular, using "selective accommodation", the "divider" does "not conciliate indiscriminately" but "does so in a fashion calculated to achieve strategic effects against the constellation of opposing forces" (Crawford 2021).

Such strategy was particularly active in the fall of 2024 ahead of the 16th BRICS Summit in Russia's Kazan (22-24 October). Throughout Russia's 2024 BRICS presidency, Western statesmen, envoys, and media had been inquiring about Serbia's participation at the Summit. Interest notably rose after President Putin's invitation to President Vučić.

On the eve of the Summit, mainstream Western raised the stakes. "Politico" commented that Serbia is "one of the most important in-between

places in the world today. Its fate will help determine which Great Power comes to dominate this century” (Kaminski 2024). It sits in a “geostrategic grey zone, pulled between the authoritarian powers of Beijing and Moscow and more recently, after some years of neglect, the US and its European allies”: “A hundred and ten years ago this summer, Serbia found itself in one (grey zone) that provided the spark for the First World War. The Serbs know this history. Do we?” (Kaminski 2024).

Reflecting on the theme, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Admiral James Stavridis, warned that “Serbia is becoming a focus of great-power conflict, and the EU and NATO can bring it into the Western fold”: “The democratic world should be extremely concerned about Russia and China making major inroads into what is otherwise becoming a NATO peninsula”, which is why “Washington is wisely putting a full court press on Serbia” (Stavridis 2024).

With a decision on BRICS participation looming, Vučić used the 80th anniversary of the Red Army’s participation in the liberation of Belgrade from the Nazis (October 20) to call Putin and announce he would not come to Kazan but would participate in the 80th anniversary of the Victory Day in Moscow on May 9, 2025. A delegation of Serbian ministers led by Aleksandar Vulin and Nenad Popović, two long-standing proponents of multipolarity in the Serbian government, attended the BRICS Summit. Republika Srpska’s President Milorad Dodik also attended and met with Putin.

Arriving in Belgrade in the immediate aftermath, European Commission President Ursula Von der Layen expressed half-satisfaction with Belgrade’s decision. However, she cancelled a meeting with Serbia’s Prime Minister Miloš Vučević after he had met shortly before with Russia’s Minister for Economic Development, Maksim Reshetnikov.

The mood in Belgrade was somewhat more upbeat two weeks later, as Donald Trump’s stunning comeback to the White House following the November 5, 2024, elections could spell less enthusiasm for the RBO and transatlantic pressure on Serbia. It was hailed in Belgrade and Banjaluka with the hope that the narrative competition could take a smooth turn away from battling on the edge.

Nevertheless, Serbia remains in the balance between strategic hedging and great power wedging on a geopolitical pedestal carved with fundamental yet unresolved questions: Should EU membership be the only

alternative? Will the NATO alliance expand in the Western Balkans? Will the Western “rules-based world order” prevail over Serbia?

Answers will illuminate the extent to which an “independent” foreign policy is possible in Europe and how far the world has advanced in building a multipolar order. They will embolden or discourage “the global rest”.

The battle for Serbia continues as the global strategic narrative war rages on.

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AUTHOR

Dr. Aleksandar Mitić is a Research Fellow at the Center for the “Belt and Road” Studies of the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade, which he joined in 2021.

He obtained his Bachelor’s in Journalism and Political Science from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada) and his MA in International Affairs in 1997 from the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. He defended his PhD thesis at the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Belgrade in 2016.

From 1999 to 2005, Aleksandar was a permanent correspondent of Agence France-Presse (AFP) from Kosovo and Metohija (during the NATO bombings) and from Belgrade. From 2005 to 2009, he was the permanent correspondent for the Tanjug News Agency from the EU and NATO headquarters in Brussels.

He lectured at the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade (2003-2005). In 2005, Aleksandar was one of the founders of the Institute 4S think-tank in Brussels, where he prepared and led the Kosovo Compromise project, Serbia’s first strategic communication project aimed at the European Union (2006-2008).

From 2010 to 2014, he was a member of the Executive Board and Editor of the Fund Slobodan Jovanović.

In 2010, he also founded the think-tank Center for Strategic Alternatives, which in 2016 became a founding member of the China-CEEC High-Level Academic Platform. He was a member of the Scientific Council of the Center for Russian Studies at the Faculty of Political Science.

Apart from scientific work, he has published articles and commentary in leading Serbian and international media, including the New York Times, the BBC, Sputnik, RT, European Voice, China Daily, and Politika.

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