Strategic narratives and the Rhetorical construction of European Identity

The Case of Ursula von der Leyen and Ukraine

Ukraine is Europe

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Ursula von der Leyen has utilised strategic narratives on social media to justify and shape the European Union's policies and public support for Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Employing strategic narrative theory alongside the strategic narrative buy-in framework, the study analyses tweets to identify dominant themes, rhetorical devices, and narrative evolution across the conflict. It examines how von der Leyen's communication addresses material interests and ontological security concerns to enhance narrative resonance and maintain collective EU identity. Eurobarometer survey data complement this by gauging shifts in EU public opinion over time. The analysis also reflects social media's effectiveness as a strategic communication tool, considering its unique capacity for immediate public engagement and feedback. Findings highlight von der Leyen's adaptive use of identity, issue, and system narratives to maintain coherence and justify policy despite waning public enthusiasm, illuminating the intricate relationship between political communication, public sentiment, and strategic policymaking during crisis. Ultimately, the study contributes insights into supranational actors' challenges and opportunities in sustaining unified policy narratives under a prolonged conflict.

Master Thesis

Introduction

Context and Background

February 24th 2022, was a drastic rupture in the political landscape of Europe with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This invasion was not an isolated event but a culmination of tension, conflict and diplomatic failure. The prelude to the current full-scale war has its roots in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and conflicts between Russian-backed forces and Ukrainian forces in Luhansk and Donetsk. Subsequent diplomatic efforts, such as the Minsk Agreements, failed to deter further escalation, as intelligence and satellite imagery confirmed Russia had been engaging in a military build-up along its borders with Ukraine and with units stationed in the neighbouring country of Belarus. (*War in Ukraine | Global Conflict Tracker*, 2025)

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine galvanised the European countries to reconsider their security and defence policies, along with an increase in rhetoric (Youngs, 2022). It became evident when Sweden and Finland decided to apply for NATO membership on May 18th 2022 (NATO, 2022). Denmark chose to enter the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy on July 1st, 2022 (EU Information Centre, 2022). The geopolitical landscape changed radically, and European nations and Allies quickly mobilised the international community to condemn Russian aggression. The EU and its member states were prompted to impose sanctions and demand that Russia stop its attacks and withdraw from Ukraine (European Council, 2022). In the early stages of the war, the EU diplomatic response was described as unprecedented, with measures such as implementing the EU's Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians, offering candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova (Bosse, 2024, pp. 1222–1223).

The EU's Response to the Russo-Ukrainian War

Furthermore, the measures and sanctions imposed were wide-reaching, including decisions such as banning several Russian banks from the Swift system, forbidding state-owned Russian media outlets from broadcasting in the EU, and excluding Russian aircraft from EU airspace (Council of the European Union, 2022a). Meanwhile, the EU amended its legislation in early 2022, which allowed it to allocate €17 billion to relieve internal financial pressure connected

to hosting the Ukrainian refugees (Council of the European Union, 2022b). Besides the internal aid to member states, the EU also allocated funds to Ukraine. This aid has increased in magnitude as the war progressed. The military aid from the EU to Ukraine reached €1.5 billion on April 13 2022, when the council approved additional funding (Council of the European Union, 2022c). To demonstrate how the aid from the EU has evolved. The thesis utilises the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, who frequently publish and updates a "Ukraine Support Tracker", which is a working paper that tracks and quantifies government-to-government, i.e. not INGOs like the Red Cross or private donations (Trebesch et al., 2022). The table below shows the EU aid, including member states' contributions, based on the most recent published research note from the working paper (Bomprezzi et al., 2024, p. 5).

Figure 3: EU aid over time- committed vs. allocated
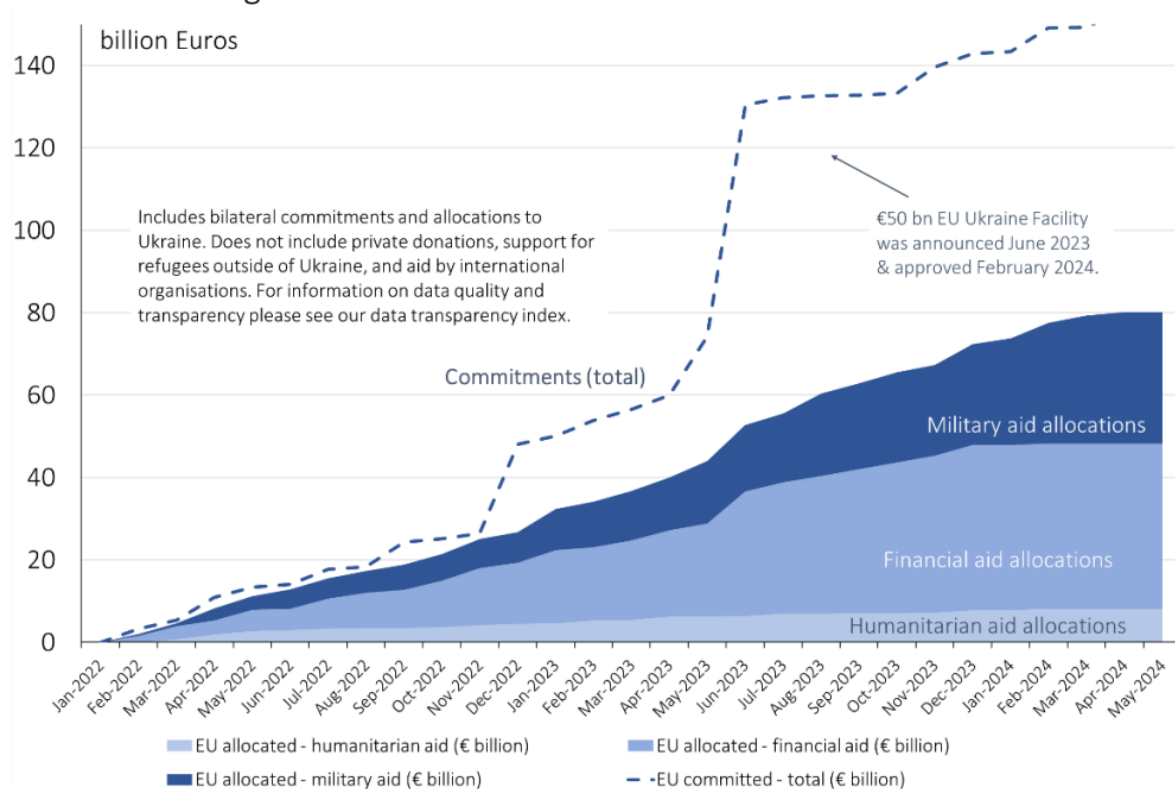
The graph shows that the pace of allocation and commitments has increased over time (Bomprezzi et al., 2024). When examining the evolution of the total allocation of funds, it becomes apparent how slow the initial aid efforts were when comparing May 2024 to May 2022. In just two years, the EU and Member States disbursed around €70 billion in aid and committed to around €80 billion more (Bomprezzi et al., 2024).

Shifts in Public Opinion

While it does not include internal refugee aid, the data demonstrates how long the EU took to mobilise aid. Considering the early stages of the war and the subsequent actions taken by Western leaders were backed by a high degree of public support, a survey conducted in April to May 2022 by Eurobarometer concluded amongst other that 81% that the EU is defending its value by supporting Ukraine (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2022, p. 44)[1], along with high support for humanitarian aid and welcoming refugees being 93% and 91% respectively in addition to 70% agreeing on providing military assistance in the form of equipment (Appendix 1). Moreover, when asked about their satisfaction with the current action taken, 59% were satisfied with the Union's response, and 57% were satisfied with their national government's response (Appendix 1).

Challenges to EU Unity

However, as the Russo-Ukrainian war progressed, a shift in Public Opinion became more visible based on standardised Eurobarometer questions. Below is a demonstration of this by taking Eurobarometer number 1, September 2022 and comparing it with number 6 from November 2024 (Appendix 1). Thus, with public opinion trending downwards, the question is how long the EU and its member states can maintain and politically justify their support for Ukraine, especially considering how these trends are based on EU averages. Quite a few MS have a general population against some of the EU's actions in response to Russia.

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[1] This Eurobarometer is a part of Appendix1, this was cited one cited since the reference is not included in the Appendix1.

The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree of disagree with each of these actions taken? (EU 27 %)

In general, how satisfied are you with the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by The European Union
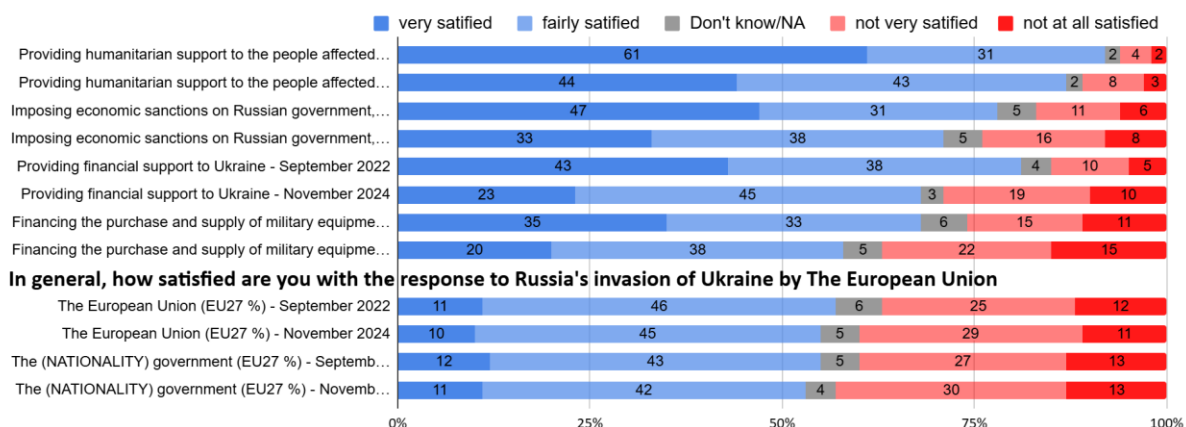
To illustrate this, we examine the four continuous questions from September 2022 to November 204. Humanitarian aid remains overwhelmingly high, with Romania being the country with the most disapproval, 27% against, 4% N/A, and 69% still in favour (European Commission, Directorate General for Communication, 2024, p. 14). Economic sanctions against Russia, etc., there is only one country against the current response, Cyprus, with 59% against, and 36% for[2]. However, a few MSs are close to being more against the current response than for it, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia and Hungary. Below is an illustration of the MS public opinion according to Eurobarometer data gathered from (European Commission, Directorate General for Communication, 2024, pp. 16–22).

Country	response	totally agree	tend to agree	tend to disagree	totally disagree	don't know	
Cypurus	sanctions	12	24	30	29	5	100
Bulgaria	sanctions	15	29	26	19	11	100
Greece	sanctions	14	33	31	15	7	100
Slovenia	sanctions	18	32	27	19	4	100
Hungary	sanctions	17	35	26	20	2	100

Examining and comparing both tables shows how the more disagreeable responses from the EU are equally seen to have a corresponding higher number of MS public sentiment against it. Therefore, it is pertinent to question what, if anything, can be done by the EU and its top leadership to maintain coherence. Nonetheless, the growing divide between the EU and its MS implies that the unprecedented unity may soon be over, as the MS will start weighing national interests over policy coherence. However,   the EU is still adopting sanctions and has

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[2] See Appendix 1 for rest of table and for reference

implemented its 17th set on May 20th 2025, to pressure Russia into peace negotiations (Smialek, 2025). Despite Donald J. Trump's election promises, these have not fully materialised, besides a highly publicised meeting in Istanbul between delegates (Steve Rosenberg, 2025). The meeting resulted in an agreement to exchange 1.000 Prisoners of war, while Trump and the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov hinted that a successful exchange could become more (Christian Lowe, 2025). The war in Ukraine still rages.

The war in Ukraine has shifted multiple times, from the initial advance by Russian forces, which was stopped, to Ukrainian troops recapturing much of their territory and keeping the initiative in mid/late 2022. However, fighting in 2023 has had less clear results, with a lack of clear victories like those in late 2022 (Gady & Kofman, 2024). Consequently, the fighting became a stalemate and was dubbed a battle of attrition akin to fighting along the western front in World War 1 (Gressel, 2024). The Ukrainian Kursk offensive in August 2024 shifted the momentum, while Russia was forced to divert troops from the frontlines and reinforce itself, further with North Korean troops, eventually resulting in a rapid withdrawal mid-March 2025 (Jonathan Beale & Anastasiia Levchenko, 2025). The prolonged fighting and downward-trending public opinion pose a significant challenge, as maintaining support for the Ukrainian war effort may be unsustainable if public sentiment shifts (Gady & Kofman, 2024). Furthermore, the recent volatile relationship with America under Trump's presidency only prompts more questions than answers.

Therefore, it is prudent to question how long European politicians can advocate for further aid and funding to Ukraine. Furthermore, the EU itself is in a unique and precarious situation as a supranational institution, as shaping a unified policy towards the war in Ukraine is complicated by individual member states' national interests, and symmetry between these and with supranational governmental interests and values is a balancing act (Gressel, 2024). Meanwhile, the Atlantic divide under Trump's second term is growing (Amandine Hess, 2025). The current state of affairs mimics the ruptures, similar to those in 2022, caused by the Russian invasion as described by (Bosse, 2024). Thus, exploring how the EU affirm leadership during this period of flux, particularly the top leadership, namely Ursula von der Leyen, seeks to ensure MS, the general public, and promote confidence in the EU's ability to act. This Thesis will adopt a similar approach to (Bosse, 2024) by seeking to understand how von der Leyen has communicated throughout the Ukrainian-Russian war. We can achieve a sense of what might come next for the EU.

Research Focus and Rationale

This thesis seeks to understand and analyse how the EU leadership frames and promotes its policies supporting Ukraine, to achieve insights on how the EU's Ukraine policy is shaped by public opinion and strategic interests. The lens through which these questions will be explored is the theory of strategic narratives. This theory will provide a solid framework for understanding the intersection of public opinion and perceptions with political objectives and interests. The framework will provide a foundation for understanding the interaction between the public and politicians and eventual policy decisions. The research question will be followed by three additional minor questions to explore the subject thoroughly.

Major Research Question

- How has Ursula von der Leyen constructed and developed strategic narratives on Ukraine via social media during the Russo-Ukrainian war?

Minor Research Questions

1. What dominant themes, narrative types, and rhetorical tools are employed in Von der Leyen's communication during significant events in the conflict?
2. How have these narratives evolved, particularly concerning public sentiment, EU priorities, and conflict developments?
3. What does this narrative evolution suggest about the EU's broader strategic communication aims and its role in shaping European identity and support for Ukraine?

Limitations and Scope of the Thesis

This thesis will seek to understand social media's role in political communication and reflect upon how the European Union Leadership utilises social media to engage and demonstrate its leadership to member states, the general public, and external observers. However, this is an insurmountable task. As a result, the thesis resorted to employing a case study approach to achieve limited insight. The case study will focus on Ursula von der Leyen as the focal point in the EU leadership and examine her communication on Twitter. The thesis will explore how von der Leyen applies strategic narrative to engage her audience and promote various actions, policies, and responses to the ongoing war in Ukraine on social media. The thesis will also

apply concepts, such as ontological security and material interests. Therefore, it will be stressed that the thesis will not examine any MS interests or security needs; it will view them from a collective EU perspective. The methodological approach for this research is a constructivist and interpretivist stance. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the study's results, by extension, become a perspective on how audiences are influenced. Thus, the nature of the research also promotes contextual insights to achieve a concrete, but nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how von der Leyen uses social media.

Literature Review

This literature review seeks to critically examine the existing body of work concerning strategic narratives, focusing on the EU from relevant fields of study within academia. This review will systematically explore how scholars have utilised the Strategic Narrative's theoretical framework and accompanying methodological approaches to understanding the EU's policies and political position. In this context, the nature of the EU is important to understand, given its "*Sui Generis*". Viewing the EU as a single actor without specific reason or justification may be tempting. However, this would fail to grasp the complexity of the EU. Therefore, following this literature review, a section on theory operationalisation will describe the thesis justification for defining the EU as a single actor, which will be based upon a review of the examined literature; methodological approach, and definition of the EU, in addition to accounting for the EU institutional structure and decision-making process.

Furthermore, to recognise the intricate nature of member states' inherent diversity and interests, it may become necessary to analyse and discuss member states' individuality and its implications on the strategic narrative projected by the EU as an actor. At the same time, this adds a layer of complexity to the thesis, it provides an opportunity for enrichment by accounting for member states' individuality, which provides a more nuanced and realistic picture of how the EU operate and projects itself on the international stage.

Overview of Strategic Narrative Theory

This section will present the theoretical concept of strategic narrative. To realise and appreciate the full potential of strategic narrative, this section will draw upon multiple influential scholars and their insights. The study of strategic narrative within international relations is relatively new; Lawrence Freedman is commonly credited with its introduction (Coticchia & Catanzaro,

2022; Schmitt, 2018). Freedman described strategic narrative as "*compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn*" (Freedman, 2006, p. 6), In other words, strategic narratives are a concept that helps shed light on the power of communication in politics, how actors tell stories that appeal to the audience. The utility of rhetoric is not new. Krebs & Jackson (2007) noted that it has been well understood how rhetoric and persuasiveness are political tools, but their importance as a field of study has been downplayed. The study of rhetoric and narratives has resurged and been more widespread, and the concept of strategic narrative has contributed to this proliferation, as highlighted by multiple scholars (Chaban et al., 2023; Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2022; Schmitt, 2018).

While multiple influential authors have explored different theoretical avenues of strategic narrative, one of the theory's key scholars, Miskimmon et al. (2013), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding strategic narrative applicability and utility in the book "*Strategic Narrative: Communication Power and the New World Order*" which defines strategic narrative as:

> "*Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors. (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 2.)*"

An actor's ability to craft and shape a narrative to reflect their political agenda is crucial. Understanding how and why actors create these narratives is just as crucial, as the authors elaborate upon; narratives serve as a tool to define who the actor is and what order they want, but narratives are not freely constructed; they are the result of ongoing and dynamic social interactions between domestic and international audiences. Therefore, understanding the historical context, cultural identity, and an actor's reputation is essential, as past actions by the actor, present perception of the actor, and future expectations of the actor define the narrative boundaries. (*Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 2-8.)* When actors craft and project these narratives to audiences, they help shape perceptions and attitudes towards the issue. The actor can then use these narratives strategically to push their narrative boundary in an ever-evolving process, as the dynamic nature of the social interaction means that each new narrative provides an opportunity to shape the opinions and behaviour of its audience. (*Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 2-8.)* Thus, a clear definition of strategic narrative and how it works. It becomes prudent to deconstruct the idea further, including its core components such as the types of narratives.

Narrative in International Relations

Thus, a clear definition of strategic narrative and how it works as a concept are needed. It becomes prudent to break the idea down further, to understand what a narrative is, what makes a narrative effective, what the types of narratives are, and how strategic narrative is developed, employed, and received. To answer these questions, we rely upon the concept as presented by A. Miskimmon et al. and their iteration upon this, with complementary insights from other scholars. To understand what constitutes a narrative, we draw upon the insights of A. Miskimmon et al., in their book "*One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative",* give the following explanation:

> *"A narrative contains a sequence of causally related events. Structurally, all narratives contain features: characters or actors; a scene or setting; an obstacle or puzzle to overcome; the tools the characters use to overcome the obstacle; and projected endings that are desired or to be feared. As humans stitch together those features into an overall heuristic to interpret the world, narratives give a temporal quality to experience, a sense of how we are moving through history (or are stuck)." (Miskimmon et al., 2021, p. 8)*

Thereby, understanding that a narrative is a story that unfolds over time, the story itself progresses through time, and it is not static. The elements and events of the story help give reference to the audience; the interpretation of these elements and events is what gives sense to the story (Miskimmon et al., 2017b). The sense of time is important for the narrative, it helps inform the audience from a story perspective, from where we were/are to where we are going. But it also helps distinguish narratives from other forms of communication, such as discourse that is static as highlighted by Miskimmon et al., (2013)"*Discourses do not feature a causal transformation that takes actors from one status quo to another, as narratives do (*(Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 7)*.* However, discourses can lay the basis for a narrative. The actor can utilise it to create a reference point of who/where we are/were (ibid). Other stories, such as myths or master narratives, which are stories with deeper roots, cultural significance, and a more permanent idea of who we are, also differ from strategic narratives (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, pp. 22–24). Because strategic narratives are inherently more adaptable, actors can create stories and adapt them to their particular circumstances freely, which distinguishes them from the semi-permanence of societal myths; however, strategic narratives can also choose to reinforce these myths through repeated narration or use these myths to make their narrative more

compelling (ibid p. 22-24)(Colley & van Noort, 2022c). Similarly, actors can also choose to use framing in their narration as highlighted by (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 7).

> *"As with discourse, frames as analytical units lack the temporal and causal features narratives necessarily possess In other words, understanding narratives helps us understand why and how framing works. "(Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 7)*

Throughout their narration, actors can frame particular parts of the story to evoke specific emotions or references from the audience. Based upon these insights, a theoretical understanding of a narrative and how it is distinguished from other forms of communication is achieved. But before delving deeper into what makes a narrative effective, we must account for an extensive scholarly body of work and understanding of what a narrative is.

Defining Key Elements of Narrative

What is a narrative, and why are they different from other forms of communication? As stated previously, many influential scholars have explored different theoretical avenues and the applicability of strategic narrative. While this research and its findings have pushed the theoretical insights further, they have also made condensing and defining the concept a herculean task. This is further exacerbated by expansive theoretical applicability and differing terminology within international relations (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2022). The reason behind this is anchored in the idea that storytelling is a natural human form of communication, and sharing stories is a way for humans to connect and share interpretations of the world and our place in it (Colley, 2017). These stories or narratives can shape the audience's sense of identity, behaviour and worldview (ibid). Because of these elements, narratives are often assumed to be more impactful and persuasive than other types of communication or rhetorical techniques (ibid). This idea can be summarised by Thomas Colley, who contends:

> *"This reflects a broader trend in which narrative is seen increasingly as a communication panacea (Salmon 2010), the key to "soft" power in the twenty-first century Roselle et al. 2014) and even the "foundation of all strategy (Vlahos 2006)* (Colley, 2017, p. 1).

Therefore, narrative has this inherent broad utility because a narrative is assumed to have this ability to connect humans and help make sense of the world. As highlighted by Colley, strategic narratives help connect events; they give answers to questions such as why, what, and how, which in turn aids in determining success or failure (Colley, 2017).

Returning to the temporal aspect, defining the time constraints through which the sequence of events described by the narrative unfolds is very ill-defined. This makes it difficult to conceptually define what a narrative is because this ambiguity means that what could be described as a singular narrative can also just be an event in a sequence of events within a larger narrative (Colley, 2017). This ambiguity has also led to terminology expansion, as highlighted by (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2022), which makes it harder to clearly define what constitutes the temporal dimension of narrative. As highlighted by Miskimmon et al., "*Strategic narratives may be designed with short-term and/or long-term goals in mind.* (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 8), Thereby understanding that temporal aspects must be considered intently when defining what a narrative is. It provides a reference point for the objective measurement of success or failure. Subsequent strategic narratives about or relating to the topic will be incorporated under this term. This term will be discussed and explained more clearly in the operationalisation section of the thesis, but this term will allow us to streamline our understanding and definition of what a narrative is.

Incorporating these insights from other scholars, a more nuanced understanding of what a narrative is is achieved. This allows us to define a narrative as a story about an actor in a given setting with a particular conflict to overcome, the tools the actor uses to overcome it, and a result, good or bad. A narrative unfolds over time, and it gives the audience a sense of where we were and what we need to do now to get to where we are going. These stories are powerful and unique from other types of communication because they connect us on a human level. Through these stories, actors can build a shared worldview with their audiences.

What Makes Narratives Effective?

Moving forward with a clearer understanding of what a narrative is, it becomes possible to delve deeper into what makes a narrative effective. As highlighted earlier the idea that narratives are uniquely powerful and persuasive is often assumed than demonstrated (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, pp. 19–21), to understand why narratives are compelling, we continue this assumption and incorporate the idea that narratives can use other rhetorical techniques such as framing as highlighted by (Miskimmon et al., 2013). This is because, while the theory itself may be new, the fundamental concepts it builds upon are not; at its core, rhetoric and persuasion are essential. Actors rely upon these concepts to create compelling narratives for their audiences. Actors can employ various techniques in their persuasion, such as framing.

However, these techniques are not necessarily limited to ethical persuasion and can encompass more manipulative techniques, like propaganda, misinformation and disinformation. As Brian McNair noted:

> *"The distinction between 'persuasion', which is a universally recognised function of political actors in a democracy, and manipulation, which carries with it the negative connotations of propaganda and deceit, is not always an easy one to draw.* (McNair, 2017, p. 29).

The blurred line between persuasion and manipulation is critical when analysing strategic narratives. Actors may use this ambiguity to their advantage when presenting their narrative in addition to traditional rhetorical tools. As highlighted by (Colley & van Noort, 2022a; Graaf, DIMITRIU, et al., 2015)in theory a gap between the narrative reality and actual reality should be kept as small as possible, but recent events and research have shown how some actors can sustain a larger gap in reality than what was assumed possible however, this area needs further inquiry (Colley & van Noort, 2022a, p. 279). Appreciating that actors have a certain degree of freedom in narrative reality, but a gap that is too large will invite criticism and opposition (Graaf, DIMITRIU, et al., 2015, p. 359). Therefore, understanding that actors have a high degree of agency when crafting their narrative, they are not limited to purely ethical techniques, but must consider the risks of narrative reality incoherence with actual reality, the consequences of which will be explored further in the operationalisation.

Returning to rhetorical techniques actors can employ in their narratives that make them more persuasive, we work in reverse, the assumption that narratives are more convincing and influential than forms of communication is that through various techniques a compelling narrative creates a story that resonates with its audience (Colley & van Noort, 2022b; Schmitt, 2018). Understanding this allows us to investigate how narrative gets there, and which techniques are particularly potent for creating a compelling narrative. As noted by Colley (2017), when reflecting on the existing body of work from scholars, the insights of what makes strategic narrative particularly effective in the communication and persuasiveness of foreign policy reflect Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm (Colley, 2017). Colley notes that:

> *"in which* they *should be structurally coherent and plausible accounts of events (narrative probability), but also resonate with individual experiences, beliefs and cultural values (narrative fidelity). Beyond this, though, it is often unclear what makes narrative uniquely persuasive."*(Colley, 2017, p. 3).

Colley further demonstrates this point by describing how some scholars have applied classical techniques such as Aristotle's ideas of ethos, pathos, and logos, which are not unique to strategic narrative and blur the distinction between strategic narrative and other discourse types (Colley, 2017). Colley also points to how a general characterisation of what makes a strategic narrative is similarly more applicable to different types of discourse. This is not unique for strategic narrative; according to Colley, these claims and characterisation can be extended to multiple terminologically similar words, which echoes (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2022). While strategic narrative is a growing research field with a diverse body of literature, it can be problematic, since each academic applies a slight spin on it in their application of strategic narrative, which slowly expands and obscures the concept through interpretation filters. The thesis seeks to retain a clear understanding of strategic narrative; therefore, the thesis seeks a precise characterisation of features, as introduced by (Graaf, Dimitriu, et al., 2015) but built on (Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011). This characterisation identified four elements that make a strategic narrative effective/strong:

- *Clarity of purpose*; a strong narrative that articulates a clear and compelling purpose, in the context of the Afghan war, this is summarised by answering the question of "why this mission". (Graaf, Dimitriu, et al., 2015, p. 9)
- *Prospect of success*: a strong narrative that helps define success criteria, further enhanced by linking events unfolding into a narrative of progress and achieving success. A strong narrative of this type can help secure public support by providing clear success criteria that the public can buy into. (Graaf, Dimitriu, et al., 2015, p. 9)
- *Consistency*: a narrative must be consistent; a narrative that fails to maintain consistency can confuse and sow doubt. (Graaf, Dimitriu, et al., 2015, pp. 9–10)
- *Absence of strong competing narrative*; a strong strategic narrative is noted by having few or weak counter-narratives, it can be enhanced by having multiple actors opting into the narrative, but a strong narrative can still be challenged by other compelling competing narratives. (Graaf, Dimitriu, et al., 2015, p. 10)

However, following Colley's argumentation, these elements apply to other types of discourse as well. Therefore, it is an important critique of strategic narrative. The assumption that these elements only apply to narratives and that is what makes them particularly compelling is flawed. Furthermore, strategic narratives as described earlier, can also choose to use deeper societal myths, to make their narration to be more compelling by appealing/tieing into to

foundational ideas of given societies' mythos, which also makes it harder to compete against as these mythos are not easily challenged (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, pp. 23–25). However, the usage of societal mythos to make a compelling narrative is not unique to strategic narrative. It can similarly be applied to other forms of discourse and arguments, to make them more compelling.

But if we, for the sake of argument, follow Miskimmon et al. (2013) point on how strategic narrative can incorporate other types of discourse and their techniques, such as framing in its larger storytelling. A strategic narrative is likely compelling because it can utilise various rhetorical techniques to formulate a persuasive narrative that resonates with its audience. Therefore, understanding actors requires a high degree of agency and tools to create a narrative. However, actors must consider their narrative reality when they craft their narrative. Now, with a more nuanced understanding of what makes narratives effective, we can explore what types of narratives there are.

As previously noted, conceptual clarity on what constitutes a narrative is lacking. This extends to the classification of narratives. Literature narrows significantly on this topic, therefore, this section will focus on the classification systems as introduced by Miskimmon et al. (2013), which have laid down a system for classification that breaks down a strategic narrative into three types of sub-narratives (system, identity, and issues narrative) which offer a analytical framework that gives insight on how the narrative operates on various levels (Miskimmon et al., 2013), this framework have been co-opted by fellow scholars such as (Bain & Chaban, 2017; Chaban et al., 2019; Moral, 2024; Schmitt, 2018). The three sub-categories of strategic narratives are described by Miskimmon et al. (2013), and their iteration upon this is in (2017) and (2021).

- System narrative: "*describes how the world is structured, who the players are, and how the system works*" (Miskimmon et al., 2017b, p. 8). This narrative type operates at the highest level. It gives the audience a sense of our place in the world. Roselle (2017) highlighted that this includes narratives about the war on terror and alliances such as NATO (Roselle, 2017, p. 101). From an analytical standpoint, assessing how actors talk about the systems that actors are part of, such as NATO, the EU and the global economy, is the subject of analysis (Miskimmon et al., 2021, p. 9).

- Identify narrative: "*these set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has* (Miskimmon et al., 2017b, p. 8)*".* The narrative boundary constrains this type of narrative, as the audience's perception of an actor's past actions shapes current perceptions and future expectations (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 8). Furthermore, identity narratives also include narratives about other actors, be they allies, enemies, small powers, great powers or superpowers (Miskimmon et al., 2021, p. 9). From an analytical standpoint, the subject of analysis is assessing who the actor is, their values and goals, and how they and others perceive them.

- Issue narratives: "*... that set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished.* (Miskimmon et al., 2017b, p. 8)." Issue narratives set the stage for an actor's response or action; they describe the issue/obstacle and what is done to overcome it (ibid p.8). Issue narratives inform the audience by giving context and helping them understand how an actor will meet and overcome a specific challenge. From an analytical standpoint, assessing how actors present issues and respond to them becomes the subject of analysis.

This framework demonstrates how breaking down a strategic narrative into smaller analytical groups can provide a deeper insight and appreciation of the strategic narrative. It gives a structural and methodological approach to classifying and evaluating a narrative from various aspects and perspectives. But as highlighted by Miskimmon et al. (2013), it is essential to understand that these different aspects make up the sum total of strategic narrative, and are interlinked (Miskimmon et al., 2017b, p. 8). Furthermore, it is important to note that the contradiction between these different subcategories can undermine the effectiveness of a strategic narrative (ibid p. 8); this insight is similar to what was previously described as narrative reality. Additionally, it must be noted that a given strategic narrative can, in theory and practice, choose to weigh certain aspects higher than others in its narration. Moving forward, we seek to understand how strategic narratives are developed, employed and received.

Given the theoretical and conceptual uniformity, we seek to understand these ideas and concepts as described by Miskimmon et al. (2013), and their iteration upon this is in (2017) and (2021).

- Formation: "*Explaining the formation of strategic narrative involves understanding actors' strategic goals and types of communication*" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 8). The actor's strategic goal, such as agenda-setting, policy legitimation, and securing

acquiescence, drives the formation process (ibid., pp. 8-9). It is important to understand the actor has a degree of agency when crafting their narrative, as they decide on the content, what the goals and agenda they are trying to achieve, these goals can be short and long-term objectives, actors can use their narrative to gather political capital and soft power (Ibid p. 8-10). The types of communication refers to which persuasive and rhetorical tools the actor uses to further their interests and agenda, the actor can use different tools depending on if they are trying to build a consensus on topic or trying to force conformity, the actors agency is central when formulating the narrative the actor chooses which tools to include in their narration (ibid). From an analytical perspective, understanding "*different types of communication will underpin the formation and motives behind a strategic narrative*" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 10). However, an actor must still consider the audience and their agency, but understanding how actors craft their narrative helps us understand why (ibid. p. 8-10).

- Projection: "*addresses how narratives are projected (or narrated) and contested, particularly in a new media environment.* (Miskimmon et al., 2017b, p. 9). Thereby understanding that projection refers to how the narrative is presented, through which mediums they communicate their narrative (Miskimmon et al., 2013, pp. 10–11). Actors have a high degree of agency when choosing through which channels they project their narrative. Still, it is important to understand that not all actors are equal; accessibility and availability can limit which channels actors can use to project their narrative (ibid). Furthermore, it is important to understand that not all media are equal and some have unique challenges that actors must consider when deciding which medium they use, as some new media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, etc., offer a greater degree of interaction between actor and audience than traditional platforms (ibid). Thereby understanding that: "*New social media allow greater interactivity … Today audience members can become actors themselves, commenting, liking, and remixing images, information, and narratives.*" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 11). From an analytical standpoint, it is therefore important to note which medium actors use as it can affect how the narrative is crafted or adapted.

- Reception: "*addresses how narratives are received. This means their reach or saturation as well as how individuals understand and process information.*" (Miskimmon et al., 2017b, p. 9). Before delving deeper into reception, it is important to understand that project and reception are linked closely; while an actor may initially

choose which medium they project through, they can not control how the narrative spreads and disseminates afterwards (Miskimmon et al., 2013, pp. 10–12). Thereby understanding that actors must consider their mediums and audiences, as certain channels can increase or decrease their reach. Understanding the audience (other states' elites, domestic public, or foreign public, etc.), the type of media they use predominantly, their cultural/societal norms and values, and what the competing narratives are (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Understanding this allows the actor to adapt their narrative to better resonate with the audience and decide channels to use to appeal through for greater reach/impact (ibid). An actor needs to understand that the audience possesses their own agency, their perception and interpretation of narrative and is not a blank slate for actors to project on (Chaban et al., 2019). From an analytical standpoint, determining the impact/effectiveness on an audience can be complex as determining the narrative's influence requires a clear before and afterwards assessment, with analysis of how attitudes or opinions have been affected and how behaviour has changed (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 12).

However, while understanding these concepts lays the foundation for a nuanced theoretical understanding of strategic narrative, it is important stress that these concepts are intertwined in a multifaceted way, as highlighted by Miskimmon et al. (2017b) the strategic narrative cycle does not happen in a void, they are influenced by the media ecology, which is why is necessary to account for this ecology as the narrative circulates, as they affect them but are also affected by them (Miskimmon et al., 2017b, p. 10). Furthermore, understanding that the cycle is not a linear process, because actors have agency in the construction of narrative, they can anticipate responses and adapt their narrative accordingly (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Thereby understanding the cycle provide important conceptual insight on strategic narrative, But as highlighted by (Colley & van Noort, 2022c), incorporating everything from this cycle in the theoretical understanding/analytical use of strategic narrative is not a must, scholars can chose to examine elements of this cycle as described by Colley & van Norrt, (2022c):

> "*Extensive research has examined strategic narrative formation, and hybrid media scholars have provided nuanced accounts of strategic narrative projection. We know less about reception. Some researchers have completed one cycle —starting with a state's strategic narrative formation, then examining how it is projected and received.*"
> (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 21)

While certain aspects of this cycle objectively offer more accessibility for scholars, as certain aspects have been researched extensively, while reception remains a key aspect that is often overlooked, the metaphorical elephant in the room (Miskimmon et al., 2017a, pp. 321–322). The reasons for this can in part be explained by the complexity and challenge of correlating a particular narrative to a behaviour/policy change, as accounting for any and all factors that may affect this change is extensive and complicated (ibid. p. 322). While certain methods, such as public opinion, offer limited insight, they give policymakers a sense of how the public receives their narrative (O'Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 47). O'Loughlin et al. argue that it fails to capture the complexity of audience agency, as well as their interpretation and perception. They highlighted a new methodological approach of focus groups to better understand how narratives are received by individuals (Miskimmon et al., 2017a, p. 322).

Based upon the reviewed literature, we have achieved a deeper understanding of strategic narrative as a theory, centred on the foundational framework presented by Miskimmon et al. (2013) while incorporating insights from influential scholars. We can synthesise a clear understanding of the theoretical concept as follows:

Strategic narrative is a theory that is based upon understanding the role of communication in politics and international relations. It describes how actors can use storytelling to attempt to influence their audience's behaviour and worldview towards their agenda. Strategic narrative is a tool which actors can use to frame conflicts, justify policies, construct identities, project power, and gather political capital. It is a dynamic process; the stories actors tell are constrained by their own and the audience's perception of the actor's history, present, and future. Actors use their story to strategically push and influence their audience's perception of them. It is an ever-evolving social dynamic process, where these stories are constantly repeated or iterated upon. Regardless of what the story or narrative is, it is assumed that they are particularly effective in gathering listeners and affect their audience. Because storytelling is a fundamental part of human nature and communication, it helps give listeners a sense of *who we are/were, where we are going, and how we get there.* These narratives all unfold over time and feature an actor, scene, conflict, resolution, and end. Within these narratives, actors/narrators can employ various rhetorical and communicative techniques to achieve greater resonance with the audience. Through this resonance, the narrator can connect to the audience and influence their

behaviour by constructing a shared worldview. Lastly, understanding that these narratives are told through different channels, and the medium itself can influence how the narrative is told.

Theory

Through an extensive literature review, we now have a clear understanding and definition of what a strategic narrative is. However, one must also understand the political agendas and objectives contained within and behind the narrative. Therefore, using strategic narrative as an analytical tool requires a broad and comprehensive understanding of fundamental concepts within international relations, as the narratives and strategies behind them can be motivated by other theories and concepts from IR. Strategic narratives' strength lies in understanding and analysing the narratives actors tell each other about the world, while their weakness lies in understanding the underlying motives behind the narrative because these narratives can be explained and analysed from different perspectives and mainstream IR theories, such as liberalism, realism or power dynamics to name a few.
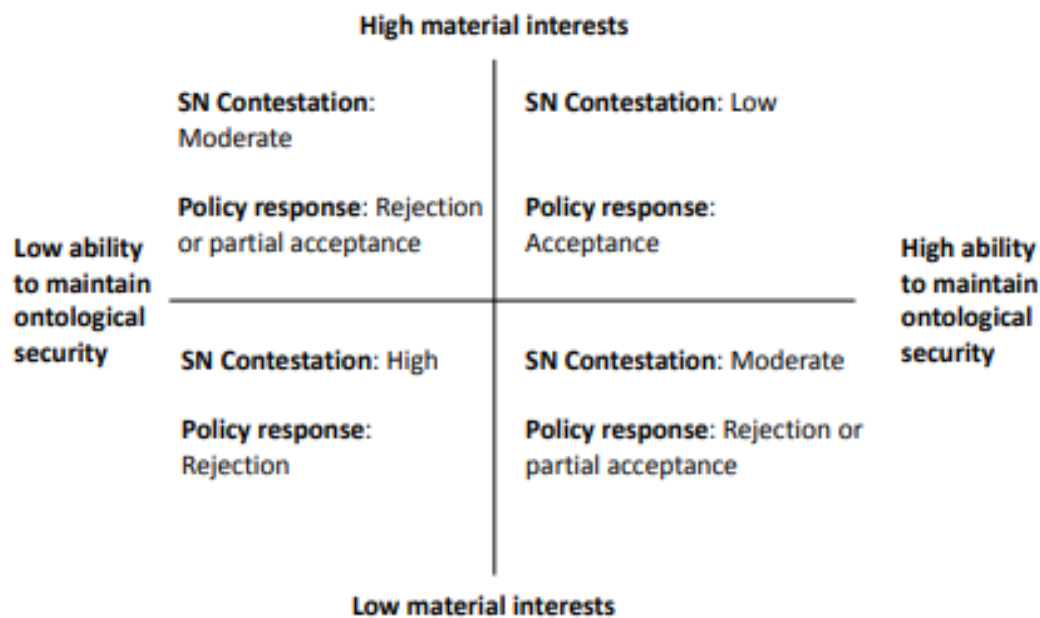
However, the theoretical framework of strategic narrative does not seek to explain why actors tell the stories, as objectively determining an actor's true motives is impossible; we can only guess. The utility of strategic narrative is its emphasis on understanding how actors tell these stories. This is an important point to stress, as before introducing the new theoretical framework, it is necessary to acknowledge that strategic narrative has its limitations and gaps in the existing literature, as highlighted in the literature review. When we attempt to overcome these challenges, it becomes adventurous to incorporate additional literature. For this purpose, *the strategic narrative buy-in framework*, which was made by Colley & van Noort, is introduced. Their framework expands on the analytical capabilities of strategic narrative by utilising additional insights from the concepts of *ontological (in)security* and *material interest,* to provide additional context and insight on how certain states justify their choice to join or reject another state's policy initiative (Colley & van Noort, 2022c).

Ontological- security and *in-security* are concepts that originated from psychology and were incorporated into sociology by Anthony Giddens, after which, they quickly disseminated throughout the social sciences, including international relations (Ejdus, 2018, pp. 884–885). In brief, the concepts describe how states/individuals seek a stable sense of self, and how their

need for identity stability and coherence drives their behaviour (Cash, 2020). States' behaviour in international relations can be described as seeking stability amidst uncertainty and change (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017). States attempt to manage their anxiety about uncertainty by either maintaining their established routines or modifying them to better adapt and cope with the situation (ibid). Regardless of the outcome, states seek to preserve their sense of self without undermining the amount of ontological security they experience (Cash, 2020, pp. 318–320). However, when states attempt to justify their behaviour to international and domestic audiences (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, pp. 27–29). The narrative becomes important as states can utilise various techniques to frame their behaviour, even significant behaviour changes, as a coherent and natural continuity of a state's identity (ibid).

Material interest, as used in the theoretical framework, centres on describing and justifying why something is worthwhile. The narrative plays an essential part in convincing audiences that future prospects outweigh potential costs, meaning that policymakers may choose to justify behavioural change if the future promises of material interests/benefits are significant enough to convince audiences of the same. Furthermore, the framework views material interests as constituted by the narrative, which allows for material interests to be both tangible and intangible. The future prospects of material gain mean that while there may be some uncertainty about living up to expectations, states/actors are able to justify their actions. (Colley & Van Noort, 2022, pp. 21–23, 32–34, 269–274).

Drawing upon these additional and well-established concepts enhances the utility and variability of strategic narrative. But before continuing with introducing and explaining the framework, it must be highlighted that this framework is in its infancy, which means that the theoretical boundaries/scope of the framework are undefined. Therefore, I will describe in detail how I intend to implement and apply it to this case study, and it will be discussed and detailed further in the operationalisation. Nonetheless, these additional concepts provide additional insights into how narratives can affect policy changes. Below is an illustration of the framework and how these new concepts interact with strategic narrative.

High material interests

SN Contestation: Moderate	**SN Contestation:** Low
Policy response: Rejection or partial acceptance	**Policy response:** Acceptance
SN Contestation: High	**SN Contestation:** Moderate
Policy response: Rejection	**Policy response:** Rejection or partial acceptance

Low ability to maintain ontological security

High ability to maintain ontological security

Low material interests

From (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 30)

The theoretical framework contends that a state is more likely to enact a policy change if they are able to justify the change through the promise of material interest/gain, and maintenance of its ontological security (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 29). If these conditions are met, policymakers are more likely to find a policy change *feasible*, and ultimately, they are more likely to enact the policy change (ibid). This premise extends to what are called *global policy initiatives,* such as China's Belt and Road Initiative[3]. The state/actor leading a global policy initiative must create a convincing strategic narrative that promises potential participants material benefits without undermining their ontological security (ibid). Strategic narratives that manage to fulfil these criteria will be met with less scepticism and receive less contestation in potential participating states, as policymakers will find the global policy initiative more *sayable (ibid)*.

However, the target audience of narrative must be considered intently, as audience perception of the narrator matters greatly, as these perceptions influence the ontological security concerns raised by potential participants (ibid. 101-125). When these concerns are expressed, it allows for more scepticism towards the policy initiative and signals a higher level of contestation for policymakers; these both indicate a degree of ontological insecurity (ibid). Policymakers could

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[3] Which was the subject of the Colley and van Noort case study that led to the creation of the theoretical framework

choose to reject policy initiatives in order to maintain their sense of self. However, if the material benefits promised by the initiative are considerable, policymakers may join the policy initiative and risk the ontological insecurity, contestation and opposition (ibid). Similarly, if a policy initiative offers no material benefits but maintains/reaffirms their sense of self, policymakers can choose to reject the initiative or risk the potential consequences (ibid). Therefore, it is important to understand and appreciate the role of perception and how it influences the decision-making process. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that material interest or ontological security concerns shape how participating states choose to craft their strategic narrative about joining the narrative, which brings us to the second premise of the framework that states:

> *"Our second assumption is that a state's strategic narrative is more effective if it is co-opted by others. Getting one's strategic narrative co-opted by others is important for two reasons. (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 31)*

Thereby understanding that the original strategic narrative must be curated to their audience to ensure a higher likelihood of success because, when policymaker finds a strategic narrative *sayable* (ibid). They are more likely to *buy-in*, which refers to whether the potential participants decide to join the initiative, but also if they choose to co-opt the original strategic narrative in their own narrative (ibid). States that choose to co-opt the original strategic narrative will also lend some credence to promises made by the original narrative and initiative. Furthermore, when states support the original narrative, it becomes stronger, meaning that getting other states to co-opt the narrative will legitimise it and lead it to become a more prominent interpretation of the policy issue.

> *"Over time, the more one's preferred interpretation of a policy initiative dominates, the more audiences are likely to accept that initiative. Joining the initiative will seem like a more common-sensical thing to do"* (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 31)

However, it must be noted that the strategic narrative buy-in framework has some shortcomings that must be highlighted. For example, states can, in principle, choose to project a completely different strategic narrative to justify their policy decisions, but this would increase the likelihood of contestation. Additionally, as these agreements are agreed upon between states, a

certain degree of congruence is to be expected so as not to strain their relationship and raise doubts about the variability of the agreement for domestic and international audiences. Furthermore, it must be understood that states can, in principle, choose to co-opt or align with the original narrative, as doing so has no or few potential downsides. Lastly, it is important to note that states have a variety of reasons to join an initiative. Whether or not a strategic narrative has any bearing on the decision to join or reject a policy initiative is hard to collate with absolute certainty.

Understanding these shortcomings is important because realising that strategic narrative has its limitations also allows for appreciating its strengths. Narratives are a communicative and political tool that can be utilised by actors to influence their audience's behaviour and perceptions. However, strategic narratives are rarely enough to affect change in other actors alone, but analysing the narratives that actors project when justifying and legitimising their policies. Help us identify and understand some of the aspects that motivated a change. Thereby, understanding that strategic narratives are a part of the policy initiative and adaptation process, they offer insights on how narratives affect policy outcomes. However, without access to policymakers' true motives, it is impossible to determine how much influence the narrative had on the outcome. Although through analysis, the narrative actors project when justifying their policy change, it becomes possible to trace how much influence the original narrative had on the policy outcome.

Thus with a comprehensive understanding of strategic narrative achieved through the literature review, and the additional insights from the buy-in framework, it becomes possible to synthesise and apply this knowledge to the context of the case study, which enables us to understand how the EU justifies its continued support of Ukraine, its actions, and policies. However, certain parts of the framework must be reconceptualised to fit the parameters of the case study. In the following section, I will describe how I intend to operationalise these frameworks and their insights in the case study, while providing clear arguments and justification for the adaptations.

Operationalisation

The strategic framework buy-in framework provides an important insight into how one actor persuades another actor to join their global policy initiative. The framework demonstrates how

strategic narrative is an effective tool to convince other actors to join by tailoring the narrative around the policy in such a way that promises material gain and maintains their ontological security (Colley & van Noort, 2022a). However, when operationalising the framework to the context of this thesis, the problematic nature of defining the EU as a single actor and its policies as global policy becomes apparent. Nonetheless, the justification for both is built on the premise, as the study centres on the EU's top leadership response and actions towards Russia, the underlying institutional mechanism becomes critical to understand, as policy actions; such as sanctions, are decided by the EU council and require unanimity (*Unanimity - EUR-Lex*, n.d.). This requirement enforces a collective agreement to the action, therefore, the EU's policies achieved through this mechanism can be understood as global policy because the requirement of unanimity forces a balancing and compromises between member state's individual interests and needs, thus these policies are built on collective bargaining and agreements between member states and have a higher global impact than member states individual foreign policies.

However, as these policies are achieved through the EU council mechanism they are also subject to internal negotiations and compromises, the final policy outcome may be impacted by member states individuality, as member states may start to weigh self-interest higher than overall goals set forth by the EU, as highlighted by (Portela, Clara et al., 2020) "*EU members sometimes threaten to veto sanctions renewals. Hungary blocked the renewal of an embargo on Belarus until a weapons category was exempted (König 2020).*" (Portela, Clara et al., 2020, p. 685). In the operationalisation of the framework, a certain freedom is taken regarding what exactly constitutes and defines a global policy, in the context of this case study, because as the framework claims that "*If the policy appears to promise little material gain and potentially undermines ontological security, it will likely be contested discursively and rejected.*" (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 30) in the operationalisation of the framework, the perspective of the claim ties directly into the justification of viewing the EU as a single actor, through the policy formation process, the institutional mechanism ensures collective agreement. The requirement of unanimity forces the member states to negotiate between themselves and reach a policy compromise that all member states and their policymakers find *sayable* and justify their *buy-in*.

The operationalisation understands global policy as the collectively agreed-upon action/policy taken by the EU Council. I operationalise that the global policy concept grants insight into the

internal negotiations in the policy formation of the EU, as the requirement of unanimity becomes key. However, the policies themselves are not the object of analysis in this case study; rather, the case study focuses on how the EU uses its narrative to justify its policies, as well as gather political capital for further policy evolution and policy escalation. The justification for describing the EU as a singular actor lies within the understanding of the role of the EU's narrative. Because, as the policy outcome has navigated the complex pluralist nature of the EU, the EU as an actor must then construct a strong strategic narrative, that continually builds support for their policy initiatives and discourages dissent, the EU's narrative is important to understand in this case, as the collectively agreed upon sanctions/policies and the accompanying narrative explaining them, must be tailored in such a manner that members state find them *sayable* and can justify the *buy-in*, but also tailored to suit the political agenda of the EU's top leadership. I operationalise that the EU's narrative must serve the overall interests and needs of the union. Therefore, the EU's narrative needs to maintain its political capital by seeking support from citizens and member states and establishing policy legitimation. While also building pressure on individual member states, whose interests and needs may differ from the EU's as a whole, thus discouraging dissent and enabling further policy evolution and escalation of its response, thereby understanding why viewing the EU as a single actor is important and why the EU's narrative is important.

Operationalising the EU as a single actor and focusing the analysis on using ontological security and strategic narrative, to explain and understand why member states join "global policy initiatives". While also understanding that the EU as an actor must gather the necessary political capital to continue its support for Ukraine, by formulating strategic narratives and messaging that enable buy-in from member states and the union's citizens, which in turn help the EU as an actor apply pressure to individual member states to accept further policy evolution, while on the other hand member states co-option of the EU's narrative and messaging helps the EU gather wider support from the union's citizens. But also acknowledging the EU's narrative and messaging are restricted, by what policies are collectively agreed upon by the EU Council in the first place, as the EU's messaging and narrative boundary are constructed by the initial agreement, but also limited by the narrative reality of what policies and actions can be pushed through the unanimity requirement of the EU Council. Because, as highlighted by Colley & van Noort (2022c), the narrative reality is important to consider:

> *"Finally a large 'say-do gap' is potentially a source for ontological insecurity for a state which is communicating about a global policy initiative. In theory, ontological security is maintained or enhanced through a combination of strategic narrative and routine behaviours. Ideally these would mutually reinforce one another, so that the stories one tells about oneself are illustrated by one's actions. If there is a large gap between one's strategic narrative and one's behaviour, however, they no longer reinforce one another, with ontological insecurity the potential result."* (Colley & van Noort, 2022a, p. 280)

Therefore, understanding how the EU must limit its messaging by what is achievable within the internal mechanism of the EU Council is crucial, because if the EU projects a narrative that does not reflect its actual policy accomplishments, the EU loses credibility as an actor. The loss of credibility as an actor could, in turn, weaken the EU internally and externally, as member states may start weighing individual interests higher, thus further exacerbating the EU's ability to push through policies. Externally, the loss of credibility could undermine the EU's position and power on the global stage. Thereby understanding the intric nature of how the EU as an actor is both formed and separated from the EU Council is essential for the analysis, the objectives of the EU's narrative and messaging are thus, presumed to be unique and may differ from member states, while also understanding that the EU's narrative and messaging must reflect its supranational nature. Because the EU's so-called "*sui generis*" means that the EU as an institution must constantly strive to create a Union identity that can gather support and legitimacy from its citizens and member states, meanwhile, it must ensure that the Union identity does not alienate its citizens or member states. Thereby understanding that ontological security plays a central role in the EU's narrative and massaging, furthermore, as the case study focuses on the EU's response and within this the EU Council's role is critical to understand, as the collective agreement means that member states must agree on ontological security concerns, which is why we must operationalise the threat perception.

I argue that the ontological security threat is clear and agreed upon for all member states and their citizens, because the Russian invasion and subsequent full-scale war represent a far more immediate breach of international norms and laws than the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Bosse (2022)underscores that this full-scale invasion led to a fundamental reorientation of EU security interests. Similarly, Orenstein (2023) describes how the invasion marked an

ontological rupture for the EU, realigning member state threat perceptions and reinforcing collective security priorities. While some scholars, such as Portela et al. (2020), note that the EU had already imposed sanctions against Russia in 2014, suggesting some degree of continuity, I argue that the EU's post-invasion response was qualitatively different. Cardwell & Moret (2023) describe the resulting sanctions regime as the most comprehensive the EU has ever implemented, a position echoed by Orenstein (2023), who frames them as a dramatic escalation in scope and intent. These insights support the view that the EU's post-2022 actions reflect not only policy consistency but a significant transformation in strategic posture.

Therefore, I operationalise that the change in threat perception has united member states more. Their perceived ontological insecurity has increased the EU's action potential, as member states sought to achieve greater policy impact to discourage Russian aggression. The EU as an actor must then maintain a messaging and narrative that offers a higher level of ontological security for member states and citizens than what individual member states can offer, enabling the EU to expand its action and policy potential further. However, as previously mentioned, this is a dynamic process where the EU as an actor must push its agenda forward to maintain political capital and build pressure on individual member states by gathering support from the public and other member states. But the EU as an actor must also consider the restrictions of narrative reality, as the EU's narrative and massaging must not exceed its possibilities, as the institutional mechanism of the EU Council enforces a narrative boundary as breaking it would create a large say-do gap, which could lose credibility and political capital by not delivering on its promises. Therefore, operationalising that stable or rising levels of public support would suggest successful narrative buy-in, thus granting more political capital to the EU as an actor, while declining levels of public support would indicate that the EU as an actor is losing political capital. However, it is important to realise that deducing support from member states is a much more complicated, almost herculean task and attempting to accomplish this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I operationalise that using public support as an empirical indicator of narrative buy-in enables tracking of broad sentiments. While recognising it may be flawed, it fails to grasp the complexity of the underlying and unknown factors that may influence the results. However, the use of Eurobarometer data allows for the examination and assessment of broad trends and the evolution of public sentiment. Thus allowing the analysis to focus more on the narrative

itself, its massaging, and its reception. This operationalisation follows the argumentation of the strategic narrative buy-in framework.

> "*Finally, approaching material interests and ontological security concerns as constituted by narrative is methodologically beneficial. This is because it makes it possible to substantiate our argument empirically, by analysing the narrative that political actors project. Without access to policymakers' minds, it is impossible to determine definitively what caused a policy change*" (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 33)

Thereby understanding that the focus on the strategic narrative projected by the EU as an actor means that, the analysis will first focus on the narrative itself drawing upon analytical frameworks described by Miskimmon et al. (2013) to do so, with complimentary insights from other scholars as highlighted in the theory section, after analysing the narrative itself the massaging will be a subsequent point of analysis, here the analysis will draw upon the insights from the Strategic narrative buy-in framework. Lastly, the analysis will use public support to gauge how successful the narrative buy-in is. This concludes the operationalisation of the thesis's applied theories and framework.

Methodology

Philosophy of science

The philosophical guiding principle of this thesis adopts a stance of social constructionism, also referred to as constructivism, and will be referred to as constructivism. Still, it is essential to underscore the social aspect of this ontology (Porta & Keating, 2008). Constructivism asserts that social phenomena and their meaning are dynamic; this implies that social phenomena are constantly evolving through social interaction and revisions (Bryman, 2016, pp. 29–30). Within this ontological stance, the emphasis on subjectivity and the dynamic nature of social realities promotes an understanding of how realities are shaped by interaction, beliefs, and narratives of social actors, meaning they are dynamic and ever-evolving (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, in the context of this thesis, the strategic narratives used by EU leaders are seen as socially constructed realities that may influence and shape public perception and political discourse.

These narratives are not viewed as static but as dynamic and evolving. However, in International relations, it is essential to highlight that constructivism constrains two broad, but differing orientations (conventional and critical constructivism) that are similar in their ontological standpoint, but diverge in their epistemological standpoint (Lawler, 2024, pp. 292–294).

This Thesis uses the approach of critical constructivism as described by Lawler (2024), the epistemological standpoint and argumentation for critical constructivists is expressed as taking issues with positivists methods used by conventional constructivists, to investigate the social dimensions of agency and structure, viewing it as insufficient to capture social aspects that constitute reality (Lawler, 2024, pp. 292–294). Furthermore, Lawler (2024) refers to Christian Reus-Smit insights, who highlights that when investigating the social dimensions and meanings of reality, these aspects are in turn, shaped by pre-existing fields of shared meaning, which is why treating them as measurable variable that impacts behavior in any manner is flawed (Christian Reus-Smit, 2022). Reus-Smit (2022) describes how early constructivists insisted that the study of these social dimensions necessitates an interpretive methodology, which today has been almost "forgotten" by mainstream constructivists (Christian Reus-Smit, 2022, pp. 198–200). Lastly, Reus-Smit (2022) highlights how today, only a few and "sophisticated" constructivists use interpretive methods to capture the fundamental differences between the social and natural worlds(Christian Reus-Smit, 2022, pp. 198–200). Therefore, adopting an interpretivist epistemological approach is more suited for exploring the thesis research question. The thesis seeks to understand how Ursula von der Leyen construct and develops strategic narratives on Ukraine via social media during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Thus, appreciating the interpretivist stance, which emphasises an exploration of how meaning is constructed and informs the methodology of the thesis (Porta & Keating, 2008). The research design and ultimate goal are not to demonstrate causality in a positivist sense, but to gain contextual knowledge (Porta & Keating, 2008).

Thereby understanding that, for this thesis, this philosophy of science extends to the choice of theory and methodology, as strategic narratives are viewed as a social construction, these narratives are understood as dynamic and evolving in nature. The methodology follows Krebs and Jackson's (2007) model of *rhetorical coercion* and argumentation, which posits "*We cannot observe directly what people think, but we can observe what they say and how they respond to*

claims and counterclaims" (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, p. 42)*.* Therefore, the study seeks to observe and understand how the EU narrates and how this narrative evolves. Which is similar to the methodology and theoretical application of strategic narrative uses by (Colley & Van Noort, 2022), where they view "*material interests and ontological security concerns as constituted by narrative"* (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 33)*,* and use strategic narrative to demonstrate how actors uses these interests and concerns within the narrative to justify or reject policy change Colley & van Noort (2022c). However, the thesis departs from Colley & Van Noort's methodology by applying a broader understanding of strategic narrative as a theoretical concept and analytical framework for analysing von der Leyen's narratives. Nonetheless, the research design and findings still draw upon *strategic narrative buy-in framework* insights, while also understanding that strategic narrative alone can not establish a causal effect on policy decision (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 32). The choice of an interpretivist stance instead of a positivist or even post-positivist stance is vital because the thesis may achieve contextual insights on how the EU uses strategic narrative. It would be naive to attempt to causally link a compelling narrative and policy outcomes, as influencing others through communication is highly unlikely and complex (Colley & van Noort, 2022a, p. 291; Miskimmon et al., 2017a, p. 320). Furthermore, the unanimity requirement for the EU's policy decisions, such as sanctions, further stresses this point (*Unanimity - EUR-Lex*, n.d.). Therefore, the study seeks contextual insight, answering "how" instead of "what".

Case study

The thesis employs a Longitudinal case study with clear elements of a qualitative case study design. This is because the thesis seeks to create a case study that facilitates a detailed examination of von der Leyen's strategic narrative projected through tweets. The study will also be longitudinal, given how the thesis will examine specific time periods. This will allow the thesis to capture the complexity of strategic narrative development. (Bryman, 2016)

Ursula von der Leyen is the selected case for the thesis because of her role as the president of the European Commission. Von der Leyen is thereby understood as the highest representative of the EU. Her leadership and communication with the general public for the whole EU provide a unique opportunity for strategic narrative analysis. Furthermore, this rationale follows Tereszkiewics (2023), which notes how the European Commission under von der Leyen has articulated a distinct vision of the EU's international role, positioning the Union as a normative

and regulatory power, particularly in global digital policy. Her rhetorical centrality, agenda-setting capacity, and symbolic role in EU identity construction make her particularly suited for a single case design to understand how strategic narratives are constructed, projected, and developed over time. (Tereszkiewicz, 2023)

Research Methods

Before delving deeper into the study's methodology, it is essential to highlight how the constructivists' ontological stance, combined with an interpretivist epistemological approach, is seen as a remarkably versatile methodology. Because, as described by Friedrich Kratochwil:

> "*The social world is of our making, and it requires an episteme that takes the question of our world-making seriously and does not impede an inquiry on the basis of a dogmatic conception of science or of method*" (Kratochwil, 2008, p. 97).

Therefore, understanding that the choice of method is not constrained, the methodology choice is informed by research questions and objectives. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods, driven by a desire to strengthen its findings. In addition, I want to gain more qualified insights on how the narratives projected by Ursula von der Leyen adapt and change over time. However, the mixed method approach does not mean that both approaches are weighted equally, because of practical and analytical considerations, which will be evident as the methodology is described in detail. The final result will be a qualitative content analysis of popular tweets posted by von der Leyen, derived through a quantitative approach to data collection and selection. In addition to quantitative Eurobarometer data, we need to gauge public sentiment. This combination seeks to achieve a nuanced examination of how von der Leyen construct her strategic narratives and how these tweets are developed.

Twitter: initial data selection, collection, and treatment

Given the thesis choice to focus strategic narrative analysis on the new media ecology, i.e, social media, the thesis seeks to strengthen its empirical foundation by extensively covering Ursula von der Leyen's official Twitter account. This choice is based upon two rationales. First and foremost, upon search, Ursula von der Leyen only uses Twitter and Instagram; the following on these accounts is vastly different, with a following of 1.6M on Twitter and 567T

on Instagram[4]. Secondly, the reviewed academic literature on strategic narrative rarely spoke directly about social media and political communication. Still, when it did, it seemed more focused on bigger platforms like Twitter (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2021). Furthermore, when accounting for the EU context of the case study, the rationale is further strengthened by a focus on Twitter by academics (Haman et al., 2023; S. F. Özdemir et al., 2025; S. Özdemir & Rauh, 2022). Based on these factors, Twitter is the thesis source material for new media data collection.

The methodology for Twitter data collection is quite complex because it aims to take a qualitative data assessment and apply a quantitative technique to select its data for final treatment and analysis. As a result, it becomes essential to underline and emphasise the contextual aspects. Following the idiom of history or politics does not happen in a vacuum, which stresses the necessity for casting a wide net in the data collection to account for factors (Topaloff, 2017). Therefore, by adapting and accounting for selection influences such as subtext and personal bias, the initial approach to data collection is advantageous because it allows for a systematic approach to selection and initial categorisation.

Selection Criteria

The retrieved data is selected based on the case study period, which covers the period from February 22, 2022, to November 30, 2025. All tweets from Ursula von der Leyen's official and public Twitter profile were screened. The data were selected based on their relevance. Key criteria for this screening are whether the source material includes any reference to policy decisions, responses, economic sanctions, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic efforts in general relating to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Russia, or Ukraine.

The methodology for data collection on Twitter utilises a search filter to heighten transparency and replicability. The Tweets were found through these search criteria *(from:vonderleyen) until: XXXX-XX-XX since: XXXX-XX-XX[5]"[6]*. The applied filter went through an iterative process of filter parameters articulation and review as technical challenges presented themselves: Such as X/twitter had a maximum of search results it would show, which necessitated the addition of a date filter, where each date was individually searched.

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[4] Number at time of writing, checked May 27th 2025.
[5] the sequence for date are Year, months, day.
[6] the search filter itself are originally generate through the advanced search option

Furthermore, a word filter for "Ukraine" was also applied initially. Still, upon review, it caused some tweets to be missed; for example, the word filter missed threads and emojis specific to Ukraine. A total of 871 tweets were deemed relevant.

Collection

The applied filter only restricts tweets and retweets from von der Leyen. These tweets were then read and selected based on the aforementioned key criteria for further analysis. The data gathered were organised and categorised in Appendix 2; within this Excel file, several columns denote the tweets' identifying features, and below is a summary description of these.

- Screenshot of the tweet, at the time of selection.
- Tweet link, post date and time,
- Tweet content in the original post structure with emojis, text, etc., and a separate column for the tweets trimmed, i.e., adjusted sentence structure.
- Tweet engagement: views, likes, comments, reposts, and bookmarks as seen, with a separate column for an approximation of these since k and m denote 1 thousand and 1 million each.
- Tweet ownership. Is von der Leyen the original poster? If not, then note who is.
- Tweet number, for reference in Appendix 3, in the analysis, etc.

Before moving on to data treatment, it is necessary to discuss the relevancy term further, as this is a relativistic term, where personal bias and subtext reading can influence the results. Therefore, it is essential to reiterate how personal bias may have influenced the categorisation in an unforeseen or unintended way. In cases of doubt, I have taken a stance of airing the side of caution, thereby including tweets that were deemed relevant. The rationale is that the data treatment will only include the most popular tweet within a given timeframe. Therefore, including any questionable tweets should not affect the results.

Treatment

The empirical foundation for the analysis is quite extensive. However, the limitation of how data can reasonably and satisfactorily be analytically processed will inform the data treatment. The tweets were categorised into six time periods. That will be combined with the Eurobarometer data. The tweets within these periods will be organised based on the "engagement rank", which is a way to decipher which tweets were most popular. While not

attributing any type of engagement from the audience of more or less value, the rationale follows the same approach by Krebs and Jackson (2007), that is, the sediment of not prescribing any weight to unknowable motivations/acts. Therefore, the tweets are scored based on their ranks in likes, comments, reposts, bookmarks, and views[7] then these ranks are added together and given a final ranking. This ranking is the selection criterion for further analysis, and only six tweets from each period are included. These tweets are then deconstructed, analysed, and categorised based on their narrative content.

The final data output for the analysis is these tweets, which are then described and analysed systematically. Then, they were further analysed selectively for their fascinating insight or elements in the analysis section of the thesis. However, all the tweets have undergone the exact systematic breakdown of narrative elements, rhetorical techniques, ontological security perspective, etc. Below is an illustration of how this is done for one period, and is available in Appendix 3. But please note this is done for all the tweets in the analysis, but the written analysis is diverse and varied, so as not to become an exercise in presenting analytically redundant insights.

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[7] Please note only the last four will be ranked based upon view, because the have complete datasets in this regard

ID	Tweet text	Category	Narrative structure	Rhetorical devices	EU framing	Policy implication	Public reception	Narrative function	Intertextual links	Venue	Media	Danish context
531	EU/UA We are with you. We have been with you in this existential fight from the beginning. Ukraine has become the centre of our continent. The place where our values are upheld, where our freedom is defended, where the future of Europe is written. Слава Україні.	Identity, System	Actor: Ukraine- Setting: Europe- Obstacle: Existential war- Action: Upholding shared values- Outcome: Ukraine = moral and geographic center of Europe	Mythic framing- Pathos ("existential fight")- Metaphor ("centre of our continent")	Ukraine portrayed as essential to EU identity and future	Not explicit; implies future support with emotional alignment	Repositions Ukraine as core to EU; reinforces value-based Europe	Repositions Ukraine as core to EU "European dream" and "moral partnership" into narrative fusion	Synthesises earlier "European dream" and "moral partnership" into narrative fusion	European Parliament	1m 9s seconds, video	Dette tweet blev skrevet dagen før afstemningen for Ruslands invasion og fremhæver Ukraine som det moralske og politiske centrum i Europa.
398	Russia's attacks against civilian infrastructure, especially electricity, are war crimes. Civilians suffering with winter coming - these are acts of pure terror. And we have to call it as such. https://x.com/i/broadcasts/21RKgBg DgyMGb	Issue, Identity	Actor: Russia (aggressor)- Obstacle: Civilian suffering- Action: War crimes classification- Outcome: Moral and legal condemnation	Legal framing ("war crimes") and norms; Pathos (children, winter)- Normative statement ("pure terror")	EU reaffirmed as protector of civilians	Justifies legal action, humanitarian response and sanctions	Strong public backing: 66% supported banning Russian state media (Eurobarometer May 2022)	Continues narrative of Russia as criminal state	Establishes high-stakes moral frame; supports later judicial (prefigures 371); builds on 427's defiance framing	speech from European Parliament	No pictures, but a link to a video	Dette tweet blev postet under en periode med intens russisk bombning af ukrainsk energiinfrastruktur for vinteren.
513	EU/UA Welcome to Brussels, dear @ZelenskyyUa The heart of the European family in which Ukraine belongs. We will support Ukraine every step of the way towards our Union.	Identity, System	Actor: Ukraine- Setting: Brussels- Action: Welcoming Zelenskyy- Obstacle: Not explicit- Outcome: Symbolic belonging to EU family	Emotional symbolism ("heart of the European family")- Future-oriented certainty ("will support")	Frames Ukraine as already belonging in EU identity	Promises institutional support and policy follow-through	Symbolic resonance with EU audiences and institutional elites	Softens formal EU accession process through identity-based legitimacy	Builds on Tweet 535's fusion of institutional affirmation; precursor to 289's fusion		Yes, but just a picture	Dette tweet kom efter omfattende diskussioner med president Zelenskyj's besøg i Bruxelles, hvor han talte i Europa-Parlamentet.
383	Shocked and appalled by the vicious attacks on Ukrainian cities. Putin's Russia has again shown the world what it stands for: brutality and terror. I know that Ukrainians will stay strong. We will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes, with all the means we have.	Issue, Identity	Actor: Russia (terrorist)- Obstacle: Missile strikes- Action: Moral condemnation- Outcome: Renewed EU support	Pathos-heavy framing ("brutality and terror")- Moral dualism- Repetition: "stand with Ukraine"	Reaffirms EU commitment and moral resilience	Suggests continued use of "all means" to counter aggression	Taps emotional outrage while maintaining high public alignment	Reasserts narrative of EU as enduring ally; strengthens moral polarity frame	Links back to 746's escalation and forward to 416's legal framing of terror as war crime		1m11s seconds video	Tweetet blev postet i forbindelse med russiske missilangreb på ukrainske byer, hvor civile mål blev ramt.
448	Russia must pay for its horrific crimes. We will work with the ICC and help set up a specialised court to try Russia's crimes. With our partners, we will make sure that Russia pays for the devastation it caused, with the frozen funds of oligarchs and assets of its central bank	Issue, System	Actor: Russia (criminal)- Obstacle: War crimes- Tool: ICC + special court- Outcome: Justice via frozen Russian assets	Logos (legal institutions)- Ethos: international partnerships- Mild pathos (victim/justice)	Frames EU as rule-based actor ensuring justice	Direct link: financial penalties, use of seized Russian assets	80% supported economic sanctions; aligns with justice-based messaging	Shifts from moral outrage to institutional accountability and legality	Continuation of 416; builds structural legitimacy for war crime narrative (sets up Tweet 277)		2m4s minutes video	Tweetet blev postet i forbindelse med diskussioner om retsforfølgelse for krigsforbrydelser.
514	With your voice, President @ZelenskyyUa, the voices of millions of Ukrainians echo through the halls of this assembly. Millions of Ukrainians aspiring to a European future. Let's turn their dreams into reality.	Identity, Issue	Actor: Zelenskyy + Ukraine- Setting: EU Parliament- Action: Aspiring to Europe- Outcome: Shared dreams, symbolic unity	Personalization ("your voice...millions echo")- Pathos ("dreams", "European future")	EU is a dream worth striving for; Ukrainians = ideal aspirants	Symbolic connection supports long-term integration narrative	Public receptive to emotional appeals; aligns with shared values narrative	Extends 535's "European dream" and lays groundwork for broader identity alignment	Anticipates 289's stronger fusion; part of a long-form narrative arc about EU belonging		20 seconds video	Dette tweet blev delt under Zelenskyj's tale i Europa-Parlamentet.

We now achieve a deliberate research design. This design facilitates an ideal narrative analysis, where insights on the shifts in public sentiment in a given period may offer additional insight into narrative formation and messaging. This design's methodological advantages and utility will be discussed further in the subsequent section on Research design.

# The quantitative method: determining the effectiveness of the EU's narrative

The thesis utilised Eurobarometer to examine and determine how public sentiment changes as the conflict develops. However, it must be stressed that the thesis does not seek to correlate von der Leyen's narrative and messaging with changes in public opinion.

Data collection

The quantitative data utilised in the thesis was gathered from Eurobarometer and organised in Appendix 1, which was chosen based on a predetermined list of criteria, as collecting the data personally was an insurmountable challenge. Eurobarometer as a datasource offers certain advantages such as; a consistent methodology with recurring questions across surveys, which allows for tracking of public sediment changes over time, in addition to its consistent and standardised polling across member states, in the form of a frequent standardlised questionnaire twice a year, that covers a broad range of topics and issues, combined with specific issue related surveys covering a variety of the individual problems more in depth. Moreover, Eurobarometer has a long history as a reputable source with high transparency and accessibility.

Selection Criteria

The standardised questionnaire published by Eurobarometer twice a year contains specific questions regarding the conflict in Ukraine. The questions asked during the survey are constructed to allow us to break down the overall opinion into more specific categories. Furthermore, the wording of these questions is consistent, which is advantageous for gauging sentiment towards specific sub-issues. The consistency in wording and frequency of surveys facilitates comparative analysis, as illustrated below in Figure X.
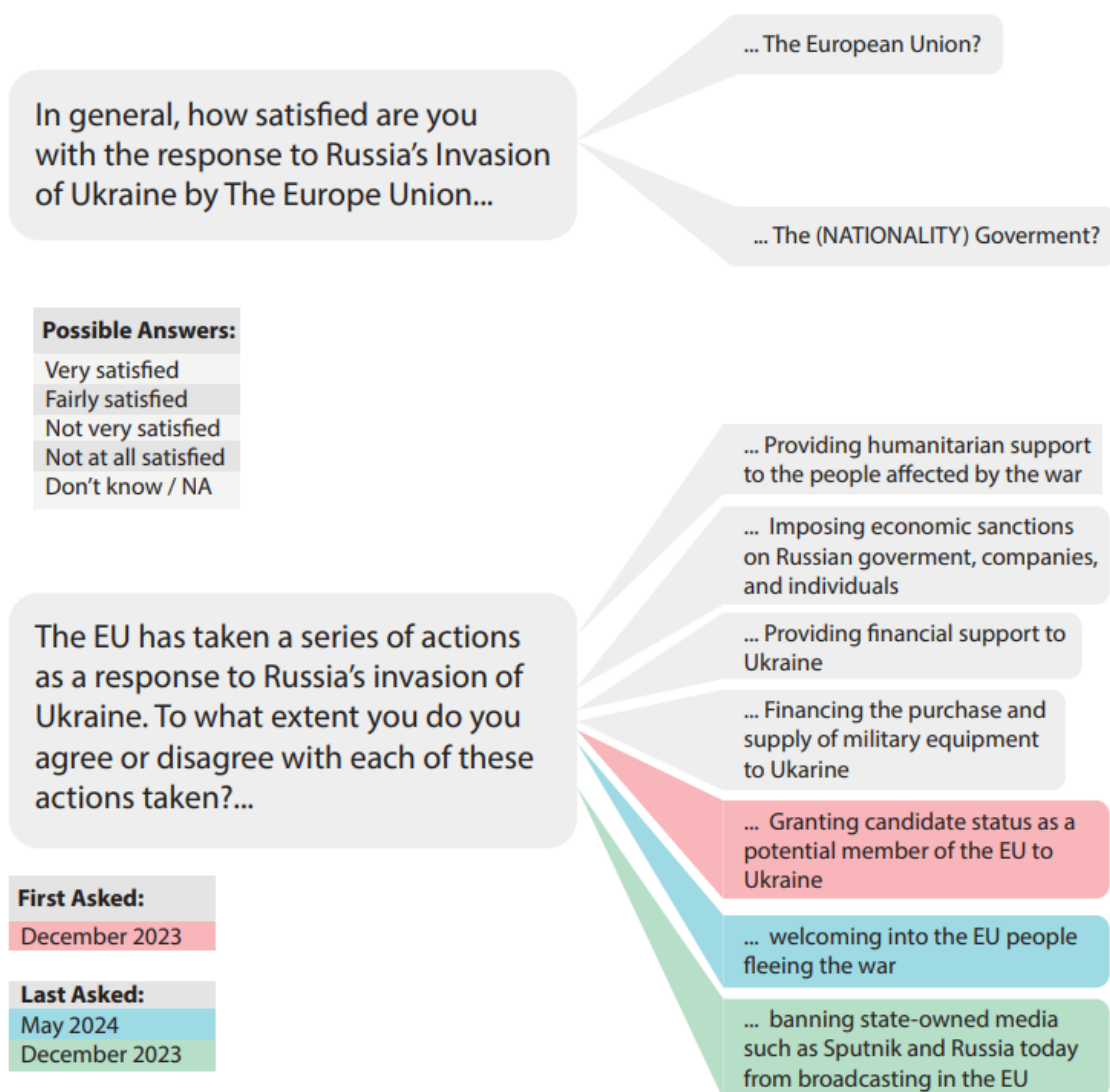
Six standardised Eurobarometers have been published since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The first one was published in September 2022, and a seventh is expected to be published in late May 2025. The thesis will use the Eurobarometer insight to create a timeline with six time periods for analysis, which will be the point of formatting for the empirical body.

Methodological considerations and critique

Regarding methodological considerations, challenges, and critique, it is imperative to note that the EU, as a supranational and intergovernmental institution, presents some clear methodological challenges to limitations and the scope of data collection. Therefore, it is necessary to impose clear data section criteria, which also serve the dual purpose of enhancing the reliability and validity of the thesis, as the data impacts its findings. While the thesis and

its subject could be improved by expanding data selection, it is vital to consider the scope and limitations of the thesis. For example, the thesis originally intended to include von der Leyen's speeches, statements, and press releases, but the length and time restrictions meant that these were eventually dropped. However, they may have impacted the results as had been read and organised, which could have created some subtext and insight that had an unintended effect on the tweet analysis.

The thesis could include additional analysis points, including top EU politicians, officials, EU council members, and official department social media profiles, allowing for a better understanding of the narrator. Other approaches, such as emphasis on better reception metrics, could facilitate insights on receptions within the new media ecology, and a more intimate audience analysis could offer additional insight into reception and fill another gap in the literature (Miskimmon et al., 2017a). Furthermore, a study by Keuleers (2021) highlighted how audiences receive and internalise narratives (Keuleers, 2021). The logic is that narrative dominance in this narrative could be viewed as a strategic narrative success, which will feature this in the conclusion.

The study focuses on new media, not traditional media, which limits its insights. For example by including statements/interviews/debates, etc, across European/national press, parliaments and more, which would offer an opportunity to understand better and analyse if individual council members are co-opting or challenging the official narrative, projected by von der Leyen, in justification of their actions and policies by the top leadership of the EU. This would offer a nuanced understanding of how actors interact with the official narrative and its effects on public opinion and the narrative itself. In addition, it provides a chance to observe how these actors use the narrative to further the agenda set forth by the EU or themselves. However, such an undertaking would require more extensive research and an increased complexity of the subject matter.

An essential critique regarding this research is that it is limited by not having access to internal negotiations within the EU Council, which also limits its findings. Because without access to these negotiations, it is impossible to ascertain if members, amongst other negotiation tools, use the evolving narrative regarding the Ukrainian-Russian conflict to support their position or pressure other members to accept or reject a new policy or action. This is a significant barrier

to recognise, limiting the understanding of strategic narratives' capabilities and application. However, to reconcile these challenges, we must accept that we can only analyse their results without access to internal negotiations, meaning their new/continued actions or policies and statements regarding these. This critique is important to raise, but the argumentation for this methodological choice follows the same argumentation made by Colley & van Noort (2022) as described in the operationalisation, which is informed by Krebs and Jackson (2007) who argued that instead of focusing on unanswerable question about actors true motives, academics should focus on what actors say and do (Colley & van Noort, 2022c, p. 33). Therefore, because internal negotiations within the EU council are inaccessible, this thesis focuses on decision outcomes and statements about these council meetings.

Research design

The aim is to achieve a holistic understanding of how the EU uses strategic narratives and how these evolve over time in response to societal discourse and events unfolding in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. the thesis aims to combine aspects of the strategic narrative framework and its methodology as described in the literature review, but is heavily centered on Miskimmon et al. (2013) original framework and the *strategic narrative buy-in framework* as defined by Colley & van Noort (2022) through the operationalisation of these, the study sets out to gain insight on *"How has Ursula von der Leyen constructed and developed strategic narratives on Ukraine via social media during the Russo-Ukrainian war?"* The research design will thereby be built as follows:

Research design in practice

First, the study will define its case period from the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 22nd, 2022, to November 30th, 2024. Then, it will combine this data with Eurobarometer data to examine broad trends in public sentiment and perceptions of the EU's response.

The study will then examine the EU's narrative and its evolution throughout the timeline, by adopting an exploratory approach with deductive guidance in its design. This design allows us to delve deeper into how strategic narratives function within the context of study/case: informing and frame this exploration (Bryman, 2016) While simultaneously encouraging the

possibility for new areas of understanding, by using frameworks for strategic narrative examine the EU's communication, while remaining open to new interpretations and meaning emerging from this analysis (Bryman, 2016). Lastly, the study will use a deductive approach to assess whether theoretical assumptions derived from the operationalisation of the strategic narrative buy-in framework apply to this context.

This means the research design will utilise the strategic narrative framework derived from the literature review and described in the theory section. The thesis aims to analyse how von der Leyen, as an actor, constructs her narrative about the commission and the EU's actions and policies and how this narrative has evolved as the European identity has taken shape and support for Ukraine. The study will utilise the buy-in framework insights to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the projected narrative and its underlying messaging. The buy-in framework provides key insights on how and why the narrative is constructed in a certain way, as the theory suggests the importance of considering the concepts of material gain and ontological security to understand, what makes a policy change *sayable* and ultimately what enables a *buy-in*, i.e. acceptance/continued support of the EU actions and policies. Here, Eurobarometer data is added to gauge if the public has *buy-in* to the EU narrative and response, without needing a more complex statistical analysis. *Furthermore, it is assumed that high public support, among other factors, helps the EU as an actor to maintain political capital while maintaining pressure on individual member states to agree to policy evolution and escalation of its response.* The research design is thus curated to facilitate a holistic assessment of how EU leaders construct their narrative, how it is presented, what the content of the narrative is, and what makes the narrative effective in securing continued support.

Analysis

Please see appendix 3 for tweets

Early Phase: Outbreak and Shock (Feb 22, 2022 – Sept 30, 2022)

When examining the six tweets with the highest engagement ranks from the period, it is immediately noticeable that five are posted within a few days of the onset of the war, which is expected to a certain degree, as the conflict was breaking news and a rapidly evolving situation at the time. In addition, the last one remaining is tied with a significant event, the EU Commission's recommendation of granting Ukraine candidate status for accession (*Memo*,

2022). The happenstance of five best-performing tweets being this chronologically close provides an excellent opportunity to examine how the narrative evolves in a microcosm. Tweet 17 is a pretty interesting message that affirms the EU identity through symbolism, conveys subtle messaging and framing such as "darkness vs light", and expresses solidarity. In addition, the visual aspect sets a subtle emotional tone while laying the foundation for the narrative evolution.

Tweet 28 The narrative shifts to be more centred on the system and issue by building legitimacy through unified action with Western allies. This further creates the narrative by globalising the EU's moral stance against Russia. The EU asserts its leadership, while also showing stability through multilateral validation, the objective of reducing risk by "*crippling Putin's ability to finance his war machine*", demonstrates how material interests and ontological security needs are being addressed. Thus, by acting in unison with Western allies, the legitimacy of the EU's policies is enhanced. The framing of the conflict as the Western world vs Russia and "*Putin's war machine*" enables the EU to draw upon more mythical narrative elements. The following three tweets were written rapidly and are treated as one for analytical purposes. The narrative arc culminates in an issue-based narrative that utilises the build-up of underlying justification and legitimacy to frame the actions taken as bold and historic. This gives the messaging a sense of urgency and projects the EU as an active actor. Tweet 35 & 33 utilise the exigency gained to frame the subsequent messaging as increasingly momentous. This is clear in the presentation of actions by utilising qualifying language; first, second, and third[8], while also using firm and direct language. Furthermore, the presentation of the individual tweets are quite masterfully crafted as deliberately ending on weighted words; "*sanctions against kremlin", "private jets of oligarchs", "ban their toxic and harmful disinformation in Europe*", demonstrates a consideration for, and usage of the medium, which in particular is evident when considering the engagement metrics. Lastly, it should be noted how narratives do not end with these tweets; it is a continuous process where elements of the projected narrative can be reused/reiterated to justify new actions and policies.

Tweet 259 is a short and direct excerpt from a statement given the same day. However, Von der Leyen effectively communicated the meaning by establishing the EU values as something worth sacrificing everything for. Furthermore, the message is very emotionally charged; the

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choice of language, such as "*the European dream*", is underscored by suggesting that Ukrainians are willing to die for it. The framing is seemingly deliberately designed to forge a shared identity between the EU and Ukraine, which builds political capital as the linkage arguably implies moral responsibility to support Ukraine and enforces the EU value as an ideal worth dying for. Lastly, it is important to note how the message seeks to create emotional resonance, which is demonstrated by the fact that it is the third highest across the metrics and the post with the most replies.

Based on the engagement score, it would be prudent to question whether the actions carried out align with public opinion. The issue of data availability is unavoidable; the earliest survey with data concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war from Eurobarometer was published in May 2022, with fieldwork conducted during April 2022. The implication of this will be discussed further in the appropriate section. However based on the data, and actions taken in the tweets we can see align med the actions, such as 80% approval of economic sanctions against Russia, and 79% approval on sanctions against oligarchs, 67% approval of financing military supply and equipment 66% approval of banning state-owned Russian media from broadcasting in Europe.

These tweets have the most engagement. It would be a disservice not to acknowledge that the restrictive structure of SoMe/Twitter limits the messaging and content of a given narrative. This becomes evident when analysing the engagement ranks across tweets and periods. The tweets within threads see an almost consistent drop in engagement score as they progress.

Adjustment and Consolidation (Oct 1, 2022 – Feb 28, 2023)

When examining these six tweets, another interesting analytical opportunity arises because these posts are relatively evenly divided between each end of the period. This offers a novel chance to generate and analyse a snapshot of what sort of tweets and their content are getting significant engagement while also being able to compare them against each other and the word cloud from the whole period.

Tweet 383; The narrative itself is a fascinating blend of identity and system narrative that are almost intertwined because the embedded messaging expresses both a "We, Ukraine and EU"

and a " them, Putin's Russia" perception. In addition to ascribing certain aspects to each, Russia is brutal and terrorising, Ukraine is moral and resilient, and the EU is a faithful and enduring supporter/ally. This duality of narrative persists in a deeper analysis of rhetorical techniques, for example, the framing of the "*vicious attacks…brutality and terror*" invites a good vs evil interpretation, while another reading may emphasise the ascribed characteristics of each actor. However, on purpose, the possibility of the narrative being an issue type has not been explored yet, as this interpretation may be the most straightforward and obvious on an initial reading. The heavy emphasis on pathos and an unspecified "*as long as it takes*" pledge reaffirms stability and enduring values. This analysis aims to demonstrate how the narrative audience could be interpreted in various ways, and why this makes it particularly potent.

Because the construction of a powerful, but deliberately vague, message is advantageous, as it elicits strong responses and reassures narrative consistency without requirement for specific action, which can lead to any instability from opposition, failure, or if narrative reality becomes untenable, the strength of the narrative is the inherent strategic ambiguity, as it ensures narrative freedom to emphasise or downplay certain elements to best adapt their messaging and objectives, to shifts in a dynamic situation and political reality. Furthermore, it is essential to stress how the various audiences affect the narrative and its messaging, and their perception may influence their interpretation of the underlying messaging and narrative structure. The vagueness of narrative means it can satisfy ontological security needs for EU audiences, demonstrate enduring commitment and support for Ukrainian audiences, and signal steadfast values and unbroken resolve for international observers/audiences.

Tweet 398 is heavily centred on issue type with elements of identity narratives, the escalation from brutal and terroristic to war crimes. The strong condemnation of Russia's attacks on civilian targets serves two critical objectives. First, within a pure issue-based narrative, the rhetorical techniques, such as pathos with the emphasis on children, "*acts of pure terror*", and denial of necessities, combined with robust framing, such as calling the attacks war crimes to signal strong condemnation. These techniques ensure the EU seizes the moral high ground and builds momentum and political capital to justify further measures/sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, the call to action by telling audiences what is happening is a war crime while pressuring non-aligned actors to acknowledge the norm-breaking behaviour. This leads back

to the identity narrative. Taking such a firm stance, the EU projects itself as a moral authority and defender of norms and values, such as protecting civilians.

The narrative of war crimes is a notably emotionally charged stance to take, which can be challenging to adapt from. Additionally, the stance calls for action, which presents further complications as the actor (Von der Leyen) must show a credible follow-up not to lose momentum, credibility, and political capital. What is particularly interesting about this narrative thread of crimes/war crimes is the complexity, the emotions evoked in the audience are powerful, but require tact usage as not to deplete its value, while also requiring significant follow-through, which is complicated by the legal processes involving the prosecution of perpetrators. Therefore, using words like "war crime" is fascinating from an analytical perspective, as it requires careful, considerate, and skilful employment from the orator. This narrative thread and first usage by Von der Leyen was on 03/04/2022- tweet 132, and becomes recurring throughout Von der Leyen's tweets, and will be seen again later in the analysis.

Tweet 448, the narrative presented within the tweet is a narrative issue, as the message continues on a crime/war crime thread. However, a system narrative, such as the ICC and "a specialised court," is also invoked to codify how Russia is being made to pay for its crimes. Implementing rhetorical tools is quite skilful as it transforms the emotional outrage and momentum achieved from previous tweets into action by detailing how and through which justice will be delivered. This narrative shift is analytically fascinating as it occurs quite rapidly, as demonstrated by the first sentence, "*Russia must pay for its horrific crimes",* being emotionally charged and eye-catching, as it retains the emphasis on pathos as seen in tweet 398. However, it immediately shifts to a focus on logos for the remainder of the tweets, as seen in "*We will work with the ICC and help set up a specialised court to try Russia's crimes.*" This section describes to the audience what is the tool/action to resolve the issue of Russian crimes/war crimes and the subsequent part describes the outcome of the action as seen "*With our partners, we will make sure that Russia pays… with the frozen funds of oligarchs and assets of its central bank*". The legality and legitimacy are set aside for now, as the latter part of the tweet offers some insight into the ontological security context. Because the insecurity associated with war crimes is relieved by ensuring the audience that justice will be served and that the frozen assets will pay for it, this is despite the questionable legality of it concerning international law, which is avoided by asserting control and legitimacy for the action through

the rhetorical technique of logos and ethos. The ICC and partners lend credibility and institutional authority to the action. At the same time, the use of courts to ensure restitution is logical, and the use of frozen funds and assets to pay is fractal. The tweet effectively reignites a policy issue by presenting the policy response codified, thereby ensuring the audience's legitimacy and ability to do so.

The question of legality warrants further discussion, as the shift may also be motivated by a necessity to avoid a say-do gap, by shifting to a narrative reality centred on making Russia pay, reflecting a more considered analysis of the political reality. As one might expect, bringing exact perpetrators to justice is both a complex and challenging task that realistically may not be achievable at the moment. However, the shift to justice through monetary compensation, through seized assets from oligarchs and Russia's central bank, is also interesting.

The following two tweets are regarding the same event (Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to and speech at the European Union parliament), post time within a three-hour window, and have similar content. Therefore, these tweets are combined into a singular analysis point to avoid confusion and analytical repetition. While both Tweets 305 and 306 have identical narrative constructions and content, they differ in how this is presented to the audience, which is what the analytical focus will highlight and examine closely.

Tweets 305 and 306 firmly align with the identity narrative of Ukraine being part of European identity; the tweets differ in the usage of system and issues narrative. Tweet 513 is more centred on a system narrative seen as affirmative in its presentation of Ukrainian integration to the EU. The narrative implies certainty, a framing of when, not if. While tweet 514 presents a European future as more distant and aspirational, the narrative is hopeful for the future, but aware of the obstacles facing Ukraine. This is seen more explicitly when comparing the tweets side by side:

 "*The heart of the European family. We will support Ukraine every step of the way towards our Union." This is* compared to tweet 514, "*Millions of Ukrainians are aspiring to a European future. Let's turn their dreams into reality.*"

As seen above, the message is very similar, but how the message is presented to the audience differs. While Tweet 513 projects a more familiar tone with a warm welcome, the framing of

Brussels/Union as the heart of the European family, but Ukraine as a member of it, is interesting. Because this framing works on two layers, it projects Brussels as the political core of Europe, which grants the EU more institutional authority and leadership to external and internal audiences. This framing extends to Ukraine's path to EU membership, as framing Ukraine as already belonging within the EU softens the path to accession by presenting a future where this is a reality, not just an aspiration. Furthermore, this guarantees future membership, underscoring the implicit but logical argument of continued support. This argument also reinforces the commitment of aid to Ukraine on a higher level for internal audiences by linking the EU's ontological security and material interests to Ukraine, thereby creating a more stable position for policy buy-in.

Tweet 514 projects a similar emotional tone, but there has been a notable shift in EU relations with Ukraine. While the sentiment of Ukraine being part of the EU in the future is still present, framing the EU as a dream worth aspiring for is notably different. This follows a similar sentiment and rhetorical techniques expressed in tweet 259, demonstrating a narrative continuation across periods, where the Ukrainian struggle for a European future becomes a worthy cause that deserves EU support. Because the battle is for the values and ideals held dear by the EU, the argument for continued support becomes a moral obligation. Furthermore, the commitment to Ukraine is strengthened by framing Zelenskyy as a credible democratic leader, who is a conduit for millions of Ukrainians' hopes and dreams, and the moral obligation becomes even greater.

However, the urgency expressed earlier in tweet 259 is now toned significantly, but "*the European dream*" maintains immense value. The narrative may have lost some intensity by shifting the rhetoric from Ukrainians being willing to die for the European perspective to millions of Ukrainians hoping for a better future. However, both tweets' emotional impact and framing are equally powerful; therefore, we understand that the narrative has matured and evolved from reactive urgency to more strategic storytelling. What is particularly interesting about this storytelling in tweets 514 and 513 is how the argument for supporting Ukraine undergoes essential changes. At the same time, both express a sentiment of a shared European identity and hint towards a shared destiny of EU membership. The framing of why is presented from two different perspectives, with a similar outcome of enabling audience buy-in, but with a slight difference in the underlying motivation and rationalisation.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand narrative evolution as a skill, meaning that an orator can employ rhetorical techniques to intensify or temper the narrative according to their needs, which is seen in the escalation of narrative in tweet 383 to 398, where the jump from brutality and terror, to war crimes is quite significant and a entrenched narrative position. But Von der Leyen tactfully de-escalated the narrative without diminishing the impact of the previous statements. Understanding how actor poses agency within their narration to adjust the faucet (intensity/pressure) through various rhetorical tools is paramount for analysing tweet 298.

Tweet 529 demonstrates how Von der Leyen takes elements from tweets 514 and 513, reiterates upon them, and employs them in a tweet marking the 1st anniversary since the full-scale invasion/war in Ukraine. The narrative elements presented in previous tweets, tweet 513 introduced an implied linkage between the EU's ontological security needs and material interests, which is continued within this tweet 531 through framing and language such as "*where our freedom is defended, where the future is written*". Tweet 514 continued and expanded on how the Ukrainian struggle represents the EU's values and ideals, through sentences such as "*where our values are upheld*". Additionally, the linkage to previous tweets from the 1st and 2nd periods emphasises how the EU has been a Ukrainian supporter since the beginning of the war. However, the tweet is intensified through deliberate rhetorical tools. First by reframing the Ukrainian-Russian war as an existential fight, then by centring the European continent on Ukraine instead of Brussels, lastly projecting Ukraine af the defender of shared values and ideals. This takes previously established narratives of shared identity, future, and destiny, through a narrative fusion that realigns Ukraine as the idealistic core that the EU depends upon. Which narrative goal is interpretive as being designed to reinforce the legitimacy of Ukrainian support by framing it as value-based, with high ontological security implications, as Ukraine's fate determines the fate of the EU. This intensive reframing and narrative evolution may also express a desire to address the drop in public sentiment in all categories/measures in Eurobarometer data. This consideration may offer insight into the relational dynamics behind the intensification and narrative realignment. But without access to Von der Leyen's mind and true motives, any plausible explanation is essentially only a guess. However, understanding how this tweet draws upon and reuses elements from previous popular tweets, with increased intensification of rhetorical techniques, may offer some insight into the virality of the tweet.

Maturation and Accountability (Mar 1, 2023 – Jul 31, 2023)

Tweet 547 is quite an interesting tweet as it resembles and continues the narrative in tweet 448. The opening statement of "*Russia must pay for its crimes*" cues the reader into the subject matter while also de-escalating the framing of content. This is seen by dropping the attributive adjective of "*horrific*" in the articulating crimes and not using rhetorical tools to emphasise the nature of the crimes, which becomes a bit more neutral. However, this could cause credibility issues for the actor, as escalating narrative tension and then de-escalating the narrative without any meaningful action presents an unsustainable gap in narrative reality. In contrast, the narrative is shifted from the emotionally charged origin, logos/reasoning and ethos/credibility, with framing supporting these tools increasing. Because when de-escalating, the narrative gradually leans more on a reasoning that supports achieving justice through legitimate international institutions such as the ICC, and the newly established International Centre for Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression lends credibility and legitimacy to the adjudication and restitutions. This could be argued as not being an issue for internal audiences, given the high support for similar punitive actions, such as 72% of internal audiences approving of sanctions. The international community, on the other hand, is quite different, which may explain why von der Leyen favours this approach. Actions that are norm-breaking with international law require significant political cover so as not to trigger political fallout on other fronts.

Therefore, we must understand that an actor like Von der Leyen must balance internal and external audiences' expectations. When it becomes necessary to adjust the narrative parameters, these adjustments must be made with some strategic planning and implementation. This will gradually shift the narrative and the audience's perception of the issue while presenting a credible action that reflects the audience's expectations, resulting in no credibility loss as an orator. Nonetheless, ensuring audiences receive these messages is quite impossible to say, with any accuracy, because of social media's algorithmic opacity and vitality. When an actor considers and understands these factors, the narrative structure may adjust its rhetorical techniques, usage such as cue sentences for narrative threads (as highlighted earlier), resurances/repetition, particularly within narrative undergoing strategic repositioning. This is used here: "*We must do everything in our power to bring the perpetrators to justice.*" By ending the narrative on an emotionally charged note, the messaging retains some momentum seen in tweets 383, 398, and 448. If audiences only see tweets 398 and 547, the evolution of narrative messaging and function may disorient the reader. However, there are still elements present to

indicate a narrative continuation. However, these examples may also be rhetorical styles, based on another theoretical paradigm, or unique to Von der Leyen or her SoMe handler. Nonetheless, the similar usage is quite interesting, given how it reflects an actor who skillfully employs strategic narrative tenets within their narration.

This strategic repositioning is particularly interesting and consequential when examining the evolution of the crime narrative thread. Before continuing, it is necessary to highlight that my subsequent analysis could be countered by perceiving the narrative change, i.e., the shift in framing and rhetoric techniques, as organic. However, I will justify the theoretical foundation for my argument at the end of the analysis of the war crime/crime thread tweets.

Tweet 569 makes significant use of issue and identity narrative types, while also shifting the rhetorical techniques towards generating emotional resonance and outrage. The issue narrative is present throughout the tweet and accomplishes three key points. First, by highlighting the duration of the issue, second, by stressing the importance and why they must be stopped, while also identifying the perpetrators, third and final, ensures the audience that their action will have consequences.

1. *"What happened in Bucha one year ago was not an isolated episode.*
2. *"Those executions in cold blood were part of a bigger plan. The Kremlin's plan to eliminate Ukrainians. Their national identity. Their sense of being."*
3. *"War criminals will be held accountable."*

The first point, by utilising a highly publicised and disturbing example, the seriousness and emotional tone are intensified for the narrative. Additionally, highlighting the anniversary of the incident and framing it as open-ended ties into the second point. The seriousness of the war crimes is stressed by framing the executions as *part of a bigger plan,* the description of crimes being committed in *cold blood* and *eliminate*, amplifies the horror of the crimes. Furthermore, by linking the war crimes to the Kremlin's *plan,* the Russian leadership are framed as genocidal villains; this likeness is asserted by framing their war crimes as systematic atrocities orchestrated with clear objectives. This framing and the last key point grant additional moral authority for Von der Leyen as a narrator and the EU position, while the promise of justice and the previous tweet 547 communicate action, which could be interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate response and action to combat the relative low satisfaction of 56% with the reaction from the EU since the Russian invasion began.

Moreover, it takes a well-known Russian narrative and casus belli of nazisme in Ukraine and its leadership. However, reframing this narrative onto the Russian leadership, the moral indictment strengthens this narrative retort. This is achieved through a versatile narrative that evokes strong emotional responses from audiences while leaving little room for contestation by anchoring the narrative to Bucha. This is strategically placed as it leaves little doubt with the audience, given the publicity of the incident, and the fractal nature of the additional claims is more complex to undermine and challenge. Because competing claims/narratives wishing to challenge this assertion are rhetorically forced to take unfavourable positions, by having to ignore, deny, or acknowledge, etc., the incident in Bucha. Regardless of which, the results are similar, ignoring, rejecting, or attempting to disprove Bucha likely offers little credibility for the orator and their projected narrative, while acknowledging or whataboutism regarding Bucha is even more morally indefensible.

Tweet 618 continues quite a few laid narrative threads previously projected; the narrative encompasses all types. But they are not weighed equally, descending from least to most fitting. System narrative, as the committed war crimes and call for justice, refers back to how the EU will make them pay for them. However, this is implied and requires the audience to recall these tweets. Nonetheless, cue sentences and the vitality of previous tweets indicate a degree of likelihood.

Furthermore, the EU is an active institution because it mobilises aid and support, backed by naming a precise system for this aid identity narrative. After all, it describes Russia as a war criminal, which has been an applicable identity through the war crime/crime thread, thereby invoking outrage and emotional engagement. The tweet's framing reinforces the more descriptive villainous notion from tweet 569 by highlighting the atrocity and endangerment of thousands of people. Lastly, framing the EU as an institutional entity helping in a crisis like this indirectly frames the EU as humanitarian. Issue narrative: The dam's destruction is a crisis and requires immediate action to save thousands. The urgency of the tweet is immediately followed by a description of the action taken by the EU. This shows agency and willingness to act from the EU, perhaps to a similar attempt to demonstrate a response. According to the previous Eurobarometer, the action is also linked to humanitarian-based aid/support, which

holds significantly higher approval ratings of 91% in February 2023. Still, it falls to 88% in the upcoming July 2023 poll.

The narrative manages to encompass all types while including many narrative threads; this narrative and thread fusion is quite interesting, as the functionality and purpose are amplified. The interconnected narratives mean that emotional shock and outrage over Russian war crimes become connected to more visible and concrete action. This can be interpreted as an attempt to fill a growing *say-do* gap, from a lack of demonstrative response/action to alleviate ontological (in)security needs generated from the emotional impact of war crimes. Thereby understanding and asserting the intended and established policy outlets, simultaneously showing the EU's agency and capacity to respond rapidly. Nonetheless, by invoking the emotional power of "*war crime*, the audience needs credible policy outlets and a failure to ensure tangible outcomes, lessens the word, diminishes the orator, and invites narrative competition. While Von der Leyen's strategic narrative manoeuvring in tweet 547 anchored a vantage point, from which it was possible to escalate to a more visible and harsher tone again, since the intended policy outcome was desirable. The audience perception is ultimately the deciding factor. Additionally, other actors and competing narratives may generate more resonance.

The following two tweets, 620 and 629, will be combined and analysed, given their similarities rhetorically and narratively. Both utilise an identity and system type narrative to reinforce a bond between the EU and Ukraine; the messaging implies shared identity and destiny, but the rhetorical techniques used to achieve this have one notable difference and one key similarity. Tweet 629 employs a fascinating style of framing seen here "*When Ukrainians re-imagine their future, they see Europe's flag flying over their cities…We are building this future together*", the futuristic/forward framing of what lies ahead of Ukraine, it should noted that the futuristic sediment are also implied in tweet 620, but is more explicitly shown in tweet 629. In this case, the symbolic usage of Europe's flag is a visual indication of ensuing EU membership. While these rhetorical techniques are growing the legitimacy of shared destiny in the "European dream", as expressed in tweet 259 and reiterated in tweet 514. This narrative thread demonstrates how actors achieve more narrative control through repetition, which builds a shared worldview and perception of events with the audience. Meanwhile, repetition allows for thread evolution that enables the actor to strategically reposition according to goals and reality,

build legitimacy for policies, and lastly. But above all, this repetition allows the actors to create or adopt new societal mythos.

For instance, Von der Leyen's repeated use of identity narrative type effectively created a shared European identity with Ukraine. Due to this, the bond, as mentioned earlier, is rhetorically formalised to a mythic status. This new status is best demonstrated by examining the identity narrative type evolution, where tweet 531 quite explicitly describes and frames the Ukrainian struggle as a defence of European values and freedoms. This sediments the narrative of a familiar bond between the EU and Ukraine; the narrative must emphasise that the shared bond and moral obligation to support Ukraine are eroding. The identity narrative type is shifting towards a more symbolic and rhetorical view of Ukraine being a champion/avatar defending the shared "European values and freedom". This shift can be viewed as an attempt to imply that the Ukrainian struggle is a more personal struggle for the internal audiences/people of the EU, which translates to increased *buy-in* from the audience, because their ontological needs and material interests are equated to the outcome of the war. However, examining the Eurobarometer data and its steady decline could be viewed as the audience not receiving and interpreting the same message.

Tweet 648 is unique, using the 500-day structure that clearly emphasises identity narrative type. This provides an opportunity to highlight a unique and interesting usage of framing reassertion: the enduring resolve of the EU. The repetition of 500 days three times offers a medium that allows Von der Leyen to communicate the gravity and length of the crisis. However, the structured manner through which it is projected to the audience indicates a sense of control and stability to a certain degree. This is demonstrated by framing European support as unwavering despite lacking a conclusion. This is achieved by leveraging the establishment of 500 days of loyal and determined support.

Furthermore, repetition invokes a clear sense of emotional resonance with the audience, as the repetition of 500 days within the tweet encompasses framing and language deliberately used to generate emotional responses within the audience, and increases in strength as the narrative progresses. This culminates in reassuring sentences that guarantee consistency while clarifying the mission statement. This structure partially follows the description of a strong strategic narrative (Graaf, Dimitriu, et al., 2015, pp. 9–10). This renewed mission statement may also be

interpreted as an attempt to reassure and reaffirm the public during increased uncertainty and declining public opinion.

Resilience and Reframing (Aug 1, 2023 – Dec 31, 2023)

Tweet 662 What is immediately notable about this tweet is that it is only the first to rank within the top 6 engagement score for a given period. While "only" being oriented towards the EU and internal audiences is engaging, it is not deemed necessary to investigate underlying reasons and indicate further, even though it could suggest increasing narrative fatigue. However, the tweet is narratively interesting because of the rhetorical techniques applied. It should be noted that the tweet relies upon an issue- and system narrative type, both seeking to demonstrate policy outcome success. As a result, the messaging is centred on narrating long-term strategic autonomy and providing short reassurance to internal audiences. Therefore, this hybrid narrative affects the application of rhetorical techniques, namely the framing of policy outcomes, as it switches between short-term success and long-term strategy. Likewise, the messaging switches tones rapidly from detached fractal/logos to personal/ethos amplified tone to generate credibility and collective action/success. Notably, the emotional tone presented throughout the analysis section of this tweet is almost/if not utterly, devoid of emotion. The more procedural tone could be interpreted as deliberate; previously, it was illustrated how tweets would temper the audience by intentionally adjusting the formation/projection of a narrative to control tone, and convey authority by demonstrating leadership and action.

The subsequent five/four tweets will be presented chronologically, as they all tie into a narrative thread of Ukrainian alignment and path towards the EU, and why the EU has a responsibility to help Ukraine. Individual narratives tie back to each other and propel elements that fit into the larger narrative thread. Which analysis is interesting as the messaging and functionality change throughout the tweets, but the outcomes are linked.

Tweet 670 uses an identity narrative type that continues the previous thread from tweet 531, where Ukrainians were framed and equated to fighting for European ideals and values. Von der Leyen uses the transfer effect to deepen the perception of Ukrainians embodying ideals and values, specifically by framing the Ukrainian people and their qualities as an inspiration for all Europeans. This is particularly fascinating because Von der Leyen narratively forged/shaped this perception for her audience in a relatively short period. Granted, this could be perceived

as a single evolution, but I view it as two separate evolutions within a single narrative thread. That is to say, tweet 259 introduced the "*European dream*" as something worth a great sacrifice; this dream was later narratively changed to the freedoms and values in tweet 531. Meanwhile, Ukraine was beginning to be framed as belonging to the European family and narratively fused with the same identity in tweet 629. At the same time, the narrative framing Ukraine as the defender of European values was repeated in tweet 620. Now, arriving in the present time period, the idea of Ukrainians defending is replaced with them being the embodiment of the "European dream." narratively, impressive evolution there presumably forged a new perception of Ukrainians in their audience.

Therefore, it is worth examining how Von der Leyen achieved this rapid narration iteration, while it is true that only using previous tweets may not be the whole story. A pattern also emerges; Von der Leyen constructs a narrative that emphasises the creation of emotional appeal and resonance. Enables her to expand upon the audience's existing perception of Ukraine/Ukrainians, which is done through at least two narrative cycles. For this reason spending significant time analytical discretising the rhetorical techniques in tweet 670, what is notable the framing as Ukraine being European ideal could be a point of narrative departure where it through repetition transforms this idea into a myth, moreover, the symbolism is quite interesting as "*in a united Europe*" reinforces the notion of shared identity and destiny, which also may build additional legitimacy for rapid Ukrainian accession to the EU when a peace agreement is reached. Lastly, it should be noted that the qualifier of "all" in "all European" is viewed as intensifying the emotional tone further.

Tweet 680 is a notable stylistic shift from tweet 670, as the emotional elements are significantly deemphasised, in favour of logical and credible elements. Furthermore, the narrative type has shifted toward emphasising the system and issue narrative type, with a fascinating dynamic, which is best demonstrated by analysing the narrative outcome. The system narrative is quite explicit throughout the story, as the messaging and rhetorical techniques demonstrate, the emphasis on institutional credibility and authority is shown by "Today *we disbursed*", the EU is presented as an active actor and supporter. This becomes even more evident as the temporal framing stresses this: "*Just this year, we paid €13.5 billion to help Ukraine keep hospitals, schools and other services running.*" The rhetoric and framing techniques here are fascinating, as they leverage tangible evidence of support to demonstrate actor agency. Which also helps

Von der Leyen reduce any perceived gap in narrative reality, as the framing links EU support to quantifiable aid and action. Moreover, the narrative choice to specify the allocation towards essential public services such as health and education frames the EU as a moral and humanitarian actor. This framing is strategically beneficial as it projects institutional and policy alignment with internal audiences. It emphasises widely supported elements of the general public opinion that favour humanitarian aid (88%) and financial assistance (77%). This will legitimise the EU's actions and policy decisions on a technocratic level.

Furthermore, the tweet implies that the continued support is linked with "*transformative reforms*", which strategically connects the aid with the ontological security needs and material interests of the EU by implying a specific conditionality behind the aid. This is particularly important to understand as the narrative thread ties back to tweet 670. At the same time, there is substantial variation between the tweets; they both help the shared narrative thread become more nuanced. This shared thread is best described as a narrative on Ukrainian alignment and path towards the EU, and why the EU has a responsibility to help Ukraine. However, this narrative thread is rather vague/obscure, but will become more apparent as the larger narrative progresses.

Tweet 703 notably integrates and utilises all three narrative types. As a result, the tweet combines personal diplomacy and connection with formal institutional policy and interests. Von der Leyen's role as an actor here is exciting, as the tweet highlights how Ursula von der Leyen operates as the official mouthpiece for the EU while maintaining personal agency and sentiment. This is demonstrated by "*... my 6th wartime visit. I'm here to discuss Ukraine's accession path to the EU.*" The blending of personal commitment and institutional policy is rhetorically well executed, but also beneficial as the personal connection shows consistency and adds credibility. While still using a personal tone, the transition to formal institutional objectives bridges the sentences and underscores Von der Leyen's ethos for the audience. Moreover, the shift in formality also signals how Ukraine's path towards the EU has significantly evolved from aspirational to legitimate institutional policy within the EU. The narrative thread from tweet 680, where the framing implied a conditionality of the aid, is becoming more explicit as seen in "*The EU's financial support to rebuild Ukraine as a modern, prosperous democracy.*". This reframes and repositions the aid narrative to be more of an investment while affirming that Ukraine is aligning with the EU. The tweet notably continues the making Russia pay thread from tweets (551, 448, and 398), but because the tweet is centred

on Ukraine's path to the EU, Von der Leyen can subtly reintroduce this thread without going into detail. The tone and emotional impact used in previous tweets are notably absent from this tweet. However, the tweet suggests a sense of continuity, i.e., Russia is already paying for it, but the way is extremely vague. Thereby understanding that the strategic ambiguity is favourable for the EU and helped by downplaying the tone, because the EU gets to maintain narrative accountability (say-do gap) by indicating action. As a result, the tweet attempts to reassure the audience of continuity while avoiding escalation fatigue.

Tweet 710 is fascinating because Von der Leyen employs a rhetorical juxtaposition combining system and identity narrative type. On the one hand, it effectively depicts Ukraine as a committed counterpart, reforming and implementing the policies necessary to meet the EU's accession criteria. On the other hand, Ukrainians are simultaneously fighting an existential war. This strategically positions Ukraine as a sympathetic and courageous aspirant. Therefore, while fighting for existence and, by extension, the European values asserted previously, they also meet the formal and institutional criteria. Ukraine is thus framed as doing everything expected of them. Therefore, they are worthy of accession.

Furthermore, the narrative thread is quite apparent and clear at this point: the evolution from Ukraine being an expression of European ideals and values to fulfilling the actual criteria while having to fight an existential war. The rhetorical techniques used to frame Ukraine also serve as a moral and institutional argument to start accession negotiations.

Tweet 724 is centred on the system and identity narrative type, formally affirming Ukraine's path towards the EU. The rhetoric and framing of the historic moment is noteworthy because it achieves multiple rhetorical outcomes: "*A strategic decision and a day that will remain engraved in the history of our Union*". The tweet essentially elevates a procedural action, and ascribes clear, significant and symbolic value to the action. This is rhetorically strategic as the justification for enlargement becomes a strategic and historic decision, the framing and language becoming mythological to a certain extent. The narration is viewed as deliberately aiming to frame enlargement as a normative and moral fulfilment, while the rhetorical techniques assert legitimacy and significance to the action. Moreover, this demonstrates a culmination of multiple narrative threads that is important to understand; the rhetoric and frame employed highlight the procedural act as narrative closure. While the path to full EU membership is ongoing, recognising Ukraine as worthy of open accession negotiations is a

narrative convergence point. To best illustrate this point, we return to tweet 259 and the concept of "the European dream", which evolved from an aspirational to realised throughout the analysis.

Renewal and Future Orientation (Jan 1, 2024 – May 2024 / present)

When examining the six tweets with the highest engagement score for this period, specific patterns and themes emerge, from which a structured approach is derived. The following section will chronologically analyse tweets 750, 751, 755, and 762. This is because these tweets are seen as part of a larger narrative theme on democracy and martyrdom, thus providing a structural justification for this analytical structure.

Tweet 750 combines both an identity and issue narrative type to frame Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's death, as emblematic of Putin's regime/critique of autocracy in general. The tweet emphasises an emotional tone to resonate with the audience and becomes a call to action. Certain parts of the tweet are fascinating and warrant further analysis. The first passage is worth highlighting: *"Putin fears nothing more than dissent from his own people."* The rhetorical devices employed here frame and imply a broader rational cause-and-effect of authoritarianism. Where dissent is met with repression, the implication is that Navalny's death is symbolic of this causality. Navalny is also framed as a martyr, while specifically describing Putin as an antithesis to people's will. Moreover, rhetorical devices and the framing of authoritarianism are strategically employed, as seen here: *"Let's unite in our fight to safeguard the freedom and safety of those who dare to stand up against autocracy."* The sentence essentially seeks to leverage support/power by constructing a moral anchor point for audiences and actors to rally around. This call to action is interpreted as strategically ambiguous because of the lack of any concrete action/policy, and the usage of broad and somewhat vague concepts ensures narrative and policy autonomy.

Tweet 751 uses a more targeted identity narrative type to complement and continue the thread from tweet 750; the tweet utilises a cue sentence to signal a narrative continuity. This guides the audience back to previous tweets and a call to action, and builds upon the emotional outrage/resonance. The rhetorical device, through which Von der Leyen channels and amplifies the emotional capital and narrative momentum, is the framing of Navalny. This framing is notably more explicit, describing Navalny as a *"freedom fighter"* and the subsequent

invocation of his name: "*And in his name we will stand up for democracy and our value*s." Due to this repeated framing of Navalny as a martyr, and thereafter value anchoring upon his legacy, the narrative reinforces an emotional connection to Navalny. It implies a moral obligation to continue his "fight". Understanding the narrative fosters a sacralising of Navalny while it ties the EU's values and ideals to invoking his legacy. The mentioned continuity in strategic ambiguity offers insight into how Von der Leyen engages in virtue signalling without obligating action, thereby maintaining narrative freedom to navigate the complex reality of international relations.

Tweet 755's identity narrative used in this tweet is fascinating, as it uses the ten-year commemoration of the Maidan revolution 2014. This framing expands existing narratives of Ukrainian-EU alignment, and emphasis on historical continuity generates a more mythical foundation for EU-Ukraine unity. Thereby projecting that the transformative change from EU aspiration to realisation has been an almost decade-long process. This is emphasised by stressing the sacrifice made by the "Heavenly Hundred Heroes"; this deepens the emotional bond. Meanwhile, the framing of already being victorious and the inevitability of full membership offers reassurance despite decreasing public support. Lastly, the invocation of the heavenly hundred Heroes legacy to strengthen the emotional legitimacy for Ukraine's eventual accession, the usage of martyr meant to underscore emotional resonance with audiences.

Tweet 103 shares significant similarities with tweet 110; describing these again is redundant. However, the tweet conveys and demonstrates how a mythologisation of Ukraine's sacrifice is becoming more internalised. The tribute and reverence for the Wall of Remembrance build their sacrifice's emotional connection and impact. The depiction of Ukrainian sacrifice is made in the name of defending the values and ideals of the EU, narratively elevating their death to martyrdom. This will become a symbolic representation of Ukraine's worthiness and legitimacy for eventual membership, and explicitly show what is described as a strategic narrative embedding messages (Miskimmon et al., 2013). The narrative continuity and messaging evolved into an embedded idea of their sacrifice, made protecting shared values, the repetition of which indicates how Von der Leyen seeks to embed it into the audience's consciousness (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

Tweet 760 demonstrates another example of narrative blending identity, system, and issue types to highlight the war's second anniversary. Von der Leyen's physical presence in Kyiv lends her credibility by emphasising her commitment. The narrative choice to "*financially, economically, militarily, morally*" serves a narrative entrenchment that effectively communicates commitment. However, this is framed ambiguously, with no exact policy detail, achieving rhetorical flexibility through vagueness. The tweet reinforces enduring institutional support to the Ukrainian cause by stressing "*More than ever, we stand firmly by Ukraine*, " indicating a narrative escalation without policy escalation. The narrative maintains continuity and repeats previous projections of the EU, but personal investment amplifies the tone and presents a more credible reassurance to audiences.

Tweet 769 employs issue and identity narrative types to reaffirm the EU's alignment with Ukraine. Von der Leyen condemns a "vile attack" on Odesa during the visit of Zelenskyy and Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Greek PM). Thereby highlighting Russia's norm-breaking behaviour to internal and external audiences, the statement "*no one is intimidated*" implies collective resistance and, as a rhetorical act of defiance, while undermining Russia as the framing and tone is interpreted as childish/patronising. Moreover, Von der Leyen narratively implies that the attack effectively united the actors, rather than dividing them. This is communicated: "*More than ever, we stand by Ukraine,*" which also acts as a cue sentence that ties tweets 760 and 769 together through a narrative anchor point. The tweets use the same strategic ambiguity previously described, but within this tweet, the lack of consequence for a condemnably act is analytically interesting. Because the ambiguity introduces a degree of narrative risk, the absence of concrete repercussions could be perceived by some audiences as a lack of resolve. However, it could also be interpreted as a deliberate rhetorical strategy, which allows the EU to assert moral leadership while avoiding an escalation of tension. In other words, the audience's predispositions likely decide their interpretation of events as tactical restraint or a narrative deficiency.

Discussion

The empirical body and subsequent analysis above may infer an ability to draw generalised conclusions or imply any causal relationship between strategic narrative projection and audience reception. However, this is not the objective of the thesis, nor does it attempt to advance any such conclusions. Moreover, the research objective, supporting theory, and

applied methodology do not provide any basis for this. The thesis employs a case study with the explicit intention of facilitating a holistic assessment of how Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, implements and evolves strategic narratives concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war on Twitter. Thereby, understanding that the research design is created to foster an interpretivist analysis and reflection of how von der Leyen uses social media as a narrator to portray and describe the war and the EU's response to it. This section will discuss and reflect on what can be derived from this analysis with regard to methodological boundaries and limits of the interpretivist stance.

The analysis of Von der Leyen's Twitter communication unveiled a sophisticated repertoire applied to forming and projecting narratives. Furthermore, analysing the six tweets with the most engagement in each period offers insight into the elements that constitute an engaging/viral narrative. The results are a systematic approach to deconstructing von der Leyen's tweets, where rhetorical elements are categorised and streamlined. However, the methodology was initially designed for the analysis, favouring precision over generalisation. As a result, the tweets were re-examined with an emphasis on broader themes, which will be discussed further to answer the research questions.

Strategic Narrative themes, types and rhetorical devices.

First, the thematic pillars of messaging consist of an interwoven core triad of Europeanness, Unity, and Freedom. Notably, these three pillars are interconnected to the extent that they almost merge into two. Moreover, the examination highlighted three additional and distinct pillars centred on moral legitimacy, sacrifice, and resilience/endurance. Second, narrative types will highlight the two most common contents described in the specific narrative types.

- Identity narrative: Ukraine is Europe and Russia/Putin
- System narrative: legal and institutional
- Issue narrative: sanctions and war crimes

However, as expected by Miskimmon et al. (2013), the narrative types overlap throughout the analysis. Nonetheless, von der Leyen uses identity narrative more in her strategic narrative to a higher degree; the implications of this will be discussed further later. Third, the standard rhetorical tools and techniques and their use in von der Leyen's strategic narrative. Returning to the core of persuasion, based on the analysis, a discussion of the rhetorical variety is warranted.

Strategic narrative evolution and maturing over time

The defining feature of Von der Leyen's strategic narrative is its evolution across distinct phases of the conflict. It interpretatively reflects and even anticipates shifts in public sentiment and political context. A discussion of why will be emphasised later.

- Early Phase (early 2022 to early 2023): Messaging is characterised by emotive urgency and moral clarity. Identity and pathos dominate, positioning the EU as an ethical actor in the face of existential crisis: "Ukrainians are ready to die for the European dream".

- Mid-Phase (early 2023 to late 2023): The tone matures, emphasising institutional and legal mechanisms, ICC, sanctions, and asset freezes. There is a shift from emotional mobilisation to procedural assurance and legitimacy, coinciding with an increased need for accountability and international alignment.

- Current Phase (early 2024– late 2024): The narrative pivots to resilience and future orientation, reframing Ukraine clearly within the EU, projecting: "Ukraine is Europe"

Narrative evolution aligns with public opinion.

This adaptive progression is not random. Analysis of Eurobarometer data reveals that narrative shifts often parallel public opinion trends: as support for military aid or sanctions declines, Von der Leyen's messaging leans more heavily on humanitarian, mythic, and unity frames, preserving legitimacy and emotional resonance even as policy enthusiasm wavers Such adaptability underlines a key strength of strategic narratives and von der Leyen as a narrator namely, their flexibility and adaptability. By modulating between emotional, institutional, and legal registers, Von der Leyen maintains coherence while adjusting to the evolving demands of both internal and external audiences. While it is in practice, it is debatable whether or not this is an objective truth. The consistency of von der Leyen's strategic narrative pattern lends credibility to the claim,

The issue of objectivity in rhetorical analysis

The tweets had arguably tended not to use ethos to the same extent as logos or pathos. However, whether this is a fair assertion is debatable because Ursula von der Leyen's profile front page would show the audience that she is the EU Commission president, thereby implicitly

establishing ethos. The need to develop more ethos in confined messages is indeed questionable; the few times von der Leyen explicitly attempts to establish ethos seems to be audience or content-specific factor, as tweets 760, 751, 703, and 680 are seeks ethos for a ukrainian audience, while tweets 32, 28, 448 and 547 are in a more international context. This is interesting as the presumption of ethos for the European audience implies legitimacy for her role in the EU. Still, it is understood as downplaying the counter-narrative based on euroscepticism by non-engagement. Admittedly, personal bias may have shaped this interpretation of ethos, which is hard to determine, but should be acknowledged.

Identifying and determining rhetorical techniques such as strategic ambiguity and myth-building is inherently flawed, as they play into our individual biases and interpretations. Thus, what I view and describe as one of these techniques is based on an internalised perspective of events, and maintaining objectivity in determining rhetorical techniques is arguably impossible since any reader will have a personalised interpretation of language. Furthermore, what audience and analysts will ascribe value to is objectively and experience-based, which means advancing specific assertions requires high certainty. Therefore, decisively concluding something is a rhetorical technique that requires vigorous and diligent argumentation, while still retaining the possibility of not being viewed as objectively true for the reader.

Therefore, any assertion of rhetorical intent of effect must be made with humility and sufficient supporting evidence. Additionally, only a few rhetorical tools and techniques are based on provable facts, like repetition. Moreover, pathos, ethos, and logos appeals exist here as well. This is because their concept is a foundational part of rhetoric, proving their presence within a narrative is a matter of demonstrating linkage and causation, but only kinda, since they are based on internationalised interpretations of language and perspective. While it is essential to understand that their presence is not a fact in a strict sense, they are built on a clearly defined, plausible claim.

Accepting and discussing these challenges is necessary, as the thesis partly reflects personal interpretations of the analysed narratives. Replicability of findings is not guaranteed. However, the nature of sound academic interpretive analysis promotes insight based on clear argumentation and the construction of objective truths. Hence, deriving a similar conclusion exemplifies a well-rounded interpretation of analytical insight.

The narrative saturation threshold

The examination of tweet coding revealed that identity narrative types were used most frequently. This warrants a discussion on why identity narratives are broadly applied. As Miskimmon et al. (2013) note, identity narratives are more adaptable and less risky than system or issue narratives, which require meeting specific audience expectations. For von der Leyen, facing internal pressure to maintain buy-in from MS, audience legitimacy, and demonstrate action are all significant challenges; identity narratives may have offered a safer, more flexible rhetorical tool to project from and gather political capital. Because the ability to maintain political capital to pressure MS, such as Hungary, to adopt new sanctions, aid packages, etc., is interpreted as being tied to policy legitimacy and public support. Moreover, this is further complicated by *sui generis* of the EU, which means policies and actions have to balance the pain threshold between the EU, i.e. MS and the public, while also affecting/restricting the Russian capability to wage war.

Von der Leyen is viewed as having to be aware of the collective and individual interests of the EU, MS, and the MS public. Since the reality that constitutes the boundaries of her narrative reality, not adhering to it could risk further alienation of the audience. The requirement of unanimity makes this significantly more complicated, because while average EU public sentiment regarding sanctions is 71% agreement, individual MS publics are shifting towards being against it. Bulgaria and Cyprus were against sanctions in the Eurobarometer 102, nov 2024, and other MS public sentiment are close to favour-disagreement as well. This is interpreted as making it harder for von der Leyen to foster consent to policies in the EU Council. Yet, the frequency of identity narrative types suggests a greater need for political capital than risk aversion. It may reflect a strategic need to sediment ideas such as the "Ukraine is Europe", while risking becoming narratively self-destructive.

This is because of an effect multiple scholars warn about: audience fatigue from overexposed narratives. Gurr & Metag (2023) describe "issue fatigue" as a condition in which repetitive political messaging results in emotional exhaustion and reduced cognitive engagement. Similarly, Zhang & Zhou (2023) show how Russian identity narratives during the Ukraine crisis lost credibility through excessive repetition. Adding a complementary layer, Zakharchenko (2025) illustrates that centralised strategic narratives, such as those promoted by governments, tend to lose relevance over time, especially if they fail to resonate with the

affected public. In the case study, these insights provide context to help understand emotionally invested audiences that organically shape their narratives via social media.

This matters for von der Leyen's case. While her use of diverse narrative types occasionally blending identity with system or issue frames may suggest rhetorical flexibility the broader communication environment remains centralised and formal. Despite frequent narrative activity, the slow, consistent decline in EU public sentiment, according to the Eurobarometer data, raises what is described as a black box problem: the intended narrative input is not translating into a coherent public response. One plausible hypothesis is that narrative saturation, compounded by the absence of emotionally resonant, participatory narrative structures like Zakharchenko's "connective strategic narrative", leads to diminishing rhetorical returns. Moreover, the high pathos usage in tweets in the early to mid periods may have invested audiences that have become fatigued.

This observation does not claim causality, but instead signals a research gap. Zakharchenko (2025) noted that even powerful state narratives become vulnerable when they cannot evolve with public sentiment. The eventual exhaustion of affective publics, or in this case, the EU's internal audiences, may explain why von der Leyen's identity-heavy messaging, while consistent, may increasingly fail to sustain attention or support. Strategic narrative effectiveness is not merely about message clarity, narrative adaptability, rhetorical tools and techniques, ontological security needs or material interests. But also audience co-ownership and emotional impact. Recognising this limitation and the risk of rhetorical fatigue offers fertile ground for expanding the strategic narrative and buy-in frameworks.

Conclusion

This thesis explored how Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, constructed and developed strategic narratives about Ukraine on Twitter. The case study design promoted a longitudinal study to achieve a deep but context-specific insight into how von der Leyen's strategic narrative adapted to changing realities. Furthermore, the thesis sought insight into how von der Leyen's strategic narratives aligned with EU public opinion and institutional objectives. This study anchored its insights on a clear and comprehensive understanding of strategic narratives. However, this was only made possible by an extensive literature review of

the theoretical framework and concept of strategic narrative. This study combined these insights with the strategic narrative buy-in framework from Colley & van Noort (2022), which then allowed for synthesising an analytical approach to deconstruct von der Leyen's strategic narrative. Finally, by employing a systematic, interpretive analysis of highly engaged tweets alongside Eurobarometer data, this study sought to illuminate the mechanics and the boundaries of narrative leadership in contemporary European crisis communication.

Empirically, the analysis reveals that von der Leyen's narratives consistently foregrounded themes of Europeanness, unity, and freedom, effectively framing Ukraine not merely as a strategic partner but as an integral member of the European family. Her messaging evolved strategically across different stages of the conflict: initial communications employed emotional tone, rhetoric, and framing, marked by urgency and moral legitimacy, emphasising existential solidarity with Ukraine. As the war persisted and public sentiment began to reflect greater complexity and fatigue, von der Leyen adapted her narratives toward a more institutional and technocratic focus, highlighting legal frameworks, economic sanctions, and procedural legitimacy. However, not devoid of emotional tone, audience rally points were still used and escalated and de-escalated emotionally throughout this phase. In recent phases, the narrative further emphasised resilience, endurance, and the symbolic "Europeanization" of Ukraine, reflecting strategic responsiveness to internal EU dynamics and evolving geopolitical realities. Nonetheless, von der Leyen still evokes an emotional and institutional tone.

Therefore, understanding that the period has more distinctive features, von der Leyen expands her narrative repertoire. Moreover, identity narratives remained dominant in this narrative evolution, providing essential rhetorical flexibility. By repeatedly asserting Ukraine's European identity, von der Leyen crafted a persuasive and emotionally resonant sense of shared destiny, which legitimises sustained support despite fluctuations in public opinion. Nonetheless, Eurobarometer data highlighted inherent limits to such narratives. Despite sophisticated rhetorical appeals, emotional (pathos), moral credibility (ethos), and policy justifications (logos), narrative fatigue and declining enthusiasm for specific policy measures such as military aid and sanctions posed significant challenges. This tension underscores the complex interplay between narrative consistency and the necessity for continual rhetorical innovation in the EU's multilevel polity.

Theoretically, this thesis advances Strategic Narrative Theory by illustrating the strategic importance of coherence, adaptive ambiguity, and myth-building in sustaining legitimacy during prolonged crises. The findings demonstrate that while interpretive methodologies can effectively trace narrative structures and strategic adaptations, they cannot definitively establish causality regarding public opinion or policy outcomes. Furthermore, the study acknowledges apparent methodological limitations, notably its exclusive focus on one communicator (von der Leyen), a single social media platform (Twitter), which restricts the generalizability of the findings and limits insights into audience reception and internal EU policymaking processes. Narratives are shown to be dynamic instruments of identity construction and policy legitimation, while being capable of framing collective meaning but inherently constrained by audience agency, institutional complexities, and the broader geopolitical context.

This case study design and accompanying analysis revealed how von der Leyen, as narrator, matured and evolved her narrative as events unfolded in the Russo-Ukrainian war. One of these narratives is particularly interesting as von der Leyen narratively evolves her framing and presentation of the central premise gradually. This evolution is quite strategic, and repeated narration cultivated a bond between audiences. This grew an initial interpretation of Ukraine fighting for European ideals, and over time, reframed it as Ukraine defending European ideals in an existential othering of Russia. These techniques forged new identities and perceptions for her audience by projecting curated tweets. Meanwhile, von der Leyen was able to leverage public sentiment towards Ukraine to advance institutional agendas, Ukraine's accession and subsequent negotiations. These outcomes follow a similar, if not parallel, narrative evolution. The narratives also became more intertwined, resulting in a current narrative of "Ukraine is Europe" and "Europe's future is Ukrainian", which is an excellent starting point for further analysis.

Conclusion: Further research

Further research could expand and iterate on the analysis by including additional narrators, platforms or data sources, and media types. Including any of these will develop the analytical insight and provide an opportunity to assess whether the systematic breakdown of tweets could be applied to speeches, statements, etc. and still achieve satisfactory insight or requires

adjustment. This would help establish a more flexible analysis framework for interpretative analysis of strategic narrative.

Another avenue for analysis is audience fatigue. This is an interesting idea that warrants further research. Because it is based on communications studies (Gurr & Metag, 2023), it lends credibility, as strategic narratives have a similar origin. Furthermore, the idea is versatile and offers meaningful insight into multiple layers of reception, i.e., the general public or focus groups. While in theory, it could bridge a gap in knowledge about narrative saturation and offer practical insights for actors/narrators. But is it provable?

Lastly, a broader analysis, rationale being politics does not happen in a vacuum as described by Toploaff (2017), based on European identity, suggests that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has prompted a more united Europe; the question is whether this is temporary. New shocks will reflect this assumption, while Trump's presidency has likely caused ruptures like those described by Bosse (2024), will the EU's unity narrative surrounding Ukraine translate into increased public support or renewed trust in the EU as an institution?

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