

Strategic Narratives on Social Media: How Information Environments Shape the Russian-Ukrainian War Discourse in Seven European Countries

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by the dissemination of strategic narratives aimed at legitimizing military aggression and undermining international support for Ukraine. While these narratives often originate from Russian officials and state-controlled media, they have been adopted by various actors in Europe and integrated into national public discourses. This article analyzes Facebook and Instagram posts ($n = 93,217$) by major news outlets and political actors in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden. Using automated content analysis, hierarchical clustering, and logistic regression models, we show that during the study period, narratives aligned with Russia's strategic objectives were present in Hungary, Italy, and Germany, but largely absent in the other countries. In Germany and Italy, right-wing populist actors accounted for most pro-Russian war-related messaging, while in Hungary, pro-Russian narratives were also found in the media. The study contributes to research on disinformation, digital political communication, and information warfare.

Keywords: strategic narratives, disinformation, information environments, Russian-Ukrainian war, social media, automated content analysis

In times of armed conflict, the media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, political debates, and international responses (Bradshaw, Elswah, Haque, & Quelle, 2024; Locoman & Lau, 2024). Russia's invasion of Ukraine has intensified debates on how strategic narratives complement military operations by targeting public opinion and policymaking worldwide (Bergmanis-Koräts, Isupova, & Vecmanis, 2025; Freedman & Williams, 2023). Information environments—shaped by national media systems, political alignments, and platform algorithms—influence which strategic narratives gain traction in

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specific contexts (Knüpfer & Entman, 2018). Therefore, examining how war-related strategic narratives are disseminated across varying information environments is essential to understanding the broader dynamics of political communication in times of conflict.

Russia's use of state-controlled media and digital propaganda networks to justify its military aggression has been extensively documented (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Locoman & Lau, 2024; Marigliano, Ng, & Carley, 2024). However, narratives aligned with Russia's strategic objectives are not confined to Russian actors (Yanchenko, Shestopalova, von Nordheim, & Kleinen-von Königsłow, 2024). Similar messaging is echoed by a range of actors in the West—for example, right-wing populist politicians (Wondreys, 2025), so-called alternative media operating within democratic contexts (Beseler & Toepfl, 2024), and segments of journalistic media in countries experiencing democratic backsliding (Czyż, 2024). At the same time, other actors actively engage in counternarrative efforts, emphasizing themes such as Russian aggression, civilian suffering, and democratic resilience in their war-related communication (Marigliano et al., 2024). These competing narratives form the core of this study, which examines how national contexts, media systems, political actors, and social media platforms shape the war's informational terrain.

Specifically, we analyze war-related narratives that support or oppose Russian strategic interests across seven European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden. Using Facebook and Instagram posts by news outlets and political actors, we assess how information environments influence the spread of pro-Russian content. To address this question, we apply an automated content analysis followed by hierarchical clustering to group war-related narratives. We then use logistic regression to examine the role of platforms, national contexts, and political affiliations in the spread of pro-Russian content.

The findings reveal three country groups based on the degree of pro-Russian narrative penetration into public discourse: (1) France, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden—where pro-Russian narratives were extremely rare across both news outlets and political actors during the study period; (2) Germany and Italy—where pro-Russian narratives were rare in the media yet prevalent among segments of the political discourse; and (3) Hungary—where both journalistic media and political actors displayed a notable presence of pro-Russian strategic narratives. In two of three countries where political actors spread Russia-aligned narratives, right-wing populist actors dominated the war-related discourse.

This comparative study advances debates on how information environments shape conflict discourse. Drawing on the theories and analytical approaches from political communication, international relations, and computational social science, it shows how strategic narratives circulate on social media and align with the positions of specific actors. In addition, the article demonstrates how large language models (LLMs) can be applied to analyze big data sets in effective and methodologically robust ways. The study's findings are of relevance to researchers, media professionals, policy makers, and the general public.

The Strategic Narrative Theory

The concept of strategic narratives has become a valuable analytical tool for understanding how various actors exert influence through mass communication (Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014).

According to Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), "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 behavior of domestic and international actors" (p. 175). This is achieved through the "accentuation and emplotment of particular problems or turning points in a way that indicates both causation and a normatively desirable resolution" (Szostek, 2018, p. 72). This definition reveals conceptual proximity between strategic narratives and framing theory, which also emphasizes problem definition, causal attribution, and the promotion of preferred solutions (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). However, scholars have argued that, unlike framing—rooted in domestic elite discourse and nationally bounded media systems—the strategic narrative framework is better suited to analyzing transnational struggles over meaning in today's hybrid information environments (Livingston & Nassetta, 2018).

Another key feature of the strategic narrative framework is its emphasis on the intentionality of communication (Freedman & Williams, 2023). Strategic narratives are not viewed as spontaneous or accidental; rather, they are deliberately constructed to connect individual messages to the broader goals of a political actor. To be effective, strategic narratives must also exhibit internal coherence (Schmitt, 2018). This emphasis on purpose and coherence shifts analytical attention away from the veracity of information—a central concern in much of the existing research on transnational information campaigns (Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021; Erlich & Garner, 2023)—and instead asks what the communication is intended to achieve and which actors stand to benefit from it.

Given this understanding of strategic narratives, it is unsurprising that they play an important role during armed conflicts, where various actors compete for domestic and international public support (De Graaf, Dimitriu, & Ringsmose, 2015). Previous research shows that war-related narratives often rely on binary oppositions—aggressor versus victim, defender versus perpetrator, intervention versus restraint (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, narrative strategies are primarily geared toward either reinforcing or undermining Russia's strategic objectives, which can broadly be understood as achieving Ukraine's subjugation through military and nonmilitary means. Thus, narratives that align with Russia's interests typically criticize Western aid to Ukraine; call for unconditional peace without addressing questions of justice, peace sustainability, or reparations; and portray Russia as a victim of Western hostility (Kobilke, Kulichkina, Baghumyan, & Pipal, 2023; Oates & Ramsay, 2024). In contrast, narratives that challenge Russia's interests emphasize its role as the aggressor, highlight the negative consequences of the invasion, affirm the legitimacy of Ukrainian resistance, and recognize Russia as an ongoing security threat (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Marigliano et al., 2024).

Information Environments and Narrative Dissemination

The reach of strategic narratives largely depends on the characteristics of the information environment in which they are disseminated. Information environments are shaped by multiple factors, including national media systems, the communicative strategies of political actors, and platform affordances (Aalberg, Van Aelst, & Curran, 2010). In the following, we discuss how each of these factors influences the receptivity of a given information environment to different strategic narratives about the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The Role of Media Systems

Earlier literature classified Western media systems according to four dimensions: the structure of media markets, the degree of political parallelism, the level of journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). More recent work operationalized and validated these dimensions using cross-country data (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014) and introduced new indicators to capture technology-driven changes, such as digitalization (Humprecht, Castro Herrero, Blassnig, Brüggemann, & Engesser, 2022). Currently, scholars typically distinguish three media system types: the democratic-corporatist model, characterized by high journalistic professionalism, inclusive media markets, a strong role of the state, and low political parallelism; the polarized-pluralist model, marked by weak media markets, low levels of journalistic professionalism, a limited role of the state, and high political parallelism; and a hybrid model, which occupies an intermediate position concerning all four dimensions (Humprecht et al., 2022).

The above typology allows us to formulate theoretical expectations about how journalistic media in countries with different media systems engage with strategic narratives about the Russian-Ukrainian war. In countries with democratic-corporatist or hybrid media systems, journalistic media will be unlikely to systematically disseminate narratives aligned with Russia's strategic objectives. Instead, their coverage will reflect a perspective grounded in international law, which defines Russia's actions in Ukraine as an act of unprovoked and illegal aggression (United Nations, 2022). This typically entails a focus on Russian military actions and their consequences while avoiding the reproduction of Russian narratives, such as justifying the invasion or shifting blame to other actors. For instance, a recent study found that journalistic media in the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany did not present the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) eastward expansion as a justification for Russia's 2022 reinvasion of Ukraine, despite this narrative being promoted by Russian and several domestic actors in each of the countries examined (Zollmann, 2024).

In countries characterized by a polarized-pluralist media model, low levels of journalistic professionalism and strong media-political parallelism create conditions conducive to the dissemination of pro-Russian strategic narratives (Selvik & Høigilt, 2021). However, the extent to which such narratives are amplified by journalistic media is likely to depend on the government's stance toward the armed conflict. Where the government adopts a pro-Ukrainian position, media-political parallelism is unlikely to result in the amplification of narratives aligned with Russia's strategic objectives.

The Role of Political Actors

Political actors also play a role in disseminating war-related narratives, for example, by addressing citizens through social media platforms (De Graaf et al., 2015). This study examines how populist actors contribute to the discourse on the Russian-Ukrainian war, given that a high prevalence of populist communication has been identified as a factor reducing countries' resilience to manipulative information campaigns (Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020).

Populist actors have a strong incentive to maintain a presence in war-related debates, as such visibility offers opportunities to reinforce their ideological positioning and mobilize supporters (Aytaç,

Çarkoğlu, & Elçi, 2025). By engaging with the topic of war, they can challenge traditional political and journalistic actors and present themselves as defenders of national interests (Hameleers, 2020). The emotional and polarizing nature of armed conflicts makes them particularly well-suited to populist communication strategies, which often rely on fear appeals, outrage, and crisis narratives (Humprecht, Amsler, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2024). This emotionalization is highly relevant in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, where both sides appeal to the public to either mobilize or paralyze international support for Ukraine (Locoman & Lau, 2024).

Studies show that in several contexts, right-wing populist actors have promoted narratives about the Russian-Ukrainian war that align with Russia's strategic objectives (Wondreys, 2025; Wondreys & Zulianello, 2024). These may include demonizing NATO, condemning military aid to Ukraine, or calling for peace in terms that ultimately benefit Russia as the aggressor. A question that has not yet been studied in detail is whether such narratives gain greater prominence in public discourse when populist parties are in government. We assume that in such a context, populist actors are not only more visible but also have greater access to institutional and media resources through which to amplify their preferred messages. Their control over parts of the communication environment, particularly in countries with high levels of media-political parallelism, may enable them to shape public discourse in ways that reflect their ideological positions and foreign policy preferences (Cadier, 2023).

The Role of Platforms

Social media platforms also play a role in the dissemination of strategic narratives by algorithmically amplifying certain types of content (Huszár et al., 2022). The concept of algorithmic gatekeeping (Van Dalen, 2023) suggests that platform algorithms, rather than journalistic gatekeeping, determine the visibility of content. Studies on engagement-driven content curation further demonstrate that emotionally provocative and polarizing narratives tend to gain more traction on platforms with algorithmic recommendation systems (Ludwig, Müller, Nikolajevic, & Grote, 2025). This phenomenon is particularly relevant to armed conflict discourse, where highly emotive content, such as graphic imagery or emotionally charged calls to action, tends to be widely shared (Kušen & Strembeck, 2023).

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the role of social media platforms in amplifying strategic narratives remains complex and underexplored. A recent NATO report shows platform-level differences when it comes to Russia-aligned messaging (Bergmanis-Koräts et al., 2025). For example, among the 10 platforms analyzed, X (formerly Twitter) exhibited the highest volume of Russia-aligned narratives, though these were primarily spread through reposts. In contrast, Telegram emerged as a leading platform in terms of user engagement. Another study featuring multiple European countries found that the use of Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, but not X or Instagram, was positively linked to belief in Russia-aligned narratives (Zilinsky et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of accounting for potential platform differences when analyzing the dissemination of strategic narratives.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The conducted literature review provides the basis for formulating the research questions and hypotheses of the study. First, acknowledging the importance of narrative coherence (Schmitt, 2018), we pose an exploratory question about the patterns of association among individual strategic narratives:

RQ1: What are the co-occurrence patterns among individual war-related narratives?

Second, we investigate how the prevalence of pro-Russian strategic narratives varies across platforms and countries, both overall and when broken down by actor type:

RQ2: How does the prevalence of pro-Russian strategic narratives vary across platforms, countries, and actor types?

Building on the literature on media systems (Brüggemann et al., 2014) and the resilience of information environments to malign information influence (Humprecht et al., 2020), we formulate two more specific expectations related to RQ2. In particular, we assume that journalistic media will disseminate considerably more pro-Russian strategic narratives in countries that combine a polarized-pluralist media system with a pro-Russian government stance. Given that Hungary is the only country in our sample meeting both conditions (see Method section), we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Journalistic media in Hungary will demonstrate a higher-than-average use of pro-Russian strategic narratives relative to journalistic media in other countries in the sample.

Regarding political actors, prior research has shown that populist parties and politicians tend to reproduce narratives that align with Russia's strategic objectives (Wondreys, 2025). Based on this, we assume that in countries where populist actors are in government, political discourse will exhibit a higher prevalence of pro-Russian narratives. During the timeframe covered by the data set, right-wing populist governments were in place in Hungary and Italy (see Method section). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Political actors in Hungary and Italy will demonstrate higher-than-average use of pro-Russian strategic narratives relative to political actors in other countries in the sample.

Lastly, the prevalence of specific narratives depends not only on what different actors communicate but also on who dominates the discourse on a given topic. To account for this, we pose the following question:

RQ3: To what extent are populist actors involved in shaping war-related discourse in the studied countries?

As the literature suggests that crisis events such as armed conflicts are readily instrumentalized by populist actors (Aytaç et al., 2025), we assume the following:

H3: In countries where political actors demonstrate higher-than-average use of pro-Russian strategic narratives, populist actors will dominate the war-related discourse.

Method

Case Selection

The study examines narratives about the Russian-Ukrainian war in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden. Country selection aimed to capture variation across European media systems, with Germany and Sweden representing the democratic-corporatist model; Hungary and Poland reflecting features of the polarized-pluralist model; and France, Italy, and Lithuania representing a hybrid media system (Humprecht et al., 2022).

The sample also captures variation in political context, particularly regarding the role of populism. At the time of data collection, right-wing populist parties were in government in Hungary, represented by Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), and in Italy, represented by Brothers of Italy (FdI) and Lega. Elsewhere, populist actors were in opposition.

Lastly, the case selection reflects variation in national responses to the Russian-Ukrainian war by incorporating countries that differ in the extent of their financial, humanitarian, and military support for Ukraine. Support levels, measured relative to GDP (Trebesch, Bompreszi, & Kharitonov, 2023), range from strong (Lithuania, Poland, Sweden) to limited (Hungary).

Data

The study relies on a new data set of Facebook and Instagram posts ($n = 93,217$) collected on July 2, 2024, using CrowdTangle's Research API. Facebook was selected because, as of 2024, it was the leading social media platform for political news in all analyzed countries except Germany, where it ranked second to YouTube (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Ross Arguedas, & Nielsen, 2024). Instagram was included due to its relevance as a news source among young audiences (Swart & Broersma, 2024). The data covers the period from April 28 to June 10, 2024, the six weeks leading up to the 2024 European Parliament election. This timeframe was selected to capture peak campaign communication ahead of the election, when conflict-related narratives were most actively contested. Focusing on this period of heightened narrative contestation enables an analysis of how the Russian-Ukrainian war was integrated into European public discourse.

Table 1. Distribution of Posts by Country, Platform, and Account Type.

	n posts (%)						Total
	Facebook			Instagram			
	Candidate	Media	Party	Candidate	Media	Party	
France	296 (2.5)	8,808 (74.8)	1,157 (9.8)	100 (0.8)	831 (7.1)	590 (5.0)	11,782
Germany	222 (1.8)	10,193 (82.4)	421 (3.4)	240 (1.9)	979 (7.9)	309 (2.5)	12,364
Hungary	742 (3.9)	14,528 (76.4)	2,268 (11.9)	275 (1.4)	637 (3.3)	569 (3.0)	19,019
Italy	672 (5.0)	8,559 (63.8)	1,623 (12.1)	407 (3.0)	1,565 (11.7)	583 (4.3)	13,409
Lithuania	81 (0.6)	13,720 (94.0)	274 (1.9)	37 (0.3)	438 (3.0)	41 (0.3)	14,591
Poland	554 (4.0)	10,129 (73.0)	1,514 (10.9)	269 (1.9)	812 (5.8)	604 (4.4)	13,882
Sweden	133 (1.6)	6,470 (79.2)	577 (7.1)	82 (1.0)	542 (6.6)	366 (4.5)	8,170
							93,217

For each of the seven countries in the sample, we collected all Facebook and Instagram posts (excluding comments and replies) from three types of accounts: (1) journalistic media, including major quality and tabloid newspapers as well as public broadcasters; (2) political parties or coalitions projected to receive at least 5% of the vote in the 2024 European Parliament election; and (3) one key politician per party or coalition—typically the lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidat*), such as Ursula von der Leyen for Germany’s Christian Democratic Union, or the party leader, such as Viktor Orbán for Hungary’s Fidesz. We selected the more active candidate or leader per platform. Table 1 reports the number of posts across the three account categories, grouped by country and platform. After data collection, all post texts were automatically translated from their original languages into English using the GPT-4o-mini-2024-07-18 via the OpenAI API. Account lists appear in Table A1 of the Supplementary Information.²

Political parties and individual politicians were coded as either populist or nonpopulist, resulting in a binary variable later used as a predictor in a logistic regression model. The classification was based on the PopuList database (Rooduijn et al., 2024), which provides information about the populist status of most European political parties. Politicians were coded in line with their party affiliation: Those belonging to populist parties were also considered populist and vice versa. In a few cases, particularly in Lithuania, where party classification was not available in PopuList, local experts were consulted.

² For the full list of the analyzed accounts, see the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository: <https://osf.io/qmny6>.

Identification of War-Related Narratives

The identification of war-related narratives followed a three-step procedure: (1) filtering the full corpus to detect posts related to the Russian-Ukrainian war, (2) conducting an exploratory analysis of this subset to develop a coding scheme for the deductive coding of strategic narratives, and (3) applying this scheme to detect the presence of predefined narratives across all war-related posts.

First, we used OpenAI's GPT-4o-mini-2024-07-18 model to identify posts in the data set that pertained to the Russian-Ukrainian war.³ The model's binary classifications were validated against a randomly sampled subset ($n = 1,564$; 1.7% of the full corpus), manually annotated by two human coders. Inter-coder reliability for the human-coded set was satisfactory (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.77$; agreement = 97%). Against this gold-standard set, the model achieved a precision of 0.87, a recall of 0.86, and an *F1* score of 0.87.

Next, we conducted an exploratory analysis of the war-related corpus ($n = 4,478$) obtained in the previous step, using LLoM—a large language model-based framework for concept induction and classification (Lam, Teoh, Landay, Heer, & Bernstein, 2024). The goal of this step was to screen the data set for potential strategic narratives. LLoM uses vector embeddings and LLM summarization to synthesize textual patterns. We set the number of concepts to 10 per cluster and ran five iterations of the analysis.

LLoM produced structured outputs consisting of concept labels, inclusion criteria, and representative examples. Based on a qualitative review of these results, we identified seven war-related strategic narratives (see Table 2). At this stage, we did not conduct a full narrative analysis—as proposed, for example, by Miskimmon and colleagues (2013)—as our aim was not to deconstruct individual narratives but to identify recurring patterns and use them to construct prompts for automated analysis. We focused on how narratives defined the problem, attributed responsibility, and proposed normatively desirable solutions. These dimensions served as theoretical anchors for distinguishing narrative orientations, specifically whether they supported or undermined Russia's strategic interests. Based on these elements, we developed prompts that reflected the core features of each narrative, ensuring a close alignment between the conceptual framework and the automated classification task.

³ For the detailed LLM prompts, see the OSF repository: <https://osf.io/zv68j/files/osfstorage>.

Table 2. Narratives and Prompts Used for Automated Coding of War-Related Posts.

Narrative	Automated classification prompt
<i>Narratives undermining Russia's strategic objectives</i>	
N1 Russian Aggression	Does the post discuss Russian military aggression against Ukraine? Such acts of aggression may include missile strikes, troop deployments, bombings, territorial occupation, or other forms of military violence.
N2 Ukrainian Civilians	Does the post mention the negative impact of the war on Ukrainian civilians? This may include loss of life, injuries, displacement, destruction of homes and infrastructure, disruption of essential services, or psychological and emotional suffering.
N3 Russian Threat	Does the post discuss Russian threats toward countries other than Ukraine? These threats may include political interference, disinformation and propaganda, cyberattacks, hybrid warfare, or other types of threats.
N4 Support for Ukraine	Does the post advocate for supporting Ukraine? This may include calls for providing military aid, financial assistance, humanitarian relief, or diplomatic backing.
<i>Narratives supporting Russia's strategic objectives</i>	
N5 West and the War	Does the post criticize Western political actors for escalating the war in Ukraine? This may include criticism of military aid to Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, or other forms of involvement perceived as negative or dangerous.
N6 Nuclear Argument	Does the post discuss the futility or dangers of confronting Russia due to its nuclear capabilities? This may include arguments suggesting that Russia's nuclear status makes confrontation impossible, inadequate, or too risky to pursue.
N7 Peace Calls	Does the post advocate for peace in Ukraine? This may include statements about the importance of peace, invitations to pro-peace demonstrations, calls for a ceasefire, diplomatic talks, or criticism of actors and policies perceived as hindering or delaying peace.

With this classification in place, we proceeded to the final stage of analysis, automatically coding the seven narratives in the war-related corpus using OpenAI's GPT-4o-mini-2024-07-18 model and the prompts in Table 2. Each narrative was coded as a binary variable (present/absent) at the post level, allowing for the possibility that a post could contain none, one, or multiple narratives. For example, a single post might simultaneously criticize NATO's role in escalating the war and call for peace, thereby reflecting both N5 and N7 narratives (for specific examples of narrative co-occurrence within individual posts, see the Results section). Model performance was evaluated against a human-coded validation subset ($n = 450$; 10% of the war-related corpus), annotated by two coders. Intercoder agreement for each narrative reached Krippendorff's α of ≥ 0.84 . $F1$ scores ranged from 0.82 (*West and the War*) to 0.94 (*Nuclear Argument*). Full metrics are available in Table A2 of the Supplementary Information.⁴

Results

We begin by presenting descriptive statistics from the two-step automated content analysis (see Table 3). The share of posts addressing the Russian-Ukrainian war in the full corpus varied across countries, ranging from less than 2% in Italy to nearly 8% in Lithuania. Narratives consistent with Russia's strategic

⁴ For the results of the intercoder agreement tests, see the OSF repository: <https://osf.io/qmny6>.

objectives (N5–N7) were present in Hungary, Italy, and, to a lesser extent, Germany, while being nearly absent in the other countries. In contrast, narratives that challenge Russia’s interests (N1–N4) were most prominent in Sweden and France, and least prominent in Hungary and Poland.

Association Patterns Among War-Related Strategic Narratives

To address RQ1, we carried out a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward’s method (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). As a measure of dissimilarity, we used the Dice index (Finch, 2005), suitable for binary data. The Dice index gives greater weight to co-occurrences relative to mismatches. This approach was well-suited for our data because most coded posts contained only one narrative, making mismatches frequent but not meaningful. Moreover, the Dice index excludes joint absences from consideration, which is essential in our case, as the absence of two narratives in a post does not imply a similarity between them.

Table 3. Prevalence of the War-Related Posts and Narratives Across Countries.

	n posts with strategic narratives (N1–N7)							n war posts (% of total)
	(% of the war-related posts)							
	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6	N7	
France	103 (22.74)	32 (7.06)	49 (10.82)	39 (8.61)	4 (0.88)	0	18 (3.97)	453 (3.84)
Germany	128 (19.88)	42 (6.52)	64 (9.94)	41 (6.37)	26 (4.04)	4 (0.62)	52 (8.07)	644 (5.21)
Hungary	85 (6.85)	38 (3.06)	59 (4.75)	41 (3.3)	239 (19.26)	31 (2.5)	558 (44.96)	1,241 (6.53)
Italy	39 (15.4)	10 (3.95)	19 (7.51)	19 (7.51)	63 (24.9)	9 (3.56)	84 (33.2)	253 (1.89)
Lithuania	188 (16.51)	49 (4.3)	140 (12.29)	90 (7.91)	6 (0.53)	1 (0.09)	15 (1.32)	1,139 (7.81)
Poland	43 (10.54)	11 (2.7)	61 (14.95)	14 (3.43)	3 (0.74)	1 (0.25)	11 (2.7)	408 (2.94)
Sweden	76 (22.4)	22 (6.47)	37 (10.88)	99 (29.12)	2 (0.59)	0	22 (6.47)	340 (4.16)
								4,478

Note. Column labels denote the following strategic narratives: N1—Russian Aggression, N2—Ukrainian Civilians, N3—Russian Threat, N4—Support for Ukraine, N5—West and the War, N6—Nuclear Argument, N7—Peace Calls.

To determine the optimal number of clusters (k) for the seven narratives, we computed silhouette scores for $k = 2:6$ (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary Information⁵) and selected a four-cluster solution, which yielded the highest average silhouette width of 0.15. While this indicates a modest clustering structure in absolute terms, this is expected given that narratives do not form perfectly distinct groups in

⁵ For the silhouette score plot, see the OSF repository: <https://osf.io/qmny6>.

real-world social media discourse. Figure 1 presents the hierarchical clustering of war-related narratives in a dendrogram.

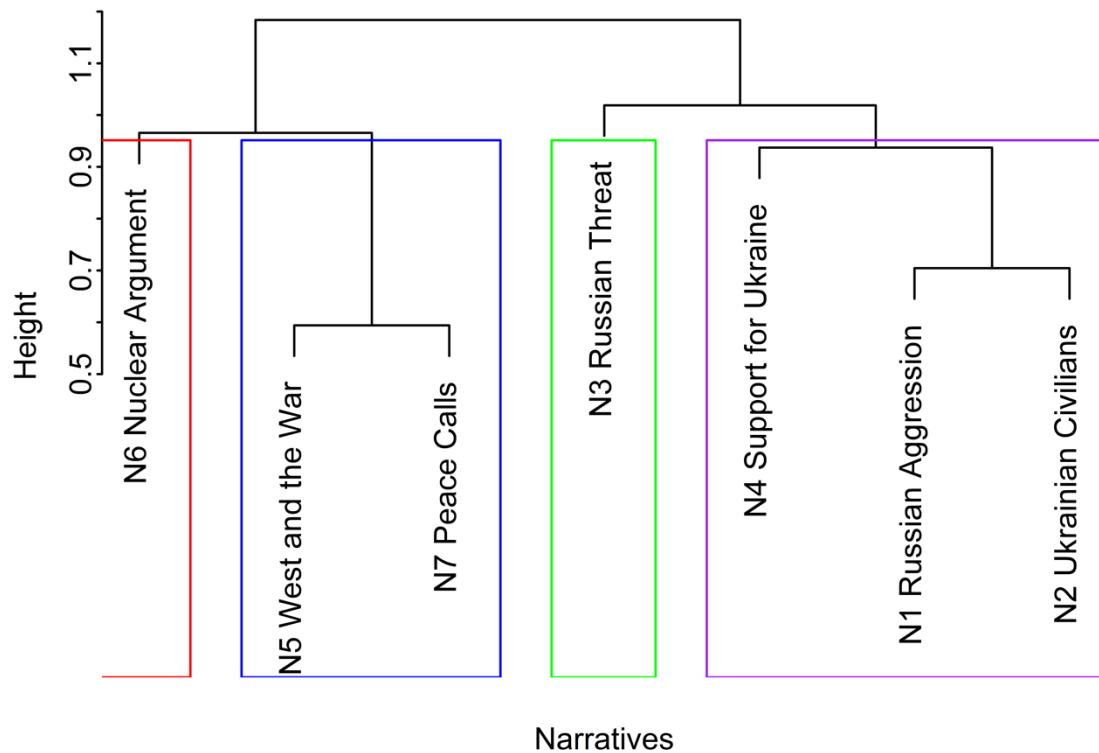


Figure 1. Hierarchical clustering of the war-related narratives. The dendrogram shows the clustering of strategic narratives based on their co-occurrence in the war-related corpus. Different colors represent distinct clusters.

A notable aspect of the clustering solution is that the first dendrogram split mirrors our a priori grouping: narratives opposing Russia’s strategic objectives (N1–N4) versus those advancing them (N5–N7). These two broad clusters are not uniform and contain sub-clusters of their own.

The most commonly co-occurring narratives were *Russian Aggression* × *Ukrainian Civilians* (purple cluster) and *West and the War* × *Peace Calls* (blue cluster). The purple cluster emphasizes Russian aggression and Ukrainian victimhood (e.g., “For months, the Russian Air Force has been targeting Ukrainian power plants—now Kyiv is facing the consequences. Electricity consumption is being rationed across the entire country” [Der Spiegel, 2024]). The blue cluster combines anti-Western messaging with peace appeals. For example, Magyar Nemzet (2024) stated, “Brussels is spreading a warlike atmosphere [...] There is only one government that is campaigning for peace [Fidesz-KDNP government].”

As expected, the *Support for Ukraine* narrative clustered with *Russian Aggression* and *Ukrainian Civilians*. Among all groups in the corpus, Swedish political actors made the most calls for supporting Ukraine (e.g., “In times of crisis and war, we must stay united. The countries of Europe must increase support for Ukraine and stand stronger against Putin” [Swedish Social Democratic Party, 2024]).

The four-cluster solution also includes two single-narrative clusters. The *Russian Threat* narrative emphasizes the dangers posed by Russia to countries other than Ukraine (e.g., “After the cyberattacks in 2022 by hackers belonging to pro-Russian groups, Italy is now also taking measures to prevent ‘physical’ actions on its national territory” [Corriere della Sera, 2024]). This narrative was most widespread in Poland. The other outlier is the *Nuclear Argument* narrative, which was the least common narrative in the data set, mainly used by Italian and Hungarian political actors (e.g., “If there is a nuclear war, then everyone will die, and everything will be destroyed [. . .] Hungary’s position remains unchanged: The fighting must end as soon as possible, and peace negotiations must begin” [M1, 2024]).

Prevalence of Pro-Russian Narratives Across Platforms, Countries, and Actors

To explore RQ2, we created a binary variable, *proRU*, coded as 1 if a post contained only narratives from the blue or red clusters. Otherwise, it was coded as 0. This approach can be considered conservative, as it does not classify a post as pro-Russian if it contains even a single narrative that challenges Russia’s interests in Ukraine.

We fitted a binomial logistic regression to predict *proRU* using Platform, Country, and Actor Type as independent variables. An interaction term between Country and Actor Type was included. To address the issue of rare occurrences of *proRU* posts in several countries, we applied Firth’s bias-reduced penalized-likelihood logistic regression with an added covariate, using the *logistf* package in R (Heinze et al., 2023). This method reduces bias in coefficient estimates caused by rare event data. The resulting model (see Table 4) was statistically significant, as indicated by the likelihood ratio test, $\chi^2(14) = 1862.69, p < .001$.

In most countries, pro-Russian content was rare among news outlets. In France, the median case, only 3% of the war-related posts were pro-Russian (see Figure 2). The exception was Hungary ($\beta = 2.272, p < .001, OR = 9.71$), where news outlets were nearly 10 times more likely to post pro-Russian narratives than in France, supporting H1.

When accounting for the Actor Type, cross-country variations become more pronounced. In the reference country, France, there was no significant difference in the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives between media and political actors, and this pattern also holds for Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden. However, in Germany, Hungary, and Italy, the difference between media and political actors was significantly greater than in France. In all three countries, political actors were more likely than news outlets to post pro-Russian content, with the largest difference observed in Italy ($\beta = 2.133, p < .01, OR = 8.44$), followed by Germany ($\beta = 1.916, p < .01, OR = 6.79$) and Hungary ($\beta = 1.322, p < .05, OR = 3.75$). The proportion of pro-Russian posts among political actors in these countries ranged from 40% (Germany) to 74% (Hungary). Therefore, H2 is only partially supported, as not only Hungary and Italy—the countries with right-wing

populist governments—but also Germany showed a higher-than-average level of pro-Russian narratives among political actors.

Table 4. Firth's Bias-Reduced Penalized-Likelihood Logistic Regression With an Added Covariate Predicting the Prevalence of Pro-Russian Narratives in the War Corpus.

	Log-Odds (β)	SE (β)	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value
Intercept	-3.663	0.301	[-4.313, -3.121]	< .001
<i>Main effects</i>				
Instagram	0.542	0.152	[0.246, 0.840]	< .001
Germany	0.093	0.391	[-0.666, 0.884]	0.812
Hungary	2.272	0.317	[1.694, 2.947]	< .001
Italy	0.880	0.441	[-0.001, 1.750]	0.050
Lithuania	-0.965	0.432	[-1.830, -0.111]	< .05
Poland	-0.819	0.617	[-2.196, 0.301]	0.159
Sweden	-1.413	0.874	[-3.640, 0.035]	0.057
Political actor	0.979	0.659	[-0.473, 2.181]	0.169
<i>Interaction effects</i>				
Germany × Political actor	1.916	0.744	[0.532, 3.506]	< .01
Hungary × Political actor	1.322	0.672	[0.092, 2.794]	< .05
Italy × Political actor	2.133	0.764	[0.716, 3.762]	< .01
Lithuania × Political actor	0.068	0.978	[-1.966, 1.990]	0.945
Poland × Political actor	0.210	0.958	[-1.607, 2.211]	0.826
Sweden × Political actor	0.425	1.159	[-1.693, 3.039]	0.709

Note. $n = 4,478$. The reference categories for the predictors are Facebook (Platform), Media (Actor Type), and France (Country). Due to the inclusion of an interaction term between Country and Actor Type, the main effects of Country refer to differences among media outlets, while the main effect of Actor Type reflects the difference between political and media actors specifically in France.

Regarding platform differences, Instagram accounts were, overall, more likely to spread pro-Russian narratives than Facebook accounts ($\beta = 0.542$, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.72$), with the biggest difference observed in Hungary (see Figure 2). This finding, however, should not be extrapolated to specific actor-country combinations, as a three-way interaction could not be modeled due to sparse data.

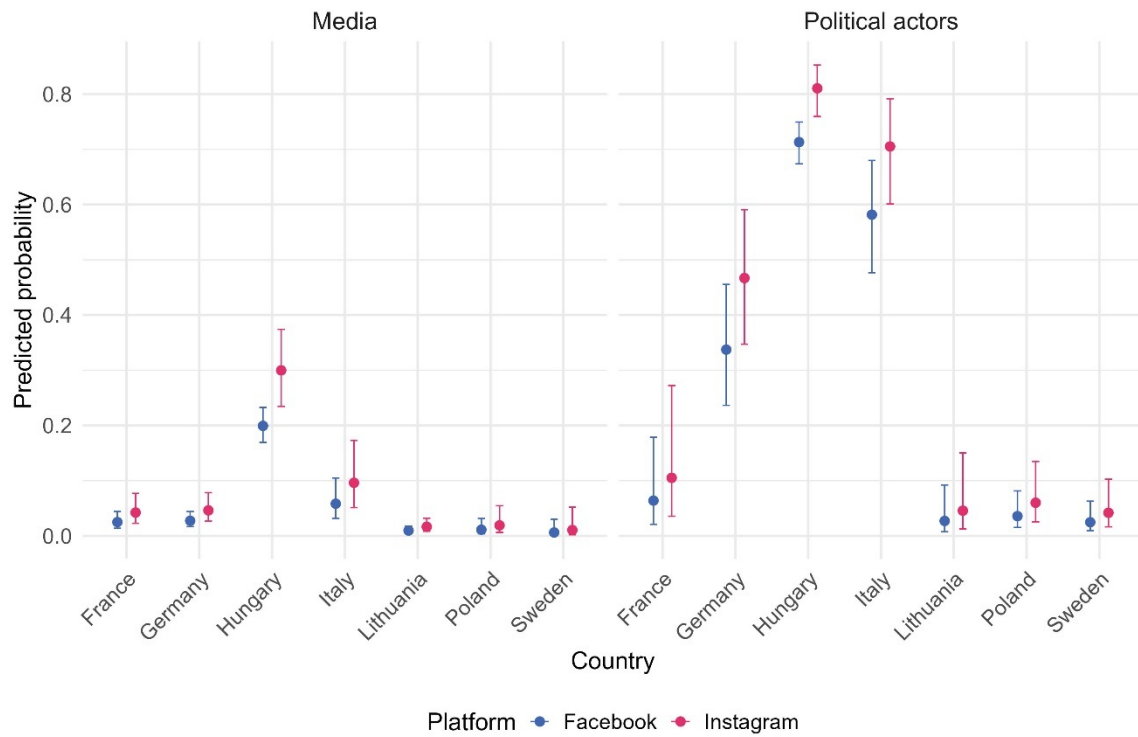


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of pro-Russian posts by platform, country, and actor. Probabilities were obtained using Firth's logistic regression with an added covariate. The model included Platform, Country, Actor Type, and Country-Actor interaction. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Populist Actors and War-Related Discourse

Given the significant cross-country variations in the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives among political actors, we examined which types of actors contributed to the war-related discourse in each country (RQ3). To address this question, we analyzed the full version of the data set, which includes posts both related and unrelated to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Focusing exclusively on political actors, we applied Firth's logistic regression to predict the likelihood of posting about the war, using Country, Populism Status, and their interaction as predictors. The resulting model (see Table 5) was statistically significant, as indicated by the likelihood ratio test, $\chi^2(13) = 1313.66, p < .001$.

Table 5. Firth's Bias-Reduced Logistic Regression Predicting the Prevalence of War-Related Posts in the Full Corpus.

	Log-Odds (β)	SE (β)	95% CI	p-value
Intercept	-2.900	0.172	[-3.256, -2.579]	< .001
<i>Main effects</i>				
France	-0.482	0.268	[-1.018, 0.038]	0.070
Hungary	-0.513	0.219	[-0.938, -0.076]	< .05
Italy	-2.207	0.563	[-3.513, -1.237]	< .001
Lithuania	1.697	0.224	[1.264, 2.145]	< .001
Poland	-0.393	0.205	[-0.786, 0.020]	0.062
Sweden	1.044	0.198	[0.667, 1.444]	< .001
Populism status: Populist	0.360	0.242	[-0.114, 0.837]	0.136
<i>Interaction effects</i>				
France \times Populism status	-1.609	0.419	[-2.448, -0.798]	< .001
Hungary \times Populism status	2.093	0.281	[1.542, 2.647]	< .001
Italy \times Populism status	1.429	0.597	[0.376, 2.783]	< .01
Lithuania \times Populism status	-2.038	0.451	[-2.973, -1.191]	< .001
Poland \times Populism status	0.390	0.310	[-0.222, 0.995]	0.211
Sweden \times Populism status	-2.515	0.542	[-3.711, -1.541]	< .001

Note. $n = 15,006$. The reference categories for the predictors are Germany (Country) and Nonpopulist (Populism Status). Due to the inclusion of an interaction term between Country and Populism Status, the main effects of Country refer to differences among nonpopulist actors, while the main effect of Populism Status reflects the difference between populist and nonpopulist actors, specifically in Germany.

In Germany—the median country in terms of the share of posts about the Russian-Ukrainian war—populist and nonpopulist actors posted about the war at similar rates. The same pattern was observed in Poland. In France ($\beta = -1.609$, $p < .001$, $OR = 0.20$), Lithuania ($\beta = -2.038$, $p < .001$, $OR = 0.13$), and Sweden ($\beta = -2.515$, $p < .001$, $OR = 0.08$)—countries with the lowest prevalence of pro-Russian narratives—nonpopulist actors were more frequently engaged in discourse about the Russian-Ukrainian war than their populist counterparts. In Italy ($\beta = 1.429$, $p < .01$, $OR = 4.17$) and Hungary ($\beta = 2.093$, $p < .001$, $OR = 8.11$), populist actors dominated the war-related discourse. Therefore, H3 is only partially supported: While pro-Russian narratives were salient among German political actors, populist actors did not dominate the country's war-related discourse. Such dominance was only evident in Hungary and Italy (see Figure 3).

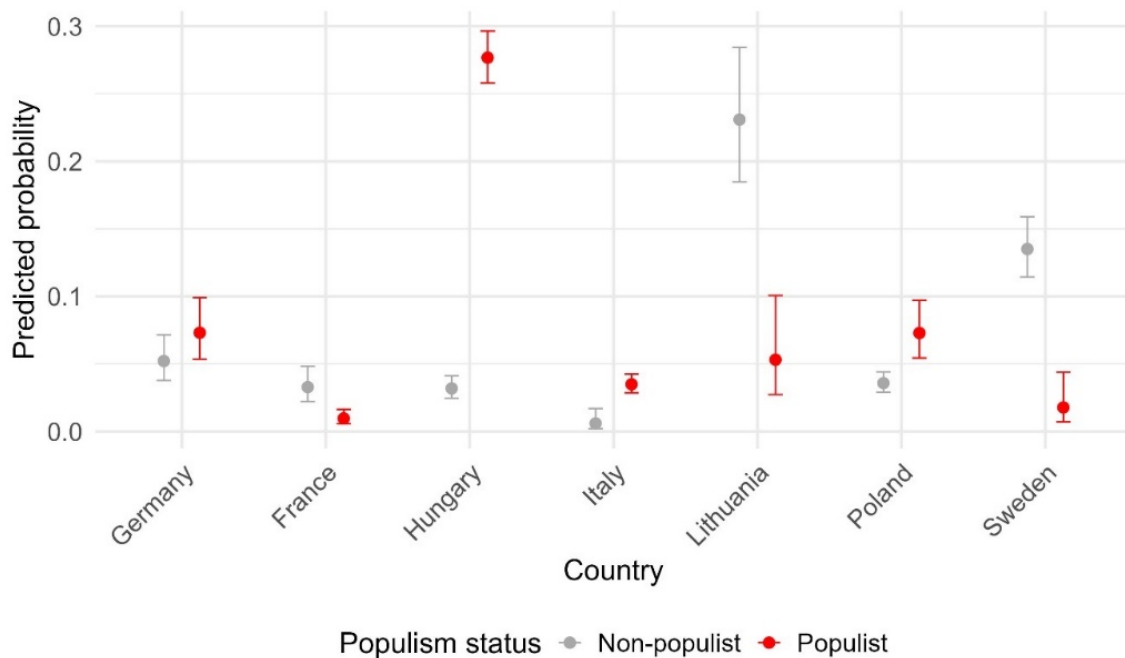


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of war-related posts among political actors by Country and Populism Status. Probabilities were obtained using Firth's logistic regression. The model included Country, Populism Status, and Country-Populism Status interaction. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

Russia-aligned narratives in Western democracies threaten to undermine democratic institutions, erode public trust, and weaken transatlantic unity. While some question foreign actors' ability to directly influence public opinion abroad (Freedman & Williams, 2023), the risk increases when domestic actors echo and legitimize strategic narratives of a foreign actor (Yanchenko et al., 2024). Drawing on strategic narrative theory (Roselle et al., 2014), this study examines how narratives about the Russian-Ukrainian war circulated in Europe in the lead-up to the 2024 European Parliament election. The findings indicate that the role of amplifiers of Russian information can be taken on by different actors, depending on the characteristics of the information environment. Factors such as media-political parallelism with a pro-Russian government stance, as well as the dominance of war-related discourse by right-wing populist actors, increase the likelihood that Russian strategic narratives gain visibility.

Association Patterns Among War-Related Strategic Narratives

Hierarchical cluster analysis has revealed two main groups of war-related narratives—those that challenge and those that support Russia's strategic objectives in Ukraine—confirming prior research on the binary structuring of conflict discourse (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). The strong co-occurrence of narratives

about Russian military aggression and Ukrainian civilian suffering suggests that much of the social media discourse in the studied countries reflects a perspective grounded in international law (United Nations, 2022). In contrast, the frequent pairing of narratives blaming Western actors for escalating the war with calls for peace reflects a well-established Kremlin-aligned strategy aimed at delegitimizing Western support for Ukraine while presenting Russia as a reluctant participant (Oates & Ramsay, 2024). This illustrates how the topic of “peace” can be instrumentalized to sow division among Western democracies and advance Russian interests. Such appropriation of widely valued concepts is not new: “democracy” was similarly co-opted by far-right, antidemocratic actors during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fominaya, 2024), just as “fake news” has been used to discredit credible journalism (Ross & Rivers, 2018). This study shows how the notion of narrative coherence (Schmitt, 2018) can guide the tracing of such instrumentalizations by identifying co-occurring narratives and the actors who promote them. Analyzing these patterns within broader communicative contexts helps illuminate the logic of competing narrative strategies and inform the development of effective countermeasures.

National Variations in the Prevalence of Pro-Russian Narratives

The results of the logistic regression analysis reveal three groups of countries in our sample, based on the extent to which pro-Russian war-related narratives have penetrated their public discourse.

The first category includes France, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden—countries where pro-Russian narratives were extremely rare across both news outlets and political actors. A common feature among these countries is their high level of support for Ukraine since the onset of Russia’s full-scale invasion (Trebesch et al., 2023). France and Sweden also stand out for their strong and independent public service media institutions (Humprecht et al., 2022), which may help limit the spread of pro-Russian narratives. None of the four countries had right-wing populist parties in government during the study period, and in all but Poland, war-related discourse on Facebook and Instagram was dominated by nonpopulist political actors. In Poland, where populist and nonpopulist actors engaged with the topic to a similar extent, the main right-wing populist party, Law and Justice, has consistently maintained a pro-Ukrainian stance, partly because of the country’s geographic proximity to Russia and associated security concerns (Czyż, 2024).

The second category includes Germany and Italy—countries where pro-Russian narratives were rare in the media but prevalent within parts of the political spectrum. In Germany, these narratives were primarily disseminated by accounts associated with Alternative for Germany and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance, while in Italy, they were voiced mainly by Matteo Salvini’s Lega and Giuseppe Conte’s Five Star Movement (M5S). This finding illustrates that, whether in government or opposition, populist actors can exert significant influence over war-related debates on social media. At the same time, it underscores the absence of a unified right-wing populist position on the Russian-Ukrainian war across Europe (Wondreys, 2025). For instance, FdI has not adopted a pro-Russian stance, unlike Lega and M5S. In countries where political discourse features significantly more pro-Russian narratives than media discourse, political actors may exploit this gap by presenting themselves as marginalized and portraying journalistic media as biased and unrepresentative.

Lastly, the third category consists of a single case: Hungary, a country where both journalistic media and political actors displayed a notable presence of pro-Russian narratives during the study period. Political actors, particularly Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, made the Russian-Ukrainian war a central theme of their campaign ahead of the 2024 European Parliament election, emphasizing the topics of peace and alleged Western warmongering. Media echoed party statements, thereby reinforcing the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives. These findings align with prior research showing that media systems characterized by high ownership concentration and close ties to political elites are more vulnerable to government influence and aligned messaging (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). They also resonate with Hungary's long-lasting democratic backsliding and Orbán's consistent pro-Russian stance (Czyż, 2024). Thus, among the analyzed countries, Hungary represents a distinct outlier.

Platform Differences in Narrative Amplification

According to our analysis, pro-Russian narratives were overall slightly more prevalent on Instagram than on Facebook during the study period. This finding should be interpreted with caution, given the lack of interaction effect estimates across countries and actors. In contrast to our findings, a recent NATO report on Russian-aligned messaging on social media suggests that Instagram accounts for only a small share of pro-Russian content in terms of volume, reach, and engagement (Bergmanis-Korāts et al., 2025). Similarly, Zilinsky and colleagues (2024), focusing on belief in pro-Russian narratives, found that using Instagram for political news was not significantly associated with such beliefs. Further studies should more closely examine platform-specific dynamics, using more granular data to understand how different user groups and national contexts shape the visibility of strategic narratives.

Conclusion

This study provides a novel cross-national, platform-comparative analysis of how journalistic media and political actors share strategic narratives about war in hybrid information environments. Beyond the specific findings discussed above, it also carries several broader implications.

Theoretically, the study calls for expanding the current disinformation-focused lens to examine not only the factual accuracy of political communication but also its strategic nature. Many narratives identified in our study are not demonstrably false, yet they interpret the conflict in ways that ultimately serve specific actors. Strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al., 2013) provides a useful framework for such analysis. The study also highlights the importance of considering narrative alignment between foreign and domestic actors, particularly those in Western democracies. Even when domestic media or politicians echo foreign actors' strategic narratives for reasons unrelated to direct affiliation, they may nonetheless (un)intentionally legitimize and amplify them for local audiences. Finally, the findings reaffirm that features such as media-political parallelism and the prominence of populist communication are crucial factors in shaping the resilience of information environments against manipulative information influence (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Methodologically, the study demonstrates how contemporary LLMs can be leveraged to identify strategic narratives across actors at scale. Our approach underscores the value of analyzing key nodes in the information environment—specifically, the most widely consumed media and the most prominent

political figures—rather than preselecting actors based on known characteristics such as political stance (e.g., populist actors) or reporting style (e.g., tabloid newspapers). Taking a holistic approach yields a more accurate assessment of which strategic narratives circulate across national contexts and helps avoid reproducing assumptions about who spreads them. Future research should examine the temporal evolution of war-related narratives, as well as assess their impact on public opinion using focus groups, surveys, and experimental designs.

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