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EU strategic communications with a view to counteracting propaganda

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IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

EU strategic communications
With a view to counteracting propaganda

ABSTRACT

Emanating from Russia in the east and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the south, the EU has been increasingly hit by destabilising messages amounting – in different forms and to different degrees – to coherent hostile 'strategic communications' campaigns, or the processes of infusing communications activities with an agenda or plan to impact the behaviour of a target audience. Both Russia and ISIL have engaged in aggressive messaging and deceptive media campaigns, albeit with distinct narratives, targets and audiences. This paper analyses the 'what' and the 'how': the respective narratives of each actor, their specificities, their similarities and their differences. The analysis also draws attention to strategic communications efforts undertaken by the EU, which are vectored into defensive (react and respond) and offensive (probe and push) dimensions. This understanding of the present context finally allows for an evaluation of what actions can be taken to enhance the effectiveness of the EU's own strategic communications.

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Table of contents

1 Introduction

Just like the term 'hybrid' (often associated with warfare, tactics or threats), 'strategic communication(s)' – which this paper will use in the plural form – has recently become rather fashionable. Moreover, not unlike 'hybrid', it often lacks a stringent definition. This has advantages, of course, as the term can be used to cover a wide range of disparate issues and activities. Still, a better understanding of its possible scope can be of help in assessing the extent to which it is applicable to the actions and actors analysed in this paper.

1.1 What's in a name?

Broadly speaking, strategic communications infuses 'communications' activities with an agenda or a plan. The field of 'communications' is broad, encompassing individuals and organisations who create news or push information (public relations firms, broadcasters), who deliver news and media (journalists), and who study the interplay between media and society (researchers). As an umbrella term, 'strategic' communications combines them all – especially the pushing and the delivering – thanks also to new forms of engagement, the proliferation of different types of media, and the low entry barriers.

Depending on the nature of an organisation, 'strategic communications' can range from marketing to policy. It can also refer to a process as well as a profession – let alone an academic discipline in its own right. Most importantly, it implies and requires tight coordination and consistency across the board in order to purposefully implement a large set of different, targeted and tailored actions. A useful definition, especially for the scope of this paper, is offered in a 2011 Chatham House Report, in which strategic communications is described as 'a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences and identifies effective conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour'[1].

In practice, for policy-related organisations, it includes elements of public diplomacy and 'spin', media relations, advertising, recruitment and training and, most notably, high levels of situational awareness (detect and deter). In operational terms, it entails both a defensive (react and respond) and an offensive dimension (probe and push).

1.2 East, south and inside

To what extent is all this applicable – and how equally – to Russia and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), i.e. the two external players which have contributed the most to destabilising the EU and its neighbours in recent years? Given that both have engaged in aggressive messaging and deceptive media campaigns, a qualified use of the term 'strategic communications' for both seems in order. That said, a degree of differentiation may be necessary, namely between a large state with powerful resources and extensive outreach (also to fellow 'nationals' in third countries) – one with which the EU and its Member States still cooperate on a number of issues – and a dispersed organisation – combining state-like behaviour where it is in control of territory with a sect-like *modus operandi* – acting across borders and outside the law.

Accordingly, this paper will analyse the 'what' and the 'how': the respective narratives of each actor, their specificities, their similarities and their differences – but without entering into a contest over which represents a more 'clear and present danger'. Both are serious, and each is unique in its own way.

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[1] P.Cornish, J.Lindley-French, C.Yorke, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*, Chatham House Report, September 2011, p.4.

And how can Europeans respond to their strategic communications campaigns? This paper will also highlight what has been and is being undertaken – notably, but not exclusively, by the EU (and in this respect, under what constraints and within what limits). Finally, it will explore what more could be done, what could be done better, as well as how and by whom in the current context. Particular attention will be devoted to the sources, the vectors, the conduits, the targets – including unconventional ones – and of course the responses. Dedicated boxes will be used to highlight specific aspects of the problem and complement the core analysis.

For the EUISS, as an autonomous EU agency funded exclusively by the Member States, the main focus will have to be, however, on the role that EU institutions, bodies and agencies have played and can play in this domain – without any detailed or systematic reference to initiatives at the national level. Looking into these would also require time and resources and, above all, is likely to lead to modest results, as at least some of the relevant activities in and by the Member States often fall into the domain of intelligence and counter-intelligence.

2   Strategic communications from the east: Russia

Russia's strategic communications are complex, both with regard to ideas and institutions. Carried out both directly and through proxies, they shape people's perceptions of the EU – be it inside Russia, in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) states or in the EU itself, as well as its candidate countries. In light of the goals it intends to achieve, Russia's messaging has proved quite effective, if not necessarily consistent: while often crude and deceitful in terms of content, its delivery is sophisticated, targeted and tailored to different audiences, and capable of exploiting the EU's weaknesses.

2.1   Russia's grand narrative(s)…

The so-called 'Colour Revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine were a wake-up call for Russia. The resulting internal debate on what went wrong led Moscow to conclude that it needed to build up its own 'soft power', partly by making more attractive offers, but partly also by developing the machinery to promote itself through media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other key players – from business lobbies to political parties. Most importantly, this was accompanied by the realisation that 'selling' Russia was not enough. The 'attractiveness gap' between Russia and the EU had to be bridged by improving Russia's standing – mainly through the promotion of the 'Russian World' (*Russkiy Mir*) – but also by reducing that of the EU. The launch of Russia Today (RT), a dedicated TV channel, just one year after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, was the first tangible outcome of Russia's lessons learned[2].

While the economic crisis that has dominated much of the last decade did not give much for Russia to boast about, it did generate a stream of negative news about the outside world, especially the EU. The focus on attacking others, rather than advertising itself, also granted Russia the possibility of reaching out to social groups that were disappointed with the political and economic situation in Europe.

Box 1: **Russia's media outlets**

Russia Today(RT)

RT consists of seven branches: three 24-hour news channels broadcasting from Moscow in English, Arabic and Spanish, RT USA and RT UK broadcasting from their own offices in Washington and London, RT documentaries (RTD), and RUPTLY, which sells video content to channels around the world and is based in Berlin.

RT was set up in 2005 under the name 'Russia Today' as an exercise in soft power. Its aim was to burnish Russia's image abroad by bringing Russian news to a foreign audience in their own language. Yet, it did not take long to realise there was not much appetite for news praising Russia in the West. There were, however, plenty of potential viewers who were willing to consume negative news about the state of the West. Immediately after the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, therefore, the TV channel opted to 'de-Russify' its brand. It renamed itself 'RT' and refocused its efforts on telling the stories supposedly neglected by the 'Anglo-Saxon' media establishment. Rejecting the journalistic ethics of the BBC and CNN and consciously following in the footsteps of Fox News and MSNBC ('there is no objectivity'), RT gave airtime to well-known but controversial figures such as Julian Assange, editor-in-chief of the organisation WikiLeaks. It also turned its attention to YouTube: as a state-backed entity that was not dependent on advertising revenue for its survival, it could afford to make its products freely available on the internet. RT had always dabbled with conspiracy theories but once war broke out in eastern Ukraine, it began to actively promote

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[2] O.Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*, Chatham House Research Paper, April 2016.

them. For example, it offered a platform to an 'academic' who accused Ukraine of committing genocide and speculated over whether or not the US had engineered the Ebola epidemic.

In rouble terms, federal funding for RT increased significantly over the last four years but fell slightly in 2016. In dollar terms, however, federal funding for RT is over 25 % lower now than it was in 2013. This matters because over 80 % of RT's expenses are reportedly paid in foreign currency. This real-term cut in funding perhaps explains the decision to postpone the launch of RT's French and German language channels indefinitely.

Sputnik & co.

Besides RT, Russia supports a plethora of websites, media partnerships, and news agencies throughout the world. Among them is *Sputnik* news, a network of sites launched in November 2014 with the ambition of producing content from 130 cities in 34 countries around the world. It aims to broadcast in 30 languages, including nearly all the languages of the former Soviet Union. The government funds Sputnik through the RT News Agency, the successor to *RIA Novosti*.

Russian state-backed media have also entered into partnerships with Western media outlets. For example, an 8-page supplement dedicated to Russia – *Russia Beyond the Headlines* – appears in 22 countries and 16 languages. Reaching some 32 million readers, it regularly appears in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *El País*, and *Le Soir*.

Sputnik on Twitter and Facebook

Branch		Twitter	Facebook
1	Sputnik Arabic	107 000 tweets; 77 700 followers	1 443 275 likes
2	Sputnik International (English)	128 000 tweets; 123 000 followers	800 462 likes
3	Sputnik France	50 100 tweets; 26 700 followers	203 858 likes
4	Sputnik Deutschland (German)	33 900 tweets; 8 502 followers	137 355 likes
5	Sputnik Mundo (Spanish)	42 000 tweets; 17 500 followers	135 279 likes
6	Sputnik Turkish	59 000 tweets; 76 000 followers	102 109 likes
7	Sputnik Urdu	5 999 tweets; 3 236 followers	42 523 likes
8	Sputnik Japanese	N/A	35 649 likes
9	Sputnik Dari	13 300 tweets; 825 followers	31 818 likes
10	Sputnik Serbian	46 300 tweets; 5 386 followers	25 853 likes
11	Sputnik Vietnamese	13 400 tweets; 490 followers	24 607 likes
12	Sputnik Italia (Italian)	10 100 tweets; 2 611 followers	21 369 likes
13	Sputnik Pashto	9 950 tweets; 933 followers	21 085 likes
14	Sputnik Azerbaijani	N/A	20 841 likes
15	Sputnik Persian	49 700 tweets; 5 696 followers	18 947 likes
16	Sputnik Ceska Republika (Czech)	18 300 tweets; 682 followers	15 572 likes
17	Sputnik Polska (Polish)	17 900 tweets; 2 179 followers	9 196 likes
18	Sputnik UK	19 800 tweets; 5 348 followers	7 759 likes

19	Sputnik Abkhaz	N/A	7 413 likes
20	Sputnik Georgia	2 978 tweets; 471 followers	4 098 likes
21	Sputnik Kyrgyz	9 781 tweets; 1 815 followers	3 107 likes
22	Sputnik Ossetian	N/A	2 391 likes
23	Sputnik Kurdish	9 477 tweets; 5 526 followers	1 771 likes
24	Sputnik Moldova (Romanian)	3 504 tweets; 200 followers	1 640 likes
25	Sputnik Armenian	2 178 tweets; 678 followers	1 422 likes
26	Sputnik Latvija (Latvian)	N/A	1 348 likes
27	Sputnik Eesti (Estonian)	278 tweets; 56 followers	330 likes
28	Sputnik Hindi	19 000 tweets; 1 389 followers	134 followers
29	Sputnik USA	95 100 tweets; 26 600 followers	N/A
30	Sputnik Chinese	39 200 tweets; 3 052 followers	N/A
31	Sputnik Korean	5 371 tweets; 401 followers	N/A
32	Sputnik Tajik	N/A	N/A
33	Sputnik Uzbek	N/A	N/A
		Total followers	**Total likes**
		393 665	**3 121 077**

Month reviewed: 15 March to 15 April 2016

Russia Today on Twitter and Facebook

Branch		**Twitter**	**Facebook**
1	RT in Arabic	294 000 tweets; 2.05m followers	8 136 211 likes
2	RT in English	164 000 tweets; 2.04m followers	3 432 095 likes
3	RT in Spanish	311 000 tweets; 1.08m followers	1 852 744 likes
4	RT US	71 700 tweets; 325 000 followers	653 702 likes
5	RT in Russian	154 000 tweets; 638 000 followers	373 299 likes
6	RT in German	8 719 tweets; 13 200 followers	192 320 likes
7	RT UK	15 500 tweets; 39 700 followers	69 462 likes
8	RT France	31 400 tweets; 45 000 followers	63 379 likes
9	RT Serbia	55 tweets; 83 followers	1 937 likes
10	RT in Kurdish	3 tweets; 2 followers	24 likes
		Total followers	**Total likes**
		6 230 985	**14 775 173**

Month reviewed: 18 March to 18 April 2016

Russia's strategic communications do contain a meta- or grand narrative of sorts, i.e. a series of core themes that consistently appear in most communications efforts. However, these themes vary (according to Russian opportunism) and often contradict one another. Nevertheless, there are a number of recurrent storylines that the Kremlin-inspired media systematically promote.

One key message depicts the West as an aggressive and expansionist entity on the one hand, and as weak and verging on collapse on the other. The EU is portrayed as close to crumbling under the combined pressure of the fiscal and migration crises. The Union is also painted as an unwieldy entity

which is incapable of making decisions due to waves of hasty enlargements to the east. These two representations, in turn, feed into forecasts about the imminent demise of the EU, just as the Soviet Union collapsed twenty five years ago.

Box 2: Conspiracy theories

Several Kremlin-financed media outlets are covertly spreading anti-Western conspiracy theories. Among them are:

- The disappeared Malaysian MH370 airplane might have been shot down by the US;
- The Malaysian MH17 plane could have been shot down by an Israeli missile or a Ukrainian fighter jet;
- The German authorities tried to cover up the alleged rape of Russian girl 'Liza' by migrants in Berlin;
- The West is killing off defence witnesses of Serbian war criminals in the Hague;
- The 9/11 attacks may have been planned by the US government; and
- Western politicians such as Madeleine Albright's have a 'pathological hatred of Slavs' and 'the war in Kosovo was considered only a first step to establish control over Russia'. These were allegedly determined by a former KGB officer with the supposed ability to read minds.

Box 3: The case of Euronews

The multi-language broadcaster Euronews was launched on 1 January 1993 to promote European unity by presenting information from a distinctly European perspective. It airs in 13 languages (including Russian) and reaches a daily audience of 4.4 million. Its *modus operandi* is based on the compulsory use of news features produced by national public TV channels, with very limited scope for its own reporting. Since its launch, Euronews has received EUR 240 million worth of funding from the European Commission, EUR 25.5 million of which came in 2014. In 2001, the Russian state-owned media holding VGTRK bought 1.8 % of its shares, and increased its stake to 16.94% the following year. In 2015, Egyptian businessman Nagib Saviris' Media Globe Networks bought 53 % of the channel and increased its capital by EUR 35 million, thus lowering VGTRK's relative share to 7.17 %.

On several occasions, Euronews has been accused of biased reporting, particularly through its Russian language service. Coverage of the 2008 war in Georgia, the 20th anniversary of Ukrainian independence in 2011, the 2014 referendum in the Donbas and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, as well as events in Transnistria has been accused of being unbalanced and pro-Russian. In August 2014, Ukraine's National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting (*Derzhkomteleradio*) revoked the broadcasting licence of the channel's Russian language service. And in March 2015, *Derzhkomteleradio* also revoked Euronews Ukrainian language licence. The decision came shortly after Ukrainian pro-Kremlin oligarch Dmytro Firtash's Inter Media Group took over the broadcasting rights for Ukrainian language programmes from channel NTU.

In April 2015, the European Commission held talks with the company addressing, *inter alia*, its future funding strategy.

2.2 …and target audiences

This messaging also tries to cater to specific audiences in the EU. Supporters of the far right readily consume news claiming that the EU is actively promoting moral decadence (by supporting LGBT rights) and neglecting Europe's Christian roots, or that the 'Islamisation of Europe' is currently underway. On the far left, Russia's messaging feeds anti-US sentiments and portrays the EU as a submissive partner or puppet of Washington.

On both the right and left, Russia also relies on and fosters an anti-interventionist narrative, whereby Western military operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – as well as the conflict in Ukraine – are all depicted as a string of illegitimate aggressive Western actions. The debacle in Iraq is the principal example to reframe the debate about other crises, such as Kosovo or Ukraine.

Russian strategic communications efforts also target (and try to influence) specific Western policies, particularly *vis-à-vis* Russia. This is most visible over the issue of sanctions. In general, and unsurprisingly, Russia aggressively promotes the idea that sanctions do not work and should not be extended. Tailoring this theme to the business community, Moscow tries to create the impression that sanctions hurt the EU more than they do Russia. In addition to lost revenue, Moscow hints at its market being permanently lost to competitors, with China often quoted as the actor taking the EU's share. It also tailors this message to national governments, stressing how many jobs they have lost due to the imposition of sanctions.

Moscow's ultimate goal is to convince European audiences that the EU is focused on imagined threats from Russia and neglecting the real ones from the south. Russia also regularly involves itself in other controversial issues inside Europe, be it the Scottish referendum, the Brexit campaign, or the Assange affair. Any potential cleavage or actual divide within the EU is picked up on and amplified. The refugee crisis is a case in point: Russia sought to inflame the issue, supporting an anti-refugee stance verging on outright racism, while suppressing any information inside Russia that could damage relations with its own Muslim communities. So while Russian headlines blamed Europe's excessive tolerance for the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the news of a jihadist-inspired Uzbek migrant who killed a child in Moscow was not even reported on Russian state TV.

The same strands of the Russian narratives are used in the **Eastern Partnership (EaP)** states, albeit with local variations. Attacking EU policies is a *Leitmotiv*, and the Union is often equated with the Soviet Union and described as a hostile geopolitical project. The underlying message is that EaP states escaped the Soviet Union only to lose their freedom again to a similar entity, now equally on the verge of economic collapse. In cultural terms, Europe is presented as a morally decadent civilisation turning its back on Christian traditions. Pro-Kremlin media also warn of an imminent reallocation of refugees from the EU to EaP states, or that Association Agreements will force its signatories to accept gay marriage.

A second line of attack targets the leaders of EU Member States and institutions. The logic behind this is: the worse European leaders look, the weaker the EU as a whole will appear – and the more impressive the Russian leadership will seem in comparison. Accordingly, messages often convey a distorted interpretation of declarations to portray the EU as disrespectful, self-serving and largely uninterested in EaP states. EU membership is deemed unattainable while the EU leadership is depicted as being in the thrall of the US. The EU is also often accused of covering up for corrupt governments or openly interfering in domestic affairs.

Russian campaigns also try to drive a wedge between EaP states and their immediate EU neighbours. Moscow often plants stories in local media about territorial claims (by Romania or Hungary against Ukraine, for example) or other emerging 'security threats' (e.g. 'Roma gangs' from Romania). Russia also presents the Baltics, Romania and Bulgaria as failing states, economically depressed and depopulated second-rate EU members, prophesising the same fate for EaP countries should they join the EU.

In Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia nurtures the elites' chronic fear of externally orchestrated regime change. Narratives portray the EU as seeking to weaken governments to gain access to natural resources or industrial assets on privileged terms. Its financial aid and conditionality, in this context, are described as purposeful efforts to increase indebtedness and thus dependency.

In Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, by contrast, Russia uses uniform messaging on the destructive consequences of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) and visa-free regimes. While the former allegedly leads to deindustrialisation, unemployment, and the loss of access to the Russian market, the latter is said to lead to the risk of refugee reallocation, terror attacks, imposed legislation on LGBT rights, and restrictions on eastward mobility.

Box 4: Gazprom and sports

The Russian energy giant Gazprom has been an important trump card in Moscow's soft power toolbox. While the darker side of its influence can be seen in coercing neighbours based on their energy dependency, it also improves Russia's international standing by sponsoring international sports. Gazprom's foreign investment in this sphere runs along two lines: the financial support of high-profile sports clubs and the funding of major international events and tournaments.

Since 2007, Gazprom has been the shirt sponsor of the German football club Schalke 04, with the latest contract from 2012-2017 amounting to some EUR 20 million per season. The deal, which was allegedly brokered by former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, saved the club from bankruptcy and was especially lucrative for its chairman Clemens Toennies, whose company opened pig farming facilities in Russia in 2007.

Moreover, Gazprom has been the key sponsor of the popular Serbian team 'Red Star Belgrade' ever since the club had serious financial problems in 2010. Since 2012, the company has been Chelsea's energy partner, providing gas and electricity for its training facilities. The London club's owner, Roman Abramovich, is a former key stakeholder of 'Sibneft' (now named Gazprom Neft), and, in 2005, sold his shares in the company to Gazprom for an estimated EUR 10.4 billion.

Since the 2012/2013 season, Gazprom has been a sponsor of the UEFA Champions League. It will also be one of the top sponsors of the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) over the next two years and will co-sponsor the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia.

In 2007, the company launched 'Football for Friendship', an international social project that brings together children from the UK, Germany, Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia and Greece. Since its launch, Gazprom has invested EUR 22 million in the project.

Finally, looking beyond football, Gazprom has been a key sponsor of the 'Kontinental Hockey League' (KHL) since 2008. The KHL was set up as a rival to the prestigious North American National Hockey League (NHL) and has shown promising results: a number of teams from Belarus, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Kazakhstan, Latvia and Slovakia have recently joined. Moreover, the KHL has succeeded in recruiting top-level international players and coaches.

Russia also has a rather complex communications strategy – and significant infrastructure – in large parts of the **Western Balkans**. For example, it sponsors Serbian-language media, both online and in print, that reach out to audiences across former Yugoslavia. And in 2014, Sputnik launched a service in Serbian, including a digital radio station. There have also been reports of RT launching a channel in Serbian – and of the prominent film director Emir Kusturica being touted as its prospective director – but this has yet to materialise.

There are also a number of media groups financed by and from Moscow (although not openly) which promote the Kremlin's worldview, often in combination with conspiracy theories and Serbian ultra-nationalism. These include periodicals and online portals such as *Geopolitika, Vostok, News Front, Ruski ekspres,* and *Gazeta.* Last but not least, there are local outlets that explicitly back the Kremlin (*Pravda*, *Pečat*, *Oslobodjenje, Srbin.INFO, SnagaNaroda* radio, and the Macedonian portal *Infomax*), and openly pro-Kremlin views also feature in parts of the established print and electronic media. For instance, a recent column for *Politika*, Serbia's oldest daily, by analyst Miroslav Lazanski denounced the Panama Papers revelations as a US-sponsored attack on Putin.

Russia's strategic communications are further sustained by a growing network of organisations ranging from governmental agencies to government-sponsored NGOs, civic associations, student groups, and political movements or parties. A recent report by the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, a Belgrade-based think tank, counts 80 such entities. The list features *Ruski dom* (Russian House), an institution that traces its roots back to the interwar White Russian émigrés and which now hosts the local branch of the *Rossiiskii institute strategicheskih issledovanii* (Russian Institute for Strategic Studies*)* – an organisation attached to the presidency of the Russian Federation. It also hosts the Alexander Gorchakov Foundation, whose board includes Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. There are also other Russian think tanks active in Serbia – such as the Strategic Culture Foundation, which runs a portal in Serbian – as well as a host of local associations cooperating with them (e.g. the New Serbian Political Thought Foundation).

Many political parties have ties to Russia, be it the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), led by Vojislav Seselj, who was recently acquitted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, or the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). The same applies to the Dveri political movement, as well as minor players such as the Third Serbia Party. Moreover, Putin's United Russia party maintains links with a number of political groups in the region, such as the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats which governs the Republika Srpska and was expelled from the Socialist International association in 2011 because of its nationalist policies.

The Serbian Orthodox Church also advocates closer ties with Russia, and it is probably no coincidence that Gazprom recently promised to fund the restoration of the St. Sava Cathedral in Belgrade. Patriarch Irinej has argued that the Serbian government should thank Moscow for preventing Kosovo's admittance to UNESCO in November 2015 and advanced the view that Serbia and Russia are united in the standoff with Europe and the US. In addition, Metropolitan Amfilohije, the church's head in Montenegro (which faces competition from the autonomous Montenegrin Orthodox Church), has lobbied for a referendum on NATO accession.

Box 5: Russia in Israel

Russian efforts to influence public opinion and decision-making in its neighbouring countries have been ongoing, and well documented, since the 1930s. But its presence in other countries often goes untold. When Israel gained independence, the socialist labour party leading the government was ideologically sympathetic towards the Soviet Union (which was the first country to recognise Israel *de jure* in 1948). Over the course of the Cold War that sympathy was significantly eroded by Israel's ties to the West. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, over one million Russian Jews immigrated to Israel. These new-comers soon made up 20 % of the Israeli population and formed their own political parties, media outlets and economic networks.

'Israel Beitenu' ('Israel our home'), the political party perceived to represent the Russian electorate in Israel – and led by Avigdor Liberman, who served as Israeli foreign minister between 2009-2015 – allegedly has strong ties to the Putin administration. Liberman and his party members have been vocal supporters of Russia and its foreign and counter-terrorism policies. A former close aide within the party also volunteered to serve as an international observer in the Russian elections, which he subsequently

lauded as being free and fair.

The biggest Russian-speaking channel in Israel is the only national TV station to broadcast news without being monitored by the Israeli Broadcast Commission. The channel's owner, a mysterious Russian millionaire who is allegedly closely linked to Liberman, replaced the previous news editor with a media expert who had previously served as Ramzan Kadyrov's spokesperson shortly after completing the purchase. The channel generally promotes right-wing nationalist views while Russia's pro-Palestinian actions receive little to no coverage. Furthermore, Russia's actions in the region – including its recent involvement in the Syrian conflict – are often portrayed as coinciding with Israeli interests.

2.3   Russia's impact

There is little comparable or systematic polling data across the EU on issues that concern Russia, directly or indirectly. Yet the claims of a highly successful Russian 'soft power' offensive across the EU are probably exaggerated (the picture in the EaP countries and the Western Balkans is more mixed though). The few opinion polls available show a clear deterioration of Russia's image throughout the EU over the last few years, especially after the crisis began in Ukraine.

Russia has not been particularly successful in selling its narrative on Ukraine to the European public. Clear majorities in key EU member states blamed the outbreak of war in Ukraine on either Russia or pro-Russian separatists, whereas Russia's official line was that the conflict was the fault of Ukraine and the West. That said, as an indication of the appeal that the Russian message has in some segments of the EU public, the same polls suggested that 15-20 % of people bought Moscow's argument. So although Russia is certainly not winning the war for hearts and minds on the European front, nor is it dominating the European public debate on certain issues, it is not losing, either. Russian narratives have 'trickled up' to significant parts of the European elite and influenced the EU's approaches to Russia (and Ukraine), while playing on growing internal dissatisfaction within the Union.

Box 6: Inside Russia

The propaganda spread by the Kremlin during the Ukraine crisis has led Russians to adopt negative attitudes towards the EU. But although Russian citizens have become more sceptical of European values and norms, they did not perform a volte-face overnight.

The anti-EU campaign began in February 2014 and reached fever pitch over the ensuing two months as President Yanukovich was deposed, Crimea annexed and the Donbas destablised. News programmes increased in length and people tuned in for longer each evening, while Ukraine dominated the headlines. This had a decisive impact on perceptions of the conflict because over 80% of Russians receive their news from TV.

As pro-Kremlin narratives claim that the EU triggered the Ukraine crisis by forcing Yanukovich to choose between East and West, the Union did not emerge from this campaign unscathed. Russians' perceptions about the state of their country's relations with the EU changed dramatically, from decidedly positive in early 2013 to decidely negative just a year and a half later. Indeed, the EU's standing fell even faster than that of the US. When Russians think of 'Europe', they now think not only of 'neighbours and partners' (28 %) but also of 'potential aggressors' (23 %) and the 'guard of US policy on the Eurasian continent' (23 %). The share of Russians who perceive Europe in this way has risen threefold in the last ten years.

Most now agree that the West is hostile to Russia, and that this hostility is reflected in sanctions (55%) and an 'information war' against Russia (44 %). One of the prime drivers of this hostility is thought to be the West's desire 'to seize Russia's natural resources' (41 %). This myth has been repeated time and again in

the media by figures such as Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council. It follows, then, that it would not be contrary to Russian interests if the EU collapsed: a Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTsIOM) poll from July 2015 showed that 49 % of Russians believed that this was in Russia's interest, with just 24 % believing the contrary.

Homosexuality is another issue that is exploited. When Vladimir Putin returned to power for a third term in 2012 (despite a wave of protests), his administration decided to build up his popularity on new ideological foundations. This campaign has manifested itself in a series of public attacks on LGBT rights. When the law against 'gay propaganda' was passed amidst intense media coverage in June 2013, two-thirds of Russians feared that their children or grandchildren could become victims of such messaging. But when the media campaign subsided, so did parents' fears: by April 2015, fewer than half were similarly afraid.

Likewise, refugees are also exploited. In September 2015, a majority of Russian poll respondents said that Europe should let them in. Five months later, however, most Russians believed that their country should not take refugees and 59 % stated that Europe was not obliged to do so, either. Their attitudes almost certainly shifted as a result of a Moscow-driven propaganda campaign that portrayed refugees as dangerous sexual predators. All this has translated into a decline in support for the values that are seen to define the West. In one poll, taken during the height of the refugee crisis, 56 % of respondents said that 'the European political values of freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights' were not important to them.

In the **EaP states**, the central goal of Russia's strategic communications efforts is to shape popular perceptions about the EU. This is facilitated by the language in which messages are communicated, the relative popularity of Russian media and social networks, the existence of sizeable Russian-speaking minorities, the attractiveness of Putin's leadership style, the aggressive promotion of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a viable alternative to the EU, and people's receptiveness to conspiracy theories.

Additional enablers are the home-grown, anti-EU rhetoric of local elites and the apparent failures of allegedly pro-EU governing coalitions. According to the European Neighbourhood Barometer, the number of respondents in the east who view the EU in a negative light swelled from 13 % in 2012 to 21 % in 2014. Polls also revealed an increase (from 26 % to 34 %) of those who do not believe the EU is bringing stability and peace to the region. The EU's image suffered mostly in the less-engaged countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus), but also in Georgia. In Ukraine and Moldova, even anti-Russian sections of the public or the political spectrum often buy some of the Russian narratives about the EU.

Where pro-EU sentiment is stronger, Moscow works to nurture or deepen existing divisions within societies. In Georgia, as memories of the 2008 war slowly fade, attitudes towards Russia and the EAEU are warming. According to polls conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), support for the EU has declined from above 80 % in late 2013 to 61 % in mid-2015. In line with Russia's messaging, fewer Georgians (from almost 60 % in 2014 to 45 % in 2015) now believe that integration with the EU brings benefits. The highly influential Georgian Orthodox Church also reinforces some of the Russian messaging which depicts the EU as a morally decadent entity that focuses excessively on LGBT rights. Yet, despite the clearly conservative and often EU-sceptic opposition from the churches in countries like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, all of their governments adopted anti-discrimination laws – one of the EU's preconditions for visa-free travel.

According to the IPPR, the number of people in Moldova who would vote against Moldova's accession to the EU grew from 18 % in 2010 to 33 % in 2015. If forced to choose, 42 % of Moldovans would currently vote to join EAEU and 39 % would opt for EU membership. Anti-EU sentiment among Russian-speaking

minorities is higher than average (between 60 % and 70 %). But in line with Russia's narratives, even many of those who support integration with the EU think the signed Association Agreement could still damage Moldova.

In Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in the Donbas have temporarily undermined Russia's appeal but have not destroyed it entirely. According to a Razumkov Centre poll, in the contest between integration projects the EU still enjoys a clear (though slowly narrowing) lead over the EAEU – 57 % compared to 16 %. But there is also an equally clear regional divide: support in the west and centre of the country is highest (81 % and 58 %, respectively), while in the south and east, those opposed to joining the EU outnumber supporters (39 % against 33 % in the south and 45 % versus 37 % in the east).

The picture in the **Western Balkans** is somewhat mixed. A Gallup survey from 2014 showed that Serbian citizens believe Russia to be the country's leading donor, well ahead of the EU. However, taken together, the EU and its Member States have spent EUR 3.5 billion in the region since 2000. In contrast, Russia has contributed hardly a tenth of this sum – mostly through loans rather than grants – and lags behind the US or even Japan.

Thanks to its size, its central location in the Western Balkans and the presence of large Serbian communities in neighbouring countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro in particular), Serbia serves as a major conduit of Russian influence on the media, political debates and public opinion in the wider region. Moscow's ability to impact domestic politics and society is therefore significant. Last autumn, for example, the Montenegrin authorities blamed opposition protests on Russian meddling: Prime Minister Milo Djukanović then used the domestic divide between pro-Westerners and pro-Russians to lash out indiscriminately at all of his critics. Moscow is also a key diplomatic ally of Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik, who has threatened to undermine the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Sociological surveys paint a clear picture. In December 2015, the pollster Ipsos found that 72 % of Serbia's citizens hold a positive view of Russia, whereas only 25 % saw the EU (and just 7 % saw NATO) in a positive light. Vladimir Putin is by far the most trusted foreign leader in Serbia, with one poll placing him ahead of Prime Minister Aleksandr Vučić. Republika Srpska is no different, and support tends to peak around highly publicised events: Russia's veto over the UN Security Council resolution branding Srebrenica a genocide (July 2015), President Putin's attendance of the military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade (October 2014), Russian aid after floods struck the country, or the humanitarian convoys sent to the Serbs in northern Kosovo (2011). By contrast, in January 2016, 47.3 % of Montenegrins backed NATO membership compared to 37.1 % against. Support for NATO is even higher in Macedonia (83 %) but, as the country's accession is blocked, there is no pressing need for it to choose between Moscow and the West.

But the fact that Russia is capable of winning hearts and minds in the region does not necessarily give it leverage over government policy. Serbia is, yet again, a case in point. Prime Minister Vučić has strengthened ties with the West, pursuing EU membership and deepening cooperation with NATO. Nevertheless, Belgrade, Skopje and Sarajevo (because of Republika Srpska) refused to support EU sanctions against Russia and are keen to reap the economic dividends from continued ties with Moscow. By contrast, Montenegro, aiming for speedy integration into NATO and the EU, implemented and backed the restrictive measures. Even though the country has seen high levels of Russian investment – in the industrial sector, tourism and real estate – its leadership clearly cast its lot with the West. And elsewhere in the region, especially in Albania, Russian influence is negligible.

Just like their governments, citizens in most Western Balkan countries would prefer to have their cake and eat it, too, i.e. to integrate into the EU without turning their back on Russia. When the chips are down, however, there is a strong preference for the EU. Even in Serbia, opinion polls show that a great majority

would rather live, work and study in Western Europe than in Russia. What the EU lacks is Russia's emotional appeal rooted in a common cultural belonging and a shared sense of victimhood at the hands of the West.

Box 7: East StratCom Task Force

In 2015, the EU created an East StratCom Task Force focusing on Russian disinformation and based in the European External Action Service (EEAS). It consists of nine full-time communication experts, most of them with Russian language skills. As the team members are from the EU institutions or seconded by Member States, the Task Force is budget-neutral.

The June 2015 EU Action Plan on Strategic Communication set the goals to improve the EU's capacities for effective communication and forecasting, addressing and responding to external disinformation activities, as well as strengthening the overall media environment in the eastern neighbourhood. In this spirit, the Task Force seeks to explain key policy areas and create a positive EU narrative through strategic communications campaigns focusing on the EU's actions in the region, unveiling and de-constructing conspiracy theories, and countering disinformation. It concentrates its activities mainly on the EU's eastern neighbours rather than the Member States themselves. In order to bridge cultural gaps, the Task Force individually tailors action plans for each target country and assists the EEAS and EU Delegations by optimising the communication of their work in the region.

The Task Force releases a 'Disinformation Review' and a 'Disinformation Digest' on a weekly basis. These offer a systematic overview of cases of disinformation and highlight broader media trends. They are promoted through a Twitter account – @EUvsDisinfo – with nearly 7,000 followers generating 500,000 tweet impressions per month. Moreover, the EEAS has started releasing communiqués in Russian and in February launched a Russian language website which averages 190,000 unique page views per month, or 25% of the total traffic to the EEAS website as a whole. In future, the Task Force aims to upgrade its activities from a tactical to strategic level, to increase its cooperation with EU Delegations and the Commission, and to pool existing resources more efficiently.

Responses to Russian disinformation by others

In July 2015, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) released a report assessing the feasibility of countering disinformation in the Russian language media space. Faced with the appeal and wide diffusion of Russian broadcasting throughout the eastern neighbourhood, the report proposes a series of measures aimed at increasing the quality and dissemination of well-balanced independent media reporting in the region. This includes the establishment of a regional news hub, a centre for media excellence and a basket fund.

The Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) has launched the 'Information Warfare Initiative'. Led by regional experts, it seeks to collect, analyse and rebut Russian disinformation disseminated in central and eastern European media. It has an active online presence, conducts media monitoring, organises workshops and produces policy recommendations.

The website *Stopfake.org* was launched in March 2014 by staff and alumni of the Kiev-based Mohyla School of Journalism and is supported by a network of journalists, translators and experts. It is dedicated to fact-checking and refuting disinformation in international media coverage on Ukraine.

EU Delegations' presence on Twitter and Facebook in EaP countries

Country	Twitter	Facebook
Armenia	140 tweets (8 in Armenian); 2 512 followers	52 posts (50 in Armenian); 18 076 likes
Azerbaijan	N/A	18 posts (11 in Azeri); 16 948 likes
Belarus	N/A	27 posts (20 in Belarusian, 5 in Russian); 2 949 likes
Georgia	20 tweets; 941 followers	16 posts (14 in Georgian); 20 720 likes
Moldova	N/A	24 posts (3 in Romanian, 1 in Russian); 4 396 likes
Ukraine	227 tweets (95 in Ukrainian, 6 in Russian); 6 181 followers	96 posts (62 in Ukrainian, 5 in Russian); 16 613 likes
Russia	85 tweets (77 in Russian); 2 190 followers	50 posts (all in Russian); 8 838 likes

Month reviewed: 18 March to 18 April 2016

EU Delegations' presence on Twitter and Facebook in the Western Balkans

Country	Twitter	Facebook
Albania	527 tweets (33 in Albanian); 2 967 followers	148 posts (92 in Albanian); 10 808 likes
Bosnia and Herzegovina	320 tweets (82 in Bosnian); 5 943 followers	47 posts (all in Bosnian); 20 146 likes
Montenegro	126 tweets (64 in Montenegrin); 1 328 followers	48 posts (all in Montenegrin); 2 763 likes
Kosovo	22 tweets (3 in Serbian, 3 in Albanian); 4 308 followers	30 posts (2 in Serbian); 20 219 likes
Serbia	228 tweets (178 in Serbian); 9 074 followers	49 posts (48 in Serbian); 11 342 likes

Month reviewed: 18 March to 18 April 2016

3 NATO's strategic communications

The Russian occupation of Crimea was described by NATO Supreme Allied Commander Philip Breedlove as perhaps 'the most amazing blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare'. However, the alliance's concern about (dis)information campaigns and what is now called 'strategic communications' has a long history.

While not called strategic communications then, the threat of Soviet covert action subverting influence, intimidating domestic audiences and undermining governing political structures was very real in Western Europe throughout the Cold War. Communist propaganda increased after the creation of the Cominform (Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties) in 1947. Its establishment made it possible for the Soviet Union, its satellite states in eastern Europe and Communist parties in Western Europe to coordinate their information and propaganda efforts and to exploit the divisions among countries in the West.

The concern over Soviet propaganda and influence led several countries in the West to establish their own information and (counter-) propaganda organisations. However, many Western European countries were reluctant to enter into any close cooperation on matters of intelligence – even with close neighbours and allies – and preferred to keep intelligence under national control.

The NATO Information Service (NATIS) – today's *Public Diplomacy Division* – was founded in 1950. Its main job during the Cold War was to promote NATO among the publics in the member states but not directly engage in anti-communist propaganda. Support for NATO was particularly weak in countries with large and well-organised communist parties. With only a small proportion of the population aware of what NATO was and how it functioned, it was feared that communist propaganda could exploit this widespread ignorance and undermine the defence efforts of the organisation as a whole. NATIS coordinated the work by member governments in this field, and produced its own information material (poster, pamphlets, lectures and seminar series, films, and travelling exhibitions). However, a lack of enthusiasm from many member governments and the absence of a dedicated budget forced NATIS to rely on irregular national contributions, thereby limiting its work. In fact, several European NATO members resisted greater centralisation and information sharing efforts, believing instead that each country should remain free to tailor its (counter-) propaganda activities to national requirements and needs.

Box 8: Radio days

While the internet and social media are today's weapons of choice in the current war of words and ideologies, radio was the key tool used in the past. Radio broadcasts, just like the internet today, could in fact directly address the population in 'enemy-controlled' territories.

Believing that the Cold War was as much a battle for the hearts and minds of the people as it was a contest of hard power, the US dedicated significant resources to counter-information and propaganda. Able to reach across the Iron Curtain, radio broadcasts made alternative information and ideas available to people in the east and helped to undermine public support for communist regimes. According to academic studies, as many as half of the adult population in eastern Europe and a third of adults in urban areas in the Soviet Union listened to Western radio broadcasts.

Radio Free Europe (RFE), Radio Liberty (RL), and Voice of America (VoA) were all set up in the early phases of the Cold War by the US government and drew on the talents and knowledge of Russian, as well as central and eastern European émigrés in support of US foreign policy. These radio stations provided an alternative to local official media in eastern Europe for communist and non-communist elites, as well as the general population at large – and in their own language. The programmes focused

on local news not covered by state-controlled domestic media, as well as on religion, science, sports, Western music and literature banned by the local regimes. RFE and RL also gave a voice to the opposition movements that later would emerge as leaders of the new post-communist democracies.

After the end of the Cold War, RFE/RL gradually ceased their broadcasts towards eastern Europe. At the same time, several new broadcast services were launched as a response to the breakup of Yugoslavia: in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian in early 1994, in Albanian (to Kosovo) in 1999, and in Macedonian and Albanian (to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) in 2001. Broadcasts to the greater Middle East began in Arabic (to Iraq) and in Persian (to Iran) in 1998. In 2002, broadcasts in Dari and Pashto (to Afghanistan) resumed, after having already been aired throughout the 1980s during the Soviet occupation. Also in 2002, RL revived broadcasts in local languages to the North Caucasus that had been suspended since the 1960s. In 2010, RFE/RL began broadcasting in local Pashto dialects to the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to provide an alternative to jihadist radio stations.

3.1   Back to the future?

The NATO *Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence* (StratCom CoE) has been operational since January 2014. Based in Riga, the centre values strategic communications as a tool to achieve both its political and military objectives. NATO StratCom CoE has 23 staff members, roughly split between administrative staff and experts. These staff members come from – and coordinate with – the civilian, military, private and academic sectors to support and further NATO's communications processes. In addition to publishing analysis, including occasional reports and the twice-yearly peer-reviewed journal *Defence Strategic Communications*, NATO StratCom CoE leverages modern technologies and virtual tools to provide practical support to the alliance.

According to the StratCom CoE website, in 2015, the centre's main activities were:

- Support the development of a NATO Military Committee Strategic Communications policy and doctrine;
- Research how to identify the early signals of a hybrid warfare scenario;
- Develop Academic Magazine *Defence Strategic Communications*;
- Study Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine;
- Research how NATO and its members could protect themselves from subversive leverage;
- Research 10 years of ISAF Strategic Communications efforts to extract best practices and lessons learned;
- Analyse the implementation of the NATO Strategic Communications policy throughout the NATO Command Structure;
- Research the implementation of Strategic Communications within Allied nations;
- Research ISIL information campaign and its influence on NATO countries' societies;
- Develop Strategic Communications online course 'Strategic Communications for beginners' courses for senior officials, basic and advanced courses for international staff officers;
- Support NATO StratCom training and education, including exercises education; and
- Study how social media is being used as a weapon in hybrid warfare.

To date, NATO is not known to have launched a strategic communications campaign against ISIL.

4   Strategic communications from the south: ISIL

The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) quickly gained a solid reputation with regard to its strategic communications. Not only *what* it communicates, but also *how* – with its slick magazines and videos, and effective use of social media – has redefined the way in which political messages are being relayed in conflict. ISIL's strategic communications are tailored to several audiences, ranging from international opponents who are susceptible to the idea of a 'clash of civilisations' to active members of ISIL and potential recruits. But, ultimately, all of them are tied into the organisation's long-term political project: the ensuring of its own survival, ideally with the largest amount of territory possible under its control. To this effect, the purpose of ISIL's strategic communications is fourfold:

- to portray itself as an effective organisation (both militarily and in terms of governance);
- to attract and retain recruits;
- to explain its raison d'être;
- to instil fear and polarise societies.

In this sense, ISIL's messaging has been both consistent and truly strategic.

4.1   ISIL's grand narrative(s)…

ISIL's narrative draws on several sources to craft its messages, creatively combining Islamic religious texts, conspiracy theories in which Muslims are the objects of Western oppression, and underdog and youth culture narratives. The resulting 'brand' which emerges has been dubbed 'jihadi cool', or as sympathiser 'Bint Chaos' put it on her blog:

'Jihadis look cool—like ninjas or video game warriors—gangstah and thuggish even—the opposition doesnt.' Team CVE [a reference to Countering Violent Extremism] consists 'mostly [of] middleaged white guys with a smidgin of scared straight ex-mujahids [ex-jihadists] and a couple middleaged women. (…) Jihadis have cool weapons. And cool nasheeds [a cappella hymns]…' She continues with: they also have 'young fiery imams that fight on the battlefield,' whereas Team CVE 'has ancient creaky dollar scholars… [S]alafi-jihadism made being pious cool. It became cool to quote aya [verse] and study Quran. And CVE has absolutely no defense against this. … I love jihadi cant—dem, bait, preeing, binty, akhi [brother]… its like Belter dialect in the Expanse. And it borrows from all languages—because jihad draws from all races and ethnicities. The voice of youth counterculture and revolution for an underclass. Like ghetto culture in the US—the inexorable evolution of cool.'

ISIL's narrative rests essentially on six elements which are used roughly in equal measure. Although the brutality element is the one which is most frequently cited in international media, its other themes of mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism feature just as much, if not more[3].

The use of **brutality** represents triumphalism and acts as a show of power. Designed largely with Arab and 'local' audiences in mind, the depiction of harsh punishments for alleged spies and traitors aims to discourage all forms of collaboration with the enemy. The beheading and crucifixion of soldiers in Mosul, for instance, contributed greatly to the desertion of elements of the Iraqi military. As a side effect, it also instils fear into potential adversaries outside of its territory.

This is mirrored by the **mercy** that ISIL demonstrates in other videos, where repentance is rewarded. Together, these two themes send the message that ISIL is harsh yet just, and that whether an individual is subjected to brutality or mercy is a consequence of his or her actions.

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[3] C. Winter, *The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy*, Quilliam Foundation, 2015.

At the same time, ISIL uses a narrative of **victimhood** to justify its 'resistance' and 'retaliation' against the 'Zionist-Crusader' complex, which it claims is waging a global war on Islam. Examples ranging from the creation of Middle Eastern states by colonial powers to the occupations of Palestine or Iraq all play into this part of its mythmaking.

This somewhat paradoxically ties into the next theme: **war**, which serves to demonstrate ISIL's military capabilities. Despite the fact that it claims to face a global anti-Muslim conspiracy, ISIL promotes the message that it is an aggressive state that is to be feared. Weapon types are frequently mentioned or military hardware displayed to showcase expertise, prestige and technical skills. An additional element is that war is reported on selectively and to ISIL's advantage. The group controls much of the information about its campaigns, since there are often few 'independent' journalists on the ground to provide audiences with an alternative, or to verify whether ISIL's reporting is indeed correct. Local news outlets, such as 'Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently' have to operate under highly dangerous circumstances. As a result, even its antagonists rely on ISIL material to report on its activities. That said, French media outlets recently begun to label this material as 'propaganda', but the majority of it passes without ISIL being highlighted as the source.

This (dis)information bestows an immediate sense of **belonging** to an in-group with a specific set of religious grievances. Videos exhibiting camaraderie during and after combat, for instance, capture this sense of togetherness. It has been argued, however, that this element of inclusion is more important in ISIL's appeal to Western recruits than to 'local' audiences.

Finally, all these narratives are weaved together to form perhaps the most important theme: ISIL's **utopian alternative**. This projected utopianism is key to understanding – and countering – ISIL's appeal, as it reveals that the group does not merely aim to undermine the existing world order, but offer a constructive revolutionary alternative. And this alternative is not just theoretical: it allegedly already exists in its proclaimed caliphate, which, according to ISIL, is on the path to restoring the Islamic Golden Age of the 8th-13th centuries.

4.2   …and target audiences

Each of ISIL's narratives outlined above serves a certain purpose and is tailored to a specific audience. Its goals are manifold, and range from rallying support to mobilising fighters, warning locals against collaboration with enemies, and provoking responses from local or international foes. It is worth noting that ISIL does not rely on strategic communications to raise funds – most of its financial resources come from activities inside its territories. These aims hint at the cyclical and self-reinforcing nature of the overall ISIL narrative, and its dependency on enemies to express their animosity towards the group both verbally and physically.

There are broadly four different types of audiences which are addressed – each in a different manner. The first target audience is the individuals living under direct ISIL control. These receive less electronic and more real-life messaging in the form of public viewing of films, posters, announcements and leaflets. The primary purposes of these communications are to encourage cooperation and to prevent the emergence of opposition. In the territories under its control, ISIL has used both carrots and sticks: it has highlighted its ability to govern as much as it has regularly and publicly executed alleged spies and others defiant of its rule. Brutality is therefore chiefly employed for this type of audience, along with mercy or justice.

Audiences outside ISIL's territory are reached mostly through electronic means. However, it tailors its messages depending on the target and goals.

The second target audience is Muslims across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The messages are often in Arabic and serve the purposes of recruiting fighters and garnering local support in order to expand ISIL activities into third countries.

Around half of ISIL's foreign fighters are Arabs (6,000 from Tunisia, 2,500 from Saudi Arabia, 2,000 from Jordan, 1,500 from Morocco, 1,000 from Egypt to name the top senders), whereas its 'national' component is Iraqi and Syrian. This makes it a predominantly Arab organisation in spite of its international claims. But recruitment is no longer ISIL's main goal with regard to Arab audiences – its communications strategy is instead designed to build up support on the ground rather than attract people to journey to its territory. This is in line with its five-year expansion plan covering the territory of the 15th-century Abbasid Empire and beyond – an area which essentially includes most Muslim-majority countries in the MENA plus those previously under Ottoman or Arab control, such as Spain or the states of the Balkans. Consequently, its focus has been to encourage the creation of local spinoffs (called 'provinces') in these areas. Some of these have been very active (Egypt, Libya, Yemen), while others less so (Saudi Arabia, Algeria)[4].

ISIL's third audience is non-Arab Muslims, with a focus on those in Europe, as well as in the former Soviet Republics. Together, these two regions make up the second-largest group of foreign fighters (after Arabs). For the time being, these groups are targeted mainly for recruitment purposes. The main messages relayed to them build on notions of utopia and belonging, although humanitarian purposes, war and justice can be used (especially in individual recruitment attempts) if need be. The main feature of European messaging is the creation of an alternative, utopian lifestyle in which the individual will find meaning, belonging and adventure. Most messages for this audience are spun in a positive rather than negative way, although life in Europe is occasionally portrayed as making life impossible for pious Muslims.

ISIL's fourth audience is its formal enemies – the 'Zionist-Crusaders' it needs in order to justify its existence. ISIL's targets, therefore, is not merely a pool of potential recruits and the function of its messaging is not solely radicalisation. It also relies on triggering reactions from enemies and propagating an apocalyptic view of an inevitable clash between Muslim and non-Muslim civilisations in order to have a reason to exist. Applauding the terrorist attacks on Paris and Brussels, threatening other European cities, and beheading Western journalists all have the function of projecting ISIL as an opponent of Western states – not only in the eyes of its own declared enemies, but also in the eyes of its supporters. Without an enemy, ISIL has no reason to fight, and consequently no leverage to attract recruits and individuals wishing to be part of its political project. As ISIL's narrative revolves around being a valiant underdog, the organisation needs a strong opponent perhaps more than anything else in order to exist[5].

Box 9: ISIL in Palestine

The Palestinian question is an example of a political issue that ISIL co-opts in its grand narrative, transforming it from one based on *political* grievances to a *religious* clash of civilisations. Matters related to Palestine feature frequently in ISIL publications: they include the living situation in Gaza and the casualties inflicted by Israel, but also the illegitimacy of the Hamas leadership. ISIL also makes frequent use of religious symbols in Jerusalem, with the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock often featured in videos and statements. It usually refers to Jerusalem not as al-Quds, as most Palestinians and Arabs do, but as *bayt al-maqdis* (the holy house). The term features often in the Hadiths, and is generally seen as carrying a clearly religious connotation. In doing so, ISIL attempts to usurp the Palestinian issue into its own narrative, even directly challenging Palestinian conceptions of the conflict. For example,

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[4] Although Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabab in Somalia have declared allegiance to ISIL, they have not been recognised as *wilayets* or administrative subunits by ISIL's central command.

[5] For more information on ISIS and Palestine see Samar Batrawi, *Understanding ISIS's Palestine Propaganda*' Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, March 30, 2016

one ISIL statement read 'Your struggle is not about land, but about right versus wrong. It's about religion.' The idea promoted is that Jerusalem will only truly be liberated when it is governed by Muslims and according to Islamic law.

The underlying reasons for this co-optation may be religious or strategic – or indeed both – in nature, since ensuring Muslim control over Islamic holy places is key to ISIL's agenda. But the Palestinian issue also seems to play well with some of ISIL's target audiences. Given that 88% of Palestinians perceive ISIL to be a radical organisation, the group tends not to use the Palestinian question for recruitment purposes amongst Palestinians. Instead, Palestine is part of a list of *Muslim* (rather than Arab) grievances which will supposedly be resolved by ISIL in the long term.

4.3   ISIL's modus operandi

ISIL's communication tactics are creative and make use of modern technology, particularly when it comes to those audiences outside of its territory. It is important to note, however, that not all ISIL propaganda is produced by the organisation itself. Instead, its strategic communications have moved from a vertical to a horizontal way of messaging. Entities such as the Al-Hayat Media Centre remain at the core of its communication efforts, but fighters and sympathisers equally produce content which is unlikely to be entirely under the control of the ISIL central command. Nevertheless, this communication style is ultimately to ISIL's advantage as it is faster and more flexible. Personal and official messages thus become blurred: a video produced by a European sympathiser will, for example, disseminate amongst other sympathisers without any effort required from the organisation. This resonates particularly well with European jihadists whose scene is less hierarchical than the Arab one.

Outside the territory under its control, ISIL has used different ways to reach its audiences. Social media in particular has become a battleground for ISIL – in part because it is difficult to control. Social media platforms not only struggle with monitoring their users, banning them does not prevent them from returning under a different alias. This 'whack-a-mole' game that ISIL has played on Twitter and elsewhere means the organisation can never fully be blocked – but its life can be made more difficult. Twitter, for instance, repeatedly shuts down jihadist accounts, closing some 125,000 of them between mid-2015 and spring 2016. Although this does not stop ISIL operatives or sympathisers from returning, it does affect their impact to a modest extent as it takes time to accumulate followers.

ISIL uses these online forums mainly for recruitment and to gain support, but these are highly individualised approaches in terms of both sender and receiver. The numbers of ISIL accounts on Twitter are debated: while some studies put it at 50,000, not all have the same function. Some generate content (about 1,000), while others are designed to retweet or to promote new accounts of users which had previously been suspended. But ISIL has found other ways to maximise its Twitter impact. A specially designed app (named *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*) connected ISIL's communications department to supporters, who would automatically retweet its messages – but in a way that would defy Twitter's spam-detection algorithm. This way, ISIL managed to send out 40,000 messages a day until Google Play was able to remove the app from its store three months later.

Most of ISIL's Twitter users are located in Syria and Iraq or in contested territories rather than in Europe or the US: 80 % of their messages are sent in Arabic and 20 % in English or other languages. These users, however, interact only with each other rather than gathering new supporters – the medium therefore serves more as a meeting place than a megaphone.

Another tool, used especially for recruitment, is Facebook (or similar websites). Because the network's features actively connect people who express sympathy for posts (via a 'Like' button), it allows for the identification of even passive users as sympathisers. More importantly, ISIL uses sites in the 'Dark Web' to

connect with supporters and spread its propaganda. Difficult to access, these hidden sites and forums move and are less traceable than Facebook or Twitter accounts, posing a problem for security services.

But ISIL also uses broader, less personalised modern methods such as videos. Apart from the brutal beheading films that are designed to project power and instil fear, ISIL also has more benign videos. They typically show glorified clips of young men firing weapons, laughing or praying together – a depiction of the aforementioned utopian narrative. The videos are often narrated by a native English or French speaker, and accompanied by Quranic songs. Videos are also used to comment on events such as the terrorist attacks in Brussels, or to threaten certain audiences.

While the cutting and editing of these videos has been lauded as professional, they can be easily produced with apps such as iMovie. ISIL also uses computer game imagery or references in its videos – just as it has made use of computer games themselves. It has modified popular games such as *Grand Theft Auto 5* and *ARMA 3* so that users can play as ISIL fighters or kill Western civilians and police. It is worth noting that modifying such games is in itself not innovative and not particularly difficult to do. However, it points to a certain age group of both issuer and target and contributes to the creation of 'jihadi cool' as a brand.

ISIL also uses more classical tools of communication such as magazines and declarations. *Dabiq* magazine is its main printed publication and was first published in July 2014. It has been published at varying intervals, with the 14th issue released in April 2016. Named after the Syrian town where it is believed that the final battle leading to apocalypse will take place, it features doctrinal articles, comments on political events, portraits of fallen fighters, depictions of life under ISIL rule and news from the frontline. Issued in .pdf format, it is formatted like a glossy magazine. It is regularly available in English and Arabic, and certain issues have also been translated into other languages[6].

Lastly, ISIL also issues declarations on events it considers important – such as the Paris or Brussels attacks – through its official channels. It uses religious language in these declarations to bolster its Islamic credentials, and translates them into several languages.

4.4   Counter-narratives in Arabic

Although ISIL often emphasises its appeal to all Muslims and its Islamic roots, it does not enjoy overwhelming support in the Muslim or Arab world[7]. In fact, there are many counter-narrative campaigns against ISIL in Arabic. There are two forms of counter-narrative which are most prevalent: satire and theological discussions.

The most dynamic space within which Arabic language counter-narratives are taking place is on YouTube. Not only can individual activists upload content, but official television stations in the Arab world also publish their shows on the free platform, meaning that the content is both diverse and easily accessible. **Satire** is the most prominent form of counter-narrative, with both official state-led television channels and activists engaged in the use of irony or sarcasm to undermine the core elements of ISIL's message. For example, the Iraqi Media Foundation produced a satirical programme called 'The State of Superstition' (a word play on 'The Islamic State'), which mainly tackles the themes of brutality and mercy. The programme's episodes have been viewed up to 900,000 times, with the most watched one featuring a trial of popular animated character 'SpongeBob Squarepants'.

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[6] For a full list of media offices and branches see C. Winter, *The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy*, p.14.

[7] See, for example, this Pew Research Center poll of 11 countries in which all countries except Pakistan had between 41-99% 'very unfavorable' views of ISIL, Pakistan having 19% of people poll 'very unfavorable' with 62% of respondents refusing to submit an answer: http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/11/17/views-of-isis-topline/

Another influential video is a specific episode of the Palestinian television show *Watan A Watar* (Homeland on a Thread), which generally serves as a critique of Palestinian society and politics. The episode in question mocks the brutality and mercy meted out at an ISIL checkpoint, and received just under two million views and extensive coverage in the English language press.

Examples of other counter-narratives include a series of powerful animated movies created by local activists in Syria. One, entitled 'No Difference', shows how both ISIL and the Assad regime make use of the same violent methods, and are therefore just as bad as each other. Finally, in another video entitled 'ISIS 2080', ISIL fighters nostalgically narrate what life was like before ISIL: electricity, running water, cars, planes, freedom, and even Islam are named as relics from a distant past. The message is that reversing modernity is not desirable, and that the alternative that ISIL offers is in fact a *dystopia*.

Theological discussions also constitute an important counter-narrative, as intra-Salafi debates about the legitimacy of ISIL have led to a number of high-profile religious figures such as Abu Basir al-Tartusi, Adnan al-Aroor, Safar al-Hawali, Muhammad al-Arefe, and many others publishing statements and videos which criticise ISIL on theological grounds. Muhammad al-Arefe, for example, is a high-profile religious scholar from Saudi Arabia with a vast following, and more than 690,000 subscribers on YouTube. He often dedicates his Friday sermon to the Syrian conflict, and has criticised ISIL's use of *takfir* (accusing another Muslim of apostasy, and using this as a justification for violence against them). Islamic scholars and leaders from around the world also released an open letter denouncing ISIL, addressed to the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Box 10: Open letter to al-Baghdadi

One of the most powerful theological counter-narratives against ISIL is the open letter to its leader, originally published in Arabic in 2014, which remains open for signature by any religious leader or scholar who wishes to do so. The list of 175 signatories to date includes the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the vice-president of Al-Azhar University. Some of its most important criticisms of ISIL are:

- The 'cherry-picking' of Quranic verses as the basis for legal arguments and *fatwas*, and doing so without mastery of the Arabic language, and with a vast oversimplification of sharia law, and ignorance of contemporary reality;
- The killing of innocent people, emissaries, ambassadors, diplomats, aid workers, and journalists, all of which is forbidden according to Islam;
- Misconduct of jihad without the right cause, purpose, and rules of conduct;
- *Takfir*: the declaration of people as non-Muslim, and mistreating in any way 'people of the scripture', which includes Yazidis;
- Forcible conversion, torture, and the disfiguration of the dead in the name of God;
- The denial of the rights of women and children;
- The execution of legal measures without the correct procedures that ensure justice and mercy;
- The declaration of a caliphate without the consensus of all Muslims.

Although powerful and important, this letter is also part of a potentially endless toing and froing, where both sides reject each other's claims on the basis that their opponent does not represent 'true Islam'. Additionally, some of the individuals and groups which denounce ISIL more generally on religious grounds are not necessarily ones with which the EU would wish to be associated, such as the Taliban, Hamas, or Hizbullah. Counter-narratives must therefore tread carefully in this highly politicised landscape.

These Arabic language counter-narratives could help Europeans understand how and why certain content and styles are received by Arabic-speaking audiences. The wider problems surrounding the credibility of external counter-narrative campaigns still remains, as does the question of how European initiatives should deal with the fact that engaging with 'local' counter-narratives inevitably means engaging with indigenous visions for the future of the Middle East – most of which are focused on reconstructing or dismantling existing elite-based power-structures and fulfilling demands that the international community has thus far viewed as secondary to 'stability'.

4.5 Counter-narratives in English and other languages

One of the elements of international policy towards ISIL has been the establishment of counter-narratives, too. These serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, from a broader strategic perspective, they serve to discredit ISIL's grand narrative. On the other hand, there is a more immediate tactical element to these campaigns, which is to counter the potentially radicalising effects of ISIL's output.

The existing counter-narrative campaigns are not organised by a single overarching institution or initiative, and although the coalition fighting ISIL (at least in theory) sought to coordinate its efforts, these have not worked as well as hoped. Furthermore, states which are not participating in the operation are excluded from such streamlining efforts. In Europe, both the EU and its Member States have launched strategic communications campaigns against ISIL. The EU's efforts have focused on two different theatres of operation: the first in the MENA, and the second in Europe.

The first project, born at the EU home affairs ministerial meeting in January 2015, right after the Charlie Hébdo attacks, is the Belgian-British Syria Strategic Communication Advisory Team (SSCAT), financed by the European Commission. The team, staffed entirely by nationals from these two countries, seeks to provide an advisory service to Member States interested in developing their own strategic communications capacity to address national domestic communications challenges. This work was intended to focus particularly on the departure of European nationals and residents to Syria, but has grown to encompass Islamophobia and the resurgence of the far right and left, particularly in relation to the migration crisis.

At the project's inception in January 2015, the power of communications in radicalising – but also in protecting – citizens was little understood. SSCAT has established a network of professionals representing 26 Member States who are able to exchange experiences and monitor developments in the way ISIL and other extremist groups (including far-right and far-left organisations) can exploit communications to radicalise and recruit European citizens. The first phase of the project will close in July 2016, giving way to a second phase which will focus on bolstering the research capabilities available to the SSCAT network and building partnerships between governments, civil society, EU institutions and the private sector. The intended result of SSCAT's work is a strong partnership across Europe that can challenge radicalising material and reinforce the overwhelming positive narratives that exist across Europe and its Member States but which, at present, are marginalised by the pace and scale of communications from ISIL and other extremist groups.

One such example, although SSCAT was not involved in it, is France's 'Stop Djihadisme'. A dedicated website containing information regarding ISIL, it also has a counter-narrative to it – most notably a powerful video directly challenging a typical ISIL clip called *Ils te disent* (they tell you). By the end of the project pilot in July 2016, SSCAT will have delivered bespoke communications advice to 15 Member States and created a network of 26 Member States sharing communications best practices.

Box 11: Arab StratCom Task Force

At its February 2015 Foreign Affairs Council, the EU expressed its commitment to 'improving its strategic communication, developing an outreach strategy to the Arab world, including developing counter-narratives to terrorist propaganda, promoting fundamental rights, and taking into account the increasingly frequent use of the internet in radicalisation, engaging through social media and enhancing communication in Arabic'. In response, an inter-institutional Task Force was set up to tackle the phenomenon of radicalisation in the Arab world through public diplomacy and communications work. The Task Force seeks to foster dialogue and cultivate mutual respect between Arabic-speaking and European communities, especially among the youth. It is chaired by the EEAS Strategic Communications Division and is made up of representatives from EEAS geographical departments, the Council's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, and all relevant Commission DGs, including the Spokespersons Service. It promotes EU policies and projects in the region and coordinates closely with the EU Delegations to strengthen existing ties and highlight shared values.

Unlike the East StratCom Task Force, the Arabic Task Force has no dedicated staff and does its work based on existing resources. It decided not to adopt a top-down approach with a single narrative to cover the whole region but to operate on the ground in the countries themselves via the EU Delegations, some of which already carry out significant work. In June 2015, the Task Force produced an advisory report which fed into the HR/VP's contribution to the European Council with an initial set of 30 recommendations. Since then, the Task Force has met regularly with a view to mapping existing outreach and communications tools, developing a business plan, implementing some of the June recommendations, and assessing resources and scope for action. Indeed, the EEAS has this year considerably increased the press and information budget for the Delegations in the Arab world. Efforts have focused on strengthening their social media presence in the region, creating translation hubs, polling young people to establish their concerns and to explore which narratives would work best where, and establishing a number of pilot outreach projects.

The work of the Task Force complements a number of other similar activities, including the project 'Strengthening community resilience to radicalisation and recruitment – MENA' funded by the Foreign Policy Instrument service through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), launched in late 2015 in Tunisia. This was reportedly born out of a conversation between the European Counter-Terrorism Coordinator and his Tunisian counterpart, and consists of a series of video clips, as well as localised approaches with NGOs working against radicalisation. A similar project is planned in Lebanon in cooperation with the Sunni Muslim Dar al-Fatwa. The EEAS Stratcom Division also participates in the regular teleconferences of the Communications Cell of the Global Coalition against ISIL and receives the Cell's daily media pack.

Preventing radicalisation and generating positive narratives have been the cornerstones of the European approach. Rather than responding to ISIL's narratives directly, the EU develops a separate and positive message highlighting the importance of mutual understanding and respect. It also highlights the role of economic development and the EU's contributions to it. In that sense, it is not counter-messaging, but proactive messaging.

In December 2015, the European Commission appointed coordinators to combat anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred. The key task of the two coordinators is to bring to the Commission's attention the specific concerns of the respective communities (for which they act as contact points), while contributing to the development of its overarching strategy to combat hate crime, hate speech, intolerance and discrimination. They will liaise with the Member States, the European Parliament, other institutions, relevant civil society organisations and academia.

The USA, for its part, appointed a Special Envoy and Coordinator for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications in 2015, also heading the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism (created in 2011 but expanded in 2015). The Center is to harness all the existing attempts at counter-messaging by other federal departments, including the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security and US intelligence agencies. The envoy, Rashad Hussein, presented a strategy in June 2015 emphasising the importance of coordinating messaging against terrorist entities such as ISIL. But frustration over the generally slow responses to ISIL's media campaign led Richard A. Stengel, the State Department's Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, to voice the conclusion that the media war against ISIL has effectively already been lost.

EU Delegations' presence on Twitter and Facebook in the MENA

Country	Twitter	Facebook
Algeria	N/A	15 posts (14 in French, 1 in Arabic); 5 353 likes
Egypt	57 tweets (3 in Arabic); 397 followers	31 posts (11 in Arabic); 42 286 likes
GCC/Saudi Arabia	87 tweets (10 in Arabic); 1 341 followers	N/A
Iraq	N/A	N/A
Israel	30 tweets (1 in Hebrew); 2 292 followers	13 posts (8 in Hebrew); 11 608 likes
Jordan	109 tweets (30 in Arabic); 493 followers	24 posts (all in Arabic); 41 649 likes
Lebanon	49 tweets (6 in Arabic); 2 621 followers	21 posts (5 in Arabic, 1 in French); 11 205 likes
Libya	17 tweets (3 in Arabic); 9 919 followers	13 posts (4 in Arabic); 21 948 likes
Morocco	64 tweets (32 in French, 11 in Arabic) 8 756 followers	14 posts (12 in French, 11 in Arabic); 6 502 likes
Palestinian Territories	23 tweets (2 in Arabic); 630 followers	15 posts (5 in Arabic); 126 010 likes
Syria	N/A	N/A
Tunisia	33 tweets (14 in French, 1 in Arabic); 562 followers	20 posts (15 in French, 5 in Arabic); 17 382 likes
Turkey	176 tweets (42 in Turkish, 6 in Arabic); 9 176 followers	12 posts (8 in Turkish); 7 680 likes
UAE	39 tweets (7 in Arabic); 850 followers	N/A
Yemen	11 tweets (5 in Arabic); 1 265 followers	5 posts (2 in Arabic); 22 984 likes

Month reviewed: 15 March to 15 April 2016

5 EU strategic communications: where from and what next

Over the past few years, the EU has been increasingly hit by destabilising messages amounting – albeit in different forms and to different degrees – to coherent hostile 'strategic communications' campaigns. Those promoted and orchestrated by Russia (inside Russia itself, within the EU, and in the European countries neighbouring both) have explicitly targeted the EU as such, its nature and its policies. Those carried out by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have been more 'civilisational' – i.e. aimed at European or Western values – and at the same time more personal, local and national, i.e. focused on specific situations of estrangement and marginalisation.

In both cases, however, 'identity politics' has played a key role, mirroring to some extent (and possibly reinforcing) similar approaches that have gained ground within the EU itself. Interestingly, Europe has been accused of simultaneously being 'no longer Christian' (by Russia) and a continent of 'intolerant crusaders' (by ISIL). Also of interest is that in both cases the West is portrayed as 'decadent', driven by values that undermine social cohesion and, indeed, a shared communal identity. In both cases, too, hostile and fundamentally illiberal messaging has been highly personalised and strongly emotional, often built on real or perceived grievances, and largely delivered through sophisticated techniques.

Last but certainly not least, both campaigns have played on the EU's own weaknesses. It is difficult to deny that the Union's 'soft power' has suffered considerably in recent times: internal divisions, inadequate policy delivery, and mounting populism have all contributed to creating an environment (even inside the EU itself) significantly more receptive to their messaging – which, in turn, further undermines that 'soft power' and, more generally, EU influence.

Both types of campaigning have indeed scored important points, inside and outside the EU. Russia has targeted both elites and significant minority groups frustrated with mainstream politics; its main emphasis has been on negative messaging and undermining the EU's own narrative. For its part, ISIL has operated mainly below the radar and at a grassroots level, combining a religion-infused anti-Western rhetoric with a violence-inspired dystopia.

Needless to say, these 'strategic communications' campaigns have been also accompanied by hostile operations on the ground, not just online and on air. In both cases, these violent actions have reinforced their promoters' image of strength, but also generated opposition and outright rejection.

Initially, the EU's collective response was slow but it has picked up speed recently. The Union does not engage in counter-propaganda, and a preference for (re)acting at the national level has long prevailed. Lately, the realisation that coordinated action at the EU level can actually make a considerable difference has gained ground, especially when the challenges are directed at the Union as a whole, know no borders, and cannot be tackled separately. As a result, a few limited initiatives have been launched and implemented – also at NATO level – as reported and analysed in the previous chapters.

What follows is a tentative catalogue of actionable points that may be considered by EU policymakers in order to enhance the effectiveness of the EU's own 'strategic communications'. Some apply to both Russia and ISIL, while others are more 'customised' and case-specific.

5.1 General approaches

If the rationale for (and the logic of) coordinating 'strategic communications' at the EU level is to be further and efficiently implemented, especially in the Union's external action and in line also with the EU institutions' declared priorities, a number of issues need to be addressed.

To start with, any credible strategic communications effort – in both its defensive and offensive dimensions – needs to be built on research and analysis dissecting the problem(s), the audience(s), and

the message(s), and to be planned and implemented accordingly. All this requires adequate resources, in terms of funding as well as staff. It is not, however, primarily – or necessarily – a matter of numbers.

The **budgetary lines** allocated by the EU to 'communications' – not only but also in foreign policy and external relations – are not negligible at all. Yet they are scattered among the different Commission Directorates-General and other institutions, with different areas of responsibility and competences, and often spread across a multitude of projects and mini-campaigns that are sometimes unprofessionally designed, run separately from one another, and occasionally carried out pro-forma, just to tick a required box. Moreover, EU Delegations (as well as Member States embassies, for that matter) have long 'done' communications half-heartedly, as a part-time activity and an afterthought, although – since the advent of the EEAS – external communications and public diplomacy have become a key priority. The EU funds consultancies to do part of its communications work (e.g. beefing up web and social media communications). In some cases, however, this has translated into paraphrasing press releases rather than concentrating resources and know-how on a single coherent set of agreed common narratives. This is starting to change now, and much can be done at various levels to streamline expenditure and maximise output, thus going beyond the old patchwork of micro-initiatives and making the Union's external communications much more 'strategic'. The forthcoming mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework may represent a first opportunity to do precisely that: consolidating communications efforts and budgets across the board. An option worth considering could be the creation of a dedicated instrument for external communications under the authority of the HR/VP. Needless to say, the European Parliament could play a key role in all this.

Training and recruiting staff 'fit for purpose' is equally important. Just publishing press releases or seeking media coverage (what insiders call 'info-politik') is clearly not enough when confronted with challenges of the scope and magnitude described above. Tailoring 'communications' to peculiar environments and targets, and customising the EU's rebuttals and own positive messaging to specific groups requires know-how that cannot be expected of officials who often have administrative and technical backgrounds. Regional analysts and media operators with relevant cultural and linguistic skills are essential to give substance and credibility to 'strategic communications'. They can be employed as trainers for current EU officials, especially in the EU Delegations, but also as temporary/contract agents in the field and at HQ. Accordingly, the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) could organise dedicated calls in order to select pools of experts (mid-career and at the higher grades) to draw upon in Brussels, the EU Delegations, as well as CSDP missions and operations. In addition, the current EU rules for Seconded National Experts (SNEs) could be reviewed – or just amended – to make room for such specialised personnel, who should come not only from national bureaucracies but also the private sector, NGOs or academia (as is happening already, at least in part, with East StratCom Task Force). Some decentralised EU agencies, too, have relevant know-how which cannot, however, be sufficiently mobilised due to outdated staff regulations. The current EEAS-internal review could factor in all this and devise appropriate, more flexible arrangements to facilitate the involvement of relevant expertise – and the European Parliament could exercise extra pressure to this end.

In terms of **method and style**, the EU's 'communications' have often been faceless, anonymous, technocratic, unemotional, and reliant on the expectation (or rather assumption) that facts will speak for themselves. This has started to change, with a greater emphasis placed on story-telling and the use of 'real people'. Perceptions are no less important, and they can be shaped – as the cases of Russia and ISIL abundantly prove. Re-shaping false perceptions and responding to outright lies or hoaxes do not require entering into an ugly or underhand contest with hostile opponents ('a lie for a lie'), which would not only be unacceptable for the EU but also, in all likelihood, counterproductive. What is now being done with 'disinformation' digests and reviews can in fact be extended and expanded, *inter alia*, through outreach and dissemination efforts aimed at bringing them to as many email and Twitter accounts as possible – and in as many languages as necessary. TV, radio or just YouTube-savvy rapid intervention teams can

quickly develop storylines about major policy issues or unfolding crises, preferably infused with real life situations and testimonies (rather than official figures and statements) – for instance, on the domestic impact of Russia's economic slowdown, the negative personal experiences of individuals under ISIL's rule, or even the successful integration of migrants in certain EU countries. Irony and satire could also be utilised to de-construct some hostile campaigns – but they will have to be handled with care and cultural sensitivity (after all, not everybody in the world knows, understands or likes Monty Python). All these features can then be translated and spread across relevant publics via both social media and local community hubs, thus strengthening resilience to hostile messages at the societal level. Internal guidelines could be drawn up and circulated across EU services, Delegations and missions. Another option worth considering could be a dedicated 'sub-strategy' on strategic communications – combining functional and geographic elements – as part of the follow-up to the forthcoming EU Global Strategy, which the HR/VP could be mandated to present to the Council at the earliest opportunity.

5.2   Specific approaches

All these suggestions are meant to rationalise and optimise the Union's overall external 'strategic communications'. Yet they do not rule out more dedicated approaches to specific situations – on the contrary: this has already started being done in the east and the south, to some extent in the Western Balkans, and **Central Asia** should probably be included soon, too. On the basis of the analysis presented above, it is indeed advisable also to differentiate EU responses to hostile strategic communications campaigns.

The following points are worth considering:

In Russia's case, the call for more common action (also at NATO level) came relatively soon, driven by the realisation of the scale of the challenge and the need to join forces and resources.

In many respects, the East StratCom Task Force has exceeded expectations – widespread knowledge of Russian inside EU administrations has proved a key asset – and deserves to be beefed up. Products like those it has delivered so far could, for instance, be translated into all EU languages and spread more systematically among EU citizens through media outlets, and arguably also via the EU Representations in the 28 Member States. Translation and dissemination in Ukrainian and Serbian would also help (surely the significant resources spent on EU communications in the Western Balkans can be used more effectively to this particular end).

More broadly, strengthening EU strategic communications in local languages in Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries is essential. Even Euronews could begin to broadcast in Romanian and Serbian as the two most important languages in the regional basin where Russian messaging is most intrusive and effective. Finally, discrete but steady support for independent local media in the region (also through professional training of local operators) could be intensified, building on the work already being done by the EED.

In ISIL's case, the Member States, although all similarly (if not equally) threatened, have long preferred to act at a national level. Only recently have they realised that the challenge concerns them all. The Arab StratCom Task Force, however, is still comparatively under-equipped in terms of personnel and budget and lacks, for instance, dedicated Arab-speaking seconded experts. Insufficient knowledge of Arabic – especially, though not exclusively, in Brussels – is also proving a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

ISIL, however, may end up being a temporary or at least transient phenomenon – although jihadist radicalism *per se* may not. It is therefore crucial to focus instead on tackling radicalisation at large and to avoid singling out Islam as its only source. Focusing purely on Islam is likely to antagonise (or neutralise) moderate Muslims further, both inside and outside the EU, which act as a crucial counterbalance to

potentially radicalising groups. Similarly, engaging ISIL on religious grounds would be dangerous for the EU, as it would implicitly legitimise the organisation's Islamic credentials – which it uses to pursue a totalitarian agenda. It is also a battle that cannot be won with theological arguments – certainly not by the EU. Strategic communications efforts, however, could consider using only the term *Daesh* to refer to the group (as some Member States are doing already), thus avoiding direct reference to Islam, as well as undermining its credentials as a state.

Finally, and more in perspective, counter-radicalisation cannot be achieved through 'strategic communications' alone (or military action and law enforcement, for that matter). The grievances that generated violent radicalism in the first place, outside and inside the EU, will also have to be addressed – or, at least, concrete efforts to that end will have to be seen and acknowledged by the wider public.

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