

Title; Strategic Communication in times of conflict; A comparative view of NATO and EU on the Middle East and Russo-Ukrainian wars

Introduction

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East are two topics that have consumed international reality at a large scale the last three years. From the beginning, conflicts have been communicated in several ways by international actors and International Organizations. NATO and the European Union are two prominent examples in point. The current paper examines through qualitative research and Strategic Communication Analysis the speeches delivered by the two organizations from June to November 2025 (approximately 100 speeches in NATO and 30 speeches in EU) and compares their communication efforts. It starts with the definition of Strategic Communication and its conceptualization and it continues with the analysis of NATO communication in the two fronts as well as the European communication in order to conclude with a comparison of the two communicative endeavors.

What is “Strategic Communication?”

Strategic Communication is the two-way communication which results from strategic thinking, it follows a grand strategy and it adapts to novel circumstances through emergent strategy and its aim is to have an impact on policy formulation and policy implementation, either at domestic or international level, through coordinated, integrated and orchestrated signaling either at the communication backstage or the front stage and the public sphere- in any case, at a contested information environment .

The element of strategy is specified in grand strategy (that refers to both the broader communicative strategy used and the communication which has to do with the alignment of ends and means to achieve goals abroad), which is the overarching umbrella term setting the goals, deliberate strategy and emergent strategy, with the latter being the strategy adopted instead of the pre-fixed deliberate one in order to response to novel and unpredicted circumstances (Popescu, 2018, p.446-447). What is important as well is that the feature of strategy has strategic thinking as its prerequisite (Brønn, 2021, p. 37), a characteristic that involves the consideration of a multitude of elements; the identity of the interlocutors and their roles as well as the environment in which the communication takes place; these include indicatively culture, ideology, power dynamics, collective memory, legitimacy and attractiveness, credibility, reputation, existing perceptions. Strategic thinking also entails the critical observation of past experiences and their consideration as productive feedback.

Strategic communication is as well though connected with policy in a twofold manner. Firstly, policy as a set of rules, principles and values is the general field within the limits of which grand strategy, deliberate strategy and emergent strategy are created; it therefore provides the framework for the content of the communication effort, either public policy or foreign policy (Ward et al., 2016, p.45). As a set of actions, policy relates to the content of the strategic communication, for instance, legislation, legal acts, regulations, treaties, establishment of institutions and other. This content is formulated in accordance with the grand strategy, the deliberate strategy or the emergent strategy that have been laid down. Subsequently, policy appears both at the beginning of the strategic communication being the stimulus and the guide for drafting the strategies at any level and at the end of it constituting the product of the communicative effort.

NATO's Strategic Communication on Russia-Ukraine war

The Strategic Communication regarding the Russia-Ukraine war follows a grand strategy that could metaphorically be characterised as a “*Zoom In*” strategy. The term is coined as such because the topic comes under scrutiny and further elaboration on facts than just a mere mention. Figurative language, such as adjectives, is used, more space in the texts is covered when it comes to this conflict and more details are offered. All in all, the particular grand strategy gives two main signals; firstly, that NATO is not just a bystander watching the facts but, since provoked, it actively gets engaged with them by taking bold measures always in response and apart from strategic reasons, for moral reasons as well- with the deviation from its core values and the brutality of the war as top examples. The second signal develops around an antithetical bipole; “*We stand with Ukraine, who is a friend of us*” and “*We oppose to Russia, who is a threat to us*”.

This grand strategy is further specified in more strategies that unravel different hues of the key signals. The “*problem-solving*” strategy is one of them with NATO proposing with it that Russia creates the conflict and destabilization, thus problems, which NATO takes measures to confront always with an approach focused on peace, security and stability in the region, thus it tries to solve them not only in mere rhetoric but in action. Two more strategies evolve around the antithesis of the dehumanization of Russia and the heroization of Ukraine; in other words, Russia is condemned for embarking on a brutal, unprovoked and inhumane war causing much suffering without caring for the repercussions, while Ukraine fights proudly and heroically for its freedom. NATO also appears as a protector of its friend, Ukraine, its territory and a defender of values (the “*identity strategy*”); on the one hand the organization's values (democracy,

freedom, rule of law) that NATO shares with Ukraine and on the other hand, strategic values like peace, security and stability in the area. One strategy also deployed in an attempt to prove that there are no discrepancies between words and deeds, and that the say-do gap is bridged, is the constant enumeration of the actions taken generally but also more specifically after the reference of a problem-usually an attack- Russia has made (the “*checklist strategy*”). This also touches upon the policy measures that were adopted following the outlined grand strategy.

Except for presenting the organization as defender of values (the “*identity strategy*”), NATO also deploys the “*polarization strategy*” of constructing the identity of the other in contrast with its own; NATO is an organization interested in peace and stability and a defender of human lives and rights, while Russia is a barbaric aggressor that pursues confrontation and is constantly destabilizing the region. In this realm, the “*securitization strategy*” along with the “*endangerment strategy*” illustrates Russia as a threat not only for Ukraine, but for the whole region, the Allies and NATO itself, and vividly underlines the need for augmenting the investment on defence production speedily. Indeed, Russia appears to potentially attacking NATO territory in a short-term horizon of five years. Finally, the strategy of “*lessons learnt*” is chosen in order to show that NATO takes seriously the feedback of past experiences and history, creating therefore the aspiration that it will not reiterate the same mistakes, while is still learning from real life with humility. The key themes include keeping Ukraine in the fight and ensuring it has everything it needs, peace through strength, defence and deterrence and the Russian threat.

NATO’s Strategic Communication on the Middle East conflict

The Strategic Communication adopted on the Middle East conflict is quite different than the one for Russo-Ukrainian war. In one word, it could be summarized as a “*zoom-out*” grand strategy, with lower intensity vocabulary, strategic ambiguity and transition to general comments . The key signal conveyed is that NATO is present on the matter and keeps an interest on the current situation as well as that any attack against the Organization, its territory, its people and its Allies will not go unanswered; on the contrary, NATO will give a strong response. What is worthy noticing furthermore is the total absence of any reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The key themes of the speeches include the destabilization in the Middle East, terrorism, the threats that NATO faces because of the two previous elements and an underlying antithesis of the Middle East conflict with Russia-Ukraine.

With its turn, this grand strategy is further developed in a series of strategies. Firstly, the issue at hand is not touched unless it has to do with precise

reference to terrorism and the destabilizing role of Iran as well as in the case that the topic arises by itself with a visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister, for example, or the opening of a representation in Iraq (“*no reference until it pops up strategy*”). In the same logic, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not mentioned at all and little space is given to the revival of conflict in the region (“*the silence strategy*”). Moreover, the language chosen does not include so many adjectives or words emotionally charged and is characterized by strategic ambiguity, that is not being too specific in the characterisations or the information given, is also frequently deployed. In this realm, more general statements are preferred more frequently in order to fill the created gap the content of which is the following (“*strategy from specific to general*”) ; “NATO remains a defensive alliance with a sacred mission of keeping one billion safe, prevent war and preserve peace, something that has accomplished for 75 years now. Having been the most successful defensive alliance in the history of mankind and although together with allies it represents half of the world’s economic and military power (“*the success story strategy*”), NATO needs to become stronger, fairer and more lethal. After all, history has taught us that “*to protect peace, we need to prepare for war*”. This is why Allies need to invest more on military production and make clear that any attempt of attacking on them will not be left unanswered; the response will be absolute (“*securitization strategy*”)

Finally, the aforementioned strategies are developed through the use of narratives which claim that; i) if peace is achieved in the Middle East, then the momentum will be used for bringing peace in Europe; ii) NATO is threatened by Russia, Iran and North Korea but also from the instability in the Middle East and for this reason, investment on defence must be pursued while a dynamic response is provided for potential attacks in the future; iii) NATO has an interest on peace and security in the region and in dealing with the revival of conflict in the Middle East and therefore salutes the solutions adopted by President Trump.

EEAS Strategic Communication on Russia-Ukrainian war

The grand strategy deployed can be summarized in “*Sanctions for peace*” and the statement that “*this war has one victim and one aggressor*”. Following this grand strategy, the basic strategy used concerns the *identification* of the two sides, Russia and the European Union, attributing to them specific characteristics.

The first tool for that, is narratives. The metanarrative is briefly given with the schema “*Russia creates problems-Russia understands only of strength-the solution for this is sanctions*”. More eloquently, four narratives with distinct problems and common solutions are subsequently developed under the aegis of the metanarrative; i) Russia does not want peace, because if it had wanted it, it

would have agreed to an immediate ceasefire; ii) Russia has caused so much suffering and European Union's major priority is to put an end to this suffering; iii) Russia has started an unprovoked, brutal war of aggression in Ukraine killing many innocent civilians; iv) Russia is a threat beyond Ukraine to all Europe. The solutions to these issues summarize around "*augmentation*"; augmenting the pressure to Russia, so that it comes to the negotiating table, augmenting defence efforts, and augmenting sanctions against Russia, so that it drains it from the resources allocated to making war.

The second tool is the polarization "*us versus them*". More specifically, the European Union appears as the biggest donor of humanitarian aid to Ukraine interested in the achievement of just and lasting peace and focusing on diplomatic solutions. Furthermore, it is presented as bold, leading and decisive by taking fierce sanctions against Russia. On the contrary, Russia is depicted as understanding only from strength, aggressive, brutal, unserious and reckless, wanting to cause suffering and not to pursue peace. Finally, the key themes reiterated in the speeches are the adoption of sanctions, rising pressure on Russia and adopting diplomatic solutions. These alternatives are further specified in policy measures that prove that the grand strategy was followed at the level of policy as well.

EEAS Strategic Communication on the Middle East

The grand strategy utilised on the topic at hand is to support both Israel and Palestine and more precisely promoting their co-existence side by side free and secure. The strategies outlined are the "*diplomatic solution strategy*", "*the delegitimization of Israeli defense*" and the "*identity presentation of the European Union*". Specifically, one narrative used is that if the solution to the conflict was a military one, then the war of Israel against Hamas would have been successful. Therefore, the diplomatic solution is the right own to escape from the deadlock reached towards a sustainable peace. The content of this diplomatic solution is the immediate ceasefire and the release of hostages, the two-state solution with PLO in governance and the ending of human suffering. Another narrative claims that Israel has the right to self-defence but what it does goes beyond self-defence, although Hamas' attack was beyond precedent. To confront the problem, the European Union pushes Israel to change course and adopts sanctions against the Israeli Government, while it helps for the reform and reconstruction in Gaza.

When it comes to the identity illustration of the European Union as an international actor in the Middle East, this includes the roles of peace broker, the biggest donor of humanitarian aid in Gaza and a supporter of the two-state solution and of the PLO. Moreover, the European Union calls for the obedience of

international law in the area but also for unity among European Member States on the topic. After all, as Kaja Kallas is constantly reiterating, the European Union is for diplomacy, and thus promotes the diplomatic resolution of the dispute. Last but not least, as far as the key themes are concerned, these include the two-state solution, the ceasefire, the PLO in governance, the right of Israel to self-defence but not in the way it does it, the pressure to Israel to change direction and the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza to alleviate the horror of war.

Comparison

The two organizations share similarities but also bear substantial differences in their communication patterns. They both declare their interest for peace, stability and security in the areas under scrutiny and call for measures towards these ends. The threat perception is also a common feature, since they both view Russia as a brutal aggressor that needs to be confronted, especially when it cooperates with other powers, such as Iran, a destabilizer of the Middle East and North Korea. In order to face these threats, defence needs to become a top priority, while it is clearly stated that potential threats are not going to be left undealt with. Under textual lenses, both NATO and EU connect the two conflicts in their speeches and they construct an “*us versus them*” contradiction. Last but not least, at the policy level, both of the leaders of NATO and the EU are constantly enumerating the measures taken towards the amelioration of the situation proving that there is no say-do gap between their grand strategies and the adopted policies in action.

At the same time however, there are points where the two communication efforts differentiate themselves. Firstly, the EU gives a special gravity to the adoption of sanctions as a strategic communication tool that signals costly measures for non-compliance with International Law both against Russia and the Israeli Government. Moreover, the EU sheds more light on the issue of the release of Israeli hostages, while talking profoundly more and with clearer terms for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the same logic, although the “*checklist strategy*” mentioned above is used in both cases, the EU offers equal space when it comments on the two conflicts.

In general terms though, both of the organizations adopt the overall direction of Strategic Communication, that is “policy which informs communicative grand strategy, which is specified in further strategies that finally solidify through policy measures”. With the two intermediate levels of grand strategy and strategies being already analyzed, it shall be noticed that both of them are informed by policy and also end up to policy; in NATO the former has to do with the deterrence and defence of its strategic doctrine while in the European Union it

refers to the foreign policy of stick and carrot; multilateralism-since Europe is for negotiations and diplomacy- on the one hand and sanctions on the other. This foreign policies, passing through the communicative level of grand strategy and strategies are specified into policy measures as proved by the constant mention of the spokespersons to the steps taken by the organizations.

Recommendations

Last but not least, further recommendations can be made regarding the communication policy of the two organizations. Firstly, NATO needs to put more emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and devote more space to it in its speeches. Alternatively, if there is a preference for strategic ambiguity as the terminological aspect is concerned, it can underline the need for peace and stability in the Middle East in a more systematic way. Secondly, Ukraine needs to be presented under the light of not a mere “friend” but of an Ally with concrete rights and obligations. This will show the solid bond between the country and the organization. Thirdly, both NATO and the European Union shall highlight their common efforts to deal with common threats in a spirit of collaboration, especially as far as the measures to keep their citizens safe is concerned. In this way, they will boost their decisive leadership profile that has taken all the possible measures for the protection of their area, their people and their values, while they will present a unified field of deterrence and defence.

Conclusion

The discussion on Strategic Communication and even more at a comparative level bears its own significance, since it contributes in understanding the diplomatic moves of international players. At the same time, it offers a tool of measurement for the achievement of the undertaken policies and therefore of the efficacy of the International Organizations under analysis. Further research is proposed on the matter on issues like possible discrepancies between the stated goals and the actions taken, the leadership profile of the organization’s officials, discourse analysis of the speeches at the reaction to the initiation of the wars or the co-operation of NATO and EU on the conflicts and how it is communicated.

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