

Index

- Introduction p.2
- 1. Strategic Narratives and their uses p.4
 - 1.1 The main actors p.8
 - 1.2 Strategic Narratives of International Order p.12
 - 1.3 Strategic Narratives, Ideology, Soft Power, and Propaganda p.12
- 2. Strategic Narratives in the Russian Ukrainian War p.16
 - 2.1 The European Union p.18
 - 2.2 Strategic Narratives in Italy p.25
- 3. Strategic Narratives in the Russian Ukrainian War p.30
 - 3.1 Oppositions parties in Italy p.30
 - 3.2 Strategic Narratives in Germany p.34
 - 3.3 Strategic Narratives in the Netherlands p.38
 - 3.4 The Coalition of the Willing p.39
 - 3.5 Strategic Narratives in the Russian Federation p.40
- 4. Strategic Narratives on the War in Gaza p.45
 - 4.1 The European Union p.45
 - 4.2 Strategic Narratives in Italy p.52
- 5. Strategic Narratives on the War in Gaza p.57
 - 5.1 Oppositions parties in Italy p.57
 - 5.2 Strategic Narratives in Ireland p.60
 - 5.3 Strategic Narratives in Spain p.63
- Conclusions p.68
- Bibliography p.71
- Sitography p.74

Introduction

This thesis examines how strategic narratives are developed and implemented by different governments during two contemporary conflicts: the Russian Ukrainian war and the Israeli Palestinian one. The timelapse considered for the former is from its outbreak, on February 24, 2022, until February 24, 2026, while for the latter from October 7, 2023, until June 2026.

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. The first one deals with the theoretical framework developed around strategic narratives. It analyses how these are structured, following the work of A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, and L. Roselle. These authors identify three main narratives: the system, the identity and the issue narrative. A system narrative explains how the international system is structured and how it works. It defines the nature of world politics by identifying who the key actors are, how they relate to one another, what the rules of the system are, and what kind of international order exists or should exist. An identity narrative explains who an actor is. It gives meaning to political actors, such as states, governments, or organizations, by defining their values, their goals, their historical role, their character, and how they differ from others. An issue narrative focuses on a specific policy issue or event. It explains what the problem is, why action is necessary, what policy should be adopted, and why that policy is legitimate or effective. Issue narratives are narrower and more immediate than system or identity narratives, but they should be consistent with them (A. Miskimmon et al., 2017).

The second and the third chapters focus on the strategic narratives implemented during the war in Ukraine. In the second chapter, the attention is on the European Union and on the Italian governments. The most important speeches of the President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, are analyzed to highlight what the key points of the European Union's narrative are and their aims. Same goes for the Italian governments' strategic narratives analyzed. When the war broke out, the Italian Prime Minister was Mario Draghi, in office until October 2022, when he was replaced by Giorgia Meloni. In my report, I will point out their differences and similarities in the use of narratives. The role of Italian oppositions parties is examined in the third chapter, focusing especially on the Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, and The League in the current legislature. The latter plays a particular role, because it is part of the ruling coalition, but it presents some contrasting elements with the policies adopted by the current government. In this chapter, strategic narratives adopted by Germany, the Netherlands, and the Russian Federation are also

investigated, following the framework provided by Miskimmon et al. Their narratives are examined thoroughly, discerning what their system, identity and issue narratives are, and what they are trying to communicate.

The fourth and the fifth chapters are centered on the use of strategic narratives during the war in Gaza. In the fourth chapter, I probe deep into the kind of narratives that are used by the European Union and by the Italian government of Giorgia Meloni, starting from October 7, 2023, analyzing some of Von der Leyen's and Meloni's key addresses on this matter, and their variations across time. The fifth chapter centers on Italian opposition parties' strategic narratives. The key parties taken into account are the Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, and Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra. These all have in common harsh reprimands toward both the European Union and the Italian government about their inaction and the double standards adopted throughout the years, in comparison with the war in Ukraine. Lastly, I examine two European countries: Ireland and Spain, both known for their strong narrative in support of Palestine.

1. Strategic Narratives and their uses

Communication plays an important role in shaping how power works. In one of his latest publications, Manuel Castells stresses how “the two main mechanisms of power formation [are] identified by theories of power: violence and discourse (2009: 11)”. In fact, legitimization is what allows the state to exercise its domination, and it relies on the construction of a *shared meaning*, established in a society through the process of communicative action. The author and sociologist refers to the modern society as ‘network society’ and identifies its communicative structures in networks, which are “complex structures of communication constructed around a set of goals that simultaneously ensure unity of purpose and flexibility of execution by their adaptability to the operating environment” (2009: 21). The consequence of what Castells describes is that communication affects how power works: he links the varying media environment and the changing political one.

According to Ronfeldt and Arquilla, narratives hold together networks. This implies that narratives provide a grounded expression of people’s experiences, interests, and values, being “compelling storylines which can explain convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn” (Freedman, 2006: 22). But as Freedman points out, they do not arise spontaneously, as “are designed (...) with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events” (ibid). They can indeed be described as strategic.

Strategic narratives can be defined as “means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors. Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 3).

The role of narrative is therefore extremely relevant for a government. Klarevas (2002) offers a review of the literature, that helps to understand why public opinion supports or not the decision of political elites, particularly in the case of an intervention abroad. He identifies four main assumptions this support depends on. First of all, the interests of a state at stake, followed by multilateralism: the more a mission has a multilateral framework, the more possibility of support it has, because it is perceived as more legitimate. But also the policy objectives, i.e. the goals of a mission. These depend on how much the public opinion knows about the actual situation on the ground. Mainly they consist of two types: humanitarian purposes, which tend to have a prominent

level of support, and regime change operations, which are more problematic, because they are more likely to be viewed and perceived negatively. Finally, the cost-benefit calculations, in other words how public opinion can balance the benefits, such as the success, and the costs (the casualties, the economic cost) of a mission. It is the relative value of a mission. The quicker and the better a mission is going, the more support it will attract. This is the so called “halo effect”: a peak of support when public opinion has concrete proofs of success on the ground (for example when national elections were held in Afghanistan in 2004). On the contrary, the casualty-aversion effect (Mueller, 1973) leads to a loss of support: the more the victims on the ground, the less the support.

So, how can public opinions assess a mission? They usually do so by listening to the political elites, who play a key role in describing the features of the intervention through the media. It is worth mentioning that media tends to play an independent role only if there is a clear differentiation in the position of the incumbent government and the opposition. This happens according to the ‘elite queue’ effect: people normally rely on political elites’ opinions.

The way political leaders describe a crisis, either national or international, deeply affects how public opinion assesses this, meaning what they perceive – or are led to recognize – as benefits or constraints of a specific situation linked to the decisions taken by political elites.

To be considered effective, a narrative needs to have and disclose a clear goal, a consistency between the shared values and the national interests, promises of success, conformity with the situation on the ground, and an integrated communication strategy. Specifically, breaking down these five main points, we can say that the goal stated must be straightforward and specific to give an idea of clarity surrounding the decision. The second point is related to the connection of shared values of a community with the national interests, which are two elements that can enter conflict, depending on the situation. The third element is particularly relevant on missions abroad: promises of success are more likely to be believed if a mission lasts shortly. The more the operation is lasting, the more decrease in terms of support it will have. A current and effective example can be the War in Ukraine. Moreover, another important aspect is connected to the storyline, which needs to be credible, so in line with the actual situation on the ground. It would also be best to have an integrated communication strategy to communicate a sense of unity, the fact that all the actors involved are on the same page. Referring again to the war in Ukraine, this is not what has happened in Europe, where countries have quite different opinions and positions on the ongoing conflict.

Another prominent element is the rise or the existence of an effective counter-narrative, that is different from the story the government developed. If it exists and is convincing, the latter will suffer and will be challenged.

I will make a practical example to show and analyse these elements of effective narrative, considering the Italian mission in Afghanistan deployed from 2001 to 2011 under the International Security Assistance Force. The level of support granted by public opinion remained quite high in the majority of western countries until 2008 and 2009. What I think is worth mentioning is that the decrease of support occurred before the number of casualties got higher. Why did this happen? To fully understand this, it is important to consider the transformation of the storyline by political leaders. In Italy for instance, until 2008 all governments – both right- and left-wing ones – developed a narrative based on traditional values: peace operation and multilateralism. However, Berlusconi right-wing government, that could count on a huge support in the Parliament, realized this narrative was not effective and credible anymore, due to a change in the situation on the ground. The harsher combat conditions and the complex military operation needed a different, updated and more valid narrative. And this is where the government lacked: they became aware of the impossibility to continue with a peace/humanitarian mission narrative but failed to present a new one. In this way, public opinion was left without answers to the question “if our troops are not there for a peace operation, then why are they even there?”. The absence of an alternative storyline is what led to a drastic decrease in support in the end.

Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle (2024) emphasize three components in the analysis and study of strategic narratives. The first one is to describe and identify their formation, projection and reception. The formation includes all the steps that lead to the production of a narrative, including a series of debates, the presentation of policy choices, and the refinement of a pre-existing narrative. The projection consists in the mechanisms and means used to convey the narrative to the audience: the use of social media directly by a political leader, campaigns, websites, indirect use of news reporting. The reception is what public opinion makes of a narrative: their interpretation, discussion, and its comparison to other narratives.

The second element is to distinguish three kinds of narratives: system narratives, identity narratives and issue narratives. System narratives are those concerning the international system and how political actors conceive their understanding of this order. Identity narratives are about “the identities of actors in the international affairs that are in a process of constant negotiation and

contestation” (2013: 10). These kinds of narratives are crucial to understand how political actors strive to project their identity in international affairs. Lastly, issue narratives seek to shape the area where policy discussion takes place, in other words they are employed by political actors to influence the development of policies.

The third aspect that needs to be taken into account according to these authors is the attempt to shape the infrastructure of communication by political elites. This is an important aspect, because strategic narratives research and analysis involve examining communication alongside policy action, and “efforts to establish wholly free global flows of information run up against states prioritizing Internet sovereignty and insulated communication systems. This affects who receives what narrative” (2024: 450).

Additionally, Miskimmon et al. have listed a number of components that they argue a narrative contains. Primarily character or actors (agent), secondly setting/environment/space (scene), conflict or action (act), the tools/behavior (agency), and lastly resolution/or suggested resolution/goal (purpose) (2018: 7).

Nonetheless, analyzing and illustrating the effect of narratives is quite challenging since perfect communication is impossible (Peters, 2012): it cannot be taken for granted that the message political elites intend to convey will have the same impact on all audiences and that it will find a guaranteed agreement. Moreover, establishing the clear causal impact of narratives is very difficult. For this reason, oversimplifications might be useful to prove a point. The complexity of narratives is also given by the fact that they can create negative effects: they might create unintended and adverse consequences. For example, narratives can make overseas publics aware of discrepancies between what a nation says about its role in the world and what it actually does - the “say-do gap” (Simpson 2012, 181). Two other important reasons are related political actors: they may have no strategy - this could happen when there is an absence of clear goals – and they might not know what effects to aim for. This last point relates to the value of a narrative: “should narratives contribute to measurable “outputs” like the number of hits on an embassy website, or should it bring about more diffuse outcomes such as attitudinal or behavioral change?” (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 25).

The role of political actors will be the focus of the following paragraph, which will present and analyze who these actors are, how they actually implement these narratives and in which ways,

and to what extent their uses are related to the conception of identity, political and cultural dimensions of the players in the international relations arena.

1.1 The main actors

The role and the concept of actors in the framework of strategic narratives is closely related to the notion of identity. In international relations theory, the significant role played by identity was brought to the debate by the constructivists. They focused on how the identity element influences interest construction, which can influence behavior. According to them, identities are complex and multifaceted and must be reconstructed over time. Much of the work on identity focuses on state identity, interpreted as “the role the state should play in the world, and the kinds of interests worth pursuing” (Lynch, 1999: 22). The core of these preferences consists in beliefs, place, reputation, prestige, and credibility. Quoting Bially-Mattern, “identities are not natural facts, but social constructions that are always in process” (2004: 9).

The structure of strategic narratives, being one that includes actors and its agency provided to actors, makes them useful in understanding the formation of identity and behaviors in international relations. Actors both influence and are influenced by the context they operate in: narratives determine who they are, what their characteristics, motivations and attributes are, and what kind of actions they undertake. Moreover, political actors can use narratives to shape the behaviors of others.

Within this framework, several actors can implement and use strategic narratives. We can say that state leaders articulate state narratives. The nation state tends to engage with narrative identities about how it perceives itself in the context of the international system (ally, enemy, great or rising power and so on). In literature national identity is defined as “a constructed and public national self-image based on membership in a political community as well as history, myths, symbols, language, and cultural norms commonly held by members of a nation” (Hutcheson et al., 2004: 28). According to other authors, the role played by these myths is a relevant one since they are believed and shared by the population other than political elites. Therefore “myths are necessary to justify the power and policies of the ruling coalition, so the leaders must maintain the myths or else jeopardize their rule” (Snyder, 1991: 17). Another important aspect is the role of the past intertwined with the future: through narratives political leaders can give and provide a shared

meaning of the past in connection with one of the future. The use of narrative includes therefore both a temporal and a spatial dimension.

Hence, we can say that nation states present a collective identity, intended as “a set of ideas that are generally accepted by any group of actors as defining what their collectivity is and the general rules under which it operates” (Clunan, 2009: 28). Collective identities are created and reinforced through narrative, that is the result of intrasocietal debates and resembles the identity commitments a state will pursue in international relations (Steele, 2012). Within the narrative of the international system, there is a wide range of actors that can be encountered: political actors (governments, political leaders), non-state actors (intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations), media outlets (news media, social media influencers) and also individuals (activists, interest group, citizens).

In their study, Miskimmon et al. look at how actors shape state narratives with expected characteristics and attributes, which are related to structure action, as they strive to have a conduct consistent with their features and others' expectations. Thus, political leaders tend to adopt a behavior strictly related to their identities, rather than to their own power capabilities. All this suggests that “how actors are defined and characterized will influence individuals and groups of people that exist within the foreign policy process, including political leaders, interest groups, bureaucratic actors, diplomats, journalists, and the public” (2017: 51). In their analysis the authors include great powers, normal powers, rising powers, and fragile states. Of course, these designations of states carry with them expectations that can both constrain and empower. In the literature, several authors agree that great powers are the main players structuring the international narrative system after the II World War. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union claimed their great power status in a bipolar world order. “It is through the use of strategic narratives that emerging and great powers can project their values and interests in order to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Antoniades et al., 2010: 3). Through their use of strategic narratives, we can understand how states tackle and respond to international problems and issues, such as climate change, extreme poverty, and pandemics. Within this complex scenario, since the mid 90s we can observe different behaviors adopted by various actors: for instance, Russia has assumed a more confident attitude in its foreign affairs. Under Putin, its narrative took a shift toward a reaffirmation of its state sovereignty, through the emphasis on the distinctiveness of Russian state and culture. Also,

China has tried to promote its own approach to international relations. Other countries, like India, have strengthened their perception of a global rising power through cooperation with other rising powers. To give an example, India and Brazil took a leadership role among developing countries in international trade. Likewise, countries forming European Union have acted unilaterally and in unison at international level: the EU has enlarged its membership and become a more active player in the international paradigm, especially within the military crisis management one.

The Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom from 2007 to 2010 and today CEO of the International Rescue Committee, David Miliband (2008), addressed these shifts in power identifying “three big shifts in power. First there is a shift from west to east, with the rise of China and India. Second there is a shift between the national and the international spheres, with the growth of regional and global institutions. Third there is a shift between states and citizens, what I call the “civilian surge”—the idea that around the world people who have hugely different access to opportunities and wealth nonetheless inhabit an increasingly common universe.”

States and other leading actors, projecting their narrative and being it comprehensible and appealing to other powers or transnational audiences, may meet aims where the use of material resources and capabilities would fail to do so.

Analyzing in a more detailed way the characteristics of the political actors, we can identify different powers in the international world order. First, great powers. These are usually associated with narratives marked by an emphasis on sovereignty, leadership, and responsibility. To give an example, the United States of America and the Soviet Union fall into this category. Narratives can help us understand how status is defined and determined, but they are also central when it comes down to expectations: what others expect from a state, that is to say what kind of behaviour is expected from them. With the downfall of the Eastern bloc, some authors - Ikenberry and Wohlforth among others – started talking about unipolarity. Anyhow, this thesis has found some critics, because of the need displayed by the hegemon to seek legitimacy and exist in the social world of institutions. In other words, it turns out that even hegemons have and need narratives. Moreover, as realists assumptions suggest, it is quite likely that the unipolar world order will be challenged. There are various theories that aim at explaining these mechanisms: the balance of power theory, the balance of the threat theory and the hegemonic stability theory. The common point to all of them is that the hegemonic power at some point will face some kind of competition and threat by another actor from the international scene. Usually, the power confronting the

hegemon is the rising one. The contemporary US – China juxtaposition is quite often referred to as the Thucydides' Trap (Allison, 2017).

The rising power opposes to the hegemon and poses a threat to the unipolar system. It can do so in several ways: becoming more influential economically, politically or in terms of soft power or all the above. If we consider this, nowadays China can be considered the rising power in contrast with the United States, the hegemonic power. Nevertheless Beckley (2023) considers China to be more a peaking power than a rising one: China has already had its 'rising power' status, in fact lately the rising trend has slowed down, and it is quite stable. So, it has a limited window of opportunity to take over the American hegemony. Another author, Nye (2022) questions the Chinese soft power actual potential: can China replace the US in the international arena? His answer is no, because of the lack of soft power spread through the years by this country. Commonly, the 'rising powers' designation identifies a precise set of countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, according to a post-Cold War rising economic power narrative. Rising powers are involved in international negotiations and seek recognition in the international system. Russia can be considered as one since the dissolution and failure of the Soviet Union. During the 90s its narrative took a turn and became more similar to and in line with Western narratives. For instance, they developed a narrative focused on state actors, rather than economic ones, conforming to the broader and dominant narrative in the world stage,p. Under Putin, Russia moved towards a 'reaffirmation' of its state sovereignty through a narrative that emphasized the distinctiveness of Russian state and culture, and therefore a distinctive Russian take on democracy, for example by developing the concept 'sovereign democracy' (Antoniades, 2010: 2). However, there are some concerns regarding the role of rising powers in the international system: what will they do with their power and independence? (Legro, 2007). Some are worried rising powers will try to change the system. Therefore, they might be perceived as dangerous, leading to specific assumptions about threat that then influence decision making and foreign policy behaviour.

The last set of states I will take into consideration are fragile states that to some extent can become failed states. These pose a threat to the international community since the beginning of the new century, as they are the main source of problems such as terrorism, radicalization, organized crime, and poverty. Usually, they are defined by lacks and gaps (Newman, 2009). They have a lack of capabilities to guarantee, namely public order, secure borders, public services, and public institutions. To measure their fragility, it is necessary to focus on three main gaps: the capacity

gap, the security gap, and the legitimacy gap. Some authors talk about ‘weak states’ and define them as “a broad continuum of states that are: inherently weak because of geographical, physical, or fundamental economic constraints; basically strong, but temporarily or situationally weak because of internal antagonisms, management flaws, greed, despotism, or external attacks; and a mixture of the two. Weak states typically harbor ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other intercommunal tensions that have not yet, or not yet thoroughly, become overtly violent” (Rotberg 2003: 4).

Besides nation states, either individually or collectively, there are also other actors implementing their narratives. Usually, they are non-state actors and tend to challenge the standardized idea of international relations, typically state-centric. Actors like transnational advocacy networks, multinational corporations, terrorist organizations, but also diaspora groups, individuals, and virtual groups, including those comprised entirely online and underground groups are the most recognized and mentioned by the literature. They can bring change to the international system by using “the power of their information, ideas, and strategies to alter the information and value contexts within which states make policies” (Keck, Sikkink, 1998: 16). In this way, this kind of actors, generally concerned about specific issues within a state, can influence political actors outside the state to intervene. For example, they can tackle sensitive matters like human rights and then states – as key actors – can influence others through strategic narratives. This leads to an international order shaped and influenced by the role played by these actors when implementing strategic narratives. Precisely, this will be the main topic of the next paragraph, where I will try to explain how their use can shape and structure the order within international relations among their actors.

1.2 Strategic Narratives of International Order

The use of strategic narratives by the actors mentioned and analyzed above is central when it comes to the assessment of international order. In the realm of international relations order represents a key aspect and its purpose and utility are shaped by a plenitude of actors, that take part in developing our conception of it. Quite often the narrative presents a dichotomy: good and bad, democratic, and authoritarian regimes.

Order is given meaning by narrative, offering explanations for three types of international order: how order is conceived, the role played by strategic narratives in the production of order, and the importance of strategic narratives in the maintaining of the order.

So, how Miskimmon et al. stress, “strategic narratives are attempts to structure engagement on how we understand order within states, among states and with transnational actors. Strategic narratives can both empower and constrain how actors engage in forming and projecting policy preferences in a highly competitive and diffuse international system (2013: 88).

Another aspect worth mentioning is the two-level game in play. As suggested by Putnam, actors have and need to focus both on the domestic and on the international level, since narratives are negotiated both domestically and internationally. Notwithstanding the increasing institutional cooperation among states that followed the Second World War, there does not seem to be a unified and shared narrative of the post Cold War world. Binary narratives used – communism versus capitalism, bad versus good, East versus West – do not generate the cohesive response they once did. So, European Union normative power, China’s peaceful rise, the steady ascent of the BRICS powers, and the US demand for global leadership have all at their basis the desire for others to follow a particular economic and political model to establish order in the international system. Order is often conceived through the metaphor of balance, which “is achieved when the structure of international relations is characterized by the balance of power among the powerful units in the system” (Waltz, 1981: 126). The post–Cold War world though has not witnessed a balance of power, not even for those who see an era of US primacy. Therefore, it is in this background of unreliability that the main actors at play – the European Union, the US, China – have been trying to present and validate their narratives. The end of a bipolar world replaced binary narratives with multiple indecisions and challenges. Randall Schweller for instance writes:

“Profound dislocations throughout the global system are causing the narrative of world politics to become an increasingly fragmented and disjointed story. Like a postmodern novel, the plot features a wild menagerie of wildly incongruent themes and unlikely protagonists, as if divinely plucked from different historical ages and placed in a time machine set for the third millennium” (2014: 9).

Moreover, the role of the new media ecology must be taken into consideration: its role “increases the participation of a range of actors, including citizens, in international affairs. (...) This media ecology also increases the transparency of international interactions. While states

created the Internet and many states have been part of the rise of satellite television, states are now in a position of reacting to and adapting to the global media ecology (Miskimmon et al. 2017: 279). Transnational media ecology brings power transition dynamics to light.

All these forms of narratives, from the one implemented by political actors and the one arising from the new media ecology, are to be distinguished from other conceptions and practices that can be enforced by the actors at play. Such distinctions will be examined in more detail in the following and last paragraph of this first chapter, also to shed some light on concepts that are sometimes used as synonyms or as interchangeable, but that in fact are not.

1.3 Strategic Narratives, Ideology, Soft Power, and Propaganda

To conclude this first chapter, it is important to mark some definitions to properly distinguish between narrative, ideology, and propaganda.

A narrative “is the representation of an event or of a series of events” (Abbott, 2008: 13). To have a narrative, it is necessary to have *events*, without them it would just be an exposition or a description. Events are then turned into episodes through emplotment (plot formation), that gives meaning to independent instances (Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2022: 435). Plots align individual and collective identities during periods of change by conveying meaning to the past, present and future.

Ideology is wide and connected to long-lasting beliefs and significant structures that play a crucial role in the process of plot formation. Ideologies are strongly related to strategic narratives: the latter shares with the former the dimension of interpretation of reality. The more a strategic narrative will refer to an ideology, the more persuasive it will be. Nevertheless, while ideologies are connected to the dimension of identity, the same does not always apply to strategic narratives. Indeed, ideologies are aimed at giving a consistency to the reality in a long-term perspective, clearly establishing ‘who we are’ regarding the world (ibid, 441).

Strictly connected to these two concepts, there’s the one of soft power. Some authors claim that “strategic narrative *is* the soft power of the 21st century” (Roselle et al., 2014: 71). The concept of soft power was explained by Nye in 1990, when he was trying to explain how the US could exert influence globally following the end of the Cold War. By the end of the bipolar world system, “it was clear that if a state amassed product of cultural attraction, then policymakers could influence how others felt about their country” (Miskimmon et al., 2024: 446). As a matter of fact, rather than focusing on hard power, scholars and politicians often claim that soft power is the

ability to influence others through the attraction of culture, values, and policies, perceived as soft power resources.

On propaganda, an interesting analysis on war propaganda and strategic narratives is the one conducted by Thomas Colley. He explains how persuasion is the core dynamic of history. Since the 'cognitive domain' is assumed to be the key battlespace, information is the most important weapon in contemporary conflict (Roennfeldt, 2011). A strategist should therefore look to communicate in the most effective way (Riessman, 2008). Because of this, the most powerful propaganda devices are narratives, to the point where 'whose story wins' is thought as important as 'whose army wins' today (Nye, 2004: 106). Strategists should therefore pay closer attention to strategic narratives as the key 'munitions of the mind' in contemporary conflict (Taylor, 2003; Freedman, 2006). War itself is perceived by him as a narrative, but its practitioners rarely conduct it as such. Yet, military commanders and politicians own the ability to frame the narrative – to choose who to act against, how to do it and what methods to use. He provides the example of the Falklands War (1982): it had a coherent although not universally accepted narrative: defending a free people against a foreign tyrant and military regime. This line of persuasion was broadly accepted by the British public.

2. Strategic narratives in the Russian Ukrainian War

The cases of the European Union and Italy

This chapter and the next one focus on the use of strategic narratives in the context of the war in Ukraine. My analysis revolves around the narratives used by some of the main actors involved in this conflict, either directly or indirectly: the European Union, Italy, Germany and the Russian Federation from February 2022 to February 2026. I decided to leave out Ukraine's strategic narratives because they follow the ones given by the majority of Western countries, thoroughly examined in this thesis. For this reason, I preferred to focus on a different point of view, the one by the other protagonist of this international crisis: the Russian Federation. Its strategic narratives offer a completely different view on this conflict and on the rooting causes that led to it, and I think they are worth being analyzed.

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which followed the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Throughout history, the relationship between these two nations has been characterized by a complex interaction of cooperation, conflict and cultural exchange. As a matter of fact, this conflict is rooted in their historical, cultural, and political dynamics. During the 20th century the relationship between Russia and Ukraine underwent a dramatic shift, marked by the Russian Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union, with the latter being one of the founding republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922. During this time, Ukraine endured periods of industrialization, civilization, but also of cultural repression: during the Stalinist era, mass purges, famine and forced deportations caused great damage to the Ukrainian population (Himka, J.P., 2015). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a new era of independence and state-building began for Ukraine, but this was not a linear and smooth path (Buchari, 2024). The transition to democracy and market economy caused political instability, economic turmoil, and social upheaval (Gregory, P. 2013). Moreover, the dissolution of the USSR left some unresolved questions on geographic boundaries and ethnic identities. Ukraine ended up divided between having closer ties and relations with the European Union, being more integrated in the western dynamics, and maintaining some kind of affiliation with Russia. A turning point was reached in 2013 during the Euromaidan protests, when President Yanukovich rejected an EU association agreement in favor of a closer alignment with Russia. In 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of a conflict in eastern Ukraine played a key role in worsening the

tensions between these two nations (Bukhari, 2024; Bebler, A, 2015). During this year, public protests in the Donbas region resulted in a war between the central government of Kyiv and the Russian separatist movements. The latter self-proclaimed two independent republics: Donetsk and Lugansk. In 2014 and in 2015, the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine, consisting of Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe¹ (OSCE), drafted the Minsk Agreement to put an end to this war. Following the international tension arisen from this crisis, western countries launched some diplomatic counteroffensive against Moscow, and NATO started in 2016 to move its military hub towards the Baltic republics to protect the eastern boundaries of Europe, with the Enhanced Forward Presence, a defense and deterrence military force. Another event that worsened the crisis was the election of Volodymyr Zelens'kyi in 2019, a pro-European candidate. Russia feared Ukraine could become a member either of the European Union or of NATO, or both, also because all its warnings toward Kyiv were not taken into consideration. In 2021, Western intelligence agencies started registering and monitoring a considerable activity of Russian military forces toward the Ukrainian border. The situation got worse quickly, and this led to the full-scale invasion of February 2024, where the two nations faced each other on the battlefield².

This ongoing conflict has been further fueled by narratives of national identity and ethnic nationalism, coming from both the western perspective and the Russian one. This chapter will analyze and focus on how both Russia and the West have been involved in a rhetorical battle to set up their strategic narrative and influence the public opinion. In fact, leadership communication has been used to control the narrative of the crisis before and of the war afterwards. In contemporary international politics, strategic narratives have become a fundamental part of conflict strategy, as a method of information operations to affect the perception of external audiences (Aspriadis, 2023). Since day one, information has played a primary role as an instrument of power (Liaropoulos, 2022). In the context of the war in Ukraine, strategic narratives were used as means of information warfare, which this chapter will now delve into more specifically, focusing at first on the strategic narratives used by the European Union from February 2022 onwards. Following this, I will focus on two European countries, Italy – in this chapter - and Germany in the next, to analyze their strategic approach to the war. What becomes known is that beside some common actions, like

¹ <https://www.osce.org/cio/181581>

² <https://www.mondodem.it/2870/>

allocations in military, humanitarian, and financial aid to Ukraine, and an increase in their spending on defense, there is a degree of variation between and within European countries to their response. In fact, despite an initial emergence of a broad consensus among parties in Europe, during the conflict we have witnessed considerable variations among them: some have been more committed to the cause, investing a significant amount of economic and military resources, while others have taken more of a back seat (Martill and Sus, 2025). In fact, as the conflict progressed, so did the perceived costs involved in backing Ukraine for citizens and political leaders, raising the prospect of increasing war weariness (Holesch A, and Martill B., 2026). By the end of 2023, it has become common to speak of ‘war fatigue’ among European citizens (Denison S., and Zerka J., 2023).

In conclusion to the chapter, an analysis of Russia’s main strategic narratives and how its perception changed throughout the nineties will be portrayed.

2.1 The European Union

This paragraph is centered on the narratives implemented by the European Union. The major sources are speeches by the President of the Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, remarks by the High Representative at the time of the war breakout, Josef Borrell, and his successor, Kaja Kallas, appointed in December 2024. In addition to this, there will be some references to some of the conclusions made by the European Council on this matter.

Ever since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the official European Union’s reaction has been clear and straightforward: full support to Ukraine and to its people. This explicitly emerges in the President of the European Commission’s speech - Ursula Von der Leyen - on February 24, 2022, the first day of the invasion:

“It is President Putin, who is bringing war back to Europe. In these dark hours, the European Union and its people stand by Ukraine and its people. We are facing an unprecedented act of aggression by the Russian leadership against a sovereign, independent country. Russia's target is not only Donbass, the target is not only Ukraine, the target is the stability in Europe and the whole of the international peace order. And we will hold President Putin accountable for that.” (U. Von der Leyen, 2022a)

The Union’s full support, along with the threat posed by the Russians are the two central issues on which the attention is focused. According to President Von der Leyen’s words, Russia’s aim is not simply Ukraine, but Europe as well, along with the international world order. At the end of her press statement, she draws a parallel between democracies and autocracies:

“We will not allow President Putin to replace the rule of law by the rule of force and ruthlessness. He should not underestimate the resolve and strength of our democracies.

History has proven that societies and alliances built on trust and freedom are resilient and successful.

And that is exactly what the autocrats fear.” (ibidem)

Following this, she concludes reiterating the full support granted to Ukraine by the European Union, saying that ‘the European Union stands with Ukraine and its people. We will continue to support them.’

The current, at the time of writing, High Representative, Kaja Kallas, also strongly condemns Russia’s attack against Ukraine:

“Russia undermines European and global peace and security. These actions demonstrate that Russia is the one undermining the prospects of peace. Nobody wants peace more than Ukrainians. (...)

We remain unwavering in our support for Ukraine. We stand with Ukraine militarily, economically, politically and diplomatically.

We support a just and lasting peace based on international law and the UN Charter. Our support to Ukraine is about making peace a reality.” (K. Kallas, 2025a)

Significant are also the conclusions reached by the European Council on the day of the Russian aggression. During a special meeting, Russia’s behavior against Ukraine is deemed as ‘unprovoked and unjustified’ (European Council, 2022a). For this reason, the Council strongly condemns such actions, stating that ‘Russia is grossly violating international law and the principles of the UN Charter and undermining European and global security and stability’ (ibidem). Therefore, it ‘invites Commission (...) to put forward contingency measures, including on energy’ (ibidem). The role of the Council has been fundamental regarding sanctions toward Russia. On July 26, 2022, it prolonged the restrictive measures, which include restrictions of finance, energy, technology, industry, transport and luxury goods, for another six months, until January 31, 2023, when they will be further implemented. These sanctions were first introduced in 2014, in response to Russia's actions in Crimea, significantly expanded in February 2022 (European Council, 2022b).

On 18 July 2025, HR Kaja Kallas defined the 18th package of economic and individual measures as:

one of its strongest sanctions packages against Russia to date. Each sanction weakens Russia's ability to wage war. The message is clear: Europe will not back down in its support for Ukraine. The EU will keep raising the pressure until Russia ends its war

A week after the war breakout, on March 1, 2022, Von der Leyen gave another speech at the European Parliament Plenary, where she quoted a Ukrainian newspaper, *The Kyiv Independent*, to reinforce the narrative of the two sets of values, portrayed by the West and by Russia: ‘This is not just about Ukraine. It is a clash of two worlds, two polar sets of values.’ The President proceeds stating:

“They are so right. This is a clash between the rule of law and the rule of gun; between democracies and autocracies; between a rule-based order and a world of naked aggression. How we respond today to what Russia is doing will determine the future of the international system. The destiny of Ukraine is at stake, but our own fate also lies in the balance.” (U. Von der Leyen, 2022b)

At the end of the speech, she reinforces this argument by saying that ‘Ukrainian people are holding up the torch of freedom for all of us. (...) they are also fighting for universal values, and they are willing to die for them’ (ibidem).

Another important aspect of this speech lies in the use of the narrative of multilateralism, when it comes to the sanctions adopted toward Russia. She makes it clear that such sanctions have ‘been closely coordinated with our partners and allies, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Norway, but also e.g., Japan, South Korea and Australia. As of this day, more than 30 countries - representing well over half of the world's economy - have also announced sanctions and export controls on Russia’. The concept of multilateralism was also used in the speech President Von der Leyen held at the European Parliament Plenary on November 27, 2024. In this case, it was adopted to highlight the central and key role of Europe in the conflict arenas around the world, ‘a world in which I believe Europe is needed more than ever. Multilateralism and partnership. Sustainable development and humanitarian aid. Security and human rights’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2024).

HR Kaja Kallas also weighed in on the sanctions, stating that the 18th package of economic and individual measures adopted by the European Union are:

“one of [the] strongest sanctions packages against Russia to date. Each sanction weakens Russia's ability to wage war. The message is clear: Europe will not back down in its support for Ukraine. The EU will keep raising the pressure until Russia ends its war.” (K. Kallas, 2025b)

A further theme that these two speeches have in common is the accession of Ukraine in the European Union in the near future. Four days after it was invaded by Russia, Ukraine applied for membership of the EU and President Von der Leyen stated that ‘there is still a long path ahead. (...) But I am sure: Nobody in this hemicycle can doubt that a people that stands up so bravely for

our European values belongs in our European family’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2022b). And as well ‘Let there be no doubt, we want Ukraine as part of the European Union. So, we will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. We will get ready with the reforms that we need on our side’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2024). During the EU Enlargement Forum, held in Brussels on November 18, 2025, attended by EU leaders, candidate countries, experts and civil society, enlargement was relaunched as a key strategic priority. The President of the Commission delivered a message on this matter, declaring that ‘enlargement is more than a choice for peace. It is an investment in our collective security and freedom’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2025a). She acknowledges the challenges of this long and demanding process, but also and foremost the benefits those who had joined acquired: incredible economic growth, higher living standards and life expectancy, and lower unemployment rates. And she promises that ‘the same will happen with the next enlargement process’. She concludes affirming that ‘enlargement is a journey that matters to all of us. Because we all share the same continent, history, culture. And challenges. (...) Europe is more than a Union. It is our home’ (ibidem).

The narrative of enlargement is present in all of her State of the Union Addresses from 2022 onwards. The first one held during the war in Ukraine was given on September 14, 2022, in Strasbourg. State of the Union addresses are delivered every year in September by the President of the European Commission to the Parliament. The address deals with the achievements of the past year and presents the priorities for the year ahead, and it states how the Commission will address the most demanding challenges of the Union. In this occasion there is an explicit reference to a future Ukrainian membership:

“We must be at their side every step of the way.

Because the path towards strong democracies and the path towards our Union are one and the same. So, I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you!”

(U. Von der Leyen, 2022c)

In her speech in 2023, when talking about the situation in Ukraine, she refers to the ‘call of history’ to complete the Union:

“And history is now calling us to work on completing our Union.

In a world where some are trying to pick off countries one by one, we cannot afford to leave our fellow Europeans behind. In a world where size and weight matters, it is clearly in Europe's strategic and security interests to complete our Union.” (U. Von der Leyen, 2023)

The same concept appears in 2025:

“Only a united – and a reunited – Europe can be an independent Europe. A larger and stronger Union is a security guarantee for all of us. And because for Ukraine, for Moldova, for the Western Balkans – their future is in our Union. Let's make the next reunification of Europe happen.” (U. Von der Leyen, 2025b)

The narrative of the enlargement is present within the European Council from the very beginning of the hostilities, as well. On June 23, 2022, it states:

“The European Council recognizes the European perspective of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. The future of these countries and their citizens lies within the European Union.

The European Council has decided to grant the status of candidate country to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova.” (European Council, 2022c)

In March 2026, during a press conference, the HR Kaja Kallas on the subject of the Ukrainian membership of the Eu stated: ‘I cannot give a concrete date, but it is in my interest, in my wish that Ukraine is going to join European Union soon.’ (K. Kallas, 2026)

Along with the themes discussed above, there are also other recurring patterns adopted by President Von der Leyen in her speeches, such as full support granted to Ukraine. To reinforce this argument, in all three State of the Union Addresses she gives examples of people fleeing their country under ‘a rain of Russian bombs.’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2025b). She recalls when the First Lady of Ukraine, in the early weeks of the invasion, ‘gathered the parents of Ukrainian children killed by the invader. We saw the first Lady leading a silent crowd of heartbroken mothers and fathers, and hang small bells in the trees, one for every fallen child’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2022b). Along with this, she tells the story of a youth child, Sasha, and of his grandmother. Sasha and his mother had sought refuge in a basement in their town of Mariupol, but when the war broke out, he was taken away by the Russians. ‘They told him he didn't need his mum. He would go to Russia and have a Russian mother. A Russian passport. A Russian name. They sent him to occupied Donetsk. But Sasha didn't give up’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2025b). In fact, he managed to phone his grandmother that rescued him. Moreover, President Von der Leyen remembers a young Ukrainian mother, Victoria Amelina, who set off to Prague to bring her child to safety, when Russian tanks crossed the border. ‘When the Czech border official stamped her passport, she started crying. Her son didn't understand. And he asked his mother why she was crying. She answered: “Because we are home.” “But this is not Ukraine,” he argued. So, she explained: “This is Europe.” On that day, that Ukrainian mother, felt that Europe was her home. Because “home is where we trust each other”.

And the people of Ukraine could trust their fellow Europeans' (U. Von der Leyen, 2023). By illustrating these moving episodes, she is able to achieve a very strong conclusion:

"Today - courage has a name, and that name is Ukraine. Courage has a face, the face of Ukrainian men and women who are standing up to Russian aggression." (U. Von der Leyen, 2022c).

And as a consequence, 'Europe's solidarity with Ukraine will remain unshakeable. From day one, Europe has stood at Ukraine's side. With weapons. With funds. With hospitality for refugees. And with the toughest sanctions the world has ever seen' (ibidem).

The final narrative I will look into is the portrayal of two very distinct and different set of values and of rule of law, characterizing the European Union on one hand and Russia on the other. Several remarks can be found in her State of the Union Addresses: she talks about the juxtaposition democracy-autocracy, rule of law-rule of gun: 'Russia is waging a full-scale war against the founding principles of the UN Charter. (...) We see a clear attempt by some to return to bloc thinking – trying to isolate and influence countries in between' (U. Von der Leyen, 2023). President Von der Leyen highlights that this fight is one 'for our values and our democracies' and that 'this is about autocracy against democracy,' therefore 'we should not lose sight of the way foreign autocrats are targeting our own countries' (U. Von der Leyen, 2022c). Moreover, she states that 'today we must protect them [our democracies] both from the external threats they face, and from the vices that corrode them from within. It is my Commission's duty and most noble role to protect the rule of law' (ibidem). On the contrary, she addresses the Russian threat as an autocratic one also when it comes down to the freedom of media: 'the first step in an autocrat's playbook is always to capture independent media. Because this enables backsliding and corruption to happen in the dark' (U. Von der Leyen, 2025b). While 'the rule of law and fundamental rights will always be the foundation of our Union' (U. Von der Leyen, 2023).

"Europe's independence is about protecting our freedoms. The freedom to decide. To speak out. To move around a whole continent. The freedom to vote. To love. To pray. To live in a Union of equality. Our democracy and the rule of law are the guarantors of those freedoms." (U. Von der Leyen, 2025b)

Clearly, the key strategic narratives implemented in President Von der Leyen's speeches focus on the theme of enlargement and a possible accession of Ukraine in the Union, the juxtaposition democracy-autocracy, the unconditional economic, military and humanitarian support to Ukraine, and the use of real-life episodes of people fleeing a country at war to back up these arguments.

An important role within the European Union is also the one played by the High Representative and Vice President of the Commission. At the time of writing this position is fulfilled by Kaja Kallas, appointed in December 2024. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is the chief coordinator and representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy within the Union. This sector has been increasingly growing throughout the years, with resolutions aimed at establishing a common strategic vision and concrete objectives to strengthen the EU's security and defense policy. Among them, the Strategic Compass approved by the European Council in March 2022, and Readiness 2030 are the main pillars³. The EU's strategic response was unprecedented and was enabled by the high degree of unity among member states and a collective responsibility to act (Maurer, Whitman, and Wright 2023).

In May 2023, Josef Borrell, the HR in office, introduced a New Civilian CDSP Compact, a key deliverable from the Strategic Compass:

“The Compact aims to strengthen the civilian side of the Common Security and Defence Policy and enhance the civilian missions’ effectiveness, impact, flexibility, and robustness. This will enable them to tackle more efficiently current, emerging, and future security challenges. The Compact will also allow the EU to face more effectively the current geopolitical environment marked by the return of war to Europe with Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine.” (J. Borrell, 2023a)

The Strategic Compass was perceived and used as a platform for reaching a coordinated response, and it established a military training mission for Ukrainian soldiers (Michaels and Sus, 2024). So, the invasion by Russia gave the European Union the opportunity to become a strategic actor. The war catalyzed a shift toward a more horizontal and collaborative mode of EU decision-making, engaging both member states and institutions (Juncos, Lovato, and Pomorska, 2024).

In the next section of this chapter, I will analyze the strategic narratives used by the Italian Government during the conflict.

³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/strategic-compass/>

2.3 Strategic Narratives in Italy

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the Italian Prime Minister was Mario Draghi, in charge until October 22, 2022. His role was then filled by Giorgia Meloni, who is still the current Prime Minister of Italy. Firstly, I will focus on Draghi's speeches, analyzing the main strategic narratives implemented, and then Meloni's ones. The speeches I selected are addresses to the Parliament right after the war breakout, for the former, while for the latter are speeches given after the elections and others while in office, that I think are crucial to understand how their narrative is shaped and how it has changed. The two Prime Ministers have some points in common, such as the reiterated support to Ukraine and the firm disapproval toward Russia's actions.

The day after the war broke out, Italy's former Prime Minister delivered an urgent briefing to the Chamber of Deputies, regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He expresses full solidarity to Ukraine and to its people, strongly condemning Russia's actions:

"Italy firmly condemns the Russian attack on Ukraine. Once again, I would like to express the Italian people's solidarity with the citizens of Ukraine and President Zelensky.

The return of war in Europe cannot be tolerated. But Russia and its President's invasion is vast and planned. I feel that we are at a turning point in the international relations, as we have known them ever since the end of World War II." (M. Draghi, 2022a)

He also makes clear that Russia's violence makes dialogue impossible, and that 'our primary goal must be to protect our continent, demand the withdrawal of troops from Ukraine, and Russia's return to the negotiating table.' Along with the disapproval of Russia's actions, another significant narrative used is the one of multilateralism regarding the sanctions: he emphasizes how Italy's decisions and actions are perfectly aligned with its allies and partners.

"Italy is perfectly lined up with other European Union countries, especially France and Germany. The measures have been coordinated with our G7 partners, which we fully share their strategy and objectives with." (ibidem)

Moreover, former Prime Minister Draghi highlights the importance of unity within Italy in such difficult times: 'to face this terrible threats, to be united with Ukraine and with our allies, it is essential to be united among us', and this is why 'the Government intends to work incessantly, in close coordination with its partners and allies, to give its citizens the answers they are seeking in such a difficult and uncertain moment' (ibidem).

On May 19, 2022, former Prime Minister Draghi delivered another urgent briefing on the war in Ukraine. Full support to Ukraine and multilateralism are still the predominant narratives:

"Italy will continue to support the Ukrainian government in its efforts to repel the Russian invasion. We will do so in close coordination with our European partners. This is not only about the strength of the transatlantic bond, but also about our loyalty to the European Union." (M. Draghi, 2022b)

Another key point is the importance of bringing Russia to the negotiating table and of continuing with the sanctions, since the latter is having an impact on the Russian economy, and this impact 'will be even stronger in the upcoming months.' He then reports some data issued by the International Monetary Fund, that predicts that 'Russia's gross domestic product will decline by 8.5% this year [2022], and the inflation rate will reach 21.3%' (ibidem). Actually, Russia GDP declined by 2.1%⁴ only and the inflation rate reached 11.9%⁵.

The last former Prime Minister's speech I will analyze is the one he held on September 21, 2022, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. During his address, he stresses that the responsibilities of this conflict are Russia's only and strongly condemns the referendum in the Donbas region as 'a further violation of international law by Russia'. For this reason, he declares that it is fundamental to reach a solution, Italy being 'on the front line to try and reach an agreement, along with its allies.' (M. Draghi, 2022c)

Lastly, I will analyze the current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's main addresses on the war in Ukraine. Giorgia Meloni has been Prime Minister of Italy since October 22, 2022. She took office following the victory of the center-right coalition in the general elections of September 25, 2022. To have a better picture of Meloni's narratives, I think it is necessary to also have a look at her speeches about this matter before she became Prime Minister. When at the opposition, she presented herself as one of the strongest and most vocal pro-Ukraine voices in Italy. In her speeches, she built her position on the war in Ukraine on strong ideological foundations, especially Atlanticist and identitarian, emphasizing the concept of freedom and self-determination against Russian aggression. Because of this, according to her, it the West's duty to support Kyiv by all means:

"It's time for a united response to a military aggression we cannot accept. It's time to give our full support to the Ukrainian people, who are teaching the world what dignity and love for their homeland mean." (G. Meloni, 2022a)

⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy/>

⁵ https://www.rateinflation.com/inflation-rate/russia-historical-inflation-rate/#google_vignette

This concept can be found in her party's Electoral Program as well. Brothers of Italy asserts that it intends to respect 'the commitments undertaken in the Atlantic Alliance, also in regard to the adjustment of defence appropriations, support to Ukraine against the Russian invasion and support for any diplomatic initiative aimed at resolving the conflict'. Even though military aid is not mentioned in her party's manifesto, in some interviews to the media the current Prime Minister states she is in favor of sending military assistance to Ukraine (G. Meloni, 2022b).

On December 13, 2022, as Italy's Prime Minister, she delivers a speech at the Chamber of Deputies, in which with a more formal and institutional approach, she reaffirms support for Kyiv unconditionally and introduces a new narrative: the concept of a 'just peace'. Peace cannot mean the Ukrainian surrender but must be achieved ensuring that Russia gains no benefits from its aggression. 'For this reason, to pursue peace, yes, but a just peace, Italy must continue to do its part.' (G. Meloni, 2022c)

Throughout 2023, Meloni's position hardens: support for Kiev remains unchallenged. In her speech to the Senate on March 21, 2023, the Prime Minister responds firmly to the criticisms of those questioning the Italian commitment:

"I consider the propaganda that Italy is spending money to send weapons to Ukraine, depriving our fellow citizens of the many needs, to be childish. This is false, and we all know it in this Chamber. Italy is sending Ukraine materials and components it already has, which, fortunately, we don't need to use. We're sending them to the Ukrainians partly to prevent the possibility of having to use them ourselves one day. In fact, we're sending weapons to Ukraine partly to keep the war away from the rest of Europe and our own country." (G. Meloni, 2023a)

In this passage two main aspects emerge: on the one hand, the need to ensure Kiev has the means to defend itself; on the other, the importance of maintaining the Western front's unity. A key aspect on the arms shipments to Ukraine is that the vast majority of them are marked as confidential, meaning that citizens are not aware of the kind of weapons distributed to Ukraine⁶. On December 2, 2022, the Italian government issued a Decree Law (197/2022), extending until December 31, 2022, the authorisation to transfer military vehicles, materials and equipment to the government of Ukraine. However, the list was marked as secret. The consumers' association (Codacons) challenged its unconstitutionality, alleging a violation of Articles 11 and 78 of the Italian Constitution. Despite this, its legal initiative ended in failure: in July 2022, the Council of State

⁶ <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/armi-dall-italia-all-ucraina-cosa-sappiamo-finora-e-cosa-potremmo-sapere-AG1Fm5J>

definitively rejected its appeal, upholding the validity of the Government's actions (Codacons, 2022).

On December 12, 2023, Italy's Prime Minister states that a 'just peace' implies not only halting the Russian advance, but above all building a security structure for Ukraine that can guarantee long-term stability. Also, because, she asserts:

"I think Ukraine has already won this war because it has made it impossible for Russia to conquer its entire territory..." (G. Meloni, 2023b)

This last passage is significant, because it paves the way for her 2024 narrative. Until spring, the Italian position remains in line with these adopted in 2023: in the speech to the Senate on March 20, Meloni reiterates support for Ukraine, but her emphasis is not on Ukraine's victory anymore, but rather on the ability to manage the war to avoid more dangerous situations.

"...the work we are doing is a work that seeks to create the necessary preconditions to reach a negotiating table." (G. Meloni, 2024)

After Donald Trump's re-election in the United States in November of that year, however, the context changed radically. For the first time, the specter of American withdrawal from the war loomed. Despite everything, Meloni still reassures the public opinion during the G20 in November and maintains her stance of support for Ukraine. During her press conference on January 9, 2025, she claims, overreaching herself:

"Frankly, I don't foresee an American disengagement, and I don't read this into the statements made by US President Donald Trump, and here too, the reality seems somewhat different from the stories being told. Donald Trump has spoken on several occasions of 'peace with strength. This should remind you of something, in the sense that I have always supported those who said over the past two years that the West's strategy was failing, that Ukraine shouldn't be supported, that the only way to create—and instead, we should work toward—an unspecified peace, that the only way to force Russia to sit at the negotiating table, was to create a difficult situation." (G. Meloni, 2025a)

She clearly aligns her position with Trump's one, or better, with what the Prime Minister mistakenly believes to be the position of the US President. On March 18, 2025, she expresses support for the new approach adopted by President Trump:

"We welcome this new phase and support the efforts of US President Donald Trump in this regard. Italy considers the ceasefire proposal agreed on March 11 in Jeddah by the United States and Ukraine to be a significant first step on a path that must lead to a just and lasting peace for Ukraine, with solid, effective,

and long-term security guarantees for Ukraine itself, for Europe as a whole, and for our American allies, who cannot afford to sign a violable peace agreement.” (G. Meloni, 2025b)

Therefore, Italy’s Prime Minister reversed the concept expressed just two months before, the one of ‘peace with strength’: in fact, until January she insisted on the need to maintain high pressure on Russia to force it to negotiate, but now she accepts the ceasefire negotiated in Jeddah and welcomes it as positive, even if this is accompanied by major uncertainties about the concessions that will be imposed on Ukraine.

On July 10, 2025, she took part in the Ukraine Recovery Conference, where she talks about ‘a common goal, which is to look beyond the unbearable injustice inflicted on the Ukrainian people for more than three years and to be able to imagine a rebuilt, free, and prosperous Ukraine.’ (G. Meloni 2025c) She also reiterates Italy’s support to Ukraine in this process:

“Our task is to help Ukraine, and we will, we will write this new chapter in its history, for the sake of justice and as a warning for the future. Italy intends to play a leading role in this, and it can do so, not only because of the consistency and clarity with which it has stood on the right side of history from the beginning (...), but also because its solid, extraordinary productive fabric has all the credentials to generate a multiplier of investments and opportunities.” (ibidem)

In line with these latest declarations, on December 17, 2025, Prime Minister Meloni addressed the Chamber of Deputies, asserting that Italy will not send any troops in Ukraine and that the aspect that is now crucial is to maintain high economic pressure on Russia. Regarding the assets, she claims that ‘finding a solution is far from simple, considering that any instrument must always respect the rules, on which the rule of law is based.’ (G. Meloni, 2025d)

On her speech at the beginning of this year, she reaffirms the importance of deterrence:

“The only way to ensure peace is deterrence, you have to be strong enough to make the enemy desist from attacking you: it is strength that builds peace, not weakness. (...) there is no option on the ground today with a United Nations umbrella.” (G. Meloni 2026)

Moreover, she states that times could be ripe for Europe to talk to President Putin, but it will be important ‘not to go in a scattered order because that would be doing Putin a favor, and the last thing I want to do is to do Putin a favour’ (ibidem).

In light of this analysis, it becomes clear that current Prime Minister Meloni’s positions and narratives regarding the war in Ukraine have changed throughout the years of the conflict. In the next chapter I will stress the role played by the opposition parties in Italy. Along with this, I will examine Germany’s strategic narratives and the one used by the Russian Federation.

3. Strategic Narratives in the Russian Ukrainian War

The cases of opposition parties in Italy, and of German's, Dutch's, and Russian Narratives

This third chapter is the second and last chapter dedicated to the strategic narratives implemented during the war in Ukraine. The focus will be on the opposing parties in Italy and on the German, Dutch and Russian Federation government. My analysis will follow the framework developed by A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin and L. Roselle, discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. I will identify how these different actors articulate system, identity, and issue narratives, and how their narratives evolve over time. That is to say, how the international system is portrayed, how the analyzed country is described and how the war is perceived. This is particularly important when analyzing opposition parties because political parties may simultaneously promote multiple narratives or adjust them in response to changes in the domestic and international context. In addition to this, before examining the strategic narratives implemented by the Russian Federation, which adopts an opposite perception of the conflict, I will provide an insight on the Coalition of the Willing (CoW) to support Ukraine. This coalition was established in London in March 2025, by Great Britain Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and French President Emmanuel Macron (Karlsrud, J., and Reykers, Y., 2025).

3.1 Opposition parties in Italy

When the war broke out, Mario Draghi was the Italian Prime Minister, whose position and narrative were analyzed in the previous chapter. On March 1, 2022, the government approved a decree authorizing the shipment of weapons, military equipment, and vehicles to the Ukrainian army. Italy's decision followed the prevailing trend among many European Union countries, which had announced the shipment of weapons to help the Ukrainian army defend itself from the Russian invasion. The decree was approved with the aim of 'ensuring support and assistance to the Ukrainian people through the transfer of military equipment, materials, and vehicles to the Ukrainian government authorities⁷.' However, this initial broad consensus did not last long: two and a half months later, the parties supporting the government led by Mario Draghi and the factions in Parliament grew increasingly divided over this matter. Five Star Movement President Giuseppe Conte and The League secretary Matteo Salvini are the two party leaders who were raising the

⁷ <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2022/03/03/22A01508/sg>

most doubts about the arms shipments to Ukraine. The former, on the sidelines of a UIL conference, said:

“As 5SM we are absolutely against a military escalation because it would mean further suffering and carnage. So, we are against increasingly lethal armaments. It is not a question of the type of armament, but of the political direction: whether it is to defend oneself or to counterattack. To be clear, we are against increasingly lethal and heavier weapons: we do not want to send tanks.”

(G. Conte, 2022a)

Salvini used similar words, stating:

“If there was a request for more weapons I would have to assemble the League: I personally am against it, I am not the Sun King, I would have to gather the League and ask the League. Sending new weapons would drive away peace and would not be appropriate.” (M. Salvini, 2022a)

The Democratic Party and Forza Italia distanced themselves from these positions and so did Giorgia Meloni, leader of Brothers of Italy, in favor of sending weapons to Ukraine. During this time, Giorgia Meloni with her party was the main opposition force. Her discourse is particularly interesting because it combined a strong support for Ukraine, a clear commitment to Italy's Euro-Atlantic orientation along with a political criticism of the Draghi government on domestic issues (Carlotti, 2023). As a matter of fact, her narrative did not align with the more “pacifist” or Russia-sympathetic narratives advanced by some opposition actors. Instead, it largely reinforced the Western narrative framing the war as a defence of national sovereignty and the rules-based international order. This can clearly be seen in her declarations following Zelensky's address to the Italian Parliament, on March 22, 2022. The main narrative consisted in four main pillars: Russia is the aggressor, Ukraine is defending its freedom, Italy must stand with NATO and the EU, and sovereignty and territorial integrity must be defended⁸. Breaking these down into strategic narratives, a system narrative basing defence on the rule-based international order can be found, along with an identity narrative, depicting Italy as a reliable Western ally, and an issue narrative of support for Ukraine, both morally and strategically necessary.

⁸ Meloni, G. (2022, 22 March). *Ucraina, Meloni: FdI ringrazia Zelensky per le sue parole, la nostra libertà dipende dal coraggio del popolo ucraino di opporsi al neo imperialismo russo*. Official website of Giorgia Meloni.

On October 22, 2022, Giorgia Meloni became the Italian Prime Minister. The main opposition parties I will focus on are the Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, and The League. The latter, even though it belongs to the government coalition, it has sometimes articulated narratives about war and sanctions that diverge from the prevailing line of the executive.

The Democratic Party

On December 13, 2022, the first major parliamentary debate after the Meloni government took office took place. Debora Serracchiani, the PD parliamentary group leader, delivered a speech, reaffirming the support for Ukraine, and stressing the importance of European unity and international law. The narratives that emerge are the following. A system narrative based on the defence of the rule-based international order, an identity narrative that views Italy as a reliable European partner, and an issue narrative centered on the importance of military support alongside diplomatic efforts (D. Serracchiani, 2022). Following Elly Schlein's election in 2023, the party increasingly highlighted diplomatic initiatives and humanitarian assistance while maintaining support for Ukraine's right to self-defence. On March 12, 2023, Schlein stated that Italy's support for Ukraine remains unchanged, humanitarian assistance and diplomacy should receive greater emphasis, and that a just peace, not simply a ceasefire, should be the objective (E. Schlein, 2023). The same concepts are restated in their European election Manifesto⁹ (2024), where the Democratic Party openly supports Ukraine's sovereignty, continued European assistance, reconstruction and a future based on a just peace.

To conclude, the Democratic Party presents a system narrative rooted in an international system portrayed as a rule-based international order threatened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In fact, Russian aggression represents a violation of international law, European security depends on defending Ukrainian sovereignty, and NATO and the EU remain the primary guarantors of peace and stability. As far as their identity narrative, Italy is described as a committed European democracy, a reliable NATO ally, and a defender of international law and democratic values. Lastly, in their issue narrative, the war is framed as an unprovoked Russian invasion, a struggle

⁹ https://partitodemocratico.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LEuropa-che-vogliamo_Manifesto-elettorale-Partito-Democratico_1.pdf

between authoritarianism and democracy, as well as a conflict requiring continued military, political, and humanitarian support for Ukraine.

The Five Star Movement

I will start again from the parliamentary debate of December 13, 2022. During the speech of their group leader, Giuseppe Conte, the main themes stressed are the importance of diplomacy before escalation, a harsh criticism on the continued arms deliveries, and the willingness of making Italy a promoter of negotiations (G. Conte, 2022b). The same concepts had already been discussed during the Rome Peace Demonstration, on November 5, 2022. In this occasion, his speech became one of the clearest articulations of the 5SM narrative, with clear-cut messages, such as ‘peace is not surrender’, the importance of diplomacy in replacing military escalation and Italy as a leader in negotiations (G. Conte, 2022c). From Contes’s speeches, the party narratives appear quite clearly, making them the clearest narrative toward the government’s approach. Their system narrative depicts the international system as increasingly polarized and characterized by escalating geopolitical confrontation. In their identity narrative, Italy is seen as a peace-building nation, a diplomatic mediator, and also an actor capable of facilitating negotiations. According to their issue narrative, war is perceived as a humanitarian catastrophe, something that cannot be resolved militarily, and a crisis requiring an immediate ceasefire and negotiations.

The League

Although formally part of the governing coalition, the League often articulates a distinct narrative. During Matteo Salvini’s parliamentary intervention on December 13, 2022, among the main debated themes, there is the perception of peace as a priority, the importance of Italy’s economic interests, and the continue assessment of sanctions toward Russia (M. Salvini, 2022b). The same concepts were reiterated during The League conference in Pontida in September 2023. He repeatedly argued that Europe should actively promote negotiations, and that the focus of Italy’s foreign policy should remain the protection of Italian families and businesses (M. Salvini, 2023). In The League’s system narrative, the international system is viewed through a pragmatic rather than ideological lens. As far as their identity narrative, Italy is primarily seen as a country that must defend its own national interests, with an economy heavily affected by sanctions and energy insecurities, and a state whose foreign policy should prioritize domestic welfare. Their

issue narrative frames the conflict according to its consequences on Italy. Emphasis is placed on the rising energy prices, inflation, economic hardship, and the need to pursue diplomatic solutions whenever possible.

3.2 Strategic Narratives in Germany

The two governments analyzed are the Scholz and the Merz one. The latter began in May 2025. During the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, chancellor Olaf Scholz was in office. He sought not only to justify Germany's policy changes but also to redefine Germany's role within Europe and within the international system. The most distinctive feature of the German narrative was the concept of *Zeitenwende* ('historic turning point'), introduced in Scholz's Bundestag speech on 27 February 2022.

The system narrative: defending the rule-based European order

The main system narrative used is based on the idea of defending the rule-based European order. In fact, the German government framed Russia's invasion as a direct challenge to the European security architecture established after the end of the Cold War. In the above-mentioned speech, some key elements of such narrative can be found: Russia's invasion is perceived as a representation of a violation of the international law, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states as non-negotiable principles, European peace and security being dependent on defending these principles, and the NATO and the European Union as essential guarantors of stability. Rather than portraying the war as a regional conflict, Scholz consistently argues that it threatens the entire European security order:

"24 February 2022 marks a watershed in the history of our continent. (...) Putin wants to turn back the clock to the days when great powers divided Europe into spheres of influence."

(O. Scholz, 2022a)

Dwelling on this crucial speech, it is important to focus on the notion of *Zeitenwende*: rather than simply announcing new policies, Scholz constructed a narrative of historical rupture, where the post-Cold War era has ended, Germany's assumptions about European security are no longer valid, and this explains the necessity for a reorientation of German foreign, defence and energy policy. *Zeitenwende* performs exactly the function identified by Miskimmon: it connects interpretations

of the past, present and future into a coherent story that legitimizes policy change (G. Löfflmann, M. Riemann, 2025).

The identity narrative: the importance of national identity

As far as the German identity narrative, Germany is portrayed as a responsible European power. Germany's national identity plays a key role here. Before 2022, German strategic culture was characterised by military restraint, multilateralism, and dialog and economic interdependence (M. Xue, 2023). Following the invasion, Scholz did not abandon these principles but reinterpreted them, describing Germany as a responsible European leader, a reliable NATO ally and a state willing to assume greater responsibility for European security. The narrative therefore shifts Germany's identity from one of restraint to one of responsible leadership. This identity reconstruction is visible throughout the Bundestag speech, where support for Ukraine is presented not as militarism but as a moral and political responsibility arising from Germany's position within Europe (G. Löfflmann, M. Riemann, 2025).

Another key aspect is the emphasis on reliability (Verlässlichkeit). In fact, throughout 2022-2024, Scholz repeatedly stressed that Germany would act together with NATO, with the EU, and with its international partners. The emphasis on coordination served to portray Germany as a predictable and trustworthy partner rather than an independent or unilateral actor. This is particularly clear in his speech at the Munich Security Conference, on February 17, 2023, where he stresses that Germany would act 'together with its allies, in close coordination, without going in alone', because:

"Germany has fundamentally changed course in security policy. We have strengthened NATO's eastern flank. We are one of Ukraine's biggest supporters." (O. Scholz, 2023a)

His emphasis is on collective action and sustained support for Ukraine. Another important speech is the one given on March 2, 2023, where the Chancellor states that 'we will support Ukraine, in strict coordination with our partners and allies. (...) There will be no peace imposed over the heads of the Ukrainians' (O. Scholz, 2023b). This concept is reiterated also during his address before the European Council, on March 20, 2024, where he affirms that Germany and its allies stand together, and reaffirms three key principles: support for Ukraine as long as necessary, ensure that NATO does not become a party to the war, and the rejection of any imposed peace at Ukraine's expense (O. Scholz, 2024).

The issue narrative: the importance of military support and of avoiding escalation

Breaking down Germany's issue narrative, the main intent is supporting Ukraine while avoiding escalation. Here the central narrative concerns the country's military support for Ukraine. The government consistently presents two objectives as equally important: supporting Ukraine's right to self-defence and preventing direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia, as it appears clearly during in his speech on February 27, 2022, where Scholz repeatedly argued that Germany would support Ukraine 'for as long as necessary', while ensuring that NATO would not become a direct party to the conflict (O. Scholz, 2022a). Thus, military assistance is framed not as escalation but as a means of preserving European peace and stability. This framing becomes especially prominent during debates over Leopard tanks and long-range missile systems, the following years (O. Scholz, 2024).

Throughout his chancellorship, Olaf Scholz consistently framed support for Ukraine not merely as an act of solidarity but as a strategic necessity for safeguarding the European security order. He argued that Russia's aggression challenged the foundations of European peace and that sustained support for Ukraine was indispensable for preserving European and transatlantic security. This narrative became particularly explicit in his speeches at the United Nations Security Council, in September 2023, and the Munich Security Conference, in February 2025, where Scholz claimed that Europe's own security was inseparable from Ukraine's sovereignty and ability to defend itself, so defending Ukraine means defending Europe (O. Scholz, 2025).

Unlike the Scholz government, whose discourse centres on *Zeitenwende* and strategic restraint, Chancellor Friedrich Merz, in office since May 2025, has framed Germany's support for Ukraine in more assertive geopolitical terms. Nevertheless, the core strategic narratives remain largely consistent: defending the European security order, supporting Ukraine, and strengthening Germany's role within Europe. As far as his system narrative, the Merz government presents the war not merely as a conflict between Russia and Ukraine but as a defining struggle over the future of the European security order. He places great emphasis on deterrence rather than avoiding escalation. This emerges clearly during the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Rome, on July 10, 2025. Some of the key elements used in his speech include the vision of Russia as an enduring revisionist power, Ukraine as defending the security of all Europe, the fact that European peace depends upon Ukraine's victory and long-term resilience and that Germany has both a national and a European responsibility to support Ukraine. In fact, he states that 'Germany stands firmly

by Ukraine’ and that the reconstruction and military support serve ‘our shared political order of freedom in Europe’ (F. Merz, 2025). This clearly links Ukraine’s defence to the preservation of the European political order.

In addition to this, if Scholz’s master narrative was *Zeitenwende*, Merz increasingly frames the international environment through the need for European strategic strength, as it is stressed by the Global Public Policy Institute¹⁰. His underlying narrative is that Europe cannot rely indefinitely on others for its security, Germany must become one of Europe’s principal security providers and that military capability is a prerequisite for peace.

From this, it is already clear that Germany is perceived and described as Europe’s security leader. This is indeed the main identity narrative developed. Rather than portraying Germany primarily as a responsible ally, like Scholz did, Merz increasingly presents Germany as a leading European power, a guarantor of European security and a country prepared to exercise leadership (F. Merz, 2025b). As a matter of fact, in his Government Statement to the Bundestag, on 14 May 2025, he stated ‘Europe expects something from us. The new German government accepts this. (...) The times in which Germany simply abstained on significant questions of European policy should be over’ (F. Merz, 2025c).

The clearest difference from the Scholz government concerns the framing of peace: Scholz frequently emphasized preventing escalation, while Merz increasingly argues that lasting peace requires military strength. In fact, Chancellor Merz consistently frames military support for Ukraine not as an obstacle to peace but as its necessary precondition. In his first government declaration, on May 14, 2025, he rejected any dictated peace or acceptance of Russia’s territorial gains, arguing that only a just and sustainable peace could preserve the European security order (F. Merz, 2025d). This narrative was reinforced during his joint press conference with President Zelensky on 28 May 2025, where he linked continued military assistance to the defence of both Ukraine and European freedom (F. Merz, 2025e). Following this narrative, at the Berlin Foreign Policy Forum in November 2025, he stated that ‘no decisions regarding the security of Ukraine and Europe can be made without the involvement of Ukrainians and us Europeans’ (F. Merz, 2025f).

¹⁰ <https://gppi.net/2026/03/26/merz-unfinished-foreign-policy-reforms>

3.3 Strategic Narratives in the Netherlands

The two government narratives I will focus on are the Mark Rutte one and the Dick Schoof one. The former was in office when the war broke out until July 2024. One interesting finding from this analysis is that the Dutch strategic narrative remained remarkably consistent despite the change of government, with changes in tone rather than substance.

During his official press conference on February 24, 2022, Rutte declares:

“It is not only an attack on Ukraine... it is also an attack on everything we have built in Europe since the Second World War. It is by far the greatest violation of international law since 1945.” (M. Rutte, 2022a)

The government consistently framed the invasion not simply as an attack on Ukraine, but on the international legal order on which Dutch and European security depend. Another important speech is his Sciences Po address, in March 2022 in Paris, where he argued:

“Peace, freedom and security on our continent seemed certain. That illusion was shattered by one act of unprecedented aggression. (...) Europe has now entered a new geopolitical reality” (M. Rutte, 2022b)

Prime Minister Dick Schoof maintained the same narrative. When announcing long-term military support, he stressed that supporting Ukraine was necessary for European security rather than charity, affirming that “the Netherlands will continue supporting Ukraine because European security is at stake” (D. Schoof, 2025a)

Analyzing their identity narrative, it is clear how the two Dutch governments have consistently portrayed the Netherlands as a principled democracy, a defender of international law and a dependable NATO and EU ally. This is particularly evident in the Speech from the Throne, in September 2022. In this occasion, Prime Minister Rutte declared that ‘the international legal order – and with it our own freedom – is under attack,’ that ‘Ukraine has every right to defend itself’ and that under these circumstances ‘the EU, NATO and the UN have once again proven to be the anchors of Dutch foreign policy’ (M. Rutte, 2022c). The Schoof cabinet explicitly rejected the idea that the change in coalition would weaken Dutch support. As a matter of fact, in July 2024, the Dutch Foreign Minister Caspar Veldkamp and Defence Minister Ruben Brekelmans during their first visit to Kyiv, described Dutch support as ‘rock solid’, stating that ‘the Netherlands’ political, military, financial and moral support remains rock solid’ (C. Veldkamp and R. Brekelmans, 2024). This reinforces the identity narrative of the Netherlands as a credible, reliable ally whose commitments transcend domestic political change.

As far as their issue narrative is concerned, they moved quickly towards endorsing military assistance, repeatedly arguing that Ukraine has the right to defend itself. In July 2022 while in Kyiv, Rutte stated that ‘we need to stay focused and continue to support Ukraine in every way we can’ (M. Rutte, 2022d). Moreover, one of the strongest Dutch narratives is persistence: Rutte repeatedly rejected ‘Ukraine fatigue.’ For instance, in his speech to the Ukrainian Parliament, he declared:

“We will continue to stand with Ukraine until peace, freedom and democracy have been restored.” (M. Rutte, 2022d)

Under Schoof this evolved into long-term commitments: the government pledged €3.5 billion for 2026, continued drone production and sustained military support¹¹.

A notable feature of the Dutch case is its high degree of narrative continuity. Unlike Germany, where the transition from Scholz to Merz brought a shift in emphasis, or Italy, where governing coalitions articulated different rhetorical priorities, the Netherlands maintained essentially the same system, identity and issue narratives across the Rutte and Schoof governments. The change in leadership did not substantially alter the country’s strategic communication regarding the war in Ukraine; instead, Schoof reinforced the narrative framework established by Rutte after February 2022.

3.4 The Coalition of the Willing

On March 2, 2025, Great Britain Prime Minister Starmer hosted a leaders meeting on Ukraine. It was attended by many European countries, Turkey, as well as the NATO Secretary General and the Presidents of the EU Commission, EU Council and Canada. The aim of the meeting was to draw up a Ukraine peace plan to present to the United States¹². Prime Minister Starmer stated:

“We will work with President Trump to ensure a strong, just, and lasting peace that ensures Ukraine’s future sovereignty and security. Ukraine must be able to deter and defend itself against future Russian attack. There must be no talks on Ukraine without Ukraine. We have agreed that the UK, France and others will work with Ukraine on a plan to stop the fighting which we will discuss further with the US and take forward together.” (K. Starmer, 2025)

The coalition consists of 34 European States and governments, including also Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and it represents a coordinated political effort to strengthen

¹¹ <https://kyivindependent.com/netherlands-to-provide-ukraine-with-3-8-billion-in-2026/>

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uks-starmer-tries-revive-hope-ukraine-peace-summit-2025-03-01/>

Europe's role in ensuring Ukraine a stable future. Meetings are held periodically and France and UK are the co-chairs of the summits. From December 2025, Chancellor Merz joined them, forming a new trilateral leadership¹³. At the time of writing, the coalition met sixteen times, the latest meeting took place in Ukraine at the fourth anniversary of the Russian full-scale invasion, on February 24, 2026. So far, they have developed a support plan for Ukraine, based on four key objectives: ensuring secure airspace, secure seas, peace on land, and supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces as a powerful deterrent¹⁴. Moreover, on January 10, 2026, the coalition expressed the intention of deploying a 'multinational force' in Ukraine in the event of a peace deal. However, only the UK and France have pledged peacekeeping troops, as a matter of fact, other countries, such as Italy, Germany and Poland, have agreed to support peacekeeping efforts in Ukraine in other ways, i.e. financially and politically (M. Clarke, 2026).

3.5 Strategic Narratives in the Russian Federation

I will conclude this chapter and the analysis on the strategic narratives implemented during the war in Ukraine with a reference to the Russian Federation sphere. Once again, I will follow the same framework used previously.

The system narrative: the collapse of the Western unipolar hegemony

The main system narratives used are the Western dominance decline, the fragmentation of the West and a multipolar world order. President Vladimir Putin declared at the signing of treaties on the accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia on September 30, 2022:

"The West is ready to cross every line to preserve the neo-colonial system which allows it to live off the world, to plunder it thanks to the domination of the dollar and technology, to collect an actual tribute from humanity, to extract its primary source of unearned prosperity, the rent paid to the hegemon. The preservation of this annuity is their main, real and absolutely self-serving motivation. This is why total de-sovereinization is in their interest." (V. Putin, 2022a)

He looks at Russia as a victim of the West, within a world system where the international order is changing, but the West is trying to maintain its hegemony. This view interprets contemporary international developments as a shift from a unipolar world, dominated by the West, to an emerging

¹³ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/11/27/macron-merz-and-starmer-are-forming-a-new-trilateral-leadership>

¹⁴ <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/analytics/what-is-coalition-of-willing-and-what-is-1746848745.html>

multipolar order that the West tries to obstruct. According to the Russian international system narrative, the current unipolar world order embodies an unfair system of material goods distribution, stemming from modern Western neocolonialism and a continuation of the colonial policies of Western nations from previous centuries (O. Snygir, 2023). Moreover, significant are the words of Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs:

“Europe is “playing” together with the US. The EU has almost no independence left. Washington has crushed Brussels under itself. There are almost no independent voices left in the European Union. French President E. Macron occasionally, but less and less often, tries to recall the “strategic autonomy” of the EU. No one will allow them to create any kind of autonomy, especially a strategic one”

(O. Snygir, 12:2023)

The recurring narrative in his speeches is that the West is losing its ability to dictate global affairs¹⁵. On March 31, 2023, he made the concept of Russia’s foreign policy clear, stating that it consists ‘of a more balanced and fairer world order’, that includes ‘polycentricity, the sovereign equality of states, their right to choose models of development, and the world’s cultural and civilizational diversity. The promotion of a multipolar world order is defined as a framework task on all foreign policy tasks.’ Adding that ‘the redistribution of the development potential in favor of new centers of growth [is] leading to the emergence of a new multipolar world order.’ (S. Lavrov, 2023a). During his speech at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, on September 23, 2023, he argues:

“Right in front of our eyes, there is a new world order being born. Our future is being shaped by a struggle, one between the Global Majority in favor of a fairer distribution of global benefits and civilizational diversity, and the few who wield neocolonial methods of subjugation to maintain their elusive dominance.” (S. Lavrov, 2023b)

He continues saying that the United States and its allies ‘are doing everything they can to prevent the formation of a truly multipolar and fairer world order. They are trying to force the world to play by their notorious and self-serving rules’ (ibidem).

The identity narrative: Russia as a distinctive state-civilization

The main identity narrative used by the Russian Federation is one where Russia is portrayed as a distinct civilization. This emerges particularly in The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian

¹⁵ <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-rapidly-changing-reality/>

Federation, published on March 31, 2023. The doctrine defines Russia as a ‘distinctive state-civilization¹⁶.’ This is something that comes to light throughout President Putin’s words across the 2022-2024 meetings of the Valdai Discussion Club, where he repeatedly argued that Russia possesses its own civilizational identity and value system, distinct from the liberal West. On October 5, 2023, he argues:

“In the Concept of the Foreign Policy of Russia adopted this year, our country is characterized as a distinctive state-civilization. This formulation accurately and concisely reflects how we understand not only our own development, but also the basic principles of the world order. (...) The main qualities of a state-civilization are diversity and self-sufficiency. (...) Over the centuries, Russia has been formed as a country of different cultures, religions and nationalities. Russian civilization cannot be reduced to one common denominator, but it cannot be divided either.” (V. Putin, 2023a)

These quotations offer quite a clear-cut answer to the question ‘What is Russia?’. It is portrayed as culturally plural but politically unified, historically self-sufficient, possessing a distinct historical mission and a state-civilization rather than a conventional nation-state.

Moreover, to dwell on the concept of state-civilization, two more speeches must be considered: the Federal Assembly Address in February 2023 and Valdai Discussion Club in October 2022. During the former, Russia is depicted by its President as ‘an open country and at the same time a distinctive civilization.’ He goes on stating that Russia does not ‘claim any superiority, but we inherited our civilization from our ancestors, and we must preserve it and pass it on to future generations’ (V. Putin, 2023b). Traditional values are at the center of his October 2022 speech as well. In this occasion they are defined as something that ‘cannot be imposed. They must simply be respected, and what every nation has chosen for centuries must be treated with care’ (V. Putin, 2022b).

The issue narrative: denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine, and the NATO expansion

Coming to the issue narrative, the first and most prominent one portrayed the invasion as a campaign to eliminate Nazism from Ukraine. This narrative was officially introduced by Vladimir Putin in his televised address announcing the invasion on 24 February 2022, where he declared:

¹⁶

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab2000e3e6397c75df9d7818fa07e3bc6008ab6800fe7e005bb6e247610678383990d108d7c6988b14300011696f19b962703defe78c35da426c84376367c1a26a710f59e8e55e8dfd358de6053b83028fedaa08a56f00ecf5ef2d

“The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians.”

(V. Putin, 2022c)

This statement became the foundational justification for what the Kremlin called the ‘special military operation.’ Rather than presenting Russia as initiating a war, Putin framed military action as an obligation to stop alleged crimes committed by the Ukrainian government against civilians in Donbas. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeatedly reinforced this message. At a press conference on 25 February 2022, he states that ‘Russia will ensure the demilitarization of Ukraine. Russia will ensure the denazification of Ukraine’ (S. Lavrov, 2022a). A few days later, during his address to the UN Human Rights Council on 1 March 2022, Lavrov reiterated:

“The goal of our actions is to save people (...) as well as to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine so that such things never happen again.” (S. Lavrov, 2022b)

The concepts of “denazification” and “demilitarization” deliberately remained broad. “Demilitarization” referred not only to weakening Ukraine’s armed forces but also to preventing the country from becoming an effective military partner of NATO. “Denazification” functioned even more expansively, referring to alleged extremist political elites, nationalist organizations and, increasingly, the political system itself. As Laruelle and Grek argue, the term evolved from a historical reference into an ideological framework portraying Russia as the heir of the Soviet victory over fascism and Ukraine as the successor to wartime collaborators (2022). Two other key issue narratives are the protection of Russian-speaking populations and restoring historical justice, and the NATO expansion and Russia’s self defence. In his invasion speech, Putin argued that Russia had been left with no alternative but military intervention because people in eastern Ukraine had suffered years of persecution. This narrative presents Russia not as an aggressor but as a humanitarian protector responding to repeated appeals for assistance. Lavrov similarly argued that Russia had a moral responsibility toward the inhabitants of Donbas:

“Russia could not remain indifferent to the fate of four million people in Donbass amid the eight year-long war against them with all signs of genocide.” (S. Lavrov, 2022b)

The language of protection was reinforced through references to shared history, common culture and linguistic unity. Russian officials consistently argued that Ukraine’s post-2014 governments had discriminated against Russian speakers by restricting the Russian language and

glorifying nationalist historical figures. Consequently, military intervention was presented as a defensive humanitarian mission rather than territorial expansion.

The issue narrative based on the NATO expansion places the responsibility of the conflict directly on the United States and on its allies. Putin repeatedly argued that NATO enlargement represented an existential threat to Russian security. In his address announcing the invasion, he states that for his country this is ‘ultimately a matter of life and death (...) they crossed the line regarding the expansion of NATO’ (ibidem). According to this narrative, Ukraine is portrayed not as an independent actor but as a proxy used by Western governments to contain Russia strategically. Lavrov consistently echoed this framing. On 5 March 2022, he argued that Russia’s conditions for peace required ‘to eliminate the threat that has been created for years by the NATO members on Ukrainian soil against Russia’ (ibidem). Over time, this issue narrative became increasingly global. Rather than describing the conflict simply as a war with Ukraine, Russian officials increasingly characterized it as a confrontation with the collective West. Western military assistance to Kyiv was presented as evidence that NATO had become a direct participant in the conflict, thereby legitimizing Russia’s continued military operations. This framing also helped explain military setbacks without fundamentally challenging the original narrative. Rather than acknowledging failures against Ukraine alone, Russian officials argued that Russia was confronting the combined military, economic and technological resources of the entire NATO alliance. As Mamedov notes, this adaptation allowed the strategic narrative to remain internally coherent despite changes on the battlefield. (2025).

4. Strategic Narratives on the War in Gaza

The cases of the European Union's and Italy's Narratives

The fourth chapter of this thesis revolves around the strategic narratives implemented by the European Union and by the Italian government during the war in Gaza, starting from October 7, 2023, until February 2026. Regarding the European Union, I will focus and analyze the words of Ursula Von der Leyen, the President of the Commission, throughout these years and try to assess what are the main system, identity and issue narratives developed. Meaning how the European Union describes the international order, how the European Union defines itself, and how this conflict is framed and what policy responses are legitimized. Moreover, I will analyze how the addresses by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy align within this narrative, as well the work and the perspective of the European Council. The same narratives will be analyzed in reference to the Italian government, while opposition parties will be covered in the next and last chapter of this thesis.

4.1 The European Union

The Gaza war posed one of the greatest challenges to the European Union's narrative coherence since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whereas the EU had constructed a strong identity narrative around the defence of international law and the rule-based international order after February 2022, the Israeli military campaign in Gaza exposed significant tensions between geopolitical solidarity with Israel and the Union's normative identity. As it will become clear in this analysis, the Commission's communication did not simply describe the conflict, it also actively constructed a particular understanding of international order, defined the European Union's role within that order, and established the boundaries of legitimate political action. Throughout the period between October 2023 and February 2026, Ursula von der Leyen's and the High Representatives' speeches show a gradual process of discursive adjustment in which humanitarian and legal considerations were incorporated into an initially security-centered narrative without fundamentally displacing it.

The system narrative: the right to self-defense in line with international law

The immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 was characterized by an overwhelmingly securitized discourse. The conflict was initially narrated not as a territorial or

political dispute, but as an attack on civilization itself. In her statement from Tel Aviv on October 13, 2023, Ursula von der Leyen declared:

“Europe stands with Israel. Israel has the right to defend itself—today and in the days to come. And we must call by their name the atrocities committed by Hamas. This is terrorism. This is an act of war. Nothing can justify what Hamas did. This is the time to stand in solidarity with Israel and its people. And this is why I am here.” (U. Von der Leyen, 2023 I)

This statement performs several discursive functions simultaneously. First, it establishes a clear moral alignment through the collective pronoun Europe, transforming the European Union into a unified political subject acting in solidarity with Israel. Second, by foregrounding Israel’s ‘right to defend itself,’ the statement frames subsequent military action primarily through the legal language of self-defence, effectively placing Israel within the category of victim rather than belligerent. Noticeably absent from this early discourse is any reference to proportionality, international humanitarian law, or Palestinian civilians. So, the three assumptions this system narrative rests on are terrorism threatens global order, democracies must defend themselves, and Europe belongs to the democratic camp defending liberal norms. In this way, the conflict gets incorporated into the broader geopolitical struggle between democracies and violent extremism. This initial framing echoed broader post-9/11 security narratives in which terrorism represents an existential threat to the liberal international order. Hamas is repeatedly described as ‘barbaric,’ ‘terrorist’ and ‘evil.’ Such terminology creates what Laclau and Mouffe describe as an antagonistic frontier separating the democratic ‘Self’ from the terrorist ‘Other.’ (1985). Throughout her visit, Von der Leyen repeatedly employs morally absolute language to describe Hamas, reporting her personal experience:

“I was today in Kfar Azza. What I saw and what I heard is breaking my heart. The blood of people killed in their sleep. The stories of innocents burned alive or slaughtered in their homes. The parents hiding their newborn babies before confronting the terrorists. Children and elderly people ripped from their families and taken hostage, even Holocaust survivors. Over 1,300 human beings were murdered by barbaric terrorists of Hamas fighting against Israel.” (U. Von der Leyen, 2023 II)

The Holocaust reference performs an especially powerful discursive function. Rather than merely describing violence, it embeds the attacks within Europe’s collective historical memory, transforming support for Israel from a geopolitical choice into a moral obligation grounded in European identity.

However, the then High Representative Josep Borrell, already on October 10, 2023, was already stressing the humanitarian crisis of the region:

“We have to increase our humanitarian support to the victims of this tragedy, and we have to reach out to partners around the world. The international community has to use this critical moment – this could be an awakening moment – in order to re-engage with the problem of Palestine and Israel.”

(J. Borrell, 2023b)

As a matter of fact, as Palestinian civilian casualties increased and criticism emerged both within Europe and internationally, this system narrative became increasingly difficult to sustain and the humanitarian emergence along with the respect of the international law came to light. By mid-October, Von der Leyen begins to incorporate explicit references to humanitarian law:

“Israel has the right to defend itself—in line with humanitarian and international law.” (Von der Leyen, 2023 II)

So does Borrell:

“Israel has the right to defend [itself], but it has to be done according to the right of international law, humanitarian law. Some decisions are against this international law.” (J. Borrell, 2023b)

The addition of the qualifying clause is particularly revealing. Rather than replacing the original narrative, it modifies it. Israel’s right to self-defence remains the principal proposition, while humanitarian law functions grammatically as a condition attached to that right. Discursively, this represents what Fairclough (1992) would describe as recontextualization: the original security discourse is not abandoned but partially absorbed into a competing legal discourse. This marks the re-entry of international humanitarian law into the Commission’s system narrative. During her speech at the EU Ambassador Conference on November 6, 2023, she stated that ‘every life is equally precious, whether Israeli or Palestinian’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2023 III). This sentence constitutes one of the first moments in which Palestinian civilians are explicitly incorporated into the Commission’s moral universe. Earlier speeches had overwhelmingly focused upon Israeli victims; here the discourse broadens to include universal humanitarian principles.

This balancing strategy started in late October 2023, when she declared:

“Israel can count on Europe. But humanitarian aid must reach civilians in Gaza.” (U. Von der Leyen, 2023 I)

The conjunction ‘but’ is significant. It introduces humanitarian obligations without undermining the preceding affirmation of solidarity.

In his speech in late October 2023, Borrell restates the importance of acting in accordance with international law and humanitarian law, meaning that

“There cannot be cutting of water and electricity for the civilian population. According to humanitarian law, a population under siege cannot be deprived of water and electricity.”

(J. Borrell, 2023c).

He also underlines that this ‘cannot be a rhetorical sentence. It has to be full of sense’ and he continues stating ‘we support the Two-State solution.’ (ibidem)

The identity narrative: the EU as a democratic and humanitarian actor

Identity narratives define who political actors believe themselves to be. Throughout the Gaza conflict, the Commission’s discourse reflects a persistent effort to reconcile two long-standing identities that increasingly appeared in tension. Immediately following the attacks, Europe was represented primarily as a democratic community standing alongside another democracy under terrorist assault. Von der Leyen’s repeated use of the phrase ‘Europe stands with Israel’ the days after the 7 October is more than diplomatic solidarity; it constructs a collective identity based upon shared democratic values, common vulnerability, and moral obligation. Europe is not presented as a neutral mediator but as a participant within a broader democratic community. This identity narrative emphasizes solidarity, shared democratic values, and collective resistance against terrorism. In this first weeks, the Palestinian dimension remained largely absent.

Importantly, this identity is established through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Israel is discursively incorporated within Europe’s moral community, while Hamas is positioned entirely outside of it. Palestinians, however, occupy an ambiguous position. During the first weeks following the attacks, they appear largely as an undifferentiated background population rather than as political subjects possessing agency. Their visibility within the discourse increases only once humanitarian concerns become impossible to ignore.

This evolution becomes apparent during the Commission’s subsequent speeches. References to humanitarian aid, civilian protection and reconstruction become increasingly frequent starting at the end of October. Von der Leyen on 18 October 2023, states that ‘we must all redouble our efforts to protect civilians from the fury of this war.’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2023 I).

Here, the discursive subject starts to change: the European Union is described as a humanitarian actor. There is indeed a shift toward its traditional self-image of humanitarian donor, defender of civilians, and of humanitarian corridors¹⁷.

The Commission also repeatedly highlighted increased humanitarian funding for Gaza. Instead of focusing exclusively upon Israel's security, the speech broadens the moral community to include civilians irrespective of nationality. The vocabulary also shifts significantly. The language of terrorism and retaliation is supplemented by humanitarian terminology— 'protection,' 'aid,' 'humanitarian corridors,' 'children,' 'families'—which evokes the European Union's traditional self-image as a civilian power (ibidem).

In a statement in October 2024, Josep Borrell expresses the grave concerns of the European Union about the situation in Northern Gaza, stating that 'the EU emphasizes the urgency of full, rapid, safe, and unhindered access to humanitarian aid in Gaza.' (J. Borrell, 2024).

Yet this humanitarian identity never entirely replaces the earlier geopolitical identity. Rather, the two coexist throughout the period. This coexistence reflects what Manners (2002) describes as the EU's identity as a 'normative power', although the Gaza war exposed the difficulties of maintaining that identity when normative commitments appeared to conflict with strategic partnerships. The gradual incorporation of legal vocabulary may therefore be interpreted as an attempt to repair the credibility of the Union's normative identity following widespread criticism that its initial response contrasted sharply with its discourse on Ukraine.

The issue narrative: protection of civilians, humanitarian access and the respect of the international humanitarian law

Issue narratives are implemented and used to explain what happened, who is responsible, and what should be done. Within the European Union communication strategy, initially the conflict is narrated almost entirely through Hamas and on the legitimate Israeli self-defense. On October 19, 2023, in a European Parliament resolution 'on the despicable terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel', it is stated clearly that Israel has the 'right to defend itself in line with humanitarian and international law.' Moreover, the Union

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/pt/speech_23_5069

“Condemns, in the strongest possible terms, the despicable terrorists' attacks committed by the terrorist group Hamas against Israel and expresses its support for the State of Israel and its people; reiterates that the terrorist organization Hamas needs to be eliminated¹⁸.”

And continues claiming that ‘the terrorist organization Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people and their legitimate aspirations’ (ibidem). This sentence is particularly important because it separates Hamas from Palestinians as a whole, allowing the Commission simultaneously to condemn terrorism while recognizing Palestinian civilians. Later, on November 6, 2023, at the Ambassadors Conference, Ursula Von der Leyen asserts:

“Hamas is clearly using innocent Palestinians and hostages as human shields. It is horrific. It is pure evil. And our hearts bleed at the images of small children pulled out from under the rubble” (U. Von der Leyen’s, 2023 III)

This formulation attributes responsibility for civilian suffering primarily to Hamas rather than to Israeli military operations. It therefore reinforces the legitimacy of Israeli self-defence while acknowledging humanitarian consequences, adding that ‘the size and scale of today's events require that we act and think strategically’ (ibidem). In fact, by late 2023, the Commission starts increasingly to discuss the future political order. In this perspective, Von der Leyen outlines five principles for the Gaza Strip after the war to prevent long-term instability and set the foundation for Palestinian self-determination: ‘no safe haven for terrorists, no Hamas-led government, no long-term Israeli security presence in Gaza, no forced displacement of Palestinians, no sustained blockade of Gaza’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2023 IV). In relation to these she admits that ‘all of this may look overly ambitious, as the war still rages on (...) But we must spare no effort to keep the hope alive. To find a lasting solution, based on two states, living side by side in peace and security’ (ibidem).

Additionally, as civilian casualties mounted, the issue narrative broadened. Responsibility was no longer limited to Hamas. The main issues are now the protection of civilians, humanitarian access and the respect of the international humanitarian law. Von der Leyen states: ‘there is no excuse for hitting a hospital full of civilians.’ (U. Von der Leyen, 2023 I). So, unlike the first speeches following 7 October, the conflict is now situated within a broader political horizon extending beyond military operations.

¹⁸ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0373_EN.html

Moreover, in September 2025, Kaja Kallas. The High Representative at office at the time of writing, underlines the role of the Union in trying to push the Israeli government to change its course of action. In order to achieve this, she lists the measures proposed: sanctions on extremist ministers in the Israeli government, sanctions on violent settlers in the West Bank and entities supporting their impunity, additional sanctions of Hamas terrorists, and the suspension of trade concessions with Israel. Stating that ‘this is a message to the current Israeli government: change course and address the human suffering.’ (K. Kallas, 2025c).

In October 2025, Kaja Kallas makes a statement, condemning Israel’s E1 West Bank settlements, declaring:

“The EU reiterates its call on Israel to halt settlement construction. Israel’s settlement policy - including demolitions, forced transfers, evictions and confiscations of homes - must stop.”

(K. Kallas, 2025c)

The European Council has played in a part on these years of conflict, reaffirming

“The European Union’s commitment to international law and a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the two-state solution in accordance with relevant UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) where two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, live side-by-side in peace within secure and recognized borders.” (European Council, 2026)

In addition to this, it reiterates its call for the implementation by all parties of the ceasefire and all other provisions of UNSCR 2803, which established a Board (BoP) and authorized it to establish a temporary International Stabilization Force (ISF) in Gaza. The resolution received 13 votes in favor and two abstentions - China and Russia. (Security Council Resolution 2803, 2025).

In conclusion, it is not easy to find a unified European position on Israel. Member States have often different positions, for instance Italy and Germany have always opposed to sanctions, while other countries like Spain, Slovenia and Ireland are calling for the suspension of the association agreement between the EU and Israel. But for the German Foreign Minister it is "inappropriate". Ursula von der Leyen's Commission agrees with Berlin and Rome¹⁹.

¹⁹ <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2026/04/21/news/non-ce-una-posizione-unitaria-su-israele-italia-e-germania-contrarie-alle-sanzioni--280220>

4.2 Strategic Narratives in Italy

From the outbreak of the Gaza war following Hamas' attacks of 7 October 2023 until February 2026, Italy developed a relatively coherent strategic narrative that attempted to reconcile three potentially conflicting objectives: unwavering support for Israel's security, protection of international humanitarian law, and preservation of Italy's diplomatic credibility in the Mediterranean. Rather than radically changing over time, Italy's discourse gradually shifted from an almost exclusive emphasis on Israel's right to self-defence toward a stronger concern for proportionality, humanitarian protection, and the political necessity of a two-state solution. The government in office when the crisis began is the actual in office: the Meloni government.

The system narrative: global security at risk

At the system level, Italy consistently framed the conflict as a threat not only to Israel and Palestine but to the broader international order. Rather than presenting Gaza as a local conflict, Meloni repeatedly argued that the war risked destabilizing the entire Mediterranean and undermining global security. This becomes clear in her speech at the Cairo Peace Summit, on October 21, 2023, where she argues:

"We must do everything possible to avoid an escalation of the crisis because the consequences would be unimaginable (...) Our common interest is that what is happening in Gaza does not become a much wider conflict, a religious war, a clash of civilizations." (G. Meloni, 2023 I)

This discourse constructs a system narrative in which the principal danger is not simply military violence but the collapse of regional stability and dialogue. Italy therefore positioned itself as a defender of diplomatic multilateralism rather than military escalation. Closely connected to this was the repeated endorsement of the two-state solution as the only legitimate long-term international framework. Regarding this, Meloni argues:

"The most serious way forward is a political initiative based on the perspective of two peoples and two states... with a defined timetable." (ibidem)

On this matter, her position had a significant shift throughout the years: in February 2015, Giorgia Meloni and the deputies of the Brothers of Italy party, at the opposition, signed a parliamentary motion (Motion 1-00747) that committed the then government to promote the recognition of Palestine within the borders of 1967, as a sovereign and democratic state. The text called for recognition to occur within the framework of coordinated international action and through direct negotiations between the parties (Atti Parlamentari – Camera dei Deputati). However, during the

last years the recognition of the state of Palestine has been deemed by the Italian Prime Minister as ‘premature’: she argues that recognizing a state that does not yet possess effective sovereignty risks being counterproductive, creating the illusion that the problem has been resolved without a genuine peace process (G. Meloni, 2025).

Another recurring element of Italy’s system narrative concerns European unity: Meloni argues that divisions inside Europe weakens diplomatic effectiveness: ‘Europe must speak with one voice.’ This is what she declared before the European Council on October 26, 2023 (G. Meloni, 2023 II).

What emerges from this first analysis is that the Italian government maintains a balanced approach based on the ‘two peoples, two states’ solution, supporting Israel's right to security while condemning the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The government is pushing for a ceasefire and is actively engaged in providing aid to the civilian population, sending humanitarian aid. This aspect emerges during a statement by Giorgia Meloni on August 21, 2025:

“A collective commitment would instead be necessary (...) strengthening international efforts to guarantee the humanitarian aid urgently needed by the civilian population of the Strip.

Italy will continue to support the mediators’ efforts in this direction and is ready to do its part in the post-conflict scenario. Italy also condemns Israel’s decision to authorize new settlements in the West Bank. This decision goes against international law and risks definitively compromising the two-state solution and, in general, the political prospect for reaching a just and lasting peace”

(governo.it)

From this speech it also emerges how Italy portrays international politics as requiring mediation, diplomacy and gradual political reconstruction.

The identity narrative: Italy as a principled Western actor

Immediately after the Hamas attacks, Meloni strongly emphasized solidarity with Israel. During her visit to Tel Aviv in October 2023, she declared:

“We defend Israel's right to exist, to defend the security of its citizens. We fully understand that it is an act of terrorism that must be fought. We think and believe that you are able to do it in the best way, because we are different from those terrorists” (G. Meloni, 2023 III)

She also characterized Hamas in strongly normative terms:

“The images show something more than a simple war; they show the will to erase the Jews from this region. It is an act of antisemitism.” (ibidem)

These statements embedded Italy firmly within the Western democratic community defending Israel against terrorism.

However, unlike more unconditional supporters of Israel, Meloni simultaneously attempted to construct Italy as an actor capable of dialogue with Arab governments. This balancing identity emerged particularly during the Cairo Summit, where she rejected any framing of the conflict as a civilizational confrontation: ‘we cannot fall into Hamas’ trap’ (reuters.com). The expression ‘trap’ became one of the dominant metaphors of Italy’s strategic communication. According to this narrative, Hamas’ strategic objective was not merely military but political: provoking regional polarization between Israel, Arab countries and the West. Italy therefore defined its own identity as precisely the actor refusing such polarization.

By 2025 this identity narrative had evolved further. While maintaining support for Israel’s security, Meloni openly criticized Israeli military operations especially in two occasions: during the annual Rimini Meeting of Influential Catholic activist group Comunione e Liberazione, on 27 August 2025, and her address to the 80th United Nation General Assembly, on September 24, 2025. During the latter, she stated:

“We cannot remain silent now in the face of a reaction that has gone beyond the principle of proportionality, claiming too many innocent victims and even involving Christian communities.”

(G. Meloni, 2025 II)

This statement did not abandon Italy’s pro-Israel positioning. Instead, it reframed Italy as a principled Western actor committed equally to humanitarian norms and security.

The following quotation is from her speech at the United Nations General Assembly:

“A reaction to an aggression must always respect the principle of proportionality. This is true for individuals and is all the truer for States. Israel has crossed that line, with a large-scale war that is involving the Palestinian civilian population beyond measure. And it is by crossing that line that the Jewish state has ended up violating humanitarian norms, causing a slaughter of civilians. A choice that Italy has repeatedly described as unacceptable, and one that will lead us to vote in favour of some of the sanctions against Israel proposed by the European Commission.” (G. Meloni, 2025 III)

Identity narratives define who political actors believe they are. In the case of Italy, the country is presented simultaneously as a loyal Western democrat, a reliable ally of Israel, an advocate of humanitarian law and a bridge toward Arab partners.

The issue narrative: Hamas as responsible and the issue of proportionality

Issue narratives explain how political actors interpret specific policy problems and propose solutions. Italy's initial issue narrative clearly located responsibility for the outbreak of war with Hamas. Meloni consistently defined Hamas as a terrorist organization whose objective extended beyond Palestinian nationalism. She argued:

"The real objective of the attack was not defending the rights of the Palestinian people but provoking a reaction against Gaza that would destroy every possibility of dialogue" (G. Meloni 2023 I)

Here Hamas is represented not only as a military threat but as a strategic actor deliberately seeking diplomatic collapse. This framing legitimised Italy's support for Israel's military response. However, Italy repeatedly argued that self-defence remained constrained by international law. As a matter of fact, Meloni explained:

"The reaction of a State cannot and must not be motivated by revenge. A state bases its reaction on the basis of precise reasons of security, commensurate with its strength with the reasons of security and the defense of the civilian population. This must remain the reaction of a state to terrorism. I am confident that it is also the will of the State of Israel." (G. Meloni, 2023 IV)

This quotation illustrates an important evolution. Rather than questioning Israel's right to military action, Italy increasingly emphasized proportionality as the defining legal principle.

One key narrative is the one related to the humanitarian concern. Throughout 2024 and especially during 2025, humanitarian language became increasingly prominent.

By August 2025 Meloni publicly stated:

"There have been too many innocent victims. (...) The reaction has gone beyond the principle of proportionality." (G. Meloni, 2025 III)

These statements marked a significant discursive shift. Whereas early Italian discourse primarily centred on terrorism and security, later communication increasingly foregrounded civilian suffering, humanitarian assistance and preservation of the two-state solution.

An interesting feature of Italy's issue narrative concerned ceasefire proposals. Meloni argued in October 2023:

"When it is said ceasefire, it is also said that Hamas remains there, it is also said that tomorrow can happen again, it is said that there could be other innocent civilians dying, and that Israel does not have so much right to defend itself. To prevent civilians from dying, that these conflicts are not there, and that Israel can defend itself," he explains, a "structural solution to the Middle East question is needed" (il Giornale, October 2023).

This framing portrayed an immediate ceasefire as politically insufficient because it would leave Hamas' military capabilities intact. Instead, Italy consistently proposed a political solution addressing both Israeli security and Palestinian statehood.

In conclusion, from this analysis it is become known that the Italian system narrative defends a rule-based international order threatened by regional escalation while promoting multilateral diplomacy and European unity.

Its identity narrative portrayed Italy as a responsible Western democracy capable of simultaneously supporting Israel, maintaining dialogue with Arab partners, and defending humanitarian principles.

Finally, its issue narrative combined three interconnected themes: Hamas as the primary source of instability, Israel's legitimate but legally constrained right to self-defence, and the two-state solution as the only viable long-term political settlement.

From a narrative perspective, the most significant change was not a reversal of Italy's position but a gradual shift in emphasis, from prioritising counterterrorism immediately after 7 October 2023 to increasingly foregrounding proportionality, humanitarian protection, and diplomatic conflict resolution as the war continued. As a matter of fact, the first phase (October-December 2023) was dominated by: the condemnation of zHamas, solidarity with Israel, anti-terrorism discourse, and prevention of regional escalation. The second phase increasingly integrated humanitarian access, civilian protection, diplomacy and political reconstruction.

By early 2026, Italy had adopted a more balanced discourse in which three principles coexisted: Israel retains the right to defend itself, military action must respect proportionality and humanitarian law, and only a negotiated two-state solution can ensure lasting regional stability.

5. Strategic Narratives on the War in Gaza

The cases of opposition parties in Italy, and of Spain's, and Ireland's Narratives

In this last chapter, the focus is on the narratives developed by opposition parties in Italy and by those enforced by two European countries: Spain and Ireland.

Regarding the Italian opposition parties, I will analyze their main common positions on this conflict, with particular attention to some of the speeches by their representatives in the Italian Parliament.

The two European countries analyzed are the ones that present the most critical position toward the common policies adopted by the European Union, and more in general by the Western community, proposing a counter narrative, along with concrete actions against the Israeli government. This is why I decided to examine their narratives to offer a different point of view.

5.1 Opposition parties in Italy

The three main Italian opposition parties are the Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, and Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra. I will start my analysis from their common positions and examining their common motion for Gaza. After this, I will examine how they condemn both the European Union and the Italian Government inaction toward the atrocities in Gaza, and the double standards used in this conflict compared to the Ukrainian one.

On April 15, 2025, these three political parties submitted a joint motion to the Italian Parliament, asking, among the main points, the recognition of the State of Palestine according to the 1967 borders, the condemnation of the extermination in Gaza, the release of the hostages in the hands of Hamas, the end of the illegal occupation of the West Bank, the condemnation of Israel's war crimes and the suspension of the association agreements between the European Union and Israel²⁰. In this occasion, Elly Schlein, the representative of the Democratic Party stressed some important points:

“What we cannot accept from the Italian government and the European Union is the double standard, so we have not heard condemnation of the humanitarian apocalypse that has been going on in Gaza for too long. We have never heard a voice that rose so strongly from the EU to call for a ceasefire, a truce, to release the hostages and to bring all humanitarian aid to Gaza. We need a stronger diplomatic and political effort.”

²⁰ <https://partitodemocratico.it/mozione-unitaria-pd-m5s-e-avs-per-la-palestina/>

And she goes on to say:

“If we have already heard few confusing words from the Italian Government, after Trump's inauguration they closed in total silence. We demand full recognition of the State of Palestine also by the European Union. Finally, we no longer accept from anyone the constant delegitimization of the International Criminal Court” (E. Schlein, 2025I).

Accusations of the Italian government's inaction, silence, and the application of 'double standards' in foreign policy are recurring themes in the narrative strategies of opposition parties.

In fact, the Five Star Movement group leader Riccardo Ricciardi, in his speech before the Italian Parliament on February 17, 2026, regarding the government inaction stressed:

“Minister Tajani knows what he should have done and didn't do? Recognize Palestine, cut off relations with Israel during the genocide, arrest Netanyahu, refrain from condemning genocide at the UN and prosecuting Israel for bombing the Flotilla.” (R. Ricciardi, 2026 I).

Moreover, the accusation of the Italian government inaction toward Israel is presented as complicity by him, during a speech before the Italian Parliament, in April 2026. In this occasion he blames the government for preventing Europe to sanction Israel:

“Tajani, explain to us yet another disgraceful act committed by the Meloni government which prevented the suspension of the trade agreement between Europe and Israel. (...) I point out that Article 2 of that agreement states that, for it to remain in force, respect for human rights is fundamental. It seems to us that that article has been widely torn up by Israel.” (R. Ricciardi, 2026 II)

He also made a very poignant speech regarding the double standards adopted by the government in May 2026, addressing the Parliament:

“Gaza revealed all the hypocrisy. Meloni says on sanctions against Israel: ‘We must not isolate the civilian population.’ But then we see how you treat the Russians, isolating peoples. Meloni does not condemn the bombing of Beirut but asks for ‘concern for civilians.’ A bit like how she responded to us about the arms trade with Israel, when she told us it would continue, ‘but we make sure that Israel does not use them on civilians.’” (R. Ricciardi, 2026 III)

Also, Democratic Party Secretary Elly Schlein made a statement criticizing the Italian government inaction in Gaza. On May 21, 2025, she stated:

“Hospitals have been bombed since March, preventing any humanitarian aid from reaching them. We have witnessed the killing of doctors and paramedics. Hunger is being used as a weapon of war. The UN has declared the escalation in Gaza to be ethnic cleansing (...) the world cannot stand by and watch.”

She uses these words to justify the joint motion, adding:

“With this joint motion, we ask the Italian government to break its complicit silence and express firm condemnation of the Israeli government's crimes” (E. Schlein, 2025 II)

Regarding the double standards, she attacks the European Union's conduct, defining it ‘not very credible’:

“It was right to put sanctions on Putin, but it is not acceptable that there are no sanctions for the Israeli government as well. The Meloni government should immediately give a signal, lifting the veto that blocks the suspension of the EU-Israel agreement” (E. Schlein, 2026).

Aligned with these positions, Nicola Fratoianni, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra group leader, on the party website shares harsh words of reprimand toward the Meloni government, defining it:

“A hypocritical and complicit government that would have power in international forums starting from its specific role of recognizing the Palestinian state, demanding sanctions and fighting with all its strength.” (N. Fratoianni, 2025 I)

When referring to the war in Gaza he speaks of a ‘genocide on live television and social media’, this accusation is directed not only at the Israeli government but also at the international community, which ‘is turning its back in the face of the extermination of the Palestinian people’ (N. Fratoianni, 2025 II). Fratoianni also addresses the double standard problem, adopted by the Italian government with poignant words directed toward the Italian Prime Minister Meloni:

“You do not want measures that affect Israeli civil society. Instead, Russian civil society with twenty packages, the Iranian one, is doing very well. Let me understand, because the double standard is unacceptable. It is the end of the credibility of the international community of the West that you fill your mouth with” (Nicola Fratoianni, 2026).

Overall, these three opposition parties present many fundamental common points, even if in the end each party continues to interpret the conflict through a distinct strategic narrative about Italy's role, the identities of the actors involved, and the political meaning of the Gaza war. In fact, the Democratic Party adopts more institutionally oriented narratives, avoiding the use of the term ‘genocide’, unlike the other two parties examined. The Democratic Party condemns the actions in Gaza, maintaining a traditional diplomatic position. Secretary Schlein supports the ‘two peoples, two states’ option and is in favor of a ceasefire. The other two parties analyzed openly use the term ‘genocide’, they ask for harsh sanctions against Israel, and press for effective humanitarian aid in Gaza.

5.2 Strategic Narratives in Ireland

Ireland's government developed one of the most distinctive Western strategic narratives on Gaza. Unlike many European governments, Irish leaders consistently combined an unequivocal condemnation of Hamas with increasingly forceful criticism of Israel's military campaign, while framing Ireland as a defender of international law and humanitarian principles. This narrative evolved under two taoisigh Leo Varadkar (until April 2024) and Simon Harris (April 2024 - January 2025), followed by Micheál Martin (from January 2025). Because Martin also served as Foreign Minister before returning as Taoiseach, his speeches reveal a remarkable continuity in Ireland's discourse.

System narrative: defending a rule-based international order

The dominant system narrative portrays the Gaza war as a test of the credibility of the international legal order. Ireland consistently argued that international humanitarian law must apply universally, including to Israel.

From the outset, the government combined recognition of Israel's right to security with insistence that military action remains constrained by law. Addressing the Dáil on 18 October 2023, Micheál Martin declares:

"In line with international law, Israel has the right to defend itself against attack. However, this must be done within the parameters of international humanitarian law.

It is vital that we distinguish between Hamas and the Palestinian people, including Palestinian civilians in Gaza. This is very well understood here in Ireland, but I am concerned at the commentary in some international media coverage and on social media that blurs this distinction." (M. Martin, 2023 I)

As the conflict progressed, the narrative became more explicit. In his speech to the Dáil on 21 May 2025, now as Taoiseach, Martin states:

"Ireland is a small country, but I hope it is one with a strong moral compass. (...)

To inflict this level of suffering on a civilian population with nowhere else to go is just wrong. Wrong morally, wrong legally. It is an affront to human decency" (M. Martin, 2025)

This language is significant because the legitimacy of international order is no longer presented simply as institutional (UN resolutions, treaties) but as both legal and moral.

A second component of the system narrative concerns opposition to territorial conquest and forced displacement. Martin states:

“There can be no forced displacement of the civilian population in Gaza. There can be no occupation of the Strip by Israel.” (ibidem)

Identity narrative: Ireland as a moral humanitarian actor

The strongest element of Ireland’s discourse is its identity narrative. Unlike larger European states, Ireland rarely portrays itself as a geopolitical power. Instead, successive Taoisigh consistently present Ireland as a small state with moral authority.

Martin’s statement on May 21, 2025, encapsulates this identity:

“Ireland is a small country, but I hope it is one with a strong moral compass” (ibidem).

This sentence performs several narrative functions simultaneously. First, it acknowledges Ireland’s limited military and diplomatic power. Second, it claims a distinctive international role based on ethical leadership. Third, it legitimizes Ireland’s willingness to criticize stronger states despite political pressure.

Leo Varadkar employed a similar identity frame. Speaking before the White House on St. Patrick’s Day in March 2024, he argues:

“When I travel the world, leaders often ask me why the Irish have so much empathy for the Palestinian people. The answer is simple. We see our history in their eyes” (L. Varadkar, 2024)

Although rhetorical, this statement is central to Ireland’s identity narrative. It links Irish historical experience of colonization, famine, and conflict to Palestinian suffering, constructing empathy as part of Irish national identity.

Importantly, however, Ireland’s leaders consistently distinguished between Hamas and Palestinians. Martin repeatedly stated:

“Hamas is responsible. Hamas must be accountable. Those crimes were not perpetrated by the civilian population of Gaza that has borne the brunt of the overwhelming Israeli response.”

(M. Martin, 2025).

This separates terrorist actors from civilians and avoids collective attribution of guilt.

Issue narrative:

The dominant issue narrative frames Gaza primarily as a humanitarian emergency. Already in October 2023, Micheál Martin warned that ‘there is incontrovertible evidence that Gaza faces a human catastrophe’ (M. Martin, 2023 II). By 2025, this narrative grew stronger. Martin described:

“Hospitals destroyed (...) humanitarian workers targeted and killed (...) journalists struck down. It is hard to imagine. It is hard to describe. It is hard to see it on our television night after night. How much harder must it be to endure?” (M. Martin, 2025).

Ceasefire

Ireland’s ceasefire narrative evolved over time. Initially, in October 2023, Leo Varadkar accepted the European Council’s language of ‘humanitarian pauses’, explaining that consensus among 27 EU member states required compromise (L. Varadkar, 2023). However, by late 2024 and throughout 2025, the government openly supported an immediate ceasefire. Martin declared:

“We called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and for immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access” (M. Martin, 2025 II)

Similarly, at the Global Ireland Summit on May 6, 2025, he insists:

“There must be an immediate ceasefire, the release of all remaining hostages and the resumption of unhindered humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza and at an unprecedented scale.”
(M. Martin, 2025 III)

Two-state solution

Ireland consistently frames recognition of Palestine not as symbolic but as necessary for long-term peace. Martin states in May 2025:

“Ireland remains convinced that the implementation of a two-State solution is the only way to establish lasting peace and security for both Israel and Palestine.” (M. Martin, 2025 IV)

Recognition is therefore narrated as part of conflict resolution rather than as punishment of Israel.

Accountability

By 2025, Ireland’s discourse increasingly incorporated legal accountability. At the UN High-Level Conference on Palestine, on 26 September 2025, Martin stated:

“We have reached a point where what is credibly described as a genocide is being carried out in front of the eyes of the world.” (M. Martin, 2025 V).

This marked a significant escalation in rhetoric. While carefully using the formulation ‘credibly described,’ the speech elevated the conflict from a humanitarian crisis to one requiring international legal scrutiny.

Thus, Ireland constructs the international system as one based on universal humanitarian law, accountability regardless of allies, protection of civilians, rejection of territorial acquisition by force, and support for a negotiated two-state solution. Its identity narrative constructs Ireland as an ethical small state, Palestinians primarily as civilians deserving protection, Hamas as a terrorist organization, and Israel as a democratic state whose government must nevertheless respect international law. Rather than discussing military operations, its Ministers' speeches emphasize civilian experiences: in fact, they are centered on hunger, displacement, destruction of hospitals, and humanitarian access. This framing shifts political attention from battlefield dynamics to humanitarian obligations.

To conclude my analysis, I think it is important to note that the position of the former Irish President, Micheal D. Higgins, and the actual one, Catherine Connolly, are very clear-cut toward the Israeli government. In fact, former President Higgins suggested in September 2025 the exclusion of Israel and countries that supply it with arms from the UN, following a recent UN report that concluded Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. He stated:

"I believe myself that the kind of actions that are necessary now are the exclusion of those who are practicing genocide, and those who are supporting genocide with armaments. We must look at their exclusion from the United Nations itself, and we should have no hesitation any longer in relation to ending trade with people who are inflicting this at our fellow human beings." (M. Higgins, 2025)

The current Irish President in September 2025, when she was a candidate for presidency, openly condemned both the actions of Hamas and of the Israeli government. She proscribed Hamas as a terrorist organization and said 'Israel is behaving like a terrorist state. Both sides have committed war crimes' (C. Connolly, 2025).

5.3 Strategic Narratives in Spain

Rather than presenting recognition of Palestine as a rupture with its traditional foreign policy, the Sánchez government constructs a coherent narrative in which Spain acts as a defender of the international rule-based order, a normative middle power within Europe, and an advocate of a peaceful resolution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. This discourse is particularly visible in the speeches of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares following October 2023 and, most prominently, during Spain's speech on the recognition of the State of Palestine in May 2024.

System narrative: defending a rule-based international order

At the systemic level, Spain portrays the war in Gaza as evidence of a broader crisis affecting the international order. Rather than framing the conflict exclusively as a regional security issue, official discourse presents it as a test of the credibility of international law and multilateral institutions. The government argues that international humanitarian law must be applied consistently regardless of the identity of the parties involved.

Addressing the Spanish Congress on May 22, 2024, Sánchez argued that Spain's recognition of Palestine was motivated by 'peace, justice and coherence', explicitly linking the decision to the defence of universal legal principles rather than geopolitical alignment. He further insisted that 'our commitment to human rights must be the same regardless of the color of the victims' skin or their religion,' thereby universalizing Spain's position and rejecting accusations of selective application of international law (P. Sánchez, 2024 I).

This systemic narrative also relies heavily on multilateralism. Spain consistently presents the United Nations, international humanitarian law, and international judicial institutions as the legitimate mechanisms for conflict resolution. Speaking at the UN High-Level Conference on the Two-State Solution in 2025, Albares argued that the recognition of Palestine was undertaken 'for justice and for peace' and reiterated Spain's support for full Palestinian participation within the UN system, framing multilateral diplomacy as the only sustainable pathway to peace (J. M. Albares, 2025 I). Consequently, Spain's systemic narrative does not merely advocate a ceasefire but promotes the restoration of an international order in which legal norms constrain state behavior equally. The Gaza conflict is therefore constructed as a challenge to the legitimacy of the global rules-based system itself. In fact, the Foreign Minister stated that Spain demands an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the unrestricted entry of all necessary humanitarian aid, and the unconditional release of all hostages. He also called again for immediate compliance with the measures adopted by the International Court of Justice, as they are binding for all parties (ibidem).

President Sánchez, on April 19, 2026, called for the end of the agreement between the European Union and Israel:

"The time has come for the EU to terminate its association agreement with Israel. We have nothing against the Israeli people; quite the opposite, in fact. But a government that violates international law and, consequently, the principles and values of the EU cannot be our partner." (P. Sánchez, 2026 I).

Identity narrative: Spain as a normative and humanitarian actor

Spain's identity narrative constructs the country as a principled international actor committed to peace, human rights, and humanitarian protection. Rather than presenting itself as an adversary of Israel, Spain portrays itself as an impartial defender of international legality and civilian protection. One of the clearest expressions of this identity appears in Sánchez's institutional declaration announcing recognition of Palestine, on May 28, 2024:

"It is essential that Palestine sees its place in the international community recognized. Palestine as a State is a decision that we do not adapt against anyone, much less against Israel, a friendly people, whom we respect, whom we appreciate and with whom we want to have the best possible relationship. What's more, this decision represents a flat rejection of Hamas, which is against the two-state solution." (P.

Sánchez, 2024 II)

This formulation is central to Spain's strategic communication. By simultaneously rejecting Hamas and distancing itself from anti-Israeli interpretations, the government seeks to establish an identity based on neutrality, legality and humanitarianism. Recognition is therefore framed not as a geopolitical alignment but as an ethical and legal obligation.

The government further reinforces this identity by portraying Spain as a country willing to exercise moral leadership within Europe. Sánchez argued before the Parliament that, when future generations assess the conflict, he wants 'Spaniards to be able to say, with their heads held high and their consciences clear, that they were on the right side of history' (P. Sánchez, 2024 I).

This language goes beyond legal reasoning to construct a moral identity for Spain. It positions the country as one prepared to defend universal values even when doing so generates diplomatic costs, thereby distinguishing Spain from European governments perceived as less willing to criticize Israeli military operations. Foreign Minister Albares reinforces this identity narrative by repeatedly describing Spain's actions as motivated by 'the moral obligation to act' while simultaneously condemning the Hamas attacks of 7 October and demanding the immediate release of all hostages. This dual framing enables Spain to present itself as both a defender of humanitarian norms and a consistent opponent of terrorism (J. M. Albares, 2025 II).

Issue narrative: recognition of Palestine as the pathway to peace

At the issue level, Spain's narrative centers on the proposition that recognition of Palestine is not the culmination of a peace process but an instrument for achieving one. This represents a significant departure from the traditional position held by several Western governments, which

have argued that recognition should follow a negotiated settlement. Sánchez explicitly rejected this sequencing by arguing that the international community cannot contribute to building peace without recognizing Palestinian statehood. In Parliament, he explained that the objective of recognition was to place Israelis and Palestinians on ‘equal legitimacy’ for future negotiations and insisted that the only viable solution remained two democratic states living side by side in peace and security (P. Sánchez, 2024 I). Another important element of the issue narrative is the separation between Hamas and the Palestinian population. Government discourse consistently distinguishes the terrorist organization from Palestinian civilians, allowing Spain simultaneously to condemn Hamas, support Israel’s right to security, and criticize what Sánchez described as Israel’s ‘disproportionate response’ in Gaza (P. Sánchez, 2024 III).

Humanitarian concerns also occupy a central place within the issue narrative. Spanish officials repeatedly characterize Gaza as an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe requiring immediate international action. Calls for an immediate ceasefire, unrestricted humanitarian access, protection of civilians, and the release of Israeli hostages are consistently articulated together, creating a narrative that seeks to reconcile humanitarian protection with legitimate security concerns (J. M. Albares, 2025 III).

Finally, Spain presents recognition of Palestine not as symbolic diplomacy but as a concrete policy instrument capable of strengthening moderate Palestinian institutions and preserving the viability of the two-state solution before political realities on the ground render it impossible. The issue narrative therefore combines immediate humanitarian objectives with a longer-term vision of conflict resolution grounded in international law and political equality.

On September 8, 2025, Prime Minister Sánchez appeared at the Moncloa Palace to announce a series of measures against Israel ‘in the face of the Gaza genocide’, including the ban on the purchase and sale of weapons with Israel and diplomatic restrictions towards the settlers and those involved in the war in the Strip. In this occasion he stated that “*Israel is not defending itself, it is exterminating a defenseless people.*” The goal of these measures adopted by Spain against Israel ‘is to stop the genocide, prosecute those responsible and support the Palestinian population’ (P. Sánchez, 2025 IV).

Overall, Spain’s strategic narrative demonstrates a high degree of coherence across the three dimensions identified by Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle. The system narrative depicts the Gaza war as a challenge to the international rule-based order; the identity narrative constructs

Spain as a principled, humanitarian and multilateral actor; and the issue narrative presents recognition of Palestine, protection of civilians, and the defence of international law as mutually reinforcing steps towards a negotiated two-state solution. Together, these narratives enable Spain to justify an unusually proactive diplomatic position while maintaining that its actions are guided by universal principles rather than partisan alignment²¹.

One last thing I think is honorable of mention is the award to the UN legal expert Francesca Albanese received, in recognition of her ‘extensive work in documenting and denouncing violations of international law in Gaza’ by the Spanish government. Sánchez stated that ‘Public responsibility also brings with it a moral obligation not to look the other way. It is an honor to bestow the Order of Civil Merit on a voice that upholds the conscience of the world’ (P. Sánchez, 2026 II).

²¹ <https://elpais.com/espana/2024-05-28/el-gobierno-reconocera-hoy-a-palestina-con-criticas-del-pp-y-presiones-de-sumar-para-romper-con-israel.html>

Conclusions

This thesis has examined how strategic narratives were constructed and used in response to two international crises: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza. By applying Miskimmon et al.'s strategic narrative framework to the European Union and selected member states, alongside the narratives advanced by Russia and by Italian opposition parties, the analysis has highlighted both the opportunities and the limitations of narrative coherence in contemporary European foreign policy.

The comparison demonstrates that strategic narratives are neither static nor purely rhetorical. Rather, they constitute political instruments through which governments seek to legitimize policy choices, define collective identities, and shape perceptions of international order. Across both conflicts, the European Union consistently frames itself as a normative actor committed to international law, multilateralism, and the protection of civilians. However, while this narrative appears relatively coherent and unified regarding Ukraine, it becomes significantly more fragmented in the context of Gaza. In fact, the comparison between the two cases reveals that the degree of narrative convergence among European actors depends not only on shared values but also on the political, historical, and strategic context of each conflict. In Ukraine, the existence of a clear external aggressor facilitates a common narrative centred on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the defence of the European security order. National differences remain largely confined to emphasis rather than substance. It emerges almost clearly a substantial convergence among European countries, and within them, to support the Ukrainian government and its people. This happens mainly because this war is perceived as one of civilization against an aggressive barbaric power, Russia, that is threatening not only Europe, but the entire world, given the involvement of many NATO countries, and Russia's disrespect for the international law, order, and its institutions. The inclusion of Russia in this analysis further illustrates how strategic narratives function as instruments of geopolitical competition. Russian narratives did not simply contest Western policy but advanced an alternative vision of international order based on claims of civilizational sovereignty, resistance to Western hegemony, and historical legitimacy. This demonstrates that strategic narratives operate simultaneously at the domestic and international levels, seeking both internal legitimacy and external influence. Conversely, the Gaza conflict exposes divergent interpretations of humanitarian obligations, security concerns, historical responsibility, and the meaning of international law. These differences translate into competing

issue narratives among member states, particularly between countries such as Spain and Ireland, which have adopted increasingly critical positions towards Israel, and Italy, whose narrative remains more closely aligned with broader Western security concerns. For these reasons, it is not immediate to draw a shared line of conduct and also of thought among countries. The divisions among European countries, and within them, on the matter, are deep. In fact, it gets more and more difficult for the European Union and for the countries, refusing to sanction Israel, to justify their positions in front of a public opinion, more and more shocked by the massacres and violences, not only in Gaza, but in Cisgiordania and Lebanon as well, caused by the Israeli army. An especially important concept, that emerges in some addresses by political leaders, such as in Ireland and Spain, is the double standard policy officially adopted by the European Union, and by many important countries (e.g. Germany, Italy and the United States of America), toward Russia and Israel. This risks to undermine the credibility of the western democracies and the respect they have, in every context and situation, of the international law and its institutions at the eyes of the rest of the world. The analysis of Italian opposition parties adds another important dimension by showing that strategic narratives are not monopolized by governments. Domestic political actors actively contest official foreign policy narratives, proposing alternative interpretations of national identity, international responsibility, and appropriate foreign policy conduct. This finding reinforces the idea that narrative construction is an inherently political and contested process, even within democratic states.

More broadly, the findings suggest that the European Union's ability to project itself as a coherent international actor depends not only on institutional coordination but also on the alignment of member states' identity narratives. The contrast between Ukraine and Gaza indicates that consistency in references to international law and universal values becomes more difficult to sustain when member states attach different historical, political, or moral meanings to a conflict. As a result, strategic narratives emerge as both indicators and producers of political cohesion.

Finally, this research confirms the analytical value of Miskimmon et al.'s framework for understanding foreign policy communication across different geopolitical contexts. At the same time, it suggests that future research could further explore how strategic narratives evolve over time, how they are received by domestic and international audiences, and how emerging actors, including political parties, media platforms, and transnational movements, influence the competition over meaning in international politics. Ultimately, this thesis argues that wars are

fought not only on the battlefield but also through competing narratives. The ability to define the causes of conflict, assign responsibility, and articulate visions of international order has become a central dimension of contemporary international relations. The comparison between Ukraine and Gaza demonstrates that the struggle over narratives is also a struggle over legitimacy, identity, and the future role of Europe in the international system.

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