How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework

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How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework

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ABSTRACT

How can European democratic states respond to Russian information warfare? This article aims to enable and spur systematic research of how democracies can respond to the spread of distorted information as part of information warfare. The article proposes four ideal-type models representing different strategies that democratic governments can employ; blocking, confronting, naturalising and ignoring. Each strategy is illustrated by ways of empirical examples of strategies applied by European states in view of what is regarded as an unwelcome Russian strategic narrative that is spread as part of information warfare. We problematise each strategy and explore reasons for why states choose one strategy over another. We then explore how different strategies might contribute to destabilise or stabilise the security environment and how they resonate with democratic values. Finally, we contribute to theorising on strategic narratives by highlighting that the choice of strategy will influence states in their formation of strategic narratives. We thus further theorising on strategic narratives by highlighting the link between strategies and narratives, thus identifying one central dynamic in how narratives are formed.

The dangers of not embracing propaganda in defence of democratic values as a canon of faith are thus greater than those of embracing propaganda as a reality of the function of the modern state in the information age. (Taylor 2002, p. 441)

How can European democratic states respond to information warfare? The question of how Western liberal democracies should respond to strategic narratives that involve disinformation and propaganda, while maintaining their self-images as democracies that do not themselves use such methods, is indeed delicate. Taylor (2002) argues that democracies have to embrace propaganda of some kind in order to stand up for democratic values. Bittman (1990) views covert action and disinformation as additional tools for policy makers besides public diplomacy and military action but acknowledges that critics in the US question whether use of disinformation in peacetime is ethical, even against an opponent who uses this tool systematically. Nincic (2003, pp. 149–150) raises two specific concerns about “perception management” as a practice in information warfare, defined as the “… manipulation of the most general national values, perceptions and objectives”. First, he warns that perception management can be used for domestic political purposes to

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generate support for national policy, and second, that information distortion aimed at foreign audiences unintentionally can turn into the basis on which the domestic audience builds their views. These are just a few examples of dilemmas that democracies may encounter while responding to information warfare. Walker (2016, p. 61) in turn argues that democratic states need to consider in a more principled way about how they can respond to the spread of distorted information:

... so far the democracies, whether out of complacency or willful ignorance, have not taken seriously the prospect that these emboldened illiberal powers could reshape the undefended post–Cold War liberal order. The challenge is particularly vexing because the authoritarians have turned integration, jiu jitsu–like, against the democracies. This unexpected twist requires some fresh and serious thinking about how the democratic world should respond to the growing authoritarian challenge. Any such renewed thinking will first require dispensing with the false framing of this issue as a choice between shunning or engaging authoritarian regimes. Most of them are already thoroughly integrated into the international system, making some kind of engagement unavoidable. It is the nature of the democracies’ engagement that must be rethought. The established democracies must pursue a more nimble and principled approach that takes into account the new environment in which authoritarian regimes are seeking to undermine democratic institutions and values.

This article aims to enable and spur systematic research into how democracies can respond to the spread of distorted information as part of information warfare. We offer an analytical framework that can be used to distinguish between and analyse different governmental strategies for countering strategic narratives as part of information warfare. We take European states’ strategies in response to Russia’s strategic narratives as illustrative examples. In a special issue of European Security, Bicchiaro and Bremberg (2016, p. 399) highlighted the need to think deeper about how the EU and NATO can address Russia’s “challenge to the normative foundations of the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe” that was raised by the annexation of Crimea and hybrid warfare in the eastern parts of Ukraine (see also Cross and Karolewski 2016). The special issue targeted EU diplomatic practices in a very wide sense, but what was lacking was a focus on the strategic use of information. Thus, as a complement, we focus on European responses to Russian information warfare. In the past years, Russia has stepped up its information warfare and propaganda in regards to European neighbours. Plenty of empirical examples point to Russian “deliberate, systematic attempt[s] to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2006, p. 7).

What kind of strategies are available to democratic governments in view of such strategic narratives that involve disinformation and propaganda?

We depart from Freedman’s (2015, p.19) definition of strategic narratives as “... compelling storylines which could explain events convincingly and from which inferences could be drawn”. The difference between any narrative and a strategic narrative is that the latter result out of conscious deliberation (Freedman 2015). The study of strategic narratives through narrative analysis focuses on change over time in that: “A narrative entails an initial order or status quo, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that reestablishes order, often bringing about a slightly altered situation in which characters have demonstrated their qualities” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, p. 181). The salience and persuasive power of strategic narratives lie in their capacity to position states and peoples, to provide
mental maps through which people may learn of their place and that of “the other” in the world (Robertson 2010, Miskimmon et al. 2013). Today when the world is perceived as chaotic, increasingly unpredictable and fast changing narratives become particularly important devices for identifying order and structure (Miskimmon et al. 2013, p. 74). They also serve to legitimise power structures and political practices. States strive to discursively construct credible narratives about issues, identities and the nature of the international system (Miskimmon et al. 2013, p. 7). Thus, Western democracies are compelled to respond to unwelcome narratives – in our example the Russian one – in order to defend against the Other’s frame of interpretations and to safeguard their own views of the world.

The article proposes four ideal-type models representing different strategies for engagement in information warfare. We illustrate each strategy using empirical examples of concrete strategies applied by European states located in proximity to Russia and subjects to its information warfare. We discuss problems and advantages with each model, including the degree to which they are compatible. We then explore reasons for choosing one strategy over the another, and consequences of these choices, in terms of how they may contribute to destabilise or stabilise the security environment and how they resonate with democratic values. Finally and most importantly, we contribute to theorising on strategic narratives. We ask how the strategies for engagement in information warfare influence states in their own formation of strategic narratives (in contrast to Russia’s strategic narrative). In this sense, we contribute to strategic narrative theory by highlighting one central dynamic of how narratives are formed.

We begin by briefly outlining the type of security challenges that states face in information warfare, in this case Russia’s views of and use of information as a tool in the sphere of security and which includes the projection of strategic narratives. Russia is not unique in this view of information as key to security policy, nor in its use of propaganda and disinformation. Democratic governments, however, prefer not to apply these labels (Bittman 1990) to their own practices. We will briefly describe Russian policies and practices in this realm, in order to convey what European governments are reacting against. However, we do not aim to assess the Russian strategies.

**Russian view and use of information in the sphere of security**

Our point of departure is that the Russian leadership supports the projection of strategic narratives towards European neighbours and that the Russian leadership sees this as forming part of information warfare. The Russian political leadership is highly conscious of the power of information as a tool in the sphere of security and has worked actively to exploit the power of information to influence European states. Below we very briefly describe Russian policies and practices.

Russian policy-makers view information as central to security policy and “hybrid warfare” or “full-spectrum conflict”, labels referring to the use of a wide range of means ranging from conventional military ones to “… clandestine special forces and intelligence operatives, to economic threats, political influence, online and offline information battles, as well as ‘traditional’ subversion” (Jonsson and Seely 2015, p. 6). Key Russian documents depict information as essential to security policy. The Russian Information Security Doctrine of 2000 was published with the proclaimed aim of strengthening Russian national interests in the “information sphere”, e.g. by supporting state media (Russian Government
The Military Doctrine of 2014 describes information as one of the components of modern conflict (Russian Government 2014) and the national security strategy of December 2015 (an updated version of the security strategy of 2009) warns of information war on a global level and describes information as a tool for national security (Russian Government 2015).

A number of strategies have been deployed in Russian information warfare, including support of European political parties that are against the EU, purchase of Western news agencies and support of extreme political movements in Europe such as Front Nationale (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, Holehouse 2015, Orttung, Nelson and Livshen 2015, Shevtsova 2015, Herpen 2016). Another strategy is the spread of disinformation, a term that may be of German origin and adopted by the Soviet Union in order to describe secret intelligence operations (Bittman 1990). It was used by a KGB department for black propaganda referring to intentionally produced “false, incomplete, or misleading information” targeting particular actor groups (Shultz and Godson 1984, p. 41). A main purpose of the Russian contemporary use of disinformation is to fuel confusion and thereby undermine the basis for rational debate by spreading half-truths, lies and multiple and contradictory versions of an event (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, Treverton and Miles 2014, Shevtsova 2015). A cornerstone in Russian information warfare is to gain control of domestic and international media (Giles 2015). Given the predominance of TV as news media in Russia, efforts to control use and spread of free information have been relatively efficient (Giles 2015). State control of internet use has also increased (Franke 2015, Vendil 2015).

Use of state-controlled media such as RT (previously known as Russia Today) to spread the Russian narrative or contest the opponent’s narrative is an important part of Russian information warfare. Walker (2016, pp. 59–60) argues

State or statefriendly media in Russia – Life News, NTV, Channel One Russia, and Russia 24 – disseminate not just the Kremlin’s narratives but also outright fakery to domestic audiences and those in the Russian-speaking space. These outlets spread the same stories via social media as well. RT, meanwhile, pushes this manipulated content out to international audiences.

A specific concern among European states is that state-owned media agencies will be used to prepare the ground for pro-Russian interventions similar to the one in Crimea, in states with substantial Russian minorities (Ennis 2015). Thanks to state support, RT has grown into a significant media actor with a big European audience since 2005 and a budget of over 300 million dollars (Lucas and Nimmo 2015, Robertson 2015, pp. 26–28, Shevtsova 2015, Shuster 2015). The other major governmental programme for supporting media is the news agency Rossiya Segodnya, which includes Sputnik News that broadcasts in about 30 languages. Social media is another important channel for spread of narratives and disinformation (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, p. 17), including the use of “troll factories” and YouTube channels aimed at particular audiences (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, p. 17, Robertson 2015, p. 113, Spruds et al. 2016). Applebaum and Lucas (2015) see troll factories as one of two corner stones of Russian disinformation, the other being RT. Cross-media communication should also be mentioned; the spread of strategic narratives via social media that links to one another to induce users to seek more information, thus absorbing “more of” the narrative (Nissen 2015, pp. 40–43).

The Russian narrative spread by the RT and other channels about the international system includes a clear goal; to counter everything negative in the West. European
governments are depicted as immoral and unable to deal with different situations (Hutchings and Szostek 2015, p. 185, Lucas and Nimmo 2015). RT conveys that the West plans and backs political violence on a global scale (Shuster 2015). Russia in turn represents strength and stability; it is a strong state with a strong military power (Bacon 2015, p. 246). Hutchings and Szostek (2015, p. 185) identify three gains from the negative narrative on the US and the EU: it may undermine Western critique of Russia, legitimise Russian policy and defend Russia’s identity as a European great power. Scholars have labelled the Russian narrative transmitted by RT “a text book example” of strategic narrative:

RT news broadcasts are structured by a Cold War frame, and RT discourse is a textbook example of the “strategic narratives” that can be seen as part of states’ soft power arsenals. – In the world of RT, most things that go wrong are the fault of the US, UK and EU, and the market forces that underpin them (which is not necessarily a problem, in this newsworld, because everything is going terribly badly for these countries, capitalism is in decline, and the days of Western hegemony are numbered). (Robertson 2015, p. 112)

European responses: four ideal-type models

Considering the attention directed towards Russian hybrid warfare and information warfare by scholars and policy-makers alike, as well as the concrete actions undertaken such as setting up a joint monitoring agency with the EEAS that is tasked with unveiling and countering Russian disinformation called East StratCom Task Force that is to coordinate EU strategic communication towards the eastern neighbourhood, it is beyond doubt that European governments indeed view Russian policies and practices in this realm as threatening (European External Action Service 2015a, pp. 0–2, 2015b).

In order to analyse European responses, we suggest that two dimensions be taken into account: that of engagement – disengagement and that of inward targeting – outward targeting. The dimensions stretch from the practice of directly confronting narratives projected by the “other” (engaging) to a wholly passive stance, with a carefully considered no-response-policy (disengaging). By an engaging response, we mean that the state actively confronts the perceived opposing narrative/s by producing and disseminating a narrative or narratives of its own, or by setting up channels and vehicles for this purpose. Blocking is also placed towards the “engaging” end of the spectrum because of the choice to actively block opposing narratives, thus directly engaging with “the opponent”. In the case of disengaging, the state turns away from the opposing narrative/s by acting as if it did not exist nor had any import. Disengagement might also result from leading actors not being aware of the strategic narratives directed at the state, or merely neglect to give attention to them. Naturalising and ignoring are thus two types of strategies where the aim is to defend against opposing narratives, but without actively engaging with them. The defence is thus a “general” one that is not directed at any particular opposing narrative.

![Figure 1](chart.png)

**Figure 1.** Engaging and disengaging strategies in information warfare.
The second dimension divides policies into those that primarily aim to target a domestic audience and those that target a foreign audience. On the one hand, they might want to construct and project narratives to foreign audiences in order to promote the state and its worldviews thus gaining something in an international context; for instance, power, reputation or more specific outcomes such as trade agreements or entrance into security organisations such as NATO. Such outward-looking strategies may target a neighbouring state, or more generally a region, or the entire international community. On the other hand, state leaders may adopt an inward-looking perspective that centres on the domestic situation. In this case, they might be concerned with actively protecting the national strategic narrative from outside influence by ways of a strategy of isolation as a NATO representative claimed: “The goal of Stratcom is to guard the national strategic narrative from outside influence.” This might include the barring of groups or individuals from participating in the national public sphere of debate, or censoring texts or television. A quite different type of inward-looking strategy is a wholly passive one, where foreign narratives are ignored; in such a case, no particular narrative is promoted and no particular defensive measures undertaken. Such an inward-looking strategy entails sustaining a free and open society where any narrative can thrive, which makes it in essence a “pluralistic” or “democratic” strategy. Needless to say, a state may opt to employ both inward-looking and outward-looking strategies; we will come back to such “mixing” of strategies in the conclusions.

In sum then, we characterise the strategies in terms of inwards- or outwards targeting, and as engaging or disengaging (see Figure 1). The article thus sets up four ideal-type models for how states engage in information warfare (Table 1).

Each model is presented as analytically distinct from the other three. It is not likely that this fully reflects how states engage in information warfare, where a mix of models might be more realistic – some compatible and some not. One way of looking at internal tensions and problems involved in states’ responses to information warfare (pointed out by Briant 2015) might thus be to identify the incompatibility of some of these responses. In the analysis below we will keep the strategies analytically distinct, yet we then briefly discuss possible overlaps and what these might say about the complexities involved in defending against disinformation and for democracies to participating in information warfare.

### Confronting: the projection of counter-narratives

The first model involves an outward-looking strategy that entails actively producing and projecting counter-narratives, often in direct response to a particular narrative – in this case manipulated Russian stories about events, leaders, people or phenomenon in European states. The strategic narrative is thus discursively constructed in direct opposition to the foreign narratives which are seen as false, inaccurate and denigrating depictions of a particular state, Europe, the EU or the West. It is outward-looking in the sense that the leadership pays great attention to and tries to meet the perceived threat originating

<table>
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Table 1. Inward- and outward-looking strategies in information warfare.
from outside the domestic sphere. The narratives that are projected can be directed both inwards towards the domestic population and outwards towards the perceived enemy or towards other audiences beyond domestic borders.

The intention is to project counter-narratives in order to exercise influence and to change attitudes and this is sometimes made explicit and sometimes implicitly understood. Specific stories depicting corrupt leaders, Western cultural decadence, criminal activities and so on are refuted and responded to with stories setting the record straight by drawing on contradicting empirical evidence and sources that are considered and depicted as reliable. Stories might be scripted to directly confront false images and to reveal lies and inaccurate interpretations of events and situations. The construction of the narrative feeds on being different from “the other”, contrasting oneself to an opponent, sometimes defined as the enemy. They might also strive to replace the negative narrative by projecting positive images on the same subject. All in all, of the four models this model represents the most openly hostile and antagonistic strategy and although there might be different degrees of hostility involved.

An example of this ideal type is the Estonian initiative in 2015 to launch a national public broadcasting network in Russian, the Eesti Televisoon+ (ETV+). The aim is to balance and counter the narratives produced by Russian-owned television channels in Estonia. The target audience is primarily the Russian minority in Estonia, which makes up around a quarter to a third of the population. Polls have shown that Russian people in Estonia tend to take a different stand on political issues, such as the events in Ukraine for instance, than the majority of Estonians. Moreover, 72% of the ethnic minorities claim Russian television news to be a key news source for learning of the unfolding of the events in Ukraine while only 16% of the majority population (Estonians) said television news was a key source (Saar poll 2014). This indicates that there is a strong correlation between news consumption of citizens and their view on specific matters and that it is essential for the Estonian government to ensure the broadcasting of counter-narratives to Russians and Estonians. Hence, for the purpose of countering the Russian disinformation campaigns and to prevent these from exercising influence on the Russian minority without facing any alternative narrative, Russian speaking channels have been set up.

This model may be criticised in that the response resembles the kind of behaviour that one aims to confront, and may thus seem unfitting for a pluralist, democratic state. It may also serve to legitimate media actors spreading disinformation such as the RT (Gotev 2014, Shuster 2015). The projection of such a narrative also tends to resemble cultural imperialism. Moreover, it may cultivate tensions between states and ruin opportunities of dialogue, thus aggravating the security situation.

**Naturalising**

Like the previous strategy, naturalising also means that a state aims to project its own strategic narrative to foreign audiences. It is thus outward-looking and might seem identical to the “confronting-strategy”; however, it differs along the engaging-disengaging dimension. It is far less engaging, since projecting its own narrative without directly contrasting it with the narrative projected by the “other”. It provides an account of an issue, or of the international system, without directly going against other strategic narratives. It is about telling the story of the “self”, and not about denigrating and contrasting the self to an “other”. An
“other” is not even necessary. The aim is to maintain and spread values by being a good example, and the values promoted tend to be depicted as universal. Naturalising is thus an approach that seeks to construct advantageous narratives mainly about the state and its worldview – an international outlook of the state that does not aim to directly engage with and counter someone’s information warfare. Instead, it aims to show foreign audiences a positive and appealing image of the nation and thus boost the state and its worldview in the long term. This would be similar to engaging in public diplomacy activities, promoting a positive self-image to foreign audiences. This is done in order to disseminate the state’s favoured narrative, disregarding the other’s narrative. The purpose is to win the audience trust for one’s own narrative, but without openly contesting that of the “other”.

To illustrate this ideal type we turn to approaches employed by Germany. The German government recognises that Russia is the source of systematic disinformation in German media and maintains the position that the reporting of such disinformation is “tendentious”, and does confirm it to be a coordinated policy orchestrated from Moscow. Russian disinformation is thus recognised as a threat, but the main strategy is not entering into debate, questioning the Russian strategic narrative. It is rather to project a positive narrative of the “self” as credible and trustworthy and in any other way superior. German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier holds that counter-propaganda is not the best measure in face of Russian propaganda; transparent information is a better recipe. Alluding to the slogan of a German car manufacturer, he talks of as a “headstart through credibility” (“Vorsprung durch Glaubwürdigkeit”) (Sturm 2016). This strategy is thus one of combining moral superiority with national pride by placing an emphasis on credibility and accuracy. This is the sign of a disengaging strategy focusing on accuracy as a key national characteristic that makes the German state look good, rather than directly engaging with the unwelcome narrative. Another sign of the disengaging strategy is that Germany typically makes use of public diplomacy and civilian agencies to project its own narrative, such as the Foreign Ministry and the state-sponsored media channel Deutsche Welle, which has been described as Germany’s “media visiting card”. It has been characterised as between the independent BBC World and Voice of America which is controlled by the US government, since it retains a degree of independence (Wessler et al. 2008, p. 84).

Deutsche Welle’s type of public diplomacy, which profiles Germany as a friendly rather than antagonistic European state with good intentions to other peoples (Cowan and Arsenaught 2008, p. 18), is in line with the naturalising ideal type. Deutsche Welle claims as its mission to transmit an image of Germany “…as a nation rooted in European culture and as a liberal, democratic state based on the rule of law”. The strategy is clearly outward-looking based on projection; the primary audience being “international decision makers and opinion leaders” (Deutsche Welle 2016). With support of the German foreign office, Deutsche Welle has increased broadcasting in Russian and Ukrainian languages in Eastern Europe, including the broadcasting of televised news programmes (Deutscher Bundestag 2016, p. 1).

The naturalising strategy is less confrontational in character than the confronting and blocking strategy. However, a relative passive naturalising strategy may also provoke negative reactions. Other actors may experience that the narrative – however passive – signals moral superiority in a negative sense. Also, if facing aggressive information warfare, this strategy might appear too lame; it may be difficult to make an impact if
not clearly pinpointing the opponent and contrasting its own narrative with that of the opponent.

**Blocking narratives**

The blocking strategy is almost as engaging as the confronting one: the existence of an “other” is clearly recognised and measures are undertaken to oppose it. The difference is that this strategy is inward-looking and protective, in the sense that it aims to safeguard the national strategic narrative but without promoting it outwards to either foreign or domestic audiences. This might be described as a kind of status quo and defensive strategy. Rather than producing and actively transmitting a narrative, this strategy thus entails states’ efforts to protect its own narrative by blocking that of the opponent. In contrast with the confronting-ideal type, the state does not actively offer alternative interpretations of reality, projecting a counter-narrative. The practical emphasis is on restrictions and control measures such as the strategies of selective blocking of information. The purpose is to deny the public access to the narrative projected by the “other”.

We take Lithuania’s and Latvia’s strategies as examples of this ideal type. One of the two public service channels in Latvia, LTV7, broadcast in Russian to some extent. However, the original idea to start a new public service channel entirely in Russian has been at least temporarily abandoned (BBC News 2015, Latvijas Televīzija 2016, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence 2016, p. 25). Latvia and Lithuania are therefore primarily taken here as examples of the second ideal type that relies not on actively transmitting a counter-narrative, but on blocking the narrative of “the other”. Latvian authorities temporarily barred the Russian state-owned channel *Rossiya RTR* to broadcast in the country during three months in 2014 due to pro-Russian framing of Russia’s military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. (Due to legal complications the ban could not be fully implemented: the channel broadcasted from Sweden and was thus not subjected to Latvian law.) In August 2015 Latvian authorities decided not to grant the channel RT permission for establishment in the country (Kuokkanen 2015, Latvian Public Media 2015a, 2015b). Lithuania has also temporarily banned Russians channels in their country. *NTV Mir* was barred during three months in March 2014, after having transmitted a movie in March 2014 that was considered to have falsely depicted historical events in Lithuania in 1991. A similar event occurred in October 2013 when the Russian state-owned channel *Pervõi Baltiiski Kanal* (First Baltic Channel) was closed down for three months due to accusations of having lied about the same historical episode. The Channel *RTR Planeta* was also blocked for three months in 2015 due to accusations of instigation of hatred in connection with reporting on the conflict in the Ukraine (Sytas 2014, Kropaite 2015, Kuokkanen 2015, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence 2016). The blocking strategy can be criticised as clashing with values of a free and open society. Critics argue that the strategy of blocking is problematic since it is too similar to how a non-democratic and authoritarian regime works and not in line with democracy. The representative for media freedom of the OSCE 2010–2016 Dunja Mijatović (2015, pp. 7,59) argues that blocking in order to counter propaganda is an undemocratic tool and that blocking for political purposes leads to censorship that can turn permanent. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland has also expressed
concern that blocking, filtering and removal of material from the internet may impinge upon freedom of speech:

Governments have an obligation to combat the promotion of terrorism, child abuse material, hate speech and other illegal content online. However, I am concerned that some states are not clearly defining what constitutes illegal content. Decisions are often delegated to authorities who are given a wide margin for interpreting content, potentially to the detriment of freedom of expression. (Council of Europe 2016, see also Freedom House 2016)

Moreover, another problem is that efforts at blocking the inflow of information are easily diluted if the sender manages to find a way around it, for example transmitting from a neighbouring country where it has not been banned.

*Ignoring unwanted narratives*

Our fourth model is inward-looking and protective in that it does not pay active attention to the outside world, but aims to protect the domestic sphere. It does not engage with or even officially pay attention to unwelcome foreign strategic narratives. The strategy is one of not responding, but ignoring what is seen as false and manipulated narratives, thus a no-narrative strategy. This model is based on a firmly held belief that the democratic state possesses adequate resources in its very constitution and through its institutions and government agencies in order to deal with information warfare, including for example hostile narratives disseminated on social media platforms. There is a deep trust in democratic institutions and their ability to defend the honest, open and just society. No or little emphasis is therefore given to the construction of a national coherent strategic narrative, or especially set up government agencies to work with such narratives. In this model, the narratives that emerge are multifaceted and uncoordinated. In that sense, it is questionable whether they should be labelled “strategic”. This strategy might involve the active strengthening of civil society, including the empowerment of the citizens, by teaching people and professionals in sensitive branches how to critically decode media visuals and texts and to add stories of their own to an open debate. Thus, the pluralistic narrative model stresses the defence of freedom and liberty as key to countering information and hybrid warfare and focuses on the capacity of the public and the democratic society to resist such attacks. As for educating people, this model would be in line with the Unesco Media Literacy project which was launched in 2011 first and foremost addressing teachers across the globe. Its stated intent is to contribute to the “equitable access to information and knowledge, and building inclusive knowledge societies” (UNESCO 2011). The aim to empower people through information and media literacy aims at facilitating public access to the information society, and at nurturing skills to interpret and critically relate to information. This model is “elastic” in the sense that it can be applied entirely passively, with no effort or will to spread narratives, or somewhat more actively, by perceiving of the media and other institutions as opportunities for sustaining or strengthening narratives.

Swedish strategies are used here to illustrate the pluralistic model. Few efforts have been made to build institutions especially set up to coordinate national strategic narratives as counter forces to the Russian propaganda. There seems to be a firmly held belief that the democratic institutions are capable to manage the pressure that information warfare might place on the Swedish society. This is combined with a trust in the public’s ability to
decode and critically relate to different information and messages in the media and elsewhere. These ideas are reflected in the white paper from 1983 on Information preparedness (Informationsberedskap 1983). Although the report proposes a reorganisation of how to manage information warfare including the setting up of a new agency responsible for psychological defence, the main message of the report is that the civilian, existing institutions and agencies shall take responsibility for the free flow of information, also during times of war or conflict. The same approach is stated in a report by the Ministry of Defense and Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency in 2016:

Within the framework of a freedom of expression and free media, society at large needs increased capabilities to manage the impact of information. Sweden’s ability to defend itself is built on force of action and engagement of society and its actors … . This is why communication between actors, the public and the media is decisive. A kind of crisis communication that is open, coordinated and correct will strengthen the credibility of society and facilitate collaboration … . (Försvarsmakten and Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap 2016, p. 7)

The news media institutions are given particular weight and it is being emphasised that also in the case of war the media should take responsibility for maintaining an open debate (Informationsberedskap 1983, pp. 23–24). Wästberg (2016) has suggested that the journalist training programmes at the Universities should strengthen their curriculum in regards to the study of sources and practices of how to critique sources and that the government should add source critique as an assignment to the public service broadcasting commission.

This strategy is less coherent and thus potentially weaker than other ones. Also, it may be unrealistic to rely on the capacity of individuals to de-code narratives. It may also lead to an over-reliance on the media as objective independent actors that serve as safeguards of democracy as well as over-reliance on the idea that a range of different narratives will in fact be generated. It is not straightforward to nurture a media environment where the media honour the aim of reporting in a truthful and objective manner. Commenting upon the Russian government’s manipulation of facts and use of propaganda and conspiracy theories, Pomerantsev (2015, p. 48) argues that liberal democracies have to seek out ways to go against such false narratives by using “true ones” and Galeotti (2015) argues that it is necessary to expose media companies that go against criteria for objectivity and uncover spread of false information. Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014, pp. 40–41) call for a common initiative from international media actors and experts in the field including the creation of a “disinformation index” that can be used in order to evaluate media actors. To create such a system and to sustain a media environment that aim at conveying “the truth” is, however, difficult, especially in the international arena.

**Mixing strategies**

We exemplified the four strategies above with empirical illustrations. In order to establish what strategies states actually do employ, systematic empirical analysis is required. We nevertheless suggest that it is likely that states use several strategies when responding to unwelcome strategic narratives. We have presented Latvia as an example of the blocking strategy, yet in practice, it seems to have a more comprehensive approach to information warfare (Daugulis 2017). However, in case a state does invest heavily in one
strategy, the effect of this strategy might be either reinforced or reduced if it simultaneously draws on other strategies. If for example Germany primarily relies on a naturalising strategy, but simultaneously supports the Baltic states in putting up TV channels that are used to confront the Russian narrative (Sturm 2016), it becomes involved in a confronting strategy, albeit indirectly. These two strategies might be compatible and even mutually reinforcing. Germany will appear as both a benevolent state by ways of its naturalising strategy, yet also as a state displaying firmness by supporting the Baltic states in their confrontation with Russia. Yet, if Sweden prefers the ignoring strategy, as we hypothesised above, this strategy might be undermined when mixed with a confronting strategy. This might become the case when Sweden participates in the EU’s agency for engaging with Russian propaganda; the East StratCom Task Force (European External Action Service 2017). Being part of an engaging strategy on the EU level might potentially weaken the coherence of Sweden’s strategic narrative. The effectiveness of mixing thus depends on what strategies are mixed. The two strategies that are the least compatible would be the blocking and the ignoring strategies.

**What difference does the choice of strategy make?**

Having outlined the strategies, we will argue that the most important consequence of the choice of strategy is that it will constrain or enable a state in constructing its own strategic narrative. Before outlining this argument, we will discuss how different strategies might strengthen or undermine security and whether they are compatible with democratic values.

First, the ideal types towards the engaging end of the continuum are more likely to cultivate tensions in the sphere of security. Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 104) highlight the danger of a strategy based on “othering” – such as in the confronting ideal type. An actively engaging strategy based on the idea of differences may serve to cultivate and strengthen conflict in the security sphere. They argue that actors may even use this kind of narrative intentionally in order to sustain tensions:

… it may be useful to keep opposing narratives alive in order to use the differences to legitimize your own narrative. The credibility of the strategic narratives of the US and USSR during the Cold War was enhanced by the opportunity to compare, contrast, and denigrate the other’s narrative.

The ignoring strategy may be better suited to decrease tensions than the confronting and blocking strategies. In the best-case scenario, the ignoring strategy will serve to delegitimise antagonistic narratives. In this sense, ignoring aims at undermining the very idea of confrontation. This is in line with Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 104) who argue “… strategic narrative contestation may not simply be a matter of the elimination or subjugation of a rival’s narrative, but the destruction of the conditions that make alternative narratives plausible, communicable, and intelligible”.

Second, we need to consider whether the strategies are compatible with democratic values. The most problematic strategy in regards to democracy is blocking, since it involves censorship. It presumes an authoritarian, top-down approach to the flow of information in society, aiming to control the spread of ideas in society, thus threatening pluralism. Confronting is also problematic in that it uses the same kind of strategy that it aims
to refute. It does not have to, but there is a risk that this kind of strategy comes to involve propagandistic features such as limited perspectives and even manipulation of information. The risk is that the goal – averting the negative propaganda – comes to justify the means. Confronting might thus come to cross the lines between framing of messages and kind of biased messaging that is not in line with democratic pluralism in open societies. Naturalising can be seen as a “milder version” of controlling; it does favour one particular narrative of the state, actively projecting it to the world. Build-into this is a notion of one’s own superiority and if pushed to the limited it can be seen as similar to cultural imperialism. It is also more difficult to discern who is behind the narrative. It is done in a more covert way than confronting, thus making it more difficult to identify its salience and how it might actually manipulate peoples’ views of the state. Ignoring is at least in theory the response which is the most compatible democratic pluralism, since it allows for a free flow of ideas. There is no higher authority that controls communication, deciding what is appropriate or inappropriate. The model is heavily reliant on an independent media to maintain a free and inclusive exchange of ideas in society. If the media fails in this respect, there is no authority to resist the growth of particularistic dominant discourses and possibly non-democratic forces spreading their ideas. These might then come to dominate the public debate, which may undermine the pluralistic, democratic system.

**Concluding discussion: the link between strategies and strategic narratives**

We have argued that the choice of strategy will have a bearing on security and democracy. Above all, it will have a bearing on the construction of strategic narratives. We need to recall that the strategies come about in response to an unwelcome narrative (in the example above, the Russian one). At the same time, Western democracies form their own strategic narratives. We argue that this formation is coloured by any one or several of the strategies (confronting, naturalising, blocking or ignoring). We thus aim to contribute to theorising on strategic narratives by identifying the link between strategies and narratives. Examining this link, we can learn more about the formation of strategic narratives.

Each strategy carries certain features that will colour the strategic narrative. The strategy of confronting will for example yield a dichotomised narrative, infused by “othering”, that is by ideas of what separates the “self” from a negative “other”. It will yield a re-active kind of narrative that responds to the narrative of the other, addressing the same topics. For instance, it will address the same geographical spaces, issues of controversy, actors and worldviews. This is a classic dynamic, reminiscent of for example the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and the United States continuously contrasted their ideological viewpoints, addressing the same topics. They thus mirrored one another’s strategic narrative, inevitably although unintentionally giving meaning to the opponent’s narrative.

The strategy of naturalising in turn will yield a narrative that departs from the “self” rather than from the “other”. By ways of public diplomacy, it draws upon domestic culture and values, and thus yields a strategic narrative based upon an idealised national self-image. At first sight, the blocking strategy might seem not to provide any strategic narrative. Yet, we argue that blocking measures do produce a particular story of the state, a narrative of a state with characteristics such as decisiveness, integrity and strength,
but also a state characterised by a degree of authoritarianism and censorship. A blocking strategy thus yields a strategic narrative, not by projecting ready-made stories about the state, but by making a statement on the state’s character. It is an unstated, silent narrative. This resonates with Roselle et al. (2014, p. 75), who argue “…communication involves both verbal and other forms of communication. – The use of military force, for example, can be understood to be part of the narrative projection of a state”. Ignoring in turn shares this feature; it is also an unstated narrative. The strategy yields a democracy narrative in the sense that it projects values of liberty, transparency, freedom of speech etc., but it does not provide an explicit or concrete story about the state and the world.

In conclusion, in this article we have presented four ideal-type model strategies for engaging in information warfare. They are analytical tools that can be used for exploring what strategies states employ. Further research needs to explore the strategies more in detail. Each ideal type can encompass a wide range of tools. For example, educating the public in identifying propaganda and disinformation might be important to enable citizens to join the government in confronting unwanted narratives. Economic strategies, such as limiting Russia’s foreign investment in Western media (see Galeotti 2016), might be part of the blocking strategy and so on.

Moreover, we need to expose why states employ different strategies. Even though states can mix strategies as argued above, states do make different choices in information warfare and we suggest that a number of factors can explain these differences. In line with Miskimmon et al. (2013, pp. 84–85) it is our view that actors are not entirely free and unconstrained in their choice of counter-measures. We suggest that political and strategic cultures, past policies and historical experiences influence the choice of strategy. For example, Sweden has a tradition of defending transparency of information. It might then be natural to adopt an ignoring strategy that places emphasis on transparency and free flow of information. Estonia, on the other hand, has a tradition of actively standing up to and emphasising its independence from Russia. From this follows a tendency to actively engage with the Russian narrative by confronting it. Yet, current events such as recent incidents, changing threat perceptions and political change might also influence states in their choice of strategy. The precise reasons for states’ prioritising certain strategies thus need to be explored in future comparative case studies.

Finally, we have argued that the choice of strategy is important since it informs the construction of strategic narratives. Miskimmon et al. (2013) divide the study of narratives into formation, projection and reception. We have suggested that the choice of strategies for engaging in information warfare constrains and enables – and defines the character of – the formation of strategic narratives. We have offered a theoretical contribution to strategic narrative theory, by identifying the link between the choice of strategy for engaging in information warfare and the formation of strategic narratives. Future research should explore this link empirically, exposing how the choice of strategy binds a state to a particular strategic narrative; and how this in turn leads to stability or destabilisation, to democracy or authoritarianism.

Note
1. This section draws upon an unpublished research report (Olsson et al. 2016).
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