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## **Aligning with Moscow, Attacking the West: Why Iran amplifies anti-Western narratives after the Nord Stream sabotage**

Broek, Luuk van den

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# **Aligning with Moscow, Attacking the West: Why Iran amplifies anti-Western narratives after the Nord Stream sabotage**

**Bachelor Thesis - Security Studies**

Leiden University, Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs

By Luuk van den Broek

s3459497

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Marie Robin, RA 21

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**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
The Netherlands

### **Abstract**

This thesis examines the role of Iranian state-sponsored disinformation around the Nord Stream sabotage. Iran continued reporting about US and European involvement in the sabotage, even after reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage, and despite strengthened relations between Iran and Russia. Consequently, this thesis answers the question: *Why does Iranian state media outlet Press TV frame the Nord Stream sabotage in a way that emphasises US and European involvement, even after reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the sabotage?* To answer the question, this research adopts the strategic narrative theory. This theoretical approach enables the use of a narrative analysis to examine news articles from Press TV. The findings reveal that following the reports that a Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage would have left a gap in Iran's existing strategic narrative of anti-Western sentiments. Iran used the Nord Stream sabotage to amplify their existing narrative of anti-Western sentiments. While Iran supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it chooses not to frame Ukraine as their enemy. Instead, Iran uses the conflict as a means to fight the West. This thesis underlines how autocracies use strategic narratives and disinformation to undermine explanations that do not align with their existing narrative.

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## Introduction

On 26 September 2022, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Russia and Germany was damaged due to multiple explosions, leading to a gas leak. German and Swedish authorities launched investigations into the incident, but it remains hard to put a name on the perpetrator. However, a state actor is most likely directly or indirectly involved (De Jong, 2023). Separate from the official investigations, there have been all sorts of blame games and disinformation campaigns surrounding the sabotage. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh (2023) accused the United States of blowing up the pipeline, intending to eliminate the possibility of Russian gas flowing into Europe. On the other hand, the Kremlin has amplified articles that reported that the US was behind the attack (EUvsDisinfo, 2023). The latest reports claim that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage (Walker, 2024). Overall, the Nord Stream sabotage was covered extensively by news outlets from all around the world. The reports about a pro-Ukrainian team being behind the sabotage fit into Russia's anti-Ukraine rhetoric following their invasion of the country. Russia employs a narrative to justify its invasion of Ukraine by referring to NATO's eastward expansion, Kiev's persecution of the Russian speaking population in the Donbas, and framing the Ukrainian government as nazi's (Mamedov, 2024).

Iran supports Russia in the war by supplying drones and ballistic missiles (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). However, their cooperation is set to expand from just a security level. Trade corridors have been created, and in January 2025, Putin announced plans to build a new gas pipeline from Russia to Iran (Isachenkov, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Iran receives relatively little attention in the academic literature around disinformation (Jones, 2020). However, Iran, like other autocracies, engages in media manipulation in an organised manner (Howard & Bradshaw, 2017). Following Tehran's strengthened alignment with Moscow as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian reports should also fit into Iran's disinformation

strategy. Surprisingly, Iran continued reporting on US and European involvement after the reports about a pro-Ukrainian team emerged. To illustrate: ‘‘Biden blew up Russia’s Nord Stream pipelines to punish Germany: Seymour Hersh’’ (Press TV, 2023). Consequently, this thesis answers the following research question: *Why does Iranian state media outlet Press TV frame the Nord Stream sabotage in a way that emphasises US and European involvement, even after reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the sabotage?*

To answer the research question, this thesis employs a narrative analysis 37 news articles from Iranian state owned news outlet Press TV, which shows ‘‘a valuable window into the complex dynamics of how the leadership in Tehran views the world or wishes its constituencies at home and abroad to perceive it as doing so’’ (Behraves, 2013, p. 683). Many scholars believe that political actors use news media as a soft power tool to create narratives to achieve political interests (Norton & Cooley, 2024). Consequently, this thesis uses the strategic narrative theory to identify Iran’s strategic narrative around the Nord Stream sabotage, ‘‘which is a helpful approach for classifying, describing, and identifying how these narratives form’’ (Norton & Cooley, 2024, p. 83).

The findings reveal that following a narrative of Ukrainian involvement in the Nord Stream sabotage was simply not in Iran’s interest, as it would have left a gap in its anti-Western narrative. Iran and Russia are more aligned and have strengthened relations, but Iran still puts their anti-Western narratives first. In the bigger picture, Iran sees the Nord Stream sabotage and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a way to reinforce their anti-Western ideology.

This thesis consists of four other chapters: a literature review, data collection and methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion and reflection. First, this thesis justifies itself through a literature review of state-sponsored disinformation, the strategic narrative theory, and an understanding of Iranian disinformation and strategic narratives. Second, the

data collection and methodology chapter introduces a narrative analysis as the methodological approach of this thesis. Third, the results and discussion section presents the findings of this thesis. This section shows the findings from two phases within Press TV's reporting: before the Ukrainian reports came out, and after the Ukrainian reports came out. The thesis concludes by stating how this thesis contributes to the study of disinformation, strategic narratives, and their socio-political relevance.

## Literature review

### Defining state-sponsored disinformation

Disinformation, misinformation, and fake news are fluid concepts; many definitions exist across the academic and policy landscape. As this paper focuses on Iranian state-sponsored disinformation, it is necessary to use a definition for disinformation that effectively incorporates the role of state actors. Hence, this paper uses the following definition for disinformation: “the systematic and coordinated effort by state actors and elite collaborators to intentionally spread false or misleading information on a large scale” (Echeverría et al., 2024, p. 3). This definition includes the role of the state, while also differentiating disinformation from misinformation (unintentionally spreading false information) and fake news. Echeverría et al. (2024) argue that state-sponsored disinformation can be distinguished from other forms of deception through six elements: strategic planning, privileged access to material and symbolic resources, sophistication, perceived legitimacy, institutional power, and corporate and media collusion. In the end, the incentive behind state-sponsored disinformation is to gain political and economic dominance through influencing discourse and public opinion.

### Theoretical framework: The strategic narrative theory

To influence discourse and public opinion, a state actor must use language to persuade someone. As explained by Austin (1955), language is not only descriptive, it can also make one do things. Consequently, like many scholars, this thesis follows the belief that news media serve as a tool of soft power through which political actors use narratives to try and achieve their interests, both domestically and internationally (Miskimmon et al., 2013). These strategic narratives include acts, agents, scenes, instruments and purposes. “The act refers to what was done, the scene is where or in what environment it was done, the agent refers to

who did it, the instrument is how it was done, and the purpose is why they did it” (Norton & Cooley, 2024, p. 84). Ultimately, Roselle et al. (2014) argue that the theory of strategic narratives can explain the complexities of international politics concerning how political actors use news media to create influence. Some scholars critique the theory for its inability to explain how communities receive strategic narratives, and thus fail to properly explain the impact of strategic narratives. In response, this thesis does not delve into how strategic narratives are received by a certain audience. Instead, this thesis uses the theory of strategic narratives to identify how narratives are constructed and for what purpose, leading to a greater understanding of disinformation campaigns. Therefore, strategic narrative theory is a valuable instrument for researching the soft power goals and disinformation campaigns of state actors.

### **Grasping Iranian disinformation and strategic narratives**

Now that this thesis has introduced the state's use of strategic narratives to employ disinformation campaigns, we can delve deeper into the origin and implications of disinformation. According to Bennet and Livingston (2018), the spread of disinformation can be traced back to the division and disruption of public spheres as a result of “growing challenges that confront the democratic centring principles of authoritative information, emanating from social and political institutions that engage trusting and credulous publics” (p. 126-127). Overall, the spread of disinformation results from a lack of trust in democratic institutions. Autocracies such as Russia, China, and Iran engage in disinformation campaigns both domestically and abroad to undermine the democratic trust in institutions in adversary nations, by using hackers, bots, troll factories, and paying citizens to post false information (Bennet & Livingston, 2018). Kluver et al. (2018) argue that autocracies often employ a strategic narrative that enables them to create a sense of superiority for their non-democratic

political systems by framing that democratic elections can only be won by billionaires and elites. Bennet & Livingston (2018) argue that the characteristics of disinformation campaigns need to be put in a broader political context, domestic and foreign, as disinformation is not just the spreading of false information. Instead, autocracies often engage in coordinated disinformation campaigns to achieve political goals. Howard and Bradshaw (2018) also argue that scholars must try to understand how power is assumed and exercised through disinformation campaigns, as more and more state actors are directly involved in them, both domestically and foreign.

While research tells us that autocracies engage in coordinated disinformation campaigns to employ a strategic narrative (Echeverría et al., 2024), the actual achievement of the intended effects of disinformation is up for debate. Using the case of Russia's disinformation campaign towards the Baltic states, Lanoszka (2019) argues that disinformation is ineffective when intended to change a target's foreign policy and armaments. Ultimately, for disinformation campaigns to be successful, they must overcome three obstacles: "first, the fundamental uncertainty that international anarchy generates over any information broadcast by adversaries; second, the pre-existing prejudices of foreign policy elites and ordinary citizens; and third, the countermeasures that are available even amid political polarisation" (Lanoszka, 2019, p. 227). Instead, state actors face a "window of opportunity" in which they effectively can use disinformation as a tool to influence public opinion and discourse. Historic examples of these windows of opportunity are the creation of new telecommunication mediums, such as online newspapers, social media, and presently, AI. A lack of regulation for new telecommunication technologies enables state actors to exploit them and spread disinformation. Chang and Lin (2020) argue that the internet has provided autocracies with the ability to effectively censor information and demobilise civil society in reaction to the growth of ICT and contentious global politics, for example, as Iran

did during the Arab Spring (Echeverría et al., 2024).

As a result of new telecommunications and the internet, political actors gained new ways to employ disinformation campaigns and strategic narratives. As a result, disinformation gained more academic attention, leading to a significant growth in published academic articles on disinformation since 2014 (Pérez-Escobar et al., 2023). However, when analysing the academic literature surrounding state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, it becomes apparent that most literature primarily focuses on Russian (as part of their hybrid warfare strategy) and Chinese (following COVID-19) state-sponsored disinformation (Jones, 2020). In contrast, Iran receives relatively little attention from scholars. However, research by Howard and Bradshaw (2017) shows that the Iranian government operates in media manipulation in an organised manner, with approximately 20.000 employees involved. The modal targets of Iranian disinformation are domestic audiences (Howard & Bradshaw, 2018). Iranian disinformation tactics include the targeting of political opposition, spreading pro-government messages, and censoring anti-government messages. Overall, the Iranian regime has faced a legitimacy crisis since 2009, to which it has responded with disinformation campaigns (Golkar, 2011).

Akbarzadeh et al. (2024) argue that Iran's main "Big Lie" has changed since the 2022 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests in Iran. In the past, the Iranian regime used a narrative of blaming the US for Iran's domestic issues and anti-regime activities. However, this narrative has become too convenient for Tehran. The new Big Lie deployed by the regime holds "that there is no better alternative to the Islamic regime by depicting opposition actors as corrupt and untrustworthy" (Akbarzadeh et al., 2024, p. 14). Consequently, the Iranian public is subject to the lie that there is no future without the Islamic regime. This lie has been spread by state-owned media and social media accounts, which enables a fast spread of disinformation. However, this thesis expects to find itself more within the "old" Big Lie of

Tehran, as the Nord Stream sabotage is an international event, in which the US is involved, and does not necessarily involve the survival of the Iranian regime. Looking at the US within Iran's strategic narratives, Norton and Cooley (2024) explain that "Iran often takes on a negative view of the outside 'other' actors and needs to extend its sense of self to them" (p.86). This enables Iran to create a negative portrayal of the US. Overall, Iran seeks to protect itself from US ideals. To illustrate, Al-Gamde & Tenbrink (2020) show that Iranian state-owned news agency Fars framed the legal opposition in the Syrian revolution as terrorists and foreign-backed fighters, which enabled Fars to frame the conflict as a US invasion backed by the Gulf states. This showcases the old "Big Lie" of Iran as explained by Akbarzadeh et al. (2024). Another example is state-owned media outlet Press TV's coverage of COVID-19, which they framed as a virus spread by the US to target Iran.

Looking at how Iran creates its strategic narratives, Norton and Cooley (2024) show that Iranian state media outlets use persuasive language techniques to try and persuade their audiences. Within their reporting of the JCPOA nuclear agreement with the US, Iranian news outlets mainly used expert quotes, hyperboles, and metaphors to give credibility to their reporting and exaggerate their message.

### **Case selection: The 2022 Nord Stream sabotage**

Again, while much of the academic literature focuses on Russian and Chinese disinformation, Iran remains overlooked, also in the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While studies have looked at Iran's economic and strategic goals in the Ukraine war (Czulda, 2025), scholars give relatively little attention to how Iran uses Russia's invasion of Ukraine in its disinformation campaigns and strategic narratives. Iran supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine by supplying drones and ballistic missiles to Moscow (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). But current relations between the two nations do not just focus on security; strengthened

economic ties are also on the agenda through new trade corridors (Isachenkov, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Moreover, in January 2025, Putin announced plans to build a new gas pipeline between Russia and Iran. On the topic of disinformation, Research by Ng et al. (2022) shows a high correlation of similar disinformation images between Iran and Russia, potentially meaning that these countries share hybrid influence tactics, although more research is needed on this topic.

Connected to the conflict in Ukraine is the Nord Stream sabotage, which several actors have used to deploy disinformation and strategic narratives. The pipelines faced difficulty from the start of the project in 2005. Initially, Germany and the Netherlands were proponents of the pipelines, which would increase the amount of gas reaching the European continent. In contrast, the US firmly opposed Nord Stream 2, which would see Europe becoming more dependent on Russian gas. Nord Stream 1 started operating in 2011, but Nord Stream 2 never went into use. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany stopped supporting Nord Stream, and the European Union created the objective to stop Russian gas imports by 2030 (De Jong, 2023). Then, on 26 September 2022, the pipelines were damaged by explosions. It is generally accepted that the attack could only have been carried out by a state actor, as the attack was carried out with precision and required abundant resources.

Since the sabotage, a lot of accusations have been made by several actors on who was responsible. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh (2023) published an article which stated that an American unit was behind the sabotage, under direct orders of President Biden. This story was deemed as not credible, as Hersh's story was based on just one anonymous source (Bergman, 2024). Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* settled on two main narratives around the sabotage: it was not certain who blew up the pipelines, and then switched to Russia as the most likely perpetrator. Later, when reports emerged that a Ukrainian team was behind the attack, the newspaper swiftly switched its reporting and signalled it was a Ukrainian team

that was behind the attack. Overall, the Volkskrant mainly followed Western sources and experts (who quickly pointed at Russia), with the only disturbance being Hersh's reports (Bergman, 2024). Before the sabotage, Nord Stream was already used for strategic narratives, with Russia creating audience-specific narratives targeted towards English, German, and Polish-speaking audiences (Okholm, 2024). Directly after the sabotage, Russia started to spread reports that an American helicopter was close to the pipelines around the time of the explosion, which what later was found to be false (EUvsDisinfo, 2023). The latest reports that explain that a Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage fit into Russia's existing narratives that it has used to justify its invasion of Ukraine. In contrast to Berman's (2024) article, there is no research yet on how a non-Western news outlet portrayed the sabotage.

For Iran, which supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian reports should also fit into their strategic narrative. However, the Iranian state-owned news outlet Press TV continued reporting about US and European involvement after the reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage. Thus, the research question of this thesis emerges: *Why does Iranian state media outlet Press TV frame the Nord Stream sabotage in a way that emphasises US and European involvement, even after reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage?* The next chapter explains how a narrative analysis of Press TV articles provides the methodology to present an answer to this research question.

## Research Design & Method

### Research design

The research design of this paper adheres to a qualitative single case study of Press TV's coverage of the Nord Stream sabotage. Stevens (2023) explains that a single case study allows for a more in-depth analysis of data, as they ‘‘often imply very rich empirical accounts that are better able to capture ‘real world’ complexity and detail than statistical analyses’’ (p.181). For this reason, this paper also rules out a comparative study between Iranian and Russian media. One could argue that comparing Iranian and Russian media could show interesting contradictions or supporting narratives. However, solely focusing on Iran will provide a more in-depth analysis of their strategic narrative(s) around the Nord Stream sabotage. In addition, as mentioned in the literature review, there is already a lot of academic literature on Russian disinformation.

Rohlfing (2012) explains that single case studies face two challenges: ‘‘an indeterminacy problem that bedevils internal validity and a problem of external validity depriving the generalisation of causal inferences from few cases to (probably) many’’ (p. 212). In response, internal and external validity can be enhanced by a strong theory and the specifications of scope conditions, which both promote causal inference. Accordingly, in this thesis, the strategic narrative theory serves as a mechanism to identify why Press TV frames the Nord Stream sabotage in a way that emphasises US and European involvement, even after reports emerged that a Ukrainian team was behind the attack, creating in-case causal analysis. In response to the challenge of external validity, the strategic narrative theory also serves as a mechanism to specify the scope conditions of this research. This research applies to state-owned media in autocracies and narratives around geopolitical events that serve the

interests of states. These scope conditions will create an external validity that is likely to apply to disinformation campaigns and strategic narratives employed by other autocracies.

### **Data collection**

The data set for this thesis consists of news articles on the Nord Stream sabotage from the Iranian state-owned news outlet Press TV. Press TV is state-owned and is part of the English broadcasting department of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) (Behraves, 2013). The head of IRIB is appointed by the supreme leader of Iran and receives numerous subsidies from the Iranian government. Consequently, Press TV shows ‘‘a valuable window into the complex dynamics of how the leadership in Tehran views the world or wishes its constituencies at home and abroad to perceive it as doing so’’ (Behraves, 2013, p. 683). The articles from Press TV are selected within a time frame of 26/9/2022 to 31/12/2024. This time frame incorporates the discovery date of the Nord Stream sabotage and the latest reports that a Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage, excluding articles covering the creation and controversy of the pipelines before the sabotage. This time frame results in a data collection of 37 articles from Press TV that covered the Nord Stream sabotage (see Appendix A). These articles are found by using the keywords ‘‘Nord Stream’’ in the search archive on the Press TV website. Articles covering a different topic, but also mentioning the Nord Stream sabotage, are left out. Some articles do not appear when searching for ‘‘Nord Stream’’ on the Press TV website. Instead, they are referenced within other articles. These articles are included in the 37-article data set. Most Press TV articles in the data set share a similar structure (see Appendix B). They consist of a title, a leading paragraph in bold text, small explanatory paragraphs and images. Some contain videos, but these are left out of the analysis for this thesis.

For the analysis, the collected articles are divided into two phases. Phase one includes

all 18 articles that were published from the first news article Press TV published on the Nord Stream sabotage, to the last article before the reports came out that a Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage (*September 26, 2022- March 4, 2023*). Phase 2 includes all 19 articles published after the Ukrainian reports came out, to the end of the time frame (*March 7, 2023- December 31, 2024*). Separating the collected data this way allows this thesis to identify why Press TV did not adopt the narrative that a Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage and show differences and similarities between these two time periods.

### **Data analysis protocol**

To identify why Press TV framed the Nord Stream sabotage in a way that emphasises US and European involvement, even after reports emerged that a Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage, this paper employs a narrative analysis. Different from a discourse, a narrative includes a time sequence, causality, a past-present-future, and an attempt at resolution. Stevens (2023) explains that a narrative analysis moves beyond explaining what stories say about people themselves and their social reality. Instead, narrative analysis includes the structure of stories, the context of a story, and the motivations behind why people tell a certain story. Consequently, narrative analysis is the most suitable research method for the research question of this paper, as it will be able to identify the motivation behind Iran's framing of the Nord Stream sabotage within the context of the current global geopolitical landscape.

When employing a narrative analysis, one must consider the role they play in the production of knowledge, with narratives, in how and when stories are told (Stevens, 2023). The position of this thesis is that of an (Western) outsider, with no to very little exposure and experience with Iranian media. As Press TV is under direct control of the Iranian government, this paper assumes that their reporting consists of narratives that serve a political

and/or ideological goal. This thesis potentially shows different results when conducted by someone who actively consumes Iranian state media. However, the role of an outsider likely helps in identifying the motivations behind narratives within Press TV's reporting of the Nord Stream sabotage.

Stevens (2023) explains that narrative analysis has a lot of similarity with thematic analysis, as they broadly share the same end product. However, in the case of a narrative analysis, the means of accomplishing the end product are less specific. In this thesis, the coding approach as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006) is followed. After data familiarisation is established, three coding rounds are carried out to analyse the dataset. The coding approach of this thesis follows an abductive approach guided by both existing literature on strategic narratives, persuasive language techniques, and self-generated codes stemming from the collected data. The deductive coding approach is built upon the strategic narrative theory and persuasive language techniques as explained by Norton and Cooley (2024). To measure Press TV's portrayal of actors who are connected to the Nord Stream sabotage, this thesis follows Norton and Cooley's (2024) approach of focusing on purposes and scenes within narratives. First, "the purpose category measures whether the state actor is trying to portray themselves as the protagonist and/or show the 'other' nation as the antagonist" (Norton & Cooley, 2024, p. 89). For this research, the protagonist code applies when Russia was portrayed as protecting itself (simply said: framing a country as "the good guy"). On the other hand, the antagonist code applies when a nation is portrayed as standing in the protagonist's way. Second, "the scene category showed whether the state actors intend to use the message to portray a dominant narrative (an actor who holds power) or submissive narrative (an actor who has something to yield)" (Norton & Cooley, 2024, p.89). The category persuasive language techniques shows how and which rhetorical tools Press TV used to construct their narrative around the Nord Stream sabotage, coding for expert quotes

and hyperboles (Norton & Cooley, 2024). Expert quotes are defined as ‘‘a technique used to bring in clarification or background information on a subject’’ (Norton & Cooley, 2024, p. 90).

Additionally, three other coding categories are created: context, framing, and actors within Press TV’s reporting. First, the context category shows how Press TV includes the geopolitical landscape at the time of the sabotage. Measuring how the sabotage was linked to surrounding developments, external effects, future assumptions, political context, unsubstantiated claims, and international support. The codes ‘‘surrounding developments’’, ‘‘future assumption’’ are taken from Marschütz (2018). The codes ‘‘external effects’’, ‘‘political context’’, ‘‘unsubstantiated claims’’, and ‘‘international support’’ are created inductively. Second, the inductively created framing category shows how Press TV constructed its narrative around the sabotage, coding for terrorism, economic incentives, indirectly implying involvement, political incentives behind the sabotage, Russian concerns about the Nord Stream investigation, and a cover-up. Last, the actor category shows which actors are relevant in Press TV’s reporting and which were accused of sabotaging the Nord Stream pipelines. This includes Europe, the US, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Russia. Last, this thesis also focuses on potential absences of certain aspects within Press TV’s reporting of the sabotage (this is coded for under the described categories).

During and after the coding process, codes are split, merged, and refined. Structure-wise, the codes range from a few words to multiple sentences. The codes are organised in a codebook (see Appendix C), where they are given an academic definition (if possible), operationalisation, and an example of use. The coding process is done through the software programme ATLAS.ti. After data saturation has been reached, patterns found within and between the categories lead to the establishment of themes from the data. From these themes, this thesis presents its research findings and an answer to the research question.

## Results & Discussion

A narrative analysis of the two phases in Press TV's reporting shows why Press TV kept its narrative centred around US and European involvement, even after reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage. Phase 1 (pre-Ukrainian reports) shows that Iran's narrative mostly aligned with Russia's reporting around the sabotage, which enabled Press TV to create anti-Western sentiments that align with their existing strategic narrative. Phase 1 shows this based on two themes: legitimising Russia's narrative and a US empire. In contrast, phase 2 shows that Iran did not choose to pursue a narrative of the Ukrainian reports, despite their alignment with Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. Instead, Iran chooses to keep its narrative centred around US and European involvement as this aligns with their existing narrative. Although Iran supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Iran's strategic narrative of the Nord Stream sabotage is focused on anti-Western sentiments. Phase two showcases this by elaborating on two themes within Press TV's reporting: undermining alternative explanations and the EU as both a perpetrator and collateral damage.

### **Phase 1: US and European involvement** *(September 26, 2022- March 4, 2023)*

#### **Legitimising the Russian narrative**

In the immediate aftermath of the sabotage, Press TV quickly followed Russia's blame game. Press TV's first article after the sabotage immediately blamed the US: "Moscow says US behind Nord Stream leaks" (Press TV, 2022a). By starting their reporting with blaming, Press TV tried to settle their narrative around US involvement early. Quickly following Russia is not at all surprising, given Tehran and Moscow's strategic alignment and their criticism of the US and the West as a whole (Kalehsar & Telli, 2017). After, Press TV did not just stick to blaming the US, European countries such as the UK, Denmark, and

Sweden were also blamed for having some form of involvement in the sabotage.

To maintain the narrative that the US and European countries are involved in the Nord Stream sabotage, Press TV heavily relies on Russian statements on the Nord Stream sabotage. Across the analysed data set, 15 out of 37 articles have a title that references a Russian viewpoint. Accordingly, Press TV aims to legitimise Russia's narrative by including international support for Russia and portraying Russia as the protagonist, with both aspects being backed up with persuasive language techniques.

The investigation of the Nord Stream sabotage was done separately by Germany, Sweden, and Denmark, as the sabotage happened within their respective jurisdictions. However, Press TV continuously repeated Russia's calls for an investigation that would include the Kremlin. Russia stated that the countries conducting the investigations were trying to delay and hide their results, as it would expose either their involvement or US involvement. For example, "the Swedish authorities, as if on cue, remain silent," Russia's embassy to Sweden said on the Telegram messaging platform" (Press TV, 2023h, para. 2). By labeling it as "if on cue" Russia indirectly includes that some other actor is being in control of the investigation. Including Russia's statements for an investigation that would include the Kremlin amplifies Iran's alignment with Russia and weakens the investigations led by Western countries.

To further legitimise Russia's narrative and calls for an impartial investigation, Press TV includes international support for Russia's actions. Chinese and North Korean media serve as a foundation to support Russia's call for an impartial international investigation into the sabotage. Surprisingly, there is no mention of Iranian support for this cause within Press TV's reporting. However, Iran's support for Russia is crystal clear within their reporting, as they initially frame the war between Russia and Ukraine as a "special military operation", and state that the incentive for Russia's war is NATO expansion and Kiev's persecution of the

Russian speaking population in the Donbas, which have been the main narratives of Russia at the start of the war (Mamedov, 2024). Including international support for Russia's efforts for an impartial investigation further enables Press TV to legitimise Russia's narrative.

Russia's narrative is also legitimised by portraying Russia as a protagonist, which wants to defend itself from US and European actions and ideals. For example, "a hybrid war is being waged against Russia because it stands in the way of the neocolonial world order" – is that Russia is getting ready for an all-out collision with the Empire of Lies" (Escobar, 2022, para. 9). This quote showcases Press TV's use of the persuasive language technique to "lend outside credibility" to Russia's (and Iran's) stance. For the case of labelling Russia as a protagonist, this enables Press TV to frame Russia as an actor who is "the good guy", and the US and Europe as "bad guys" (e.g. the Empire of lies). On the other hand, the US and Europe are depicted as the antagonist by labeling them as having committed a terrorist attack (the Nord Stream sabotage): "Moscow was not "threatening" Europe with anything conventional or otherwise; it was trying to do business, and the Americans blocked it with a vengeance, even resorting to Pipeline Terror" (Escobar, 2023, para. 28). In comparison, Russia is relatively less portrayed as a protagonist, than the US and Europe are portrayed as an antagonist. To illustrate, within the data set, out of 37 articles, 13 portray Russia as a protagonist, while 24 portray the US and Europe as antagonists. This paper argues that this divide is only natural for Iran, as it feeds more into Tehran's anti-Western narrative. However, this thesis finds this also surprising within the context of closer ties between Tehran and Moscow. Iran seems more focused on anti-Western narratives than backing Russia.

After it was released, Press TV followed Seymour Hersh's report that the US blew up the pipelines, under direct order of President Biden, and with help from Norway (Hersh, 2023). Hersh's reports were based on one whistleblower and lacked evidence. Across the 37 analysed articles, 29 mentioned Hersh's reports (with 8 articles that did not include Hersh

being published before his reports came out). Press TV adopted the reports, citing Vladimir Putin, who ‘‘completely agreed with Hersh’s comments’’, and labelled them as facts. While *de Volkskrant* (a Dutch newspaper) stated that ‘‘Hersh’s initial, healthy ‘‘scepticism,’’ which had made him ‘‘such an exceptional journalist,’’ had devolved into ‘‘a kind of conspiracy thinking’’ (Bergman, 2024, p. 145), Press TV continuously labelled Hersh as a ‘‘renowned American investigative journalist’’ and praised him for his reporting on US crimes during the wars in Vietnam and the Middle East. Overall, Hersh served as one of the main foundations within Press TV’s framing of US and European involvement. While Iran is aligned with Russia, Hersh’s reports enabled Press TV to continue Iran’s existing anti-Western narratives.

### **The US empire**

Beyond implying that the US is involved in the Nord Stream sabotage, Press TV connects the attack to a wider frame of the US as an empire, with the EU as its satellites. Again, this fits into the existing anti-American strategic narrative of Iran (Behravesh, 2013). For example, in their first article on the sabotage, Press TV includes a statement from Russia’s foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova (without evidence): ‘‘Russia says the US is behind the leaks on Nord stream pipelines as ruptures occurred in the coasts of Denmark and Sweden, which are ‘‘fully under the control’’ of US intelligence agencies’’ (Press TV, 2022a, para. 1). Surprisingly, the US is depicted through both a dominant and submissive narrative. On the one hand, the US is portrayed as an actor with a lot of power (having the capability to take out Nord Stream, although it's within German control), and European countries are being submissive to them. On the other hand, the US is portrayed as an actor who ‘‘has something to hide’’, and has ‘‘already lost the war in Ukraine’’. Although the portrayal of a dominant US narrative is linked with negatively portrayed US interests, such as punishing Germany for hesitating to supply weapons to Ukraine, and wanting to

punish Russia. This combination of scenes within Press TV's narrative of the US serves as an effort to frame the US as an actor with a lot of power with bad intentions, but also as an actor that is on the back foot. On the one hand, portraying the US as a dominant actor with bad intentions enables Iran to justify its defiance towards the US and frame it as an evil imperialist force. On the other hand, portraying the US through a submissive narrative allows Iran to portray the US as in decline, and other nations (such as Iran and Russia) are gaining power. Overall, this dual discourse serves as a foundation to delegitimise the US to foreign audiences.

### **Iranian support for Russia with self-interest**

Within the first phase, Press TV followed Russia's narrative of US and European responsibility for the Nord Stream sabotage. Press TV legitimised this narrative by citing Russian officials and amplifying support for Russia's call for an investigation that would include the Kremlin. Strategic use of persuasive language techniques amplified these aspects. Moreover, Press TV framed the sabotage as not just an isolated incident, but as a wider attack as a result of an evil US empire. Pursuing a frame of a US empire aligns with Tehran's historical narrative of anti-Western sentiments (Norton & Cooley, 2024). Before the reports about Ukrainian involvement emerged, Iran could continue its existing narrative by following Russia's narrative and Seymour Hersh's reports. However, as the second phase will show, Press TV's alignment with Russia would be challenged by the reports about a pro-Ukrainian team being behind the sabotage.

## **Phase 2: The Ukrainian reports** (*March 7, 2023- December 31, 2024*)

### **Undermining alternative explanations**

Having established a strong narrative that emphasises US and European involvement in the Nord Stream sabotage, Press TV now had to face the reports that a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the sabotage. However, as the research question states, Press TV did not fully adopt this narrative, continuing to imply that there was US and European involvement. Russia remained the protagonist, but Ukraine was not necessarily depicted as an antagonist. Instead of adopting the Ukrainian narrative, Press TV started to undermine the explanations of a pro-Ukraine group being behind the sabotage. For example: ‘‘As for the pro-Ukrainian angle, you know the idea that some Dr. Evil organised it, that's hard to believe. It was too difficult a task, which probably only a well-trained special state service was capable of - and there are not too many of them in our world’’ (Press TV, 2023n, para. 15). While Russia also remained blaming the West (as stated in the quote: ‘‘there are not too many of them in our world’’), they also included reports that negatively portrayed Ukraine. For example, Russian state media outlet TASS (2024) published an article that stated: ‘‘New findings in Nord Stream sabotage case may sway Europe’s perception of Ukraine’’. For the case of Press TV, they did not turn to backlashing Ukraine. Surprisingly, Press TV remained focused on US and European involvement, despite its alignment with Russia. However, this thesis argues that given Iran’s historical anti-American narrative (Norton & Cooley, 2024), blaming and criticising Ukraine was not of main interest to Tehran. Although Iran and Russia are more aligned at the moment, Iran still has a primary focus on anti-Western narratives.

Within the second phase, all but one analysed articles mention Hersh’s reports. After the Ukrainian reports emerged, Hersh responded that they were an attempt by the US to cover up their tracks. Consequently, Hersh’s commentary remained central in framing the

pro-Ukrainian group reports as a cover-up. For example: “the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided the Western media with an alternative story for the destruction of Russia’s Nord Stream 2 pipeline to cover up Washington’s involvement, according to American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh” (Press TV, 2023s, para. 1). Hersh’s comments on the Ukrainian reports fed perfectly into Iran’s existing anti-American narratives. For example: “The disinformation professionals inside the CIA understand that a propaganda gambit can only work if those on receiving are desperate for a story that can diminish or displace an unwanted truth. And the truth in question is that President Joe Biden authorised the destruction of the pipelines” (Press TV, 2023s, para. 8). Again, Press TV portrayed the US as the antagonist within their reporting by using Hersh to discredit and delegitimise the US government by labelling it as a disinformation and propaganda spreader. Consequently, it was hard for Iran not to follow these reports instead of going with the Ukraine narrative, as they fit perfectly into their anti-American narratives. At times, Press TV also did not include the Ukrainian origin of the sabotage team in their article titles or leading paragraphs, showcasing their effort to keep their narrative centred around US and European involvement.

Like in the first phase, Press TV uses persuasive language techniques to amplify the resonance of their efforts to undermine alternative explanations to the Ukrainian reports. Experts and hyperboles were used to exaggerate the effects that the Nord Stream sabotage had on the European economies. French and German political figures who kept pointing at the USA for the sabotage were incorporated in Press TV’s reporting. For example, Right wing French politician Florian Philippot from the Patriots party stated that “reports about the United States blowing up the Nord Stream pipelines are obviously true, given that Washington had been opposing the project from the beginning” (Press TV, 2023r, para. 1). Including European politicians enables Press TV to further undermine the Ukrainian reports, as it legitimises Iran’s narrative around US and European involvement. If even the Europeans

are saying it was the US who did it, it becomes more difficult to believe that Ukraine was behind the sabotage. Surprisingly, as the next section explains, Press TV's narrative around European countries was inconsistent.

### **Europe as both a perpetrator and collateral damage**

After undermining the reports that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage, by labelling it as a US-made cover-up, and reiterating that the US was still behind the sabotage, Press TV created an inconsistent narrative around the involvement of European countries. A contradiction within Press TV's reporting of the Nord Stream sabotage is that European countries are both portrayed as being involved in the sabotage and being collateral damage as a result of the US's actions in the sabotage. Press TV framed countries like Germany, the UK, Denmark, and Sweden as not sovereign and subject to US interests. Framing European countries this way makes it seem that they act against their interests, leading to a frame of them being accomplices of the US and perpetrators of the Nord Stream sabotage. To illustrate, "Hersh says the US did it. Did you ask them? Did you ask them did they do it, or aren't we asking them questions anymore? Have we become so subservient, has the EU will become so subservient to US Empire, that you cannot even ask if they did it?" (Press TV, 2023v, para. 30). Again, this quote shows the use of an expert (Mick Wallace, at the time a member of the European parliament). By including this quote, Press TV reinforces its message that the European countries are not fully sovereign and are under the influence of the US. Framing European nations as collateral damage of US actions (making them dependent on US energy and further economic instability) can be seen as an effort by Press TV to create anti-US sentiments in European nations by portraying them as betrayed by the US.

On the other hand, Press TV published an article which states that "a far-right German party has urged the United Nations to investigate the "involvement" of Germany's

government in the 2022 explosions of the underwater Nord Stream pipelines, which transferred Russian gas to Europe'' (Press TV, 2024, para. 1). Far-right European parties and Iran find common ground in Western criticism. Consequently, Press TV legitimises European countries as perpetrators by citing a German political party, showing that this is not just a non-Western accusation, but also that Germans are questioning this event. Although it is a controversial party (the AfD), it enables PressTV to create internal dissent in European countries. Overall, this thesis argues that the contradiction around Europe in Press TV's reporting was a result of the Ukrainian reports emerging, which challenged its established narrative of US and European involvement. Deliberate or not, the contradiction enabled Press TV to divert attention from the Ukrainian reports and create a sense of Europe being betrayed by the US, showing that European countries are not fully sovereign and are submissive to US interests.

### **Iran has a voice**

Overall, this study reveals that Press TV generally follows Russia's narrative of US and European involvement, even after the reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage, not surprising given Iran's support for Russia in the war with Ukraine and their shared Western criticism. However, the incentive for continuing the narrative around US and European involvement was not just blindly following Russia. Seymour Hersh's reports fit perfectly into Iran's existing anti-Western narrative. While Russia also kept its narrative centred around US and European involvement, it also increased its negative reporting towards Ukraine. In contrast, Press TV remained primarily focused on the US and Europe, and used Europe as a tool to create anti-American sentiments. Consequently, this thesis argues that following a narrative of Ukrainian involvement was simply not in Iran's interest, as it would have challenged its existing anti-Western narrative. Iran and Russia are

more aligned and have strengthened relations, but Iran still puts their anti-Western narratives first. By using the strategic narrative theory, this thesis shows that Iran's performative language is not completely adjusted to Russia's, even after their strengthened alignment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Iran still follows its own ideological goals and still centres its strategic narrative around anti-Western (especially anti-American) sentiments. The Nord Stream sabotage was, and is still, a case surrounded by a lot of uncertainty. For autocracies like Iran, truth and falsehood are not that important in reporting about these kinds of events. Instead, it allows them to employ their strategic narratives and disinformation campaigns to create polarisation abroad. When new information like the Ukrainian reports emerges, a strategic narrative can override this kind of new information.

## Conclusion & Reflection

This thesis extends the academic literature around disinformation and the strategic narrative theory by applying it to an Iranian state-owned media outlet's perspective on the Nord Stream sabotage in a time when Iran and Russia are growing more towards each other on both a strategic and economic level. Specifically, this thesis sought to explain why Iranian state-owned news outlet Press TV continued to pursue a narrative that emphasised US and European involvement in the Nord Stream sabotage, even after reports emerged that a pro-Ukrainian team was behind the sabotage. The results from a narrative analysis of 37 Press TV articles show that for Iran, not following the Ukrainian narrative fits into their historic narrative of anti-Western sentiments. Given their shared view of opposing the West, Iran largely followed Russia's narrative around the sabotage. Surprisingly, this thesis finds that Iran kept its narrative centred around US and European involvement, and did not go after Ukraine, although it supports Russia in the war. Even after Russia started to criticise Ukraine more, after the reports of a pro-Ukrainian team came out. Consequently, this thesis finds that following the Ukrainian narrative would have left a gap in Iran's historic narrative of anti-Western sentiments. On a larger level, this thesis argues that Iran's alignment with Russia following the war in Ukraine is likely to limit itself to strategic military levels, not a strengthened alignment in terms of strategic narratives and disinformation.

This thesis contributes to academics and practitioners in the field of disinformation by stating that Iran did not fully copy and paste or blindly follow Russia's narrative on the sabotage after the reports of Ukrainian involvement emerged. Iran has a voice which they use according to their ideology of anti-Western sentiments. Although Iran supports Russia in their war against Ukraine, this thesis finds that in their reporting of the Nord Stream sabotage, they are more keen to use geopolitical events to amplify anti-Western sentiments. On a larger level, this thesis has shown that strategic narratives can easily override new information like

the Ukrainian reports. Other autocracies are likely to be able to do the same.

While this thesis argues why Iran pursued a certain narrative, it can not identify how its narrative is received by the audience. Moreover, it also fails to measure whether Press TV's reporting affects changing public opinion. This thesis focused on state-sponsored disinformation. However, disinformation has wider social implications (Shoai & Magariño, 2024). State-sponsored disinformation can be amplified by non-state actors such as social media accounts. These other aspects of disinformation have been excluded from this research. The focus on state-sponsored disinformation serves as a distinction in analysis for this research, state actions are connected to other social aspects as well (Shoai & Magariño, 2024). Looking at methodological limitations, this thesis coded for two persuasive language techniques within Press TV's reporting. However, more exist.

Future research could look into the strategic narrative of other countries that support Russia in the war against Ukraine, for example, China. Can other autocracies also effectively override new incoming information that goes against their existing strategic narrative? This thesis found a surprising contradiction within Press TV's portrayal of Europe in the Nord Stream sabotage: both a perpetrator and collateral damage of the US. Further research could look into the consistency of this message in other Iranian state-owned media outlets.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Data set

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## Appendix B: Example of a Press TV article

# Moscow says US behind Nord Stream leaks

Thursday, 29 September 2022 10:34 AM [ Last Update: Thursday, 29 September 2022 10:40 AM ]



This file photo, taken on November 8, 2011, shows a view of the gas pipeline terminal prior to an inaugural ceremony for the first of Nord Stream's twin 1,224 kilometer gas pipelines through the Baltic Sea, in Lubmin, northeastern Germany. (By AFP)

Russia says the US is behind the leaks on Nord stream pipelines as ruptures occurred in the coasts of Denmark and Sweden, which are “fully under the control” of US intelligence agencies.

Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said on Thursday that ruptures to the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines that caused four gas leaks off the coasts of Denmark and Sweden occurred in territory that is completely under US control.

“It happened in the trade and economic zones of Denmark and Sweden. There are NATO-centric countries,” Zakharova said an interview with the Soloviev Live online broadcast.

She did not provide evidence of US control over Sweden and Denmark but said “they are countries that are completely controlled by the US intelligence services.”

Russia and the West have traded blame over alleged sabotage that caused mysterious leaks on the Nord Stream gas pipelines. The issue has been at the heart of a standoff between Russia and Europe over energy supplies since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Earlier on Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said accusations that Moscow was behind the gas leaks were “stupid and absurd.” He pointed to the “huge profits” for US LNG suppliers who have “increased their supplies by several times.”



[Biden administration ‘obliged’ to answer if US behind Nord Stream gas leaks: Russia](#)

[Moscow says the administration of US President Joe Biden is "obliged" to answer if Washington was behind reported gas leaks on the Nord Stream pipelines that run from Russia to Europe.](#)

The Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines were hit by unexplained leaks on September 26. The Nord Stream 1 leaks were first spotted on Monday evening, hours after a drop in pressure was reported in Nord Stream 2.

Nord Stream 2, which runs almost in parallel to Nord Stream 1, was built in September 2021 but was never launched as Germany refused to certify it. The project was halted altogether just days before Moscow started its so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine on February 24.

The pipelines, operated by Russian gas giant Gazprom, are not currently in operation, but they both still contain gas.

The Russian embassy in Denmark alleged in a statement on Wednesday that the leaks were an act of “sabotage against the energy security of Russia and Europe.”

Denmark is a member of the NATO military alliance, while Sweden’s membership is pending after it abandoned its historic policy of non-alignment following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

In a statement on Wednesday, the Council of the European Union promised a “robust and united response” to the incidents, adding that “all available information indicates those leaks are the result of a deliberate act.”

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Press TV’s website can also be accessed at the following alternate addresses:

[www.presstv.co.uk](http://www.presstv.co.uk)

## Appendix C: Codebook

Category	Code label	Definition	Operationalisation	Example of use	Theme
Persuasive language techniques  (Norton & Cooley, 2024)	“Expert” quote	A technique used to bring in clarification or background information on a subject (Norton & Cooley, 2024)	Applied when an “expert” was used in Press TV’s reporting. Can include guest political writers, journalists, etc.	“An American political analyst has said that the Europeans have got to wake up to the fact that the United States destroyed Nord Stream pipelines “in order to subjugate the economy of Germany and keep them in line” (Press TV, 2023f, para. 1).”	Legitimising the Russian narrative & undermining alternative explanations
	Hyperbole	A technique used to exaggerate conditions and/or to emphasise the effect of the sentence (Norton & Cooley, 2024)		“Energy prices appear set to soar for a prolonged period, Europe’s energy insecurity <b>is now off the charts</b> , dreaded stagflation now seems like the West’s certain economic future and global bond markets are undergoing their worst drawdown ever (Press TV, 2022b, para. 3)	Legitimising the Russian narrative & undermining alternative explanations
Purpose within narratives  (Norton & Cooley, 2024)	Protagonist labelling	The main point of view of an actor in a story.	Applied when Russia was portrayed as protecting itself from coercive US/Western ideals or actions	A liberating, anti-colonial movement against unipolar hegemony is already developing in various countries and societies. Its	Legitimising the Russian narrative.

				subjectivity will only grow (Escobar, 2022, para. 5)	
	Antagonist labelling	The actor who opposes the protagonist stands in the protagonist's way.	A state actor shows the "other nation(s)" as the antagonist.	"he said, the world needs to be aware of the "vicious coerciveness, war, and conspiracy manoeuvres of the United States" (Press TV, 2023k, para. 5)	The US empire
Scenes within narratives  (Norton & Cooley, 2024)	Dominant narrative	See operationalisation	Applied when a state actor was portrayed as a dominant actor that holds power (over other countries).	This means Russia could easily destroy the competition, as in absurdly expensive LNG coming from the US. After all, St. Petersburg to Hamburg is only about 800 nautical miles, and from Kaliningrad, only 400 nautical miles (Escobar, 2022, para. 43)	Legitimising the Russian narrative
	Submissive narrative	See operationalisation	Applied when a state actor was portrayed as an actor who yielded something.	"I'm very used to the liabilities of my government. They can always do very stupid things," said the renowned reporter, who is known for his reporting on US crimes during the wars in Vietnam and the Middle East (Press TV, 2023t, para. 6)	Undermining alternative explanations & Europe as both a perpetrator and collateral damage

Context	Surrounding developments	“Refers to surrounding happenings, e.g. social and economic developments or legal implications and policies that are important for the story and have an influence on what is happening, i.e. what the actor is referring to as being important” (Marschutz, 2018, p. 152)	Applied when an event separate from the Nord Stream sabotage was linked to the Nord Stream sabotage.	“Nord Stream sabotage amid record inflation has West reeling” (Press TV, 2022b)	Europe as both a perpetrator and collateral damage
	External effects	Benefits and costs are created when an event has an impact on other actors.	Applied when the Nord Stream sabotage was linked to having effects on other sectors/nations.	“After what happened with Nord Stream, [we need] increased monitoring and protecting [of] critical maritime infrastructure and ships from physical and cyber threats,” Sinkevičius told the newspaper” (Press TV, 2023n, para. 6)	Legitimising the Russian narrative
	Future assumption	“Refers to assumptions about future events. Includes future triggers for processes and events. This is done in a more hypothetical way” (Marshutz, 2018)	Applied when there was a mention of events that (potentially) will happen as a result of the Nord Stream sabotage.	“An inevitable – certainly unforeseen – consequence is that in this new twist in the War of Economic Corridors, all bets are off: no pipeline or undersea cable, anywhere in the world, is now safe and may become	Legitimising Russian narrative

				fair game in retaliation” (Escobar, 2022, para. 18)	
	Political context	Refers to the political climate at the time of the reporting.	Applied when there was a mention of political events happening around the same time as the Nord Stream sabotage	<p>“Over a year has passed since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. since the war began the US and its Western allies, rushed to help Ukraine and armed with various types of weapons” (Press TV, 2023v, para. 17).</p> <p>“Currently, they are inextricably involved in the outcome of the war. In 2022 America led the way with major support decisions for Ukraine, with EU countries following suit” (Press TV, 2023v, para. 18).</p>	Legitimising the Russian narrative
	International support	Diplomatic assistance is given from one state actor to another.	Applied when there was a mention of other states giving their support for Russia in the case of the Nord Stream sabotage.	“China has also called for an objective, impartial, and professional investigation into the explosions, urging relevant sides to heed the calls of the international community” (Press TV, 2023k, para. 6).	Legitimising Russian Narrative

	Unsubstantiated claim	A claim that has not been proven to be true.	Applied when Press TV's reporting included statements that have not been found to be true, or have not been found to have significant evidence to back them up.	'She did not provide evidence of US control over Sweden and Denmark but said "they are countries that are completely controlled by the US intelligence services"' (Press TV, 2022a, para. 4)	Undermining alternative explanations
Framing	Terrorism	Discourse which portrayed the sabotage as a terrorist attack.	Applied when the word "terrorism" was used.	"The embassy said in a statement Moscow considers the destruction of Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines "an act of international terrorism" and will not allow it to be swept under the rug (Press TV, 2023s, para. 16)".	Legitimising Russian narrative & US empire
	Economic interest	Discourse that portrayed that the sabotage had some economic incentive behind it.	Applied when an actor was mentioned to benefit economically from the Nord Stream sabotage.	"He pointed to the "huge profits" for US LNG suppliers who have "increased their supplies by several times." (Press TV, 2022a, para.6)	The US empire & Europe as both a perpetrator and collateral damage

	Indirectly implying involvement	Discourse that portrayed an actor who “allegedly” was behind the sabotage, without mentioning them by name.	See definition	“Everybody understands who is behind this and who the beneficiary is,” Russian President Vladimir Putin stated earlier, explaining that with the gas lines inoperable, “one can now force the liquefied natural gas from the US on to European countries on a much larger scale” (Press TV, 2022e, para. 17).	US empire
	Political incentive behind sabotage	Discourse that portrayed the sabotage as a means to achieve political goals.	Applied when there was a mention of political gain for an actor as a result of the sabotage.		Europe as both a perpetrator and collateral damage & US empire
	Russian concerns about Nord Stream investigation	Discourse that spoke about Russian concerns about the investigations into the sabotage.	Applied when there was a mention about the Russian discussion on the investigation into the sabotage.	“Almost five months have passed since the sabotage of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines. All this time, however, the Swedish authorities, as if on cue, remain silent," Russia's embassy to Sweden said on the Telegram messaging platform” (Press TV, 2023h, para. 2)	Undermining alternative explanations

	Cover up	Actors are trying to hide something.	Applied when there was a mention of countries trying to hide the actors who ‘‘allegedly’’ were behind the sabotage.	‘‘Earlier in the day, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov also said that US media reports on the Nord Stream pipelines attacks were a coordinated effort to divert attention’’ (Press TV, 2023m, para. 4)	Undermining alternative explanations & US empire
Actor (accusation )	EU (accusation)	Refers to Europe as a whole.	Applied when Europe was mentioned, either as an actor within the Nord Stream sabotage, or when accused of the sabotage.	The Kremlin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said the "truth" behind the September explosions on the Nord Stream gas pipelines would "surprise" many Europeans if it was to be made public’’ (Press TV, 2022e, para. 1).	Europe as both a perpetrator and collateral damage
	US (accusation)	Refers to the nation of the United States	Applied when the US was mentioned as an actor within Nord Stream, or when accused of sabotage.	‘‘Furthermore, American journalist Seymour Hersh said formerly that US President Joe Biden had directly ordered the destruction of the pipelines in order to make sure Germany could not change its mind about sanctions against Russia and weapons shipments to Ukraine’’ (Press TV, 2023k, para. 11)	US empire

	US critique	Disapproval of US government policies.	Applied when the US was critiqued, does not necessarily have to involve the Nord Stream sabotage.	“In fact, it’s the US that has “already lost the war”: at least 87% of the world – including virtually the whole Global South – has already concluded this is a rogue, rudderless empire” (Escobar, 2022, para 31).	The US empire
	United Kingdom (accusation)	Refers to the nations of the United Kingdom	Applied when England was mentioned as an actor within the Nord Stream sabotage, or when accused of the sabotage.	“Russia has once again accused the United Kingdom of 'directing and coordinating' explosions on the Nord Stream gas pipelines on the floor of the Baltic Sea in late September” (Press TV, 2022f, para. 1)	Legitimising the Russian narrative
	Ukraine (accusation)	Refers to the nation of Ukraine	Applied when Ukraine was mentioned as an actor within Nord Stream sabotage, or when accused of the sabotage.	“The report said the officials had no evidence implicating Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the sabotage, even though the bombing benefited Kiev by severely impacting Russia's revenue from the sale of natural gas to Western Europe” (Press TV, 2023m, para. 7)	Undermining alternative explanation

	Russia	Refers to the nation of Russia	Applied when Russia was mentioned as an actor within the Nord Stream sabotage, or when accused of the sabotage.	‘‘The Russian embassy in Denmark alleged in a statement on Wednesday that the leaks were an act of ‘‘sabotage against the energy security of Russia and Europe’’ (Press TV, 2022a, para. 10)	Legitimising the Russian narrative
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