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**Erasmus  
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**Narratives and Interstate Relations:  
Understanding the depth of the Sino-Russo  
Partnership through the Narratives China and  
Russia propagate.**

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*What do the Narratives exported by Russia and China, if anything,  
reveal about the scale and limitations of the Sino-Russo  
partnership?*



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## *Abstract*

This dissertation seeks to understand the depth, scale and limitations of the Sino-Russo Partnership through the narratives propagated by Russia and China. Although the results are not completely conclusive due to the fact that there are other factors which will determine the depth of the partnership, it does provide an understanding of Sino-Russo interaction in a narrative context. To achieve these results, a collection of media sources has been taken from the global level, from Western Europe and the Balkans in order to identify the key narratives being exported by Russia and China and whether any placement of the other, be it positive or negative, is present in their respective narratives. This will also be achieved in tandem with the existing scholarly literature. The overall results showed a lack of negative placement in the media sources, suggesting an unwillingness to portray the other negatively for the sake of their partnership and some positive placement from both states towards the other, primarily in Western Europe and becoming minimal in the Balkans. The positive placement found was particularly interesting, providing connotations that there is a willingness to support each other but specifically in Western Europe where there seems to be more in common for projecting shared strength. The results also revealed a potential issue with current scholarly literature, putting too much focus on narratives exported into Western Europe and making the case that these are the narratives largely exported to all states. Overall, it shows an emphasis on positive placement where the two states need to show joint strength. The results most importantly revealed that more research needs to be collected for understanding the scale of the partnership in a narrative context, particularly at a regional level rather than a global one in order to better understand specific narrative targeting and to find potential areas of negative placement or more entrenched positive placement.

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## **Introduction**

The current state of the Sino-Russo Partnership and whether the partnership is likely to develop in further cooperation or alliance in the future are currently key questions in the field of IR which must be studied. It may emerge as a new major power block in global affairs and not just in its regional centres of dominance (Wishnick, 2018). The most common outlooks for those in the IR profession trying to understand the extent of the Sino-Russo partnership has included assessing relations between Russia and China over their relations with the West, military partnership, economy and the Belt Road initiative, the sales of arms, regions of shared interest and bilateral agreements between the two states. (Van Noort, 2020) Although these fields of study are valid and provide concrete guidelines of where the partnership currently is, they are also widely researched and understood which means that there is little more in the present which can be gained from these fields to gain illustrate the full extent of the relationship between Russia and China and their individual goals.

Because of this, there should be an increased focus on other tools which both states use in order to understand the depth of the partnership, in this case narratives and strategic messaging which both China and Russia propagate. The use of narratives and strategic messaging has been a common tool used by states both in domestic and international terms in order to project a certain image that would help bolster support for its aims and goals. This can also be clearly seen on a superficial level with Russia and China, most recently in their narrative projection towards aid during the Covid-19 Pandemic, something which will be

discussed in the dissertation. Because strategic messaging and narratives are a common feature of all states, including Russia and China, it makes logical sense for it to be used as a method for understanding the Sino-Russo partnership instead of primarily studied in the context of disinformation and information warfare as seen with NATO reports, particularly in regards to Russia.

Study into narratives is also important because it is becoming an increasingly used tactic by states globally due to the massive expansion of media consumption through multiple outlets, including the traditional methods of newspapers, television and radio as well as the rapidly expanding outlet of social media. This increased consumption and access to media from multiple angles allows for states to use strategic messaging much more effectively for successfully spreading their narratives, something which can be easily equated to propaganda due to the similar methods and tools used. This means that there is a wealth of research which can be tapped into, allowing for a comprehensive study of Russia and China's narratives which are being projected and what that might tell about the Sino-Russo partnership.

The overall aim of my research is to determine whether the narratives that are being projected in regions of interest by Russia and China can give insight into the relationship between the two states. More specifically and importantly, I hope to ascertain the strength of the partnership, its scales and limitations through researching their narrative output and the respective place of each state

within them. This would hopefully give both a better understanding of the Sino-Russo Partnership as a whole in the present.

The key objectives of my research are to:

1. Identify the key narratives which are being projected by Russia and China.
2. Establish where there are conflicting or shared interests between China and Russia if any within the chosen.
3. Find any information in the Narratives projected, both positive and negative, pertaining to the other state.

In order to achieve these objectives and reach my overall aim, I have divided my research into four specific chapters. Firstly, I will be undertaking a global study of the narrative projection in the Russian and Chinese contexts based on primarily on the current literature and a broad collection of media sources. This will include a broad overview of the strategic messaging and placement at the global level. Once I have firmly established the parameters of Russian and Chinese narratives and placement at a global level, I will use two case studies of regions where Russian and Chinese strategic messaging is present using primary media sources from 2019 to 2020. I will be discussing what key narratives are being exported into Western Europe and the Balkans with the aim of finding any placement from either Russia or China towards the other in their respective narratives. Each case study will have a conclusion based around my three key objectives. Once I have conducted the global study and regional

studies, I will move onto a discussion chapter. This will provide a comparison between the regional case studies as well as the global case study. It will serve as a means of finding key similarities in narratives, where they differ and where narrative placement, if any, differs from region to region and the global. This comparison will also serve as a means of testing whether the narratives and placement put forward by the literature and media sources in the global chapter, providing to an extent a test on the accuracy of the current literature regarding Russian and Chinese narratives. Overall, this research into the narratives propagated by Russia and China will aim to provide conclusions on the potential strength, scale, depth and limitations of the Sino-Russo Partnership.

## **Literature Review**

The literature Review I have conducted has been split into four sections:

- A. The Definitions of Strategic Narratives.
- B. The academic sources surrounding the Sino-Russo partnership.
- C. Government and NATO reports on the partnership.
- D. Documents acquired from the Media.

These four sections will cover the core literature and research that will make up this project. It will show where the current arguments lie in regards to strategic messaging and the Sino-Russo partnership more generally. From this point, the literature review will also aim to show how my own project and research will build upon their work and how it has found a niche which has not been discussed in depth previously. It should be noted that I have separated government reports and academic sources into separate sections for better engagement with the sources.

### **Definitions of Strategic Messaging and Narratives**

My understanding of Narratives as a definition is largely based on the concept of ‘strategic narratives being used as an attempt to marshal the centre ground of national and international political communication to play an influential role in

constituting the New World Order.’ (Miskimmon, 2013: 17) The areas of influence strategic narratives wish to influence includes the determination of threats, allies, rogue states, who can be cooperated with and who are the Great Powers.’ (Miskimmon, 2013: 36) A key weakness of this definition is that it doesn’t provide any substantial discussion on where a narrative ends and propaganda begins. This is quite a significant weakness because it creates a risk of narratives being simply relegated to propaganda despite the fact that they tend to be much more nuanced and developed in order to establish legitimacy. To remedy this, I take the stance that propaganda leans more towards an agenda projected from a government to its own people, in a similar vein to what was seen in the USSR through Stalin’s Cult of Personality and the Nazi propaganda machine from prior to their election all the way to the end of WW2 which was much more developed around purely false information. Where a strategic narrative differs to this, especially in the international context I am focusing on, there is a need for much more legitimacy in order to make these narratives in order to gain support outside of the state. Concepts such as the Belt-Road Initiative need more credibility in order to be received well and can’t be seen as simply propaganda. There needs to be a degree of perceived legitimacy. The concept of strategic narratives would be comparable to the messaging undertaken by Radio Freedom during the Cold War where western narratives and ideals were being spread into the Iron Curtain, done in a way to try and prevent it from being perceived as propaganda. It does not deny the use of disinformation and false messaging within these narratives, but it does cement

the need for credibility and discussion on the concepts portrayed rather than a focus on indoctrination.

However, this definition provides a general understanding of the areas that Russia and China would wish to influence and a guideline for where my research needs to focus on. Its broadness makes it a strength because it allows for investigation into multiple areas where narratives can be distributed, and more importantly recognising the fact that narratives can be designed to be targeted across multiple fields and groups. To somewhat diverge from the literature and definition, my view on strategic narratives will be more focused on the regional orders and influence of larger states over them rather than the 'Global World order' (Miskimmon, 2013). This fits with my decision to use regional case studies and provides a narrower and more feasible focus in the project. It does not discount the possibility of discussing wider ramifications of these narratives, albeit just to a lesser extent and within the feasibility of my project.

### *Academic Sources*

My proposed research project fits currently with the more recently produced materials relating to the spread of disinformation and online media campaigns used to bolster support for Russia and China. In regards to Russian messaging, it is very well researched and documented. This can be gleaned from journal articles which discuss the understanding of Russian messaging and strategic narratives in regards to its NATO border states and the Balkans where there has

been a combination of messaging from media outlets such as Sputnik in Serbia (Bechev,2020) alongside ‘hybrid warfare tactics covers using information as a tool, or a target, or a domain of operation’ (Giles, 2016: 6) in order to reinforce the narratives that it wishes to support. It shows that my case studies and decision to collect research from media outlets are firmly a part of the literature, partially guiding my decisions on what are the most prevalent areas to research.

In regards to narrative placement of each state in the other’s strategic messaging, there is no existing research on the matter on an international level within academic sources. The only literature which comes relatively close to this topic is in regards to how each state projects the other at a domestic level within their own states. This research was primarily conducted in relation to the beginnings of the Sino-Russo partnership with focuses on Russia and China using messages such as the ‘Year of China in Russia and the Year of Russia in China in 2006’ (Yeung and Bjelakovic, 2010: 251) to highlight the idea of the states being on good terms to their people. It shows to an extent a use of narratives to promote the developing Sino-Russo partnership at that time period. However, research into how Russia and China have not been significantly developed from this point with a general conclusion based on the initial development of the partnership that on the domestic front for both states, positive and negative messaging remains limited or non-existent. This is one of the key areas where this will research will aim to enhance the literature by providing a new avenue of discussion and filling in a key gap within the literature.

There has been a growing literature base on China's gradual evolution in its messaging and disinformation campaigns to establish its own narratives in areas of interest. This literature has most commonly been focused on "its domestic messaging to reinforce CCP rule" (Lams, 2018) or on its immediate borders Chinese messaging in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In contrast, Europe has largely been 'marginalised in Chinese strategic narratives' (Zeng, 2017). However, due to China's growing focus on establishing itself as a norm/system shaper internationally (Lams, 2018) in its messaging campaigns; there has been more literature centred around Chinese Narratives in Europe. This is particularly relevant in regards to its 'communication of the New Silk Road' (Van Noort, 2020) which has been predominantly seen in Asia but is now moving towards Europe as well. This shift towards Europe fits perfectly for my research because it provides ample resources to engage with it. It also fits with the current literature because my project shows recognition of the growing narrative projection being undertaken in Europe. The fact that the existing literature focuses more on domestic narratives over that of the international means that my research will be able to further expand the currently growing but not widely researched area of international narrative projection of Chinese narratives.

One of the most robust aspects of study regarding Russia, China and the Sino-Russo Partnership are foreign policy goals. There is quite extensive research and literature regarding China's pursuit of the Belt Road Initiative, aims to further influence bordering regions, its white papers' highlighting goals of

expanding its position within International Politics and the growth of its military to establish itself as a world power (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019). There is also research on Russia's goals to re-establish itself as the sole regional power over states formerly a part of the USSR in Central Asia, (Flikke, 2016) the Balkans and the Baltics alongside growing anti-NATO sentiment (Boulegue, 2017). Within the context of the Sino-Russo partnership, there is significant discussion on what the current dimensions of the partnership are, including its unwillingness to be perceived or 'declare as an alliance,' (Liu, 2018: 334) the necessity of the partnership for Russia so it can continue to profit from the sale of advanced arms and natural resources, shared scientific research and joint aims to counter US hegemony and poor relations with Europe (Lain, 2015: 71—73). The volume of discussion which exists surrounding the foreign policy goals of both states and the key facets of the partnership will play a significant role in my own research because it helps to provide indicators for what kind of narratives might be projected in each region by these foreign policy goals.

Overall, these are the key sources which I will be building upon for my research project. It will fit with the assumptions of these articles about Russia and China in regards to their narrative campaigns. My research will be able to contribute to the current literature surrounding the two states by helping to further understand what overlaps China and Russia have when it comes to the groups that they are targeting and for what purposes. Establishing whether there is any

positive placement from either state towards the other will be particularly contributory to the literature due to the literature currently being minimal on the matter.

### **NATO and Government Reports**

The focus on NATO documents has been stressed due to the volume of output, relative ease of access for sources and its focus on Russia in relation to Europe as well as NATO's development into research on China. It also serves as a broad indicator, but not wholly representative, for member states' research into Russia and China. NATO's output in regards to narrative projection in Europe and the Balkans has been primarily focused on what tactics are being used. This is mainly centred around disinformation and how it is spread to these regions. NATO documents highlight the importance and role of bots being used as a method of transmitting disinformation due to their abilities in 'automatically sending out information at a much faster rate than humans cans' and citing their growing dominance as a spreader of disinformation with 'Russian-language bots created roughly 70% of all Russian messages about NATO in the Baltic States and Poland' (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017: 4). This was also notably seen in the Balkans with NATO reports showing how 'Bots were used in spreading anti-western narratives in North Macedonia' (Metodieva, 2019: 18).

The relevance of bots and the online domain as a spreader of disinformation has been further recognised by government documents with security strategies of

states being largely being centred around how disinformation is spread rather than the narratives projected. Key examples of this include the Estonian cyber security strategy and the Russia Report released by the British Intelligence oversight committee which further illustrates the influence of online tactics such as bots and trolls to spread disinformation and by extension narratives. The Russia report in particular shows what key tools were being used by Russia within the UK to spread disinformation, including 'RT, bots, illicit funding and hack and leak' (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, 2020: 9) as key tools. The government and NATO reports provide a strong background for understanding the techniques most commonly used, albeit in a more Russian focus than that of a Chinese one. Though some research has been conducted, showing similar tactics used by China in South East Asia, including the use of 'diplomats on twitter to spread disinformation against Taiwan and the cultivation of troll dissidents to be a major part of media' (Kinetz, 2020). Overall, the government and NATO reports regarding tactics and tools of spreading disinformation has been an extremely useful literature base for the project. Although tactics are not the key focus of the project, they have acted as a guiding principle for what kind of primary sources to look for in terms of researching narratives and strategic messaging as well as where there is an increased presence of disinformation tactics; helping in the decision for which region my case studies should be focused upon.

Government and NATO reports also have a much larger focus on to how to combat disinformation spread by Russia and China rather than recognising overarching narrative goals or what it might mean for understanding geopolitical relations between the two states. One such example of this can be seen in the Baltic states' security strategies which are primarily centred around disinformation being a threat and what best tactics must be used to reduce its impact. (Republic of Lithuania, 2017, Republic of Latvia, 2017, Republic of Estonia, 2010) Although it provides a valid argument for the importance in further developing an understanding of Russian and Chinese strategic messaging because of its perception as a threat, government reports such as these are largely limited in understanding the value of narrative propagation and what potential it has for informing of us about the Sino-Russo partnership.

However, although government documents are largely focused on disinformation tactics and combatting them with recognition of narratives and strategic messaging less substantial, there are documents and reports which discuss to some extent what kinds of narratives are being projected. The US reports for example provide significant discussion on what kind of narratives are being exported by Russia, suggesting that a key narrative goal is the 'undercutting of NATO and its allies' (US committee on Foreign Relations, 2018, Page 40). This can also be seen in the Russia Report which made clear comments on Russian narrative goals within the UK, particularly focusing on overarching aims of sewing discord and promoting division with increased

media output from RT and the spread of disinformation in the UK surrounding the Scottish Independence vote in 2014 and the Brexit vote in 2016 (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, 2020). Even NATO provides recognition of Russia targeting the organisation in its narratives. These reports provide significant value towards my current research because it means that there is some pre-existing analysis of narrative propagation, particularly in Western Europe and the Balkans. It allows for the opportunity to build upon this information and to have a more concrete understanding of narrative propagation by Russia as I conduct my media analysis within each case study.

In regards to Chinese narrative propagation, NATO and government reports are lacking in quantity. There has been more focus on Chinese tactics for spreading its narratives and carrying out strategic messaging rather than the narratives themselves. Even in regards to skills and techniques there have been limits with the current NATO literature still keeping to statements that the skills and techniques China currently uses have been an “emulation of Russian techniques” (Kinetz, 2020). However, there is recognition beyond this statement with the most valuable piece of knowledge in regards to Chinese tactics in spreading narratives from NATO being that they have evolved to become a very sophisticated and widespread part of Chinese foreign policy. The current literature remains too heavily focused on Russian disinformation narratives, meaning that there is a key gap in existing NATO research over Chinese narratives due to it being a developing field. The lacking government sources

towards Chinese narratives means that my research finds its place in the region by finding a more developed understanding of Chinese narratives which are being projected globally and regionally.

A final point on NATO and national government reports is that in regards to the placement of each state in the other's narrative propagation there is no real research which has been conducted. There have been no solid claims, statements or assertions over any potential joint messaging between the two or whether narratives projected in each region have placement or discussion about the other state. The only real point in the literature that has been made regarding joint messaging or narrative placement is that the only substantial evidence of joint messaging might exist at a state level within their own countries and that there are some common interests of both states revolving around "combatting US messaging, driving wedges in the current rules-based order and targeting diplomatic alliances." (NATO Strat-Com, 2020) This shows a significant gap in both government and NATO reports, meaning that my research will be contributing to the current literature by providing an analysis and discussion over narrative placement and what it tells about the Sino-Russo partnership. Overall, it will be able to provide a new focus for those studying the stability of the Sino-Russo partnership.

### **Documents acquired from the Media**

The type of media and analysis which I have outlined in the methodology below has been commonly used for any research conducted by both academics,

governments and international organisations due to their volume and frequent use as a means of narrative propagation, allowing for researchers to show the development of media as a political tool, discover key issues and find common patterns or trends. Because of this, my research will continue to use and rely upon traditional and common sources of analysis, albeit being aided by NVivo software to help speed up the process of finding narratives and narrative placement and using new methods for identifying key language which would indicate a narrative as seen with the word frequency count for example.

Where my research will differ and build upon common media discourse analysis; will be through its focus. Media discourse analysis, particularly that in regards to Russia and China, is primarily conducted in the context of spreading of disinformation. It is much more focused on disinformation and other tools deployed by these states as opposed to the narrative goals themselves. This will hopefully glean much more insights to build upon the current understanding which could be perceived as broad and vague rather than robust. Another significant difference in my approach to media discourse analysis for narratives is that I will be undertaking research into how these narratives show interstate relations between Russia and China. Media document analysis in regards to narratives is primarily done individually with focus only being on the one state and the region or country where it is projecting the narrative towards. By going beyond this, I will be able to contribute to the literature by providing a new

perspective on how a media discourse analysis can better develop our understanding of bilateral and potentially multilateral relations between states.

### **Conclusion of Literature Review**

Overall, the literature review has clearly shown what the core arguments are in regards to the Sino-Russo partnership in the current academic literature. It has shown a clear focus on the role of military, economics, the Belt Road Initiative and the current world order as factors for understanding the Sino-Russo partnership, something which will be of significant value to the dissertation by providing a guideline for what goals, topics and language would be used in regards to the strategic messaging conducted by each state. The literature review has also clearly illustrated the key definitions of strategic messaging and narrative projection, providing a strong groundwork for the dissertation by continuing to use these largely accepted definitions when researching both Chinese and Russian strategic messaging. The review has most importantly shown what the current limits of the research in regards to the Sino-Russo partnership and narrative propagation. It has largely shown a significant focus on the more traditional methods of understanding interstate relations and geopolitics as a whole and in regards to narratives themselves focus has been much more directed more towards disinformation and its expansion in the cyber domain. This focus over these factors means that the role of using narratives to understand the Sino-Russo partnership has been neglected. Because of this fact, my dissertation will be able to build upon the current literature and ideally fill

this gap, providing a new area for studying the scale, depth and limitations of the Sino-Russo partnership.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Due to strategic messaging and narratives being largely based on the spread of ideas, messages and communication; it was necessary to choose a theoretical framework better suited to these concepts rather than theories like realism and neorealism which would have relied on traditional focuses of geopolitics and their usual outputs of research such as political influence, military and economic power as the major avenues of understanding the strength and depth of the partnership. I also cannot use theories which deviate too far from these facets due to them being interlinked to narratives and strategic messaging. It remains a significant part of this dissertation and method from both my initial research into the Sino-Russo partnership to gain a firm understanding of it and that my overall end goal is to assess the strength of the partnership. These factors make it essential that a theoretical outlook for this project must recognise the validity of strategic messaging as a tool for analysing interstate relations.

Because of this, I have decided to pursue Social Constructivism as my theoretical background. Social Constructivism is the most useful tradition of

thinking for my framework because it recognises the importance of identities, perceptions and historical context in influencing interstate relations and international relations as a whole. This fits well with my dissertation because it fundamentally recognises the validity of strategic messaging as a means of understanding interstate relations whilst also preventing my research from simply being limited to a traditional understanding of motives and goals for states, instead giving much more significance to context and how narratives play their role in achieving state goals (Theys, 2018). I will be specifically using the conventional branch of constructivism which argues against ‘the mainstream position that world is so homogeneous that universally valid generalizations can be expected to come of theorizing about it, whilst at the same time reject the critical constructivist presumption that world politics is so heterogeneous that we should presume to look for only the unique and the differentiating’ (Jung, 2019 Page 3). It effectively deals with the fact that ideals and concepts are neither fixed nor universal but recognises that there is potential for similarities and areas of overlap. The use of conventional constructivism will be particularly useful for my decision to use regional case studies, meaning that I can better understand the reasoning for any major differences to the other regions due to a wider range of knowledge which the theory considers to be valid whilst also understanding where clear similarities and overlaps lie.

Conventional Constructivism is preferred over branches of constructivism such as critical and positivist variations; with critical constructivism being more

focused upon ‘unmasking naturalized order and asymmetrical power relations in our social world’ (Hopf, 1998, Pages 183-185) and positivist constructivism being primarily being centred on epistemology (Theys, 2018) which is too theoretical rather than practical for my approach to research. Overall, using this theory will serve as a useful guideline for the project, allowing for my research to include all relevant facets for understanding the depth of the Sino-Russo partnership in the context of narratives.

### **Primary approaches for reaching my research goals**

In order to best research this area, I will be taking a mostly qualitative approach to my research. This is the best option for researching narratives because it is largely to do with ideas, themes and messages which are being distributed. This can be more easily measured using a qualitative style rather than a quantitative style which would be more dependent on hard data, something much less feasible and more subjective when discussing narratives. However, there will be some quantitative elements to my approach. This will primarily include the use of narrative share figures and word count percentages based on the media I have identified as representing a certain narrative or showing placement of one state in the other’s messaging. A key part of the structure of my dissertation will be its division into case studies by region as a means of going into more depth rather than solely a broad analysis of the general narratives Russia and China produce.

I plan to use a discussion on global narratives based on the literature and a broad selection of online news articles from multiple regions where Russian and Chinese narratives are present alongside two case studies taking a more in-depth media analysis focusing on Western Europe and the Balkans. The approach allows for comparison not just between regions but also between regional and global narratives to see if there are any substantial differences in both narrative projection and narrative placement. Notable outlets I will study and acquire media from are RT, Xinhua and Sputnik. I have chosen to focus on these primarily because they are the primary methods of media distribution and narrative projection for the two states outside of their own borders, having an influence both at the global and regional areas chosen for study. One minor issue with these sources is that due to the international nature of them, there is some crossover in media sources between regions. However, this is very minor with the research revealing clear differences in output. There are, of course, other sources which could be used and might impact the narratives found such as Russian language media which has been identified as a key source of spreading Russian narratives in the Balkans (Metodieva, 2019, Page 2) as well as the use of twitter in spreading narratives (Kinetz, 2020). However, due to due to language, time and research constraints which prevent the study of more localised media or more varied media sources. There is also the issue with only choosing one media outlet for China. However, due to the observations in the literature which suggest that China's narrative campaigns are still developing

(Kinetz, 2020), there is a less robust choice in media stations to investigate and include in the media analysis.

My case studies will ultimately be comparative as a means of finding links, similarities and differences (Burnham, 2008: 63-70) in the narrative projections and strategic messaging of Russia and China. This has been chosen in order to see what overarching connections exist and to bolster any conclusions I can make on the Sino-Russo partnership as a whole. In the event that no connections are found, the individual case studies and their conclusions can be used. This is an added benefit to taking a multiple case study approach that can use each case study comparatively and individually (Seawright, 2008). Comparison between case studies will primarily be done in the discussion chapter. The only major comparisons which will be conducted when crafting the individual regional case studies is minor comparison to the global chapter. This is acceptable and will not have a significant impact on the conclusions of the individual regional case studies because the global chapter should have provided an understanding of each state's goals globally with each region having clear connections to these overarching aims. If anything, this comparison between the global chapter with each individual case study is necessary in case of the event that in a specific region there are radically different goals to that of the broad narratives spread by Russia and China globally. The Global chapter should effectively act as a guideline or testing principle for both the media sources and existing literature

when looking at each case study, making it essential for comparison during each case study analysis, albeit at a minor level until the discussion chapter.

The timeline for my case studies in terms of media analysis will be centred around the years 2019 and 2020. A longer timeline would have its benefits, particularly in regards to the fact that it would be allow for research into what longer-term trends exist in Russia and China's narrative propagation. However, I have decided to specifically focus on these two years due to recognition over the fact that any longer time period would make data collection unmanageable for the length of time that I have available to create the project. It would also mean that any achievable analysis over a longer period of time would be superficial at the best. A two-year timeline would provide a much more focused analysis of media released by both China and Russia in each region, and due to it being based on the last two years, would give a significant indicator to the current narrative propagation being spread. The use of 2019 and 2020 would also be useful for understanding narrative propagation because it is a time period where narrative propagation has become a firmly entrenched part of both Russia and China's tactics and strategies. This is particularly the case in 2020 where strategic messaging and narrative propagation has become more prevalent as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with increased and more targeted messaging in each prevalent in each region. This means that the time period will have an abundance of media which can be analysed for each case study. The focus on 2019 and 2020 may even have the possibility in showing a shift in narrative

propagation over the two-year period which might impact the strategic messaging of each country, and more importantly, the placement of each state in their narrative propagation. Overall, this means that the time period from 2019 to 2020 will provide both ample data for my research question and aims as well as keeping the scope of the project feasible.

### **Media Analysis Tools to aid analysis**

A key point which should be made regarding the media analysis which will be used in my case studies is the number of sources which will be used. For the global sources, it will be a collection of 120 sources, 60 from Russia and 60 from China, with ten sources from each region of the US, Western Europe, The Balkans, Central Asia, Latin America and Africa. This will be quite broad and less substantial than the regional case studies but will provide a general overview of global narratives and global placement. At the regional level, each case study will have a collection of 80 sources including 40 sources from Russia and 40 from China, providing a deeper media analysis at a regional level. The selection also aims to be as random as possible within the two-year time frame by simply selecting the sources without an in-depth read in order to prevent certain biases. However, certain media regarding sports or local news will not be included, instead with a focus being put on more political and obviously regional news. To focus more on political news, I will add the words 'politics, economics and military' into key word searches. To acquire regional sources, I have used key word searches which include the region of focus. Although it

could be criticised that manually taking sources even without do and in-depth reading will still suffer from biases due to headlines and assumptions on what counts as political news, the lack of technology available to do a much more randomised search means that a manual approach is the best option.

A key tool I intend to use as a means of analysing these sources is NVivo. NVivo's basic system will be able to show key phrases, ideas and rhetoric that are being put forward by Russian and Chinese outlets. This will be achieved through the use of word frequency counts and a cluster analysis to identify narratives and narrative placement. The use of nodes with key words to search for will not be used in the analysis. This is because it can be achieved at a faster rate through a manual qualitative analysis where one simply looks at the results from the cluster analysis and the word frequency count. It is also from the fact that nodes using specific identifiers such as NATO or the US for example might overshadow other narratives which may exist, making it better to run these counts without specific indicators in order to have a less biased result. Taking a manual analysis and seeing where the similarities lie via word counts and cluster analyses not limited by potential biases from nodes allows for wider exploration of what narratives which might exist in the sources. There is also the issue of time constraints regarding nodes. Coding, even at a broad level, would take time to be accurately done which is not wholly available due to the time constraints of the project.

Although the software will act as a driving force for the case studies, this will be bolstered significantly by both the literature and manual analysis rather than solely the software. This is because the software has issues which either slow down the process of analysis or fail to recognise narratives which are present. In the case of the word frequency count, for example, one has to go through the process of removing irrelevant words such as 'at, a and it' which would be more dominant in the count. And in the case of the cluster analysis, the nodes, and a word similarity comparison do not always adequately illustrate the narratives or narrative placement present in correct groupings. The software also fails to provide a way of quickly counting the percentage of narrative share, so a manual approach has had to be taken for recognising what percentage of the sources they are a part of. (See Appendix) Because of these issues, it is essential that the case studies are a mix of NVivo software, manual analysis and use of the existing literature.

## **Limitations**

It should be noted before proceeding that there are limitations to my research which should be addressed as points of reference for future study into the field. In terms of using media as a form of analysis, one limitation to the research is that it is only a small sample of a much larger volume of content which can be found in each region and is released daily. Accessing this depth of online media would not have been possible due to a lack of time or technological capacity to sift through a larger amount of data. It would also require a much more physical presence in these areas to gain access to the media outlets I have focused on in different forms of distribution such as through television, radio and newspapers instead of solely in an online capacity. But of course, due to the time frame of the dissertation referenced previously, a lack of adequate resources to properly go through a larger volume of data and the current pandemic limiting the ability to engage in research within these areas, it would neither have been feasible nor possible to carry out media research in that kind of depth.

This also extends to the language barrier; with a lack of access to interpreters and personal knowledge of the language itself preventing engagement with a wider range of sources and regions such as Central Asia where both Russia and China have a narrative presence. It means that to a certain extent my research could be contradicted or undermined by media which might suggest a different narrative exported and propagated by China and Russia, or perhaps how each state fits into the role of the other's narrative campaigns.

Another limitation in regards to accessing other forms of distribution was the fact that the project was unable to use of social media as a resource in the process. This was primarily due to ethical concerns such as the potential improper use of social media sources such as tweets and issues over gaining permission to use them. Because of this, it was not possible for social media to be sufficiently included in my research. This means that an increasingly significant and influential output for state narratives which has been highlighted as significant by academic sources, NATO documents and government papers has not been included in the primary data collected for the dissertation. This is particularly important regarding Chinese strategic messaging which has increasingly used social media for spreading its narratives globally.

A final limitation which should also be noted in terms any conclusions on the depth of the partnership that there are other influential factors for determining the depth of the Sino-Russo partnership such as political relations, economics, geopolitics and military collaboration have not been used to determine the depth of the partnership in this dissertation. Although research surrounding the partnership in terms of military, economics and geopolitics have played a role in the dissertation through providing regions of focus and an understanding of narrative goals for each country; they are not used as factors in their own right to ascertain the depth and scale of the partnership, instead being used to better understand strategic messaging. This means that research and evidence into these sectors would reveal more about the partnership in broader terms and from

multiple dimensions rather than simply from the angle of narrative projection. Despite this, it does still show a degree of depth of the partnership but primarily in the context of narratives and strategic messaging within these regions.

The limitations highlighted are unfortunately impossible to remove from this research project. However, it should be noted that the observations and conclusions drawn from this research remain valid for providing an understanding of the depth of the Sino-Russo partnership, providing a beginning for understanding the role of each state in the other's narrative campaigns which they propagate internationally. It is also important that these limitations are recognised for future research, providing a guideline of things to avoid and overcome for further study into the field. Overall, the limitations simply establish that this project is an exploratory study, providing both initial assumptions for the narrative context regarding the Sino-Russo Partnership and a basis for future research into the field.

# **Chapter 1: Russian and Chinese Narratives at the Global Level**

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will primarily be using the existing scholarly literature to identify the Russian narratives, Chinese narratives and narrative placement at the global level. This analysis will also be bolstered by a very broad set of sources at the global level. However, due to the fact that it is a smaller and more superficial set of sources due to it being a broad global overview, it will be the literature which guides this chapter. Having the literature at the forefront for understanding the global narratives presented also serves as a means of putting forward a test for future chapters to see whether the literature fits with a more in-depth study of narratives and placement at the regional level which are guided by the media found. This will also apply to a broad overview of media sources at the global level compared to that of a more in-depth study at the regional level.

## **Strategic Messaging in a Russian context and Key Goals of Russia in its narratives globally**

The most evident and significant narrative which Russia seeks to export on a global level rather than simply a regional level is the idea that US hegemony is a global threat (Hsu & Soong, 2014: 80) and that the international order needs to be rearranged in such a way that it operates as a multipolar system (Freire, 2012: 476). This is perhaps the most important or overarching narrative which

Russia seeks to export in its strategic messaging campaigns. This can be quite easily inferred when looking at Russia's foreign policy where it claims that it seeks to 'create a stable and sustainable system of international relations based on the generally accepted norms of international law and principles of equal rights, mutual respect and non-interference in domestic affairs of States, so as to ensure solid and equal security' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013). It builds upon this goal by putting itself in direct opposition to any examples of US hegemony 'by refusing to recognise the US policy of extraterritorial jurisdiction beyond the boundaries of international law and finds unacceptable attempts to exercise military, political, economic or any other pressure' (Russian Council, 2017). This is furthered by its foreign policy spreading the message that it seeks to hold the US accountable and assure that the 'US is to strictly abide by the norms of international law, primarily those held in the UN Charter, in its actions on the international stage' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013). Critiquing of the US amounts to 23% (Appendix One, Russian Media Sources, No. 3,4,7, 9,11,17,27,28,32,33,34,40,41,42) of the narrative share in the sources collected.

The discrediting of NATO is another significant facet of Russia's strategic messaging, primarily as a result of the Russian understanding that NATO is an increasing source of tension, citing factors such as their, 'geopolitical expansion and increasing deterrence building' (Russian Council, 2017). This is also seen from foreign sources which highlight Russia as a 'hostile state towards NATO'

(HM Government, 2021: 75) or that ‘Russia has the perception that NATO has a far more aggressive posture towards Russia’ (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, 2020: 1). It is quite well evidenced as an international feature of Russia’s messaging strategy with multiple government sources across the globe specifically referencing this form of messaging. The US, for example, explicitly references specific messages surrounding NATO, particularly identifying the ‘message from a study of 2000 sources that NATO are preparing to destroy Russia after successfully causing the collapse of the Soviet Union’ (US committee of foreign relations, 2018: 196). Similar messaging has also been identified by the UK with it recognising the narrative of ‘further enlargement of NATO constituting a breach of the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act, and an unacceptable encroachment into its perceived ‘sphere of influence’ (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, 2020: 37).

The narrative of discrediting NATO is partially tied with countering US hegemony in the international order and could be seen as another avenue of pursuing that objective but specifically in a European context or only for NATO member states. However, due to the significant reach of NATO and its influence outside of Europe and along Russia’s borders, as seen with its engagement in areas such as the Middle East where NATO has a continued presence and North Africa where NATO has made engagements as seen in Libya in 2011, the narrative of discrediting NATO has become a global one. This is significant and shows that the discrediting of NATO is a global export and one of Russia’s key

narrative goals on an international level. The total narrative share in the media sources collected also supports this, amounting to 10% of Russia's strategic messaging (Appendix 1, Russian Media Sources, No. 1,2,8,9,47,48).

The current Covid-19 pandemic has proven to be a further extension and bolstering of Russia's international narratives which aim to discredit NATO. This is quite clearly seen from the NATO perspective where it has already been forced to discredit the rapid spread of narratives which portray NATO as at fault for the pandemic, creating claims that NATO defence spending has impacted healthcare investment or that the organisation has failed to aid its allies and own member states in stemming the pandemic (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2020). It even extends to more extreme claims of NATO being the creator of Covid-19 (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2020). This is quite significant because it shows that the pandemic has not changed Russia's priorities in spreading messages designed to discredit NATO or the west by extension. It shows that the pandemic has been used as an opportunity and a tool to further perpetuate narratives which discredit NATO as an institution rather than cause an ebb in the narrative to focus on the narrative of how well Russia can cope within a pandemic. It shows how firmly entrenched this aspect of strategic messaging is for Russia, being a key narrative export and indicator of its foreign policy goals internationally, primarily to undermine Western institutions. The media documentation acquired did not reveal this in the anti-NATO narratives despite it being recognised by NATO reports.

The pandemic has also allowed the opportunity for Russia to project messaging which would suggest it can be a viable alternative to NATO and US hegemony, something that it has not been able to message on a global level adequately or effectively. It has been able to use the pandemic to spread messages surrounding Russia's abilities to provide aid through medical support and specifically the Sputnik vaccine. This is an interesting development on a global level for Russia's strategic messaging because the pandemic has allowed for it to more actively spread and export a more positive message globally, including regions such as Latin America and Africa, rather than simply regions where it has a traditional influence and goals such as the Baltics and Balkans. It means that Russia can act much more openly in its foreign policy goals of spreading a more positive image of Russia on a global scale (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013), creating a more robust and powerful narrative for Russia to export. Narrative share centred around Russia's efforts around the pandemic was also quite clearly seen in the sources collected, amounting to 13% (Appendix One, Russian Media Sources, 19,20,35,45,50,53,54,56).

It should be noted that positive projection of Russia has always been a key part of Russia's narratives but the pandemic has provided new opportunities in spreading this with the possibility of increased effectiveness. Existing and more dominant narratives that Russia spread globally regarding Russia being a positive message prior to the pandemic, which are still spread, are focused around Russia's economic strength, allowing it to be seen as an 'alternative to

the west' (Metodieva, 2019). This includes elements such as its abilities in making wide ranging bilateral deals with states, its development of Nord Stream and Nord Stream two in Germany, involvement with the ASEAN states, membership of the AIIB and partnership in the Belt Road initiative. This was not identified in the media sources collected with the exception of 'Russia sending 300 military advisors to Central Africa' (Appendix, Russian Media Sources, No. 15). It suggests that although the literature has recognised other methods of positive projection, the pandemic has overshadowed and currently replaced these narratives for positive projection with the pandemic primarily.

**Strategic Messaging in a Chinese context and Key Goals of China in its narratives globally**

An overarching aim of China's strategic messaging is its projection of China as a global and positive power lacking in limitations which other states might have (Ghosal Singh, 2016: 25). Its aim is to effectively emphasises it to further emphasise that China is a global actor rather than simply a regional one. (Chou, 2015: 106) This is an undercurrent of all of the narratives which are found at the global level, operating in some shape or form to achieve this overarching messaging goal.

One such example of China projecting itself as a world power can be quite clearly seen through increasing its messaging around its abilities in combatting Covid-19. This includes both its ability in suppressing the virus within its borders through being a powerful state and its own state capacity in terms of

releasing the vaccine both nationally and globally. This narrative element hasn't been discussed in the current literature due to it being an extremely recent development. However, it can be inferred quite clearly from the global sources which showed on the cluster analysis that it amounted to 8% of the overall narrative share (Appendix One, China Media Sources, No. 13,20,21,40, 42) showing it is a significant feature of the global narratives.

Another significant element of its strategic messaging at the international stage is China's narratives surrounding the power and potential of the Belt Road Initiative, a cornerstone of China's economic foreign policy since the concept was introduced in 2013. The reason for the Belt Road being seen in an international context is due to it both being a part of China's overarching messaging of establishing itself as a global actor and the fact that the Belt Road's outreach is aimed to be global with connections going from Asia to Europe as well as extending outward towards the Middle East. Narratives around the Belt Road Initiative include its benefits for member states such as increased trade, infrastructure development projects and interconnectivity at a global level. This is quite clearly seen in the narrative share which amounts to 12% (Appendix One, China Sources, No. 12,17, 25,28,29,31,48) of the overall sources collected. It also includes how this is designed to further develop the global economy as a whole, very much tying it with the overarching narrative of China acting as a global actor. The Belt Road initiative is most likely to be the most well projected and received narrative of China at the global level because it is the most centred

around diplomacy and engagement with states rather than the overarching narrative which aims to put China as a world power which could be perceived in a negative light, despite the fact that the initiative still aims to place China at the centre of global trade.

A final aspect of the overarching global messaging is for China to position itself as a leader within a multipolar world, combatting any perception of US hegemony where it or the West can dictate the international order. This exists in its foreign policy white papers as one form of narrative messaging alongside its general media output, highlighting the insistence that international relations cannot operate on the whims of one sole state and that they must adhere to the 'rules-based order' that the global system operates under. This includes messages such as the US abusing the rules-based system and that there are other key actors internationally which cannot be ignored, including China but also states such as Europe, Japan and Russia. (Miskimmon, Zeng and O'Loughlin, 2019: 33) It is a significant, albeit more outwardly part of China's messaging, being more focused on critiquing the US or supporters of a hegemonic order which favours the west rather than focusing on China's being an alternative to the United States. The idea of China being an alternative to the US order would be seen more on a domestic level than a global level with it being quite well referenced over the past decade in mainland China. However, making China an alternative and active member does still exist at the global level, but it seeks to be more subtle or muted in order for it to be perceived less like disinformation

and propaganda, as a result of the connotations of ‘Great power not being seen as positive’ (Ma, 2019: 108). It is much more based on more tangible and visible actions, as seen with narratives around the Belt Road and vaccine deployment. Despite this being quite well identified within the literature, it was much less present in the sources acquired, only amounting to 8% of the narrative share (Appendix One, China Media Sources, No. 1,4,5,1956).

### **Common ground, Disputing Ideas and Narrative Placement**

Based on the on the strategic messaging and narrative exports above, there are areas which can be discounted with little crossover. This can be seen regarding the idea of NATO being discredited at a global level with only Russia providing a significant output and China not having any significant output regarding the organisation. However, there are areas at an international level which are both being targeted by Russia and China, primarily being the Belt Road Initiative, vaccinations within their narratives of being a positive actor globally and countering US hegemony in favour of a more multipolar world.

Regarding the messaging surrounding the Belt Road initiative, there is a commonality between the two states with both recognising it in their narratives. However, Russia is much more subdued in its messaging towards the Belt Road Initiative than China which is a significant element of its narrative projection globally. Of course, China’s messaging is much more robust due to it being the designer and head of the project with the most to gain from its success. This makes sense at a superficial level but further analysis of Russia’s messaging

regarding the Belt Road initiative on the international stage reveals that it is not viewed in a similar context. Russia's messaging towards its involvement in the Belt Road initiative is much more heavily interlinked with the narrative that Russia can find alliances and partnerships outside of the west. It puts it in the context of economic strength, political alliances and global reach instead of in the context of a relationship with China in the Belt Road Initiative or the Sino-Russo partnership as a whole. It does not imply that the initiative is a product of the Sino-Russo partnership or through positive relations with China. This can be quite clearly seen when looking at Russia's referencing of the Belt Road Initiative in the media sources found, amounting to only one source (Appendix One, Russian Media Sources, No. 59), not even being classifiable as narrative placement and discussed in a context which implies that Russia is the link between Europe and Asia for the BRI to be successful (Appendix One, Russian Media Sources, No. 59).

The reasoning for minimal messaging and no narrative placement can be quite clearly understood when looking at Russia's current political climate where it is limited in its abilities to trade fully with the west as a result of 'economic sanctions caused by the Crimea Crisis' (Arquilla, Bragg et al, 2019: 58) and the 'increased military tensions as a result of the gradual escalation in military exercises along the borders' (Russian Council, 2018). This is furthered by the fact that due to Russia's growing dependence on the Chinese market for both natural resources such as oil and gas (Arquilla, Bragg et al, 2019: 58) as well as

its advanced arms trade, there is a significant chance that Russia runs the risk of being perceived as the junior partner of the ‘little brother in its partnership with China’ (Skalamera, 2015: 99). This would be a significant shift from its historical relations with China during the Cold War period where the USSR was the senior partner in any partnership between the two states (Shlapentokh, 2004: 325). This would also be the case in the early 2000s where Russia had more sway than China until the beginnings of the shift towards China in 2008 over their oil agreements (Flikke, 2016: 159). Because of these factors, Russia needs to project strength in its narratives and this cannot be achieved through projecting narratives which are too closely tied with China. This has in turn created narrative projection which incorporates the Belt Road Initiative as a tool to show Russia’s outreach in terms of economic power and how it can act globally with multiple partners rather than only a single group.

This can be also be seen on the Chinese side to a certain extent with China hoping to project itself in its messaging of the Belt Road Initiative as the leader and centre of this economic power, with the benefits to trade for all parties being sourced because of China. This is illustrated quite clearly where the identified placement sources from China don’t actually discuss the Belt Road Initiative at all in relation to Russia (Appendix One, Identified Placement Sources, No. 10-15). The differing narrative exports of the Belt Road initiative is quite significant because it suggests that although there is quite a clear commonality in messaging for the two, there is a clear divergence in how it is portrayed which

is quite clearly independent of the two. It stresses the point that although in a global context there are areas where Russia and China have the opportunity to engage in positive placement, they don't because although there is an element of partnership between the two, their narratives still seek to put their individual state above all else rather than their partnership.

When looking at the use of Covid-19 and the distribution of a vaccine by Russia and China, what evidence there is of each state positively mentioning the other in capabilities over a vaccine and pandemic aid minimal. The number of sources identified only amounts to one, discussing how "Russia and China have made ties with Latin America through the pandemic unlike the US" (Appendix 1, Identified Placement Sources, No.6), something which could be better attributed to US hegemony as opposed to the pandemic itself. The pandemic narratives identified by both Russia and China are largely focused on their own independent aid. The only conclusion at a global level is that the vaccine distribution narrative is largely separate and independent of the other with some extremely minor placement.

As can be seen in both sections, there are narratives and messages being spread which are designed to portray a negative image of a US hegemonic order or that of a western order, with both states arguing in favour of a more pluralist international system (Flikke, 2016: 160). This is the most commonly agreed feature the two states have at a global level and the one which seemingly has the most support for the other state in their respective narratives. There isn't any

negative targeting of the other in each narrative to establish that their own respective messaging is superior. It instead significantly shows that there is an agreement that both of their own forms of governments and the claim to seek a 'pluralist world order' (Russian Council, 2018) is much more desirable than the current alternative. Although there is positive placement, this does not suggest joint messaging between the two to achieve this goal with the overarching goal of challenging US hegemony. But with the recognised sharing of tactics regarding spreading disinformation along these lines against US hegemony, there is the implication that there is a degree of minor collaboration regarding the broad sharing of techniques to spread this kind of narrative, with both states using its diplomats as a way of spreading anti-US narratives for example. The positive placement centred around the attack on US hegemony and aggression is quite clearly seen outside of the literature too, existing within the media sources from 2019-2020. Positive placement sources identified are largely centred around tackling US hegemony with headlines and content being focused on the US being confrontational towards Russia and China, abusing their power, interfering and commenting on affairs or Russia and China placing themselves as international alternatives through their partnership and others they engage in. (Appendix 1, Identified Placement Sources, No. 1,2,3,5,6,8,9,10, 15) Overall, this is quite significant because it shows that there is one factor where there is a degree of positive placement of each state in their strategic messaging alongside support on tactics for spreading narratives, implying that one of the most in-

depth features of the Sino-Russo partnership in a narrative context, and by extension its geopolitical goals, is to work on undermining US hegemony.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude this chapter, I have been able to determine the key Russian narratives exported globally include countering US hegemony in favour of multipolarity, discrediting NATO as an organisation and institution, projecting economic strength and highlighting Russia's positive contributions through the Covid vaccine. I have also been able to determine that China's key narratives at a global level include projecting its international capabilities, growing presence on the world stage as a global power operating within a multipolar world, and projecting the benefits of involvement in the Belt Road initiative. Regarding placement of each state in their global narratives, the only significant area in terms of messaging where there is existing positive placement regards support for a multipolar international system that recognise multiple global powers rather than a single US hegemon. The only exception to this identified was in relation to vaccine deployment, but only being limited to two sources. These are the only areas of placement found with messaging largely being separate to each other with minimal or no reference to the other state.

## **Chapter 2: Western Europe Case Study**

### **Russian Strategic Messaging in Western Europe**

There are four key narratives which are being spread by Russia into Western Europe in its strategic messaging campaigns, including the aggression and fallibility of NATO, the decline of the EU as an institution, the aggression of the US and the strength of Russia. These make up a larger and overarching narrative of portraying Western European institutions as confrontational, anti-Russian and failing.

Russian distribution of media critiquing NATO aggression and citing its failures is by far the most significant narrative accounting for 27.5% of the narrative share (Appendix Two Russia Media Sources, No. 2-4, 6-8, 10, 13, 16, 23, 25). This is furthered by word clouds which put NATO referencing at 0.49%, the 5<sup>th</sup> most frequent word found in the documents (Appendix Two, Figure One). This fits with the current understanding of Russia's relationship with NATO which is 'war-mongering provocations: constant announcements regarding the organization of military exercises, the strengthening of military capabilities at each other's borders, increasingly belligerent and aggressive rhetoric, flight interceptions and perilous manoeuvring between American ships and Russian fighter planes in the Baltic' (Boulegue, 2017: 362). It also makes logical sense for there being significant narrative focus on critiquing NATO due to the number of Western European states being member states, giving incentive for

Russia to spread this narrative and ideally split the organisation or spread discontent around it.

Critiquing US actions is a significant portion of the narratives projected in Western Europe, amounting to 25% (Appendix Two, Russia Media Sources, No. 4-7,9,14,15,17,18,19) of the media sources found, making it the second largest narrative within Russia's strategic messaging in Western Europe. Key headlines were primarily centred illegal military involvement abroad, US aggression towards Russia and the US' (Appendix Two, Russia Media Sources, No. 5-9,13-15) military spending. These messages in the headlines such as the 'Ankara is not a colony'(Appendix Two, Russia Media Sources, No.19) headlines were not a surprise based on the conclusions drawn in chapter one which highlighted the fact that combatting US hegemony is a key narrative of Russia at a global level and illustrated in its foreign policy, with Russia seeking to 'US is to strictly abide by the norms of international law, primarily those held in the UN Charter, in its actions on the international stage' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016). What is significant from this sample of media is the fact that this narrative accounts for 25% of the share in Western Europe, clearly suggesting the discrediting of the US is particularly prevalent in Western Europe, something which could be explained by the alliances and relationship with the US. Whether the volume of narrative share is particular to Western Europe will need to be determined when engaging in the comparison with the other regional case studies after their completion.

The Russian spread of media discrediting the EU is similar to that of NATO, adding support for an overarching messaging campaign in Western Europe centred on inciting instability. It is also a significant proportion of the narrative share, amounting to 12.5% in the cluster analysis (Appendix Two, Russia Media Sources, No. 26-28, 37, 40). The narrative being spread is primarily centred around creating the perception that the organisation is failing at that anti-establishment groups are on the rise and becoming increasingly successful. This can be seen from further analysis on anti-EU narratives where the words ‘failure, problem and disunity’ (Appendix Two, Russia Media Sources, No. 26-28, 37, 40) are key words repeatedly used in association with it. This is furthered when looking at the headlines of identified EU narratives in the cluster analysis which reference the benefits of ‘Brexit, the rise of parties such as the AFD and that the EU has become the problem not the solution.’ The targeting of the EU in Western Europe can be clearly explained by Russia’s goals of ‘dealing bilaterally with states’ and it responding to the EU sanctions put in place after the invasion of Crimea.

Russian narratives promoting the strength of Russia, primarily through the pandemic is comparatively smaller than the three previous narratives found within the sources, amounting only at 10% of the narrative share (Appendix Two, Russia Media sources, No. 12,32,33,38). This was not expected due to certain assumptions based on the literature regarding Russian messaging and disinformation in Western Europe that the state seeks to project itself as a ‘great

power, a great civilization with tremendous cultural achievements and a quasi-messianic mission to link the East and West' (Ball, 2017, Page 7). This is most likely attributed to the sample size above all else but can also be explained by the argument that showing the weakness of Western European institutions, states and allies is much more important than highlighting Russia's own strengths or allowing the opportunity for others to make faults out of their claims.

Overall, there is a clear overarching narrative from Russia that Western Europe and its institutions are perceived to be anti-Russian and confrontational by nature, ultimately being a threat that needs to be resolved for Russia's growth. It creates a very aggressive and anti-western messaging campaign towards the Western European region.

### **Chinese Strategic Messaging in Western Europe**

I have been able to determine there are four key narratives and messages being spread into Western Europe, including its trade deals with the EU, its state capabilities and cooperation with western Europe, critiquing foreign involvement in Chinese affairs from Western Europe and highlighting Sino-Russo cooperation. The final point will be elaborated on in the narrative placement section of the chapter but I will note that it accounts for 25% (Appendix Two, Figures Three and Four, Identified Placement Sources No. 6-15) of narrative share, making it the second largest narrative present in China's strategic messaging towards Western Europe.

A significant narrative being spread was its ability to make deals with the EU and be a significant trading partner for the organisation. Its total share in the cluster analysis of amounted to 17.5% of the cluster analysis of Chinese narratives in Western Europe (Appendix Two, Figure Three and China Media Sources, No.13,14,16,17,21,24,33). The key headlines were specifically centred around the most recent trade agreement between China and the EU, highlighting the most recent trade deal at the end of 2020 which was ‘hailed as balanced, high standard and mutually beneficial,’ ‘the EU seeking closer ties to China through cooperation’ and ‘Europe applauding the new investment treaty’ (Appendix Two, China Sources,16,17,24). The focus on the EU trade deals with China was an expected narrative to be found within the primary sources, given its status as ‘EU has been China’s largest trading partner, the largest source of technology and an important source of foreign investment with data showing trade between the EU and China increasing by three times since 2000, from 5.5% to 14.9% in 2016, and total trade has reached 515 billion euros’ (Liu, 2017: 1).

In terms of the narratives surrounding China’s ability to project state capabilities and cooperation with Western Europe was based on two factors. The first and most recent in 2020 being its ability to support Western Europe in combatting the Covid-19 Pandemic, primarily being centred around ‘mask distribution into western Europe’ (Appendix Two, China Media Sources, No.11,12). The second aspect of the narrative involved further economic cooperation, more in terms of

volume of trade and how it entered Western Europe rather than the trade deals themselves. Surprisingly, the Belt Road Initiative was not a key word highlighted either in word frequency counts or headlines regarding Chinese cooperation with western Europe with the exception of one source. (Appendix Two, Figures Three and Four, China Media Source, No.30). Instead, the focus was more on trade through ‘China-Europe freight,’ (Appendix Two, China Media Sources, No. 29,35) a facet of the Belt Road Initiative but not the entirety of the project. This could be attributed to the more bilateral and individual state focus of China regarding the Belt Road Initiative, being more focused on states closer to the East such as the Baltic states rather than all of the EU and Western Europe (Zeng, 2017, Page 1171). The overall share of Chinese state capabilities and cooperation as a narrative amounted to 35% (Appendix Two, Figure Four, China Media Sources, No. 1,2,3,7,10,11,12,21,25,26,29,30,34,35) within the cluster analysis, making it the most significant narrative being spread into Western Europe. This share would increase to 52.5% if one were to include the EU focused narrative which invokes similar language of ‘cooperation’ (Appendix Two, Figure Three). However, due to there being a clear focus on the EU, it has been separated but contributes towards a larger narrative.

The Chinese narrative around combatting Western involvement in Chinese affairs can be quite clearly seen through the articles identified which critique British comments over Hong Kong. It is a smaller narrative than the two previous ones identified, only amounting to 7.5% of the cluster analysis

(Appendix Two, Figure Four, China Media Sources, No.4,18,22) between. However, it remains significant in showing a willingness of China to spread messaging directed towards opposition instead of cooperation with Western Europe. It is also an interesting narrative to discuss when looking at the dates of these articles identified, being centred around when the issue arises in late '2019 and early 2020' (Appendix Two, China Media Sources, No.4,18,22) between Britain and China rather than over a prolonged period where there are examples which suggest 'Chinese cooperation and investment with Britain,' (Appendix Two, China Media Sources, No. 4) as a part of the cooperation narrative with Western Europe previously discussed. This suggests that this is a short-term narrative rather than a more long-term one which could be argued for the previous two narratives. It acts as a reaction, showing how Chinese narratives are not just for long-term goals but responding to rising issues.

Overall, the strategic messaging of China in Western Europe is very much centred around showing itself as a strong power that can operate within Western Europe, something which can be attributed to similar language seen in all three narratives with links to 'cooperation, development and bilateral' (Appendix Two, Figure Three). This messaging is largely designed to be cooperative in nature which aim to seek and strengthen ties, both diplomatic and economic, to the region above all else. The only exception to this being the critique of Britain over Hong Kong, showing a narrative that has been designed to critique Western involvement and attempts at authority in China. However, this does tie with

China seeking to show itself as a global power that will not tolerate foreign influence.

### **Narrative Placement**

There are few areas where Russia and China show common targeting areas in Western Europe based on the research gathered and ran through the NVivo software. What it shows is that Russia's messaging is much more aggressive and designed to project European instability whereas China is clearly centred around fostering connections and showing itself as an interconnected and global partner. However, despite the fact that the narratives and strategic messaging are largely different, there is positive placement from both states in their European narratives as a result of both states' shared goal in Europe of projecting the strength of their respective state.

After running a cluster analysis using all of the sources' headlines in Western Europe from RT and Xinhua, it is quite clear that positive placement exists between the two states, with a total of fifteen out of eighty sources involving Russian and Chinese positive placement where both states were giving support to the other in terms of their partnership or positive attributes (Appendix Two, Identified Sources of Placement). Examples of this include 'Russia being keen to work together with China in making legislative exchanges,' the emergence of Russian and Chinese markets, Russian and Chinese trade being at all-time highs, Russia and China being key vaccine exporters to Europe and 'China-Russia ties being the centre of Chinese diplomacy' (Appendix Two, Identified

Sources of Placement, No. 5-10). The positive placement of Russia and China represents quite a significant proportion of the total sources, amounting to 17.5% of the sources that Russia and China produce in Western Europe in this study (Appendix Two, Identified Sources of Placement). These results are bolstered when looking at the current understanding of where the Sino-Russo Partnership is at its most agreed with little dispute, consisting of ‘strong economic development and integration into the global economy, the pursuit of multipolarity’ (Yeung & Bjelakovic, 2010: 251), ‘combatting “negative factors” affecting world stability, and promoting the development of international law’ (Liu, 2018: 342). This creates the suggestion that positive placement of the two states has stronger connections to the more developed and consolidated aspects of the Sino-Russo Partnership where there is either minimal disagreement or it is a necessary cornerstone of the partnership.

Of course, It should be noted that it is not as significant as other narratives which are shared between the two, particularly over the Covid pandemic or when looking at Russian and Chinese narratives separately which would make the percentage much smaller. One can see this particularly with Russia’s narratives involving NATO are involved on cluster analysis has a total percentage of ‘20% and 0.49%’ (Appendix Two, Figures One and Two) in word frequency compared to the ‘10% and 0.42%’ (Appendix Two, Figures One and Two) that China incorporates. Despite this, deeper analysis of the individual media sources shows that they are well connected to these narratives. This is quite clearly seen

in both Chinese and Russian sources, with Chinese sources being centred around ‘trade pacts, China-Europe freight and deepening diplomatic ties’ (Appendix Two, Figure Three and Identified Sources of Placement, No. 6-15) in order to bolster the narratives around China’s value as a trading partner within Europe and its ability to cooperate and engage in Western Europe. And in the case of Russian sources, they include China regarding events such as ‘Pompeo warning Russia and China away from the Arctic,’ ‘French ship illegally in Chinese waters,’ ‘US military spending being the largest in a decade as reported by China’ and ‘Western hegemony comes to an end, Russia and other markets have other ideas’ (Appendix Two, Russia Media Sources, No. 9,13,14,15) which are particularly surrounding western aggression and how Russia and China are responding. It means that the positive placement is a significant part of these narratives and that positive placement of each state in their respective strategic messaging campaigns is designed to be integrated into existing narratives rather than simply being a single part of it.

A significant point which should be made regarding narrative placement in Western Europe, in contrast to the global chapter, is that although there is clearly positive placement there is a skew where China engages more with positive placement of Russia than Russia does in its positive placement of China. This is quite clearly seen from both individual word frequency checks and cluster analyses which put Russian mentioning of China at ‘0.42% and 10%’ (Appendix Two, Figures One and Two, Identified Placement Sources, NO. 1-5) whereas

China references Russia at percentages of '0.99% and 25%' ( Appendix Two, Figures Three and Four, Identified Placement Sources No. 6-15) in its narrative placement to the point where it can be substantially argued as a narrative distributed to Western Europe in its own right. This shows that China engages much more with placement of Russia in its narratives compared to Russia in its placement of China. The fact that China offers more positive placement of Russia in its narratives could be attributed towards its specific narrative goals of being a 'global and interconnected power which has multiple allies' (Kinetz, 2020) making it only natural to highlight its own alliances.

More specifically, it could be attributed towards the narrative of being a global power with countries seeking to be China's ally when looking specifically at certain media sources which were ran in China's media output surrounding partnership with a Russia. Although it should be noted that the placement was clearly positive, the majority of sources regarding positive placement of Russia were used in a way which would suggest that it is Russia that is most eager to deepen ties with China within the context of the Sino-Russia Partnership. Sources released by China involve comments made by 'Russian diplomats, ministers and Vladimir Putin himself' (Appendix Two, Identified Placement Sources, 6-15). The fact that multiple sources citing the strength of the partnership from the Chinese side but using language by prominent Russian figures clearly suggests the idea that this positive placement has been used in the context of bolstering its own strength and using the supposed desire of

Russia to be further integrated in its goal of being a global actor which can reach even western Europe.

From a Russian context in understanding the skew, the positive placement could be seen as a necessity to try and legitimise its narrative that the West is operating illegitimately by including other actors which have supposedly been wronged in the same vein as Russia, clearly illustrated by the media sources ‘French ships illegally in Chinese waters,’ ‘and US warns off Russia and China from the arctic’ (Appendix Two, Identified Placement Sources, No. 2-3). Any further positive placement of China by Russia beyond this could be seen as a position of weakness which could be easily bolstered by Russia’s growing dependence on the Chinese market for both natural resources such as oil and gas (Arquilla, Bragg et al, 2019, Page 58) as well as its advanced arms trade, there is a significant chance that Russia runs the risk of being perceived as the junior partner of the ‘little brother in its partnership with China’ (Skalamera, 2016, Page 99) as discussed in Chapter one regarding Russia’s decision to make the BRI only a minor part in its narrative campaigns.

The reasoning for not wanting to be perceived as the minor partner in the relationship can be seen from its traditional and historical relationship between the two states where Russia was able to assert its dominance in the context of the Russian Empire and then particularly in the USSR where Beijing acted as Moscow’s junior partner with the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance being dictated largely on Russian terms. This

would include ‘independence of Outer Mongolia, the Soviet government promising to restore the Manchurian railways to China when peace was concluded with Japan, but no later than the end of 1950 and in the 1950s, Stalin allowing China to take a prominent role in the Asian Communist movement’ (Hsu & Soong, 2014: 72). This was also furthered by Russia being the provider of Soviet advisors for the development of China. (Hsu & Soong, 2014: 73). The perception was furthered at an international level, with the USSR perceived at all times by the West and Europe to be the leader of the communist world despite insistence from Mao that it should be him after Stalin’s death as the oldest leading communist in international affairs. A factor which contributed to the Sino-Soviet split and ultimately ‘culminating in border fighting in 1969’ (Goldstein and Freeman, 1991: 24).

The nature of historical power relations is even visible in the more recent historical relations between the two states in the 1990s and early 2000s where Russia was the key contributor to China’s development of its military and could more comfortably dictate the terms on what arms it provided, with the ‘aircraft it sold to the Chinese having less capable avionics and radar packages than in versions provided to the Russian air force’ (Garnett, 2001: 45). This is something which cannot be achieved now, with Russia having to provide its more advanced arms to China as seen with Russia having to return to selling advanced arms to China in 2015 despite having stopped due to China reverse engineering the technologies. The historical underpinnings of Sino-Russo

relations and Russia's reluctance to shift from its historical position of power relations with China, makes it more understandable as to why Russia's positive placement of China in Western Europe, and on a global level as seen in chapter one, is lesser because it wants to maintain that perception.

Although the mixed level of placement is a significant aspect which needed to be referenced and discussed, it does not detract from the fact that positive placement has been identified by both states towards the other in their strategic messaging towards Western Europe. It simply suggests that there are nuances to it and multiple narrative goals around their positive placement beyond simply showing support and solidarity for the other state. This is an area which would require further research and analysis in another study or if more resources were made available to provide further study into the matter.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the case study focusing on Western Europe have revealed key details on Russia and China's strategic messaging. Regarding Russia, its overarching goal in Western Europe is to project instability into Western Europe, using narratives critiquing NATO, EU and supporting those that oppose these organisations and painting European states alongside the US as aggressors. Regarding China, strategic messaging and narrative placement is centred around China being a positive influence in Europe, spreading messages around its cooperation with the EU, growing trade deals, the importance and China's capabilities in providing aid during the pandemic. Most importantly, it

does show a considerable amount of positive placement from each state towards the other in its output and messaging towards Western Europe. It shows significant emphasis on the strength of the partnership between the two states or that both states are victims of European and American aggression through disobeying the rules-based order. It also revealed a skew in positive placement in the European narratives, with China providing more positive placement of Russia than Russia of China.

## **Chapter 3: Balkans Case Study**

### **Russian Strategic Messaging in Balkans**

Through analysing media distributed via RT and Sputnik, a global Russian state media agency that has a prolonged and wide presence within the Balkans, I have been able to identify three key narratives that are being spread. These include the discrediting of NATO, emphasising the strength of the Serbian-Russo relations and finally a positive image of Russia through delivering aid to the Balkans to combat the Covid-19 Pandemic with an overarching narrative of Russia being a key influencer in the Balkans.

Creating a negative perception of NATO in the Balkans is the most significant narrative being spread by Russia based on the sources identified over the 2019-2020 period. When running the sources through the NVivo word frequency tool which showed NATO was the most used word within all of the sources, amounting to 0.88% of the total word share (Appendix Three, Figure One). It is made more notable compared to placement of the word Russia which was third most used and amounted to a word share of 0.74% (Appendix Three, Figure One), something which one wouldn't expect in strategic messaging and narrative development where the focus usually relates back to the narrative producer in some context (Miskimmon, 2013). The word frequency count showing the importance of critiquing NATO is bolstered by the cluster analysis which shows significant groupings of headlines which portray NATO 'as dragging Balkans states into NATO' (Appendix Three, Russia Media Sources,

No. 24) for example. Overall, the total narrative share of the NATO narrative based on the headlines in the Balkans amounts to 27.5% of the sources analysed (Appendix Three, Figure Two and Russia Media Sources, No.1,5,7,11,13,15,19,23,35,39,40). The large narrative share in this study and the language illustrated in the headlines fits with our current understanding of Russia's attitudes towards the Balkans and NATO where it wants to prevent further enlargement of the organisation and to create the impression that it is an illegitimate body.

The focus on Serbia is a key facet of the Russian narratives in the Balkans, particularly highlighting the strength of Russia's relationship with Serbia. Its significance is particularly emphasised when looking at the word frequency which puts Serbia as the second most used word within the sources collected, amounting to 0.76% of the total word share (Appendix Three, Figure One). Serbia's significance is further emphasised when comparing this to other states or the region itself with the Balkans amounting to 0.42%, Kosovo at 0.56%, Macedonia at 0.24%, Bosnia at 0.24% and Albania's the lowest at 0.16% (Appendix Three, Figure One), something which could be attributed to its membership in NATO since 2009. This, alongside the overall percentage of sources studied relating to Serbia amounting to 37.5% of the narrative share (Appendix Three, Figure Two, Russia Media Sources, No.1,6,21,26,27,29,30-33,35-40) clearly shows that Serbia is a key source of focus in the Russian narratives above all others. The importance of Serbia can be explained by two

factors. The first being the strong Russian influence in the region historically and culturally with the second being Serbia's own anti-NATO stance making it a natural ally of Russia and one that Russia would seek to bolster.

Regarding history and culture, 'Russia has significant economic, cultural, and religious links to the Serbs that go back to more than a century' (Euka, 2018: 7) the idea of Serbia being intrinsically tied to Russia from 'Pan-Slavism' (Sotirović, 2015: 11). These historic and cultural ties make it easier to spread narratives because it allows for Russia to play on ideas such as a 'shared history, culture and ethnic ties' (Anderson, 1983) as a justification for its presence in the region. It bolsters a narrative and strategic messaging through tying current political goals to places where they have similarities, as seen with headlines connected to the 'Russian orthodox church' (Appendix Three, Russia Media Sources, No. 25,33).

Moving onto the second reason, NATO has strong negative connotations within the Serbian political mindset as a result of the Kosovo and NATO's response. The '78 sustained days of bombing between 24 March and 10 June 1999 consisting of 12,000 bombing missions took place,' (Daya, 2000) causing a refugee's crisis and significant economic damage to both Serbia due to the mass destruction of its infrastructure (Euka, 2018: 4-6). This naturally created an anti-NATO sentiment, as seen with 'Anti-NATO protests held in 2019 on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombings and surveys showing that '80% of citizens being against NATO membership' (European Western Balkans, 2020). The

strong anti-Nato sentiment portrayed by Serbia provides a unique opening for Russia to cement itself in the region through having a staunch existing ally that can further prove that Russia is the assumed natural opposite to NATO expansion in the Balkans as the perceived only power willing to oppose NATO. These two factors clearly make a case for why Russian narratives seek to focus on portraying Russian-Serbian relations as strong and united because there are ‘contextual factors’ (Theys, 2018) which make it easier to legitimately justify Russian foreign policy goals of being a regional power in the Balkans ‘Russian foreign ministry, 2013).

The Pandemic narrative is also a very significant portion of the narratives which have been displayed in the Balkans, accounting for 15% of the overall narrative share (Appendix Three, Figure Two, Russia Media Sources, No.17,18,20,26,27,37). This includes headlines designed to show Russia’s ability to provide aid during the pandemic as seen in the cluster analysis which showed a focus on ‘military specialists, teams and physical action undertaken in hospitals to relieve them of Corona’ (Appendix Three, Figure Two, Russia Media Sources, No.17,18,20,26,27,37). The focus is primarily focused on Serbia with 83% of the pandemic narrative share being directed towards what aid Russia is offering to Serbia, citing ‘military aid and supplies offered towards Serbia’ (Appendix Three, Russia Media Sources, No.17,18,26,27,37). But of course, this aid also extends to across the Balkans despite this prolonged focus. It ties in with the opportunity cited in chapter one to project a positive image of

Russia and its power through aid during the pandemic, showing that it is a key tool for projecting a strong Russia in the Balkans.

A final point which can be made based on the three narratives in the Balkans is that there seems to be an overarching goal of making the statement that the Balkans is a territory of Russian influence and control as opposed to that of the West. All three narratives including the NATO narrative seems to indicate a positive side to Russia and its role of being a key influence within the region. This overarching narrative can be further supported when looking at both Russia's historic relationship with the Balkans and its current policy goals within the region. As pointed out with Serbia, Russia has historic links to the region, with it acting as a significant power in the region and a shared member of the region through the concept of 'Pan-Slavism' (Sotirović, 2015: 11). In the present day, the foreign policy goals of Russia are to 'provide a counter solution to European integration through the alternative idea of Orthodox-Slavic brotherhood' (Metodieva, 2019: 3). Alongside the historic relationship where it is the dominant foreign actor, it makes sense that Russia would want to project as many narratives as possible with an underlying current of Russia maintaining its position as the reliable foreign power in the region. Overall, this would clearly suggest that the three narratives being sent out into the Balkans are extensions of the wider narrative of Russia being a fixed position and a within the Balkans.

### **Chinese Strategic Messaging in Balkans**

From an analysis of Xinhua sources centred around the Balkans, I have been able to determine that there are three key narratives, including projecting China's state capacity through its ability to aid the Balkans during the Covid-19 Pandemic, its economic ties within the region and its focus on projecting its relationship with Serbia. All of which contribute towards establishing China as a new actor within the region.

The aid China is offering towards the Balkans is currently the most significant narrative being projected into the region with it accounting for 25% (Appendix Three, Figure Four, China Media Sources, No. 13,14,19,21,26,30,31,34,39,40) of the narrative share from the sources identified both manually and through the cluster analysis. Key headlines seen in the cluster analysis show a focus on 'medical supplies' and 'the development of testing labs' (Appendix Three, China Media Sources, No.14,39) being brought to the region by China. These headlines clearly contribute towards the idea that the narrative being projected here is the power of China's state capacity in providing aid to the Balkans. There are minor headlines relating to 'China's decision to share covid data' (Appendix Three, China Media Sources, No.26,40) which would imply using the pandemic as a means of showing itself as a cooperative member of the international community but this is overshadowed by the sheer volume of state power focus through physical aid it can provide if one were to accept China as an actor within the region.

The economic focus in the sources is the second largest narrative that was identified, amounting to 22.5% of the overall narrative share (Appendix Three, China Media Sources, No.5,8,15,17,18,26,28,36,38). Its focus has largely been centred around EU Balkans integration, the Belt Road Initiative and the benefits brought about by Chinese investment. What is interesting regarding the economic narrative is that it has less exposure on the Belt Road Initiative than expected. It remains a significant part of the narrative but only occupies a total 3% of the economic share and overall share in all of the Chinese sources in the Balkans at 7.5% (Appendix Three, China Media Sources, No.15,17,26). This was not expected given the fact the Balkans is a key area of focus for the Belt Road Initiative. It is quite a well-documented focus in the region, especially when looking at it in the context of investment where ‘Beijing announced a \$10 billion credit line to support Chinese investment in the region and China having invested \$1 billion into Serbia alone’ (Tonchev, 2017, Page 2). The depth of this investment and the knowledge that ‘the Balkans plays a significant role in China’s pursuit of the Belt Road Initiative since 2012’ (Zuokui, 2019: 94) should warrant an increased presence in narrative messaging and yet it only occupies a minimal proportion of the narrative share.

The lack of substantive focus on the BRI can partially be explained by the fact that certain sources regarding trade and facets of the BRI have been more focused on how features such as China-Europe freight has brought about aid during the Pandemic, suggesting it has been incorporated into a potentially more

pressing narrative. It can also be explained by the more predominant focus on EU-Balkans's cooperation which has been pushed in this economic narrative. Particularly in regards to increasing 'integration between the EU and the West Balkans to create stability' (Appendix Three, China Media Sources, No 5.) This might suggest a longer-term goal of using the Balkans as another entry point for cooperation with the EU by supporting their enlargement plans into the Balkans region rather than solely focusing on the BRI. It can also be seen as a means of establishing itself in the region as an actor which can facilitate stability in the region.

A final point which can be made is that the bulk of the focus in the Balkans is towards Serbia. This can be clearly seen in both the word frequency, being the second most recorded word with a percentage share of 1.70% (Appendix Three, Figure Three) and when looking at the cluster analysis, showing that 45% of the media references Serbia in some way (Appendix Three, Figure Four). The significant narrative share can be better understood when looking at the fact that China and Serbia possess their own strategic partnership as of 2009, which has a focus on trade, cultural exchange and aid, all of which are present in the narratives directed towards Serbia. The decision to focus on Serbia may be a means of simply reinforcing the benefits of Chinese partnership to Serbia. It could also act as a way of projecting to the Balkans the benefits of a strategic partnership with China through its main partner in the region.

### **Narrative Placement**

A key point which should be made regarding the two states when comparing the two states' narrative messaging within the region is that they do share similarities in terms of targeting. Both states have clear messaging towards Serbia, are using the pandemic as a means of showing how they are an aid to the region and both are clearly projecting a narrative that they can be powers that Balkan states can turn to within the region despite neither state sharing substantive borders with the Balkan states. However, despite the fact that there are shared areas of strategic messaging, there is a significant absence in positive placement between the two states in the region, only amounting to 6.25% total of all sources (Appendix Three, Identified Placement Sources, No. 1-5). In the case of China, none of the sources provide any reference at all towards Russia. Russia does not exist in any grouped headlines in the cluster analysis, nor does it occupy a share within the word frequency counts in any capacity. This means that Russia does not take any role within Chinese narratives in the region, not even in supporting the key narratives which have been identified in the sources.

The only positive placement which has been identified in the Balkans is from Russia towards China. But it is both extremely minimal, numbering only 12% of the Russian sources distributed (Appendix Three, Russia Sources, No. 2,8,19,27,28) and fits more with the global narratives identified in chapter one combatting US and Western hegemony rather than the narratives specifically identified within the Balkans as seen with reference to China being centred around critiquing the EU. This potentially suggests that the positive placement

Russia has made of China in the Balkans is simply a facet of the global narratives rather than specifically the Balkans. It is something which could be attributed to the fact that both RT and Sputnik act globally beyond the Balkans. It could also be viewed as minor and not a narrative of the region simply due to the volume of narrative share which had been attributed towards anti-NATO sentiments, making it overshadowed or perhaps an unnecessary tool for critiquing NATO, especially when considering the role of the Yugoslavian conflict can be used to legitimately discredit NATO and show that Russia is not solely spreading disinformation that NATO can act illegitimately. It could also have simply been used in order to bolster these narratives above all else, hence the extremely minimal positive placement.

A potential reason why positive placement has not occurred from either can be centred around the fact that they are competing states to an extent over the region. Instead of taking a joint approach to the region where both states in the context of the Sino-Russo partnership are joint influencers and powers in the region, they have taken the individual approach. With Russia seeking to maintain and propagate its own position as the foreign power and source for stability and China also seeking to establish itself in the region in a similar style, it is natural that they would engage in this way by not bolstering the other's power projection and instead projecting their own power. (Jung, 2019) This would impose the idea that Russia are choosing to take the more anarchical view on international relations rather than focusing on their partnership. (Wendt,

1995) Of course, because no negative placement has occurred either one could argue that the two states are not willing to engage in positive placement due to conflicting interests but are not in outright competition with the other. This might suggest that although there are conflicting goals, neither state is willing to compete or discredit with the other in order to preserve their partnership and relations with each other.

Overall, the main conclusion which can be drawn here is that in the case of the Balkans, placement within each state's narratives is either non-existent, in the case of China towards Russia, or it is extremely minimal, as seen with Russia towards China.

### **Conclusions**

In Conclusion, I have been able to identify the key narratives projected into the Balkans region by Russia and China as well as determine whether there is any positive placement within them towards each other. Regarding Russia, I have been able to establish that there are three key narratives which are being spread in the Balkans, including the spread of anti-NATO narratives, the strength of Serbian-Russo relations and Russia's capabilities in providing aid to the Balkans during the Covid-19 Pandemic. In Chinese messaging, the major narratives included its ability to aid the Balkans during the Covid-19 Pandemic, its economic ties within the region and projecting itself as a power that can make recommendations on how to achieve stability within the region. I have also firmly established based on the primary sources acquired positive placement

within the Balkans region is minimal from both Russia and China. In the Chinese case, no positive placement is given towards Russia and although Russia does provide some positive coverage, it tends to be in the context of criticising foreign institutions. The only real conclusions which can be made of the two states in relation to each other is that they have both taken a specific interest in Serbia and have both used the Pandemic as a means of spreading a positive of image of themselves. But beyond this, positive placement of the other state in their strategic messaging and narratives is minimal or non-existent.

## **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I will be providing a comparative analysis of the three case studies. The analysis will include both key similarities in narratives and addressing where the regions differ. This section will particularly cover the two case studies in relation to the global case study which was conducted primarily through the current literature but also running the sources targeted at multiple regions instead of a single one. The most substantive feature of the discussion will be on the role of narrative placement between the two states and what this actually means for understanding the strengths, weaknesses and scale of the Sino-Russo partnership in a narrative context.

### **Overall Findings on Russian and Chinese Strategic Messaging**

#### **Similarities**

I will start quite simply there are certain core similarities between the Global case, Western Europe and the Balkans in the narratives distributed. In the Russian context, the significant focus on spreading anti-NATO messages is something which is clearly seen at all levels, both at the global level and the regional level within Western Europe and the Balkans. It is the most consistent and dominant narrative which was found in the Western European and Balkans studies, providing clear support for it being a key narrative found at a global level, supporting the global case study and the current literature surrounding Russian narratives. However, this was the only key narrative which was prominent and dominant in the narrative share within the Western European,

Balkan and Global case studies. This will be discussed in more depth in the discussion section.

In the Chinese narrative context, there were more similarities in the Western European and Balkans case studies over factors such as referencing specific states within each region as opposed to simply taking a regional focus, a particularly diplomatic dialogue in its narratives across both regions and a particular focus on the EU even within the Balkans. The most important similarity found in the two regional studies was a clear adherence to focusing on economic matters such as trade with the EU and the Belt Road Initiative and the benefits of Chinese state capacity such as providing aid. These two features extend towards the global case study, largely showing a match with both the global sources and the current literature surrounding Chinese strategic messaging. What was specifically important about China's narratives is that it mostly showed a very unified and consistent approach across all regions. This quite clearly suggests that Chinese messaging goals are very much centred around the key areas of economy, state strength/capacity and creating and an underlying goal as discussed in the regional case studies of establishing China as an international actor. Overall, it suggests that strategic messaging has these goals in mind at all levels, whether it be global or regional and that to a certain extent all narratives, even if they have regional nuances, are going to be centred around these trends.

### **Differences**

Despite the presence of certain similarities across the region and with the global level, there are notable differences. This is particularly the case regarding Russian narratives where there were significant changes in the narratives when comparing all three case studies; most notably with US hegemony playing only a real significant role in the global case studies and the role of pandemic aid primarily only being seen within the Balkans. In the case of comparing narratives between Western Europe and the Balkans, there were clear divisions barring the critique of NATO. This is quite clearly seen by the Balkans being perceived in the light of potential allies for Russia as seen with its narratives towards Serbia specifically. This is in contrast to Western Europe which was largely discussed in terms of being a threat or aggressor towards Russia (Appendix Two, Identified Placement Sources, No. 1-4).

The most significant difference one could see with the Russian narratives when compared between the global and regional is that there were much more nuances and divergences from the global narratives at the regional level where certain narratives were either non-existent at the regional level or have been absorbed into others. This is most present in the Balkans where critique of the US is only within the context of NATO and nothing else (Appendix Three). It is also quite clear that the targets within the region were much more important than certain global narratives which broadly fit with Russian goals in its strategic messaging. This was also the case with China to an extent with particular nuances being developed depending on the region, with the Balkans being much more focused

on Serbia, the Belt Road Initiative and Chinese aid whereas Chinese narratives towards Western Europe being much more centred around relations with the EU. This evidence clearly shows that Russian and Chinese narratives are not going to be the same in format or style across every region. There may be similar overarching goals within each region as noted in the similarities between the Balkans and Western Europe which would warrant them to be connected to the global goals found. But overall, there will be clear differences at a regional level which do not meet with the global narratives which had been put forward in chapter one through analysing the literature and the primary sources collated in NVivo.

The nuances at the regional level are an important finding because it highlights the value in narratives taking into consideration factors which would better guarantee success for Russian and Chinese goals. There is a willingness to engage in multiple factors such as ‘culture, history, economics, local relations and academia’ (Theys, 2018) as opposed to simply political and power relations in order. Referring back to the Russian example in the Balkans of the US critique being overshadowed by the anti-NATO sentiments as a narrative; the decision to pursue the NATO narrative could be interpreted as a means of critiquing the US but through recognising that NATO has more powerful and negative connotations within the region than simply the US. This can be attributed of course to the historical context of the NATO bombings in the region and the massive economic and social consequences which had come from it in the

region (Daya, 2000). Although the US was a part of it, this was a NATO operation as a whole and from the local perspective in the region, the consequences of the bombing are primarily attributed to NATO. Knowing this historical context, Russia has instead made NATO its primary focus on the region, not just for goals of preventing enlargement, but also because it is the most likely to resonate in the region. It may not create a matching narrative with the global case study completely but it better fits with the context of the region and in theory could be more successful. Overall, it fundamentally shows the importance in recognising factors outside of a purely power context (Hopf, 1998) and specific goals of states for establishing more successful narratives.

#### ***Narrative Placement and the Sino-Russo Partnership***

One of the key findings which can be made regarding narrative placement by each state in regards to the other is that no negative placement has been found in the global, Western European and Balkans case studies. None of the sources used within the media give any indicator towards negative placement where Russia portrays China in a negative light or China towards Russia (Appendix Two and Three, Identified Placement Sources). This is an extremely significant finding because it provides a broad implication that China and Russia, because of their partnership, will not target each other in their narratives or strategic messaging as a way of maintaining the partnership. The fact that this was even the case in areas where there seems to be competing narratives goals, as seen with the Balkans where there are narratives suggesting that both want to be the

main foreign power in the region, supports the idea that their partnership prevents any undertaking of negative placement because it is too valuable for both states. The closest one could see to negative placement would be no placement, something which has been identified in the Balkans narratives produced by China and minimal placement by Russia. (Appendix Three, Identified Placement Sources) Something which is also seen if one looks at the global sources collated by regional groupings, albeit less substantive in value due to being a small sample, with no placement created by China and Russia in Africa and none from China in Asia. (Appendix One, Figures Two and Four). It highly suggests that the partnership is valued by both parties and is above the narrative and strategic messaging goals of each state, preventing negative placement and only using no placement if there are competing interests.

The lack of negative placement and only resorting to no placement in the event of competing narrative goals is also a very important finding in more theoretical terms. Although more research and discussion would need to be conducted, particularly when compared to the more physical facets of the partnership such as military and economy, it provides some connotations that Russia and China do not take an entirely realist stance in their narrative campaigns, abandoning their partnership in favour of pursuing their own goals for gaining power (Rose, 1998). Instead, there appears to be more value put into a constructivist view of international relations where the anarchical nature of state relations is determined by the state (Wendt, 1995). It does not deny that there are individual

goals of each state of course. In the Balkans there are clearly competing interests and a closer inspection of Chinese sources in Central Asia and Russian sources in Latin America would suggest similar. (Insert Appendix and run %of those sources). However, what is important is that Russia and China seem to value their shared ideals and perceptions of the other above any material and individual interests Russia and China might want to pursue, and thus not engaging in negative placement of the other (Theys, 2018).

The most significant finding that was found in the regional case studies was that positive placement does exist in both Russian and Chinese narratives. This was specifically the case in Western Europe where there was significant positive placement from both states (Appendix Two, Identified Placement Sources). However, this is not consistent at a regional level with only minimal positive placement present from Russia towards China in the Balkans and none from Russia towards China (Appendix Three, Identified Placement Sources). Nor is it completely consistent at a global level. Although the first case study does suggest positive placement on a global level, particularly in narratives which critique the US and hegemony, closer investigation shows that the bulk of this narrative placement (Appendix Three, Identified Placement Sources, 1-5 and 12-16) comes from sources associated with Western Europe despite the Western European sources occupying the same proportion as the other regional sources. This is quite important because it shows that there is a skew in perception at the global level, with positive placement primarily and overwhelmingly being

present in Western Europe. This reveals quite a significant finding that the area of most focus for positive placement from Russia and China is towards Western Europe above all else. It is something which could be attributed to it being a significant ally of the US and a regional that has held traditional hegemony over global affairs, something Russia and China both want to change in the pursuit of multipolarity in international relations (Silvius, 2018, Page 625).

The fact that positive placement was most dominant in Western Europe compared to the Balkans and a more in-depth investigation of the global sources was not just valuable for understanding the Sino-Russo Partnership but also for understanding a current issue with the literature. It shows that there is a Western European skew, with literature making the assumption that because positive placement is present quite significantly and overwhelmingly in the Western European sources then this must be a global trend. It limits the value of the literature because it isn't an adequate representation of strategic messaging, narrative placement and the depth of the Sino-Russo Partnership, only being applicable for a Western European lens. This represents a significant failing in the literature and our understanding of the Sino-Russo partnership because it is fundamentally too European and Western in its focus.

A final key point which must be made regarding the positive placement which has been identified is how it is constructed. This was noted when looking at positive placement both the Western European case study and the Balkans case study where some Russian positive placement was found. Media sources tended

to be crafted in a way where positive placement was being highlighted by Chinese or Russian media but through each state reporting on what the other has said. For example, with China reporting on ‘Putin saying it is developing its relations with China’ rather than China stating it in broader terms or other key Russian figures (Appendix One and Two, Identified Sources of Placement, No. 12-16, 2,6-10). It raises the issue that this positive placement could be viewed as simply another method of showing individual power projection or that one state acts as the leading state in the relationship, something which has been debated when looking at the current academic literature surrounding the economic, political and military domains where they look at who is leading the partnership (Skalamera, 2016). This point does not deny or refute positive placement which has been found. But it does create a question as to whether its construction has simply been done to highlight individual strengths or to bolster the validity of the narratives and messaging conducting, especially if disinformation has been used to spread the narrative.

Overall, the comparison reveals three key points regarding narrative. The first being that there clearly is positive placement in the narratives of both China and Russia. The second being that this is largely towards Western Europe, with the largest amount of positive placement being found in this region, influencing the global narratives to give the indication that positive placement is a more significant feature than it is in reality as seen with the Balkans case study. And the final point is that no negative placement has been identified, giving clear

connotations that China and Russia are unwilling to project negative perceptions of the other even if they have shared and conflicting goals within the region or at the global level. It also reveals that in the context of strategic messaging, a broad and global approach towards the study of narratives is fundamentally flawed. Due to the regional nuances which are taken into account, there are clear divergences which Russia and China engage in. Although a global approach may give certain indicators to narratives or overarching goals, it can easily be skewed by one region and create an inaccurate result. It effectively means that in order for one to truly study the narratives propagated by Russia and China as well as narrative placement, it must be undertaken from a regional level.

## **Conclusions**

The project has aimed to answer the question of what narratives exported by Russia and China reveal, if anything, about the scale and limitations of the Sino-Russo Partnership. I aimed to do this through three case studies where I identified narratives distributed, any shared or conflicting narrative focuses and if any positive or negative placement of the other country was found within the narratives released by the two states.

From my research I can say that I can only answer this from a narrative context and that this will not reflect the full scale or limitations of the Sino-Russo partnership. One has to go into depth on all levels of the partnership on areas such as military, economy, diplomacy and the international stage to truly understand that and make a strong conclusion. Although these factors exist within my research and literature, being the basis for my choices in case studies, potential narratives or targeting areas and providing explanations for why certain narratives are present in a region or at the global level, these factors would need research into alongside strategic messaging and narratives in order to create a more comprehensive understanding on the scale and limitations of the partnership.

Despite this, I can make observations and tentative conclusions based on the research conducted in a narrative context. Firstly, I have been able to provide a better understanding of the narratives being projected by Russia and China. I have been able identify key narratives which are being projected both globally

and at a regional level within Western Europe and the Balkans. This includes focuses on aid during the pandemic, critiques of NATO and western hegemony, economic strength and the establishment of Russia and China as global or regional actors to name some of the identified messages. One particular element of the narrative research I had noticed was that China's strategic messaging is largely unified even at a regional level, being centred around core projections of state capacity and the development of economic relations. In comparison, Russia's is much more varied in content, being a sign of a much larger and more extensive narrative campaign.

I have also been able to compare the regional narratives towards the global case study which was based on a broad media analysis and predominantly from the current literature; revealing both a skew towards narratives targeted towards Western Europe in the literature and that regional narratives are clearly much more nuanced and targeted than at the global level, altering the dynamic upon deeper analysis. There is an increased use of engagement with specific groups, whether it be ethnic groups with shared backgrounds or states which are more keenly aligned with state goals with Serbia being a key example of this for both Russia and China.

Finally, and most importantly, I have been able to get a much better understanding of the placement of each state in the other's narratives and strategic messaging, discovering based on the sources that positive placement does exist within the narratives found but primarily towards Western Europe.

When compared to the Balkans and from interrogation of the sources ran through the global study in the discussion, positive placement is either minimal or more often non-existent. This study has also shown that negative placement of Russia in Chinese narratives and vice-versa is non-existent, even if there are cases where there may be competing interests as identified in the Balkans where both seem to have competing goals of establishing themselves as a strategic power, suggesting an unwillingness to target the other negatively because of their strategic partnership.

Overall, I would say that these conclusions are valuable because provide a baseline for further research to be conducted in Russian and Chinese narratives and how they portray the other within them to their targeting regions.

## **Research Recommendations**

As noted in my conclusions and from the limitations which I had discussed prior to my analysis, this dissertation cannot provide a definitive answer on both the nature of Russian and Chinese narratives nor can it fully provide a concrete answer on the nature of positive placement in the other's narratives. It can only give indicators or provide a beginning towards further research on the matter.

With the concept of further research in mind, there were areas which were identified in the process where further research could be undertaken in the future given more time and adequate resources. I have identified three main areas. The first recommendation for further research would be further interrogation of media propagated in other languages outside of the English Language. This would be particularly the case for Russian media which is a common method in the Balkans for example where Russian speakers are a feature of the landscape and it is well documented that 'Russia spreads its narratives in the Russian language as well as a means of specifically targeting these groups.' The second area would be delving into more areas of media. This is less of a problem for Chinese strategic messaging because of its more tentative development, indirect use of non-Chinese backed stations and the predominant use of the English Language on sites such as Xinhua. The final area of research I would recommend for the future to particularly grasp the role of placement in their narratives by engaging in regional research in Central Asia. Due to issues of accessing Russian media in the region over language constraints and the very localised nature of their media distribution into Central Asia, I was unable to

access or conduct significant research into the region. I would heavily recommend research in this region though due to the more competing interests that can be found in the region with China moving into an area of traditional Russian influence. It is an area which might potentially reveal negative or no placement of the other in narratives. Overall, these areas of research would be ideal for conducting further research into the field and better developing an understanding of the Sino-Russo partnership in a narrative context.

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91-105.

# Appendices

**Equation for calculating Narrative share: Sources Identified Divided by total sources times by 100.**

## **Appendix One: Global**

Figure One: Russia Word Frequency Count

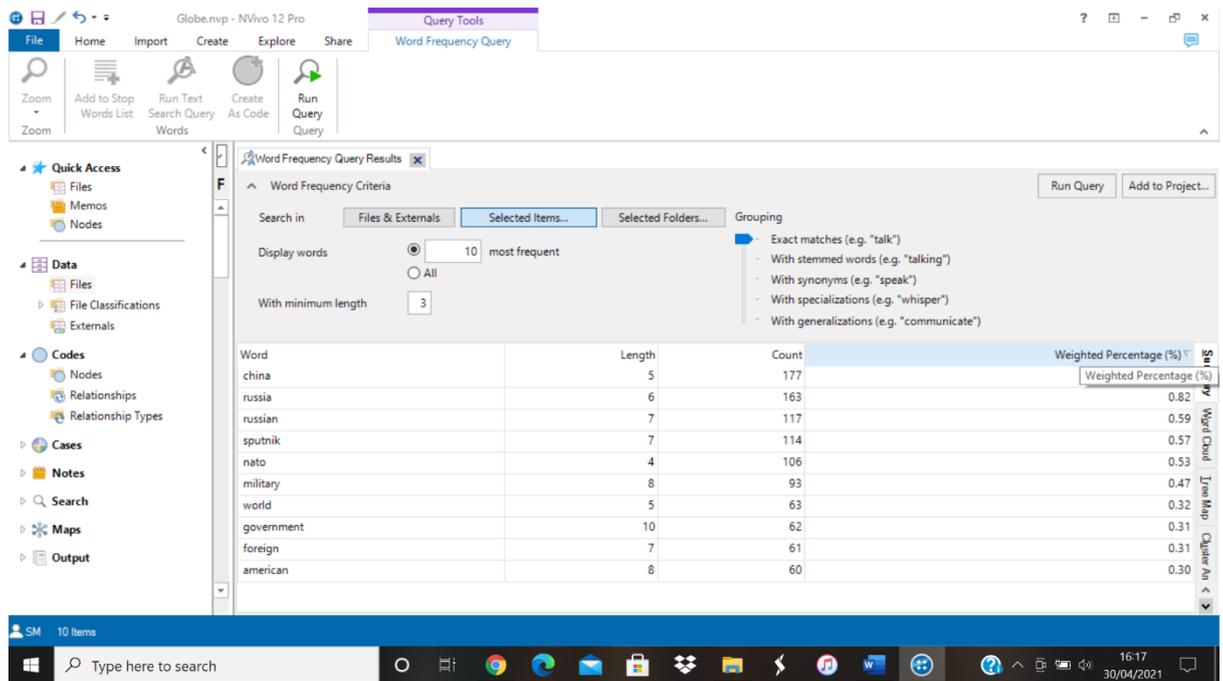


Figure Two: Russia Cluster Analysis Count: Attribute Similarity

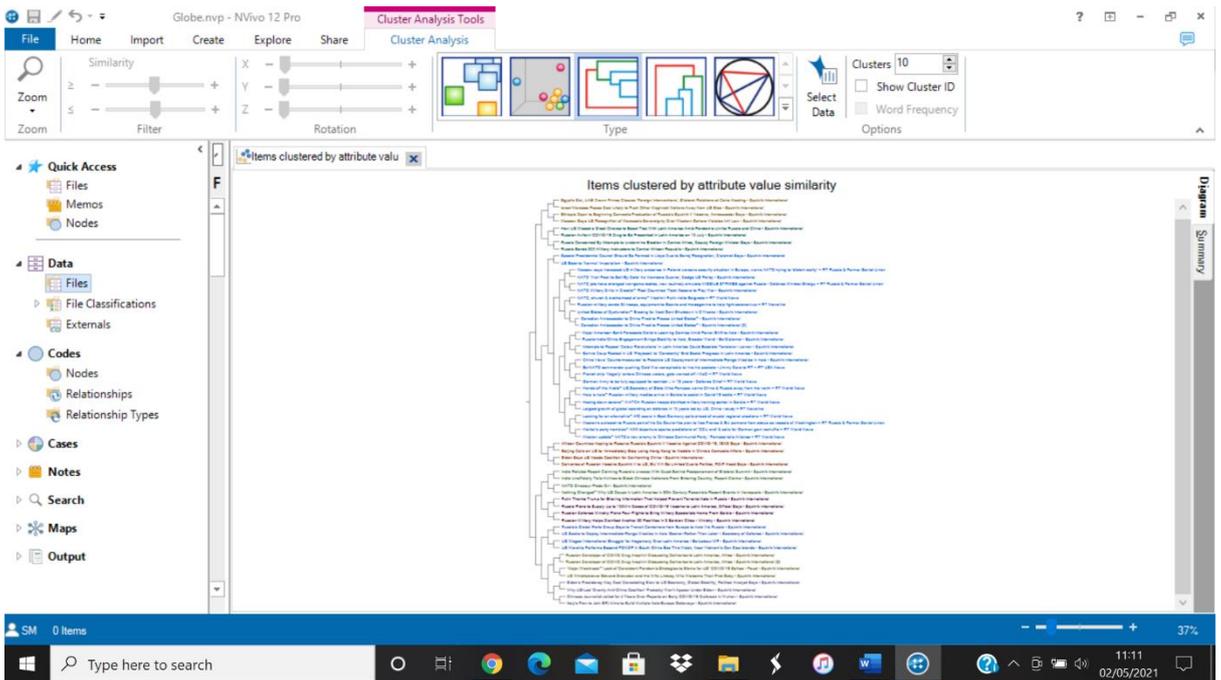


Figure Three: China Word Frequency Count

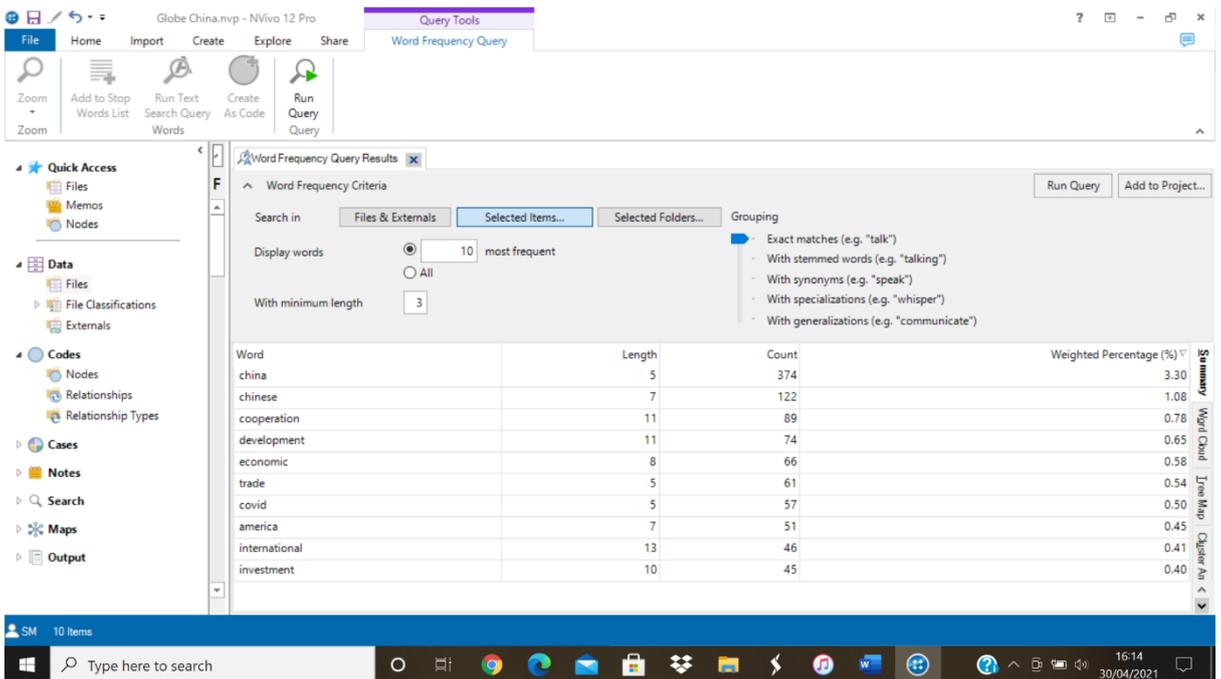
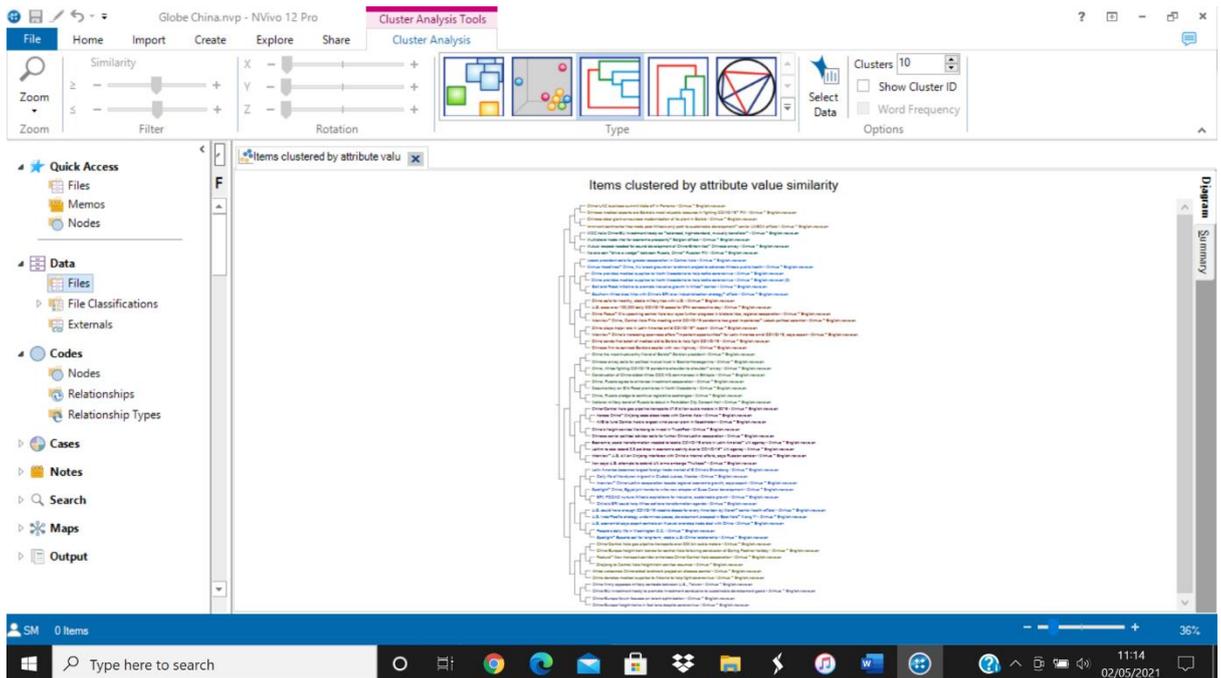


Figure Four: China Cluster Analysis: Attribute Similarity



## Russian Media Sources

1. <https://www.rt.com/usa/458780-nato-commander-cold-war-profit/>
2. <https://www.rt.com/news/457523-french-ship-chinese-waters/>
3. <https://www.rt.com/news/448105-germany-army-fully-equipped-years/>
4. <https://www.rt.com/news/458497-pompeo-arctic-russia-china/>
5. <https://www.rt.com/newsline/480876-global-spending-us-china/>
6. <https://www.rt.com/news/465858-afd-take-lead-east-germany/>
7. <https://www.rt.com/russia/507276-macron-status-vassal-washington/>
8. <https://www.rt.com/russia/500016-nato-imitate-missile-stikes-russia/>
9. <https://www.rt.com/russia/498251-us-military-presence-poland-aggravating/>
10. <https://www.rt.com/news/480510-kramp-karrenbauer-resignation-reactions/>
11. <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/202011241081260356-us-back-to-normal-imperialism/>

12. <https://sputniknews.com/africa/202009171080489957-special-presidential-council-should-be-formed-in-libya-due-to-sarraj-resignation-diplomat-says/>
13. <https://sputniknews.com/africa/202012161081483477-israel-morocco-peace-deal-likely-to-push-other-maghrebi-nations-away-from-us-bloc/>
14. <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/202012171081484641-egypts-sisi-uae-crown-prince-discuss-foreign-interventions-bilateral-relations-at-cairo-meeting/>
15. <https://sputniknews.com/africa/202012221081541337-russia-sends-300-military-instructors-to-central-african-republic/>
16. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202012221081536014-russia-concerned-by-attempts-to-undermine-presidential-election-in-car-deputy-foreign-minister-says/>
17. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202012111081429392-moscow-says-us-recognition-of-moroccos-sovereignty-over-western-sahara-violates-intl-law/>
18. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202011261081283316-ethiopia-open-to-beginning-domestic-production-of-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-ambassador-says/>
19. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202009211080522671-african-countries-hoping-to-receive-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-against-covid-19-igad-says/>
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**Appendix Two: Western Europe**



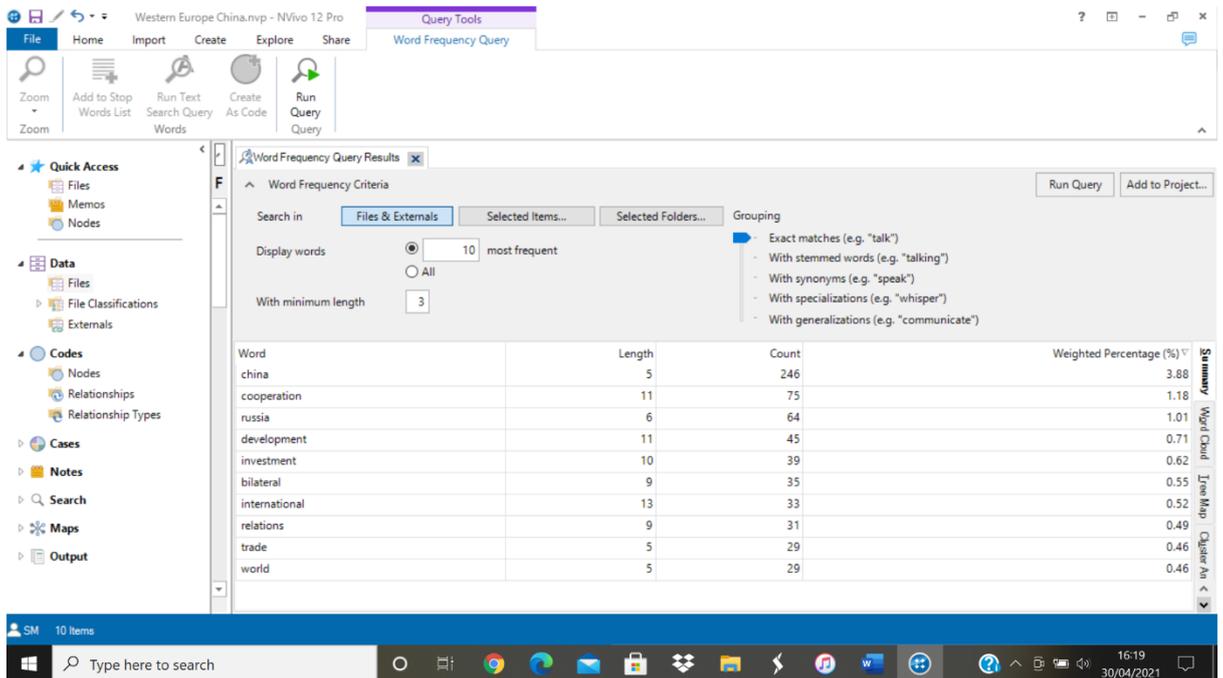


Figure Four: China Cluster Analysis: Attribute Similarity

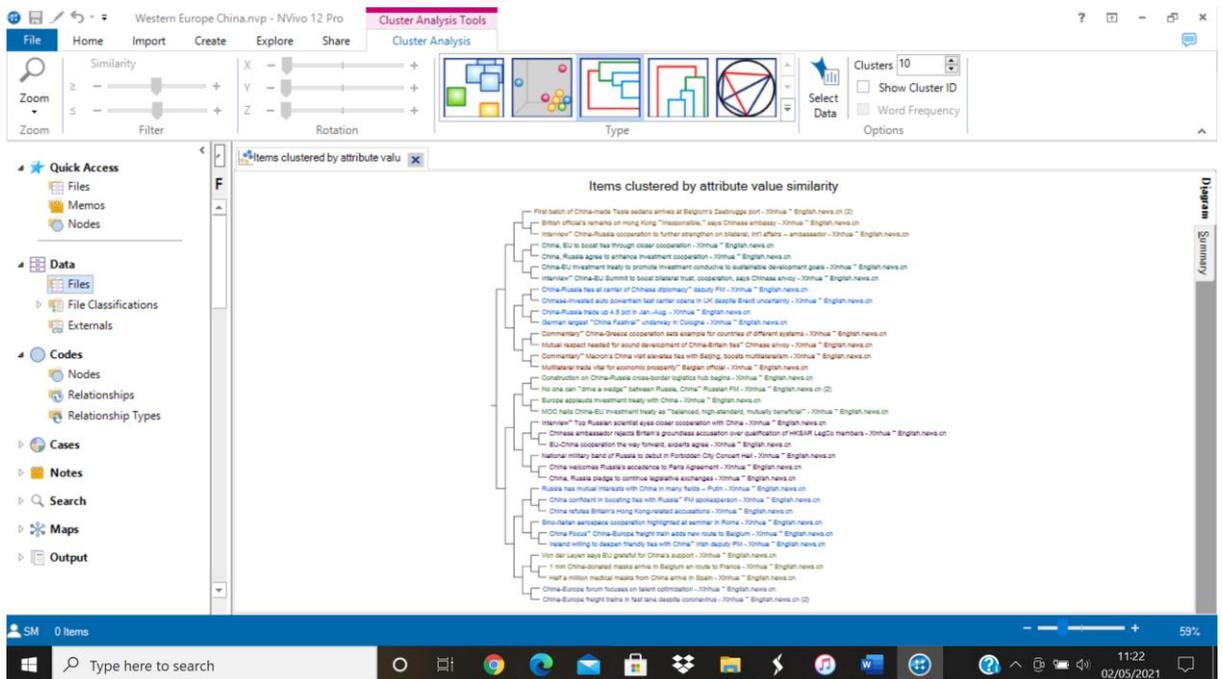
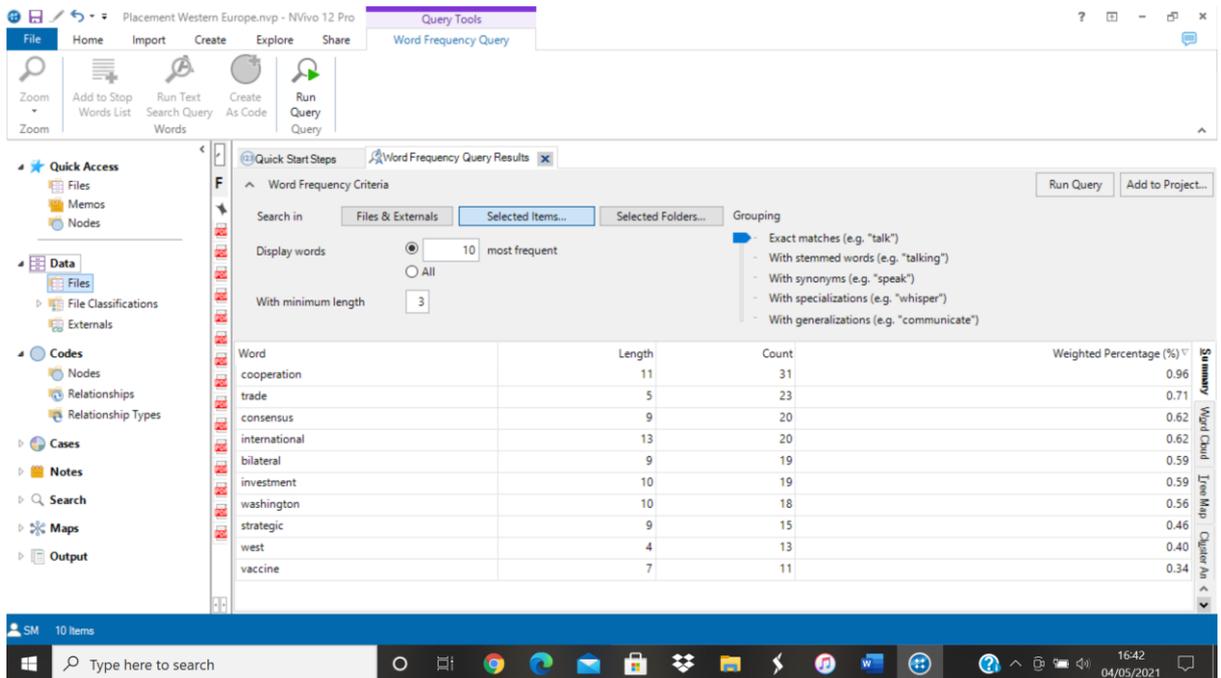


Figure Five: Word Frequency Count of Placement Sources



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### **Appendix Three: Balkans**

Figure One: Russia Word Frequency Count





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