



Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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**“Reframing War by Comparison: Russia Today and  
the Strategic Use of External Conflicts”**

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## **Abstract**

Information has become one of the most contested geopolitical resources on the international stage. The emergence of digital platforms, social media and the internet has expanded a state's capacity to influence its internal and external operations. This paper delves into the architecture of epistemic sabotage carried out by the Russian state-run broadcaster RT. Through its broadcasts, it seeks to erode confidence in the existence of an objective truth, allowing the state to impose a homogenised worldview.

Through Framing Theory and Securitization, the analysis seeks to demonstrate how RT's effectiveness does not lie in persuading the public to support Russia, but rather in sowing narrative chaos that paralyzes critical judgment and fosters a certain reluctance toward the Western-led international order.

**Keywords:** Russia Today (RT), Ukraine War, analogical framing, information war, epistemic sabotage, post-truth, securitization

## **Resumen**

La información se ha convertido en uno de los recursos geopolíticos más disputados en el tablero internacional. La aparición de las plataformas digitales, las redes sociales e Internet ha ampliado la capacidad de un Estado para influir en sus operaciones internas y externas. Este trabajo se sumerge en la arquitectura del sabotaje epistémico ejecutado por el medio estatal ruso RT. A través de sus publicaciones, busca erosionar la confianza en la existencia de una verdad objetiva, permitiendo que el Estado imponga una visión homogeneizada.

A través de la Teoría del Encuadre (Framing) y la Securitización, el análisis busca demostrar cómo la efectividad de RT no reside en persuadir al público para que apoye a Rusia, sino en sembrar un caos narrativo que paraliza el juicio crítico y fomenta cierta reticencia al orden internacional liderado por Occidente.

**Palabras clave:** Russia Today (RT), Guerra de Ucrania, encuadre analógico, guerra de la información, sabotaje epistémico, posverdad, securitización

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## I. Introduction

### a. Information as a source of power: state media and public diplomacy.

During the past decade, information has proved to be the most contested geopolitical asset in global politics. Information power, understood as the states' ability to use information for strategic means, is altering the nature and behaviour of the international arena (Rosenbach & Mansted, 2019). The emergence of digital platforms, social media and the Internet has expanded a state's ability to influence internal and external operations.

It is widely acknowledged that digital platforms were initially envisioned as a unified, borderless space for global exchange. However, these platforms have evolved into a fragmented landscape of closed ecosystems shaped by competing and economic blocs. In this constantly evolving reality, the tools used by the state to exert such influence have also changed. Politics and international communication have become a battlefield over who acquires credibility and “whose story wins” (Saliu, 2023).

While it is true that the concept of propaganda is as old as war itself, and some autocratic states today have acquired the role of disciplining the media and establishing the “official truth” rather than open-free debate, the term fails to encompass the complex interplay of ascending public engagement in these communication processes. Hence, the concept “propaganda” frames international communication as a pejorative practice and consequently undermines states' image and legitimacy (Cull, 2009). Rather, public diplomacy has arisen as an alternative of propaganda, as it emphasizes on the role of the civilian in international relations above the level of manipulation associates with state propaganda (Snow, 2020).

Gullion (1965) first coined the term “public diplomacy” in an attempt to grasp how governments communicate with and influence foreign publics- beyond traditional, government-to-government diplomacy. Nicholas Cull (2009) described it as “an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign policy”. In order for this engagement to be effective, states must gather data, opinions and information overseas for more effective decision-making processes.

As a result, autocratic states have understood the role that information plays in their legitimacy as the sole power, and therefore they have developed what Charles Wagnsson (2022) calls “malign information influence” (MII). This concept denotes information sponsored by dictatorial states to inflict harm upon others, as it was seen in the Russian interference of US 2016 election and how information shaped and manipulated behaviours across state borders (Wagnsson, 2022).

#### **b. Russia’s Position in the Contemporary International Order: Power, Strategy, and Narrative**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has struggled with the current European order, considering the existing borders as non-legitimate. The ongoing invasion of Russian forces into Ukraine, which began in 2022, has become a watershed moment in contemporary international relations. It marked a shift from an era characterised by multilateral rules and institutions, with all their imperfections and limitations, to one that is divided and plagued by uncertainty. Russia has challenged the post-Cold War security order and exposed the limited mechanisms of conflict prevention and deterrence within Europe. While many believed that it was under NATO’s expansion in Ukraine that triggered Russian’s invasion, it is the Kremlin’s views that one must consider (Götz & Ekman, 2024).

Over the past two decades, Russia has increasingly perceived itself as both a regional power and a great power within the emerging multipolar international order. Düzgit et al. (2025) highlighted that Russia’s vision of its position in this order relies on three main pillars. Firstly, the Kremlin’s historical narrative traces back from medieval Rus to the contemporary Russian state. Under this view, Russia seeks to maintain leadership and control over the post-Soviet states. Thus, creating a “special zone of privilege” to enhance its regional leadership. Secondly, Russia aims to secure its global standing in a post-Western multipolar world. In global challenges, Russia blames the West policies, values and interventions as drivers of global and regional instability and portrays itself as an alternative to this order. And lastly and relatedly, Russia seeks to undermine Western political unity and foreign policy consensus by enhancing polarisation and separatists’ movements through disinformation.

Hence, it could be argued that the war in Ukraine portrays a wider conflict against the US-led international order (Düzgüt et al., 2025). Indeed, war in Ukraine is central to his battle against the West. Additionally, under Vladimir Putin 2023 National Security Concept framework, this invasion is not offensive but a “defensive war against the West” that confronts “traditional, sovereign Russia” vs a “decadent, Western-dominated world order”. For Russia, this war is not against Ukraine, but the entire Western alliance (Tsygankov, 2024). This framing, in short, contrasts abruptly with the international community’s view of an illegal act of aggression against national sovereignty.

The international system constructed in the aftermath of 1945, anchored in U.S leadership, multilateral institutions and liberal norms, is increasingly eroding, not only because of external challenges, but mainly due to growing doubts among its original architects. Pablo A. Sanchez (2024) defines revisionist states as “one pursuing a subversive policy over the status quo and trying to implement its vision in the new world order to come”. Russia is one of the great powers endangering structural instability. Since Vladimir Putin came into power, Russia has intervened both directly in numerous conflicts: Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014) or Ukraine (2022) and indirectly, through hybrid warfare, funding and disinformation campaigns in countries like Syria, Finland or Poland.

### c. Russia Today as an international player

With its position in the current international order, the Kremlin acknowledged that Russia could not bring its worldview with classical military force. Rather, it used unconventional methods such as propaganda, disinformation and chaos within the current order to reach its goals. RT, formerly known as Russia Today, has emerged as one of the leading and most influential actors in the global architecture of disinformation (Elswah & Howard, 2020). It is a state funded and controlled international news network launched in 2005 with the purpose of portraying a positive image of Russia to the world and shatter the West’s monopoly of truth. At first, the Kremlin assigned 30 million US dollars to run the channel, which hindered its capacity to compete with other media giants such as Qatari-funded Al Jazeera (Ioffe, 2010). However, after the 2008 Georgian Conflict the Russian government identified the strategic value of the network and realised it could weaponize the channel to serve its political and state defence interest.

The state strategic decision of creating RT was not isolated, it originated within and from this system. It responded to both domestic political consolidation and the shifting global information landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. When Putin came to power, he found himself in a pluralistic, oligarch-driven landscape as a result of the democratic reforms carried out by Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s. That decade was characterised by instability, economic deterioration and the emergence of big businessmen who amassed enormous fortunes.

Faced with this oligarch-driven system of information, Vladimir Putin took control of major television networks such as NTV, ORT, and RTR, side-lining oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky. Between 2003-2005, the so-called “colour revolutions” erupted within post-Soviet space (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan) supported by Western governments and organisations. They all coordinated efforts to weakened Russian influence. As a response, RT was conceived as a counter-narrative instrument that pursued portraying Russia as modern, rational and as a viable alternative to the West.

By 2004, the domestic media environment had been centralized and aligned with the state’s narrative. This internal consolidation created the foundations on which it would project its influence internationally. Since its inception, it has provided a theoretical basis for understanding the information warfare between Russia and the West.

In general terms, Russia Today is not driven by revenues and prioritises loyalists appointed by the government than professional journalists (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). Although the media system differs significantly from the Soviet model, there is one common element: self-censorship (*Ibid.*). Both regimes play on fear and coercion, making non-alignment with the government costly. Therefore, it is not so much the development of direct means of censorship as the use of blackmail.

#### d. Western audiences and international news consumption

The Digital News Report (2025) exerts that more than half the public across the market establish that they are concerned about what is real and what is fake when it comes to online news. Today’s “Platform era” has given way to a fragmented, video-first ecosystem. Western audiences are experiencing a divergence between traditional trust and new, social-driven consumption habits. While global trust in news remains stable at

40%, concern about distinguishing real from fake news is highest in the United States (73%) and lowest in Western Europe (46%) (Newman et al., 2025).

## II. State of Art

### a. Historical context of Russian media ecosystem

Power and politics in Russia have always been tied up together. Censorship has been in the core of the autocratic Russian project since Soviet times. Lenin described the press as “not only collective propagandist and collective agitator, but collective organizer” (Gruliov, 1956). In other words, the ownership of information in Russia has proven to be an intrinsic tool for preservation of power, internal legitimacy and international projection.

During the Soviet Era, news was carefully filtered and seek to create new Russian man, loyal to the party with a strong Marxist-Leninist public consciousness (Gehlbach et al., 2022). The media aspired to achieve this ideological project that would structurally transform the public's worldview, perceptions and behaviour. To this end, any critical or ideologically inconsistent voices that could threaten this intention were eradicated. The Soviet Model of propaganda was highly centralised and systematic, in which the state was presented as the guarantor of truth. The Department for Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop), later what would become the KGB' Department, was in charge of developing active measures such as disinformation, forgeries, and sometimes even assassinations (Horbyk et al., 2023).

From the Gorbachev era through Yeltsin and into Putin's leadership, Russia's media environment has experienced deep and transformative shifts since the late 1980s. While the structural foundations of Soviet information control remained after 1991 and were adapted into more complex, networked forms of propaganda that serve current geopolitical objectives. During early 1990s, media in post-communist Russia saw a period of liberalisation and privately-owned news organisations emerged through Gorbachev Glasnost and Perestroika policies. It is true that even though the privatisation of media took place, news was strictly tied to political and economic interests of the big magnates or oligarchs of Russia.

After two decades of Putin's mandate, the mainstream Russian media has undergone strict state control, with few independent news outlets remaining. Putin saw the powerful role of media in political battles, and hence prioritised it as an existential threat. An example of this was NTV, Russia's largest independent TV station, which constituted a critical voice of the Kremlin's practices and sensitive issues. In areas where citizens had access to this channel, support for United Russia was lower (Gehlbach et al., 2022). While centralisation in today's digital era seems impossible, propaganda techniques still persist. Ideology has shifted towards cynical pragmatism and geopolitical manipulation. The challenge relies on achieving greater control over media while adopting a global position on international media.

The twenty-first century has fundamentally transformed patterns of news consumption through two major milestones. First, the democratisation of information has significantly expanded audiences' ability to access news content at any time, from virtually any location and concerning events occurring across the globe. This unprecedented accessibility has altered, not only the speed and volume of information flow, but also the relationship between audiences and traditional news institutions, reshaping how international news is produced, distributed and consumed through the digitalisation of news (Anderson, 2024).

From a theoretical lens, this reflects in a shift towards cognitive conflict, in which control over perception is as important as control over territory (Cournoyer, Badri, & Messmer, 2025)

#### **b. Russia as an actor in international conflicts: intervention, precedent and narrative justification**

Over the past two decades, Russia has increasingly acted as a decisive participant in international conflicts, employing intervention not only as an instrument of strategic influence but also as a practice embedded in carefully constructed narratives of legality, precedent, and contested interpretations of sovereignty.

The 1945 Charter of the United Nations, notably within Article 2 (1), institutionalized the "principle of sovereign equality of all states" as a cornerstone of the contemporary international legal framework. This doctrine formally entrenched the tenets of national independence, juridical equality, and the exercise of exclusive jurisdiction over internal affairs. However, the traditional paradigm of state sovereignty is increasingly contested

by revisionist methodologies that challenge its purportedly absolute character in the modern global order.

In general terms, international intervention can be understood as “the transgression of a unit’s realm of jurisdiction, conducted by other units in the system” (Reus-Smit, 2013). This milieu illustrates an expanding dissonance between *de jure* formal validity—the theoretical ideal—and *de facto* reality. While sovereignty remains theoretically central to the international system, it has been progressively eroded through selective interpretation and the recurrent interventionist practices of hegemonic powers. In this context, intervention emerges as a key site where sovereignty is not only constrained but actively redefined.

The revisionist trajectory of the Russian Federation in the post-Cold War facilitates the conceptualisation of intervention as a definitive sovereignty frame, effectively positioning it as a systemic configuration of political authority. Within the Russian strategic consciousness, the status of a great power is inextricably intertwined with its national identity. Consequently, the Russian state has demonstrated significant agility in modulating the justifications for its interventionism according to specific geopolitical contexts, reframing such actions ranging from coercive enforcement to counterterrorism operations (Kocak, 2023).

In his analysis of Russian intervention in Syria, Kocak (2023) identified what the author termed ontological security, referring to how Russia's identity is as crucial as its physical security. The author further states that, as a result of its lack of recognition as a major power in the 1990s, Russia changed its strategy to challenging the West in order to force that recognition. In this regard, interventionism translated into its acknowledgement of power. However, Russia has understood security in civilizational terms, under which international relations shape dynamics between different civilisations (Spour, 2024). Herein lies the dichotomy of Russian foreign policy: on the one hand, the principle of sovereignty becomes flexible and conditional in the so-called ‘near abroad’ (intracivilisational) and outside the Soviet space it acquires a stricter, Westphalian interpretation of the term (intercivilisational) (Ibid.).

During the period of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, it considered territorial expansion to be the best form of border defence (Noordenbos et al., 2025). That is why

the preservation of both internal and external political power has always been one of the government's priorities.

That is why López Jimenez (2022) argues that the aggression of 2022 is not an isolated event, but rather “the last link” in Russia's attempt to interfere with Ukrainian sovereignty. From Russia's perspective, Russia was an empire long before it was a nation, and it is because of this status that it has the right to interfere in its “near abroad” as happened after the dissolution of the USSR and served as a justification under “collective security” to intervene in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Tajikistan, among many others.

At the discursive level, it is important to analyse how Russia uses the same terminology as the West—legality, sovereignty, non-intervention—but with a substantially different meaning. This highlights what Andrew Spour (2024) called inherent polysemy, which is not semantic, but rather reflects how seemingly universal principles can be reinterpreted and mobilised as legitimisers of power.

### **c. Narrative and editorial strategies in RT's conflict coverage**

During the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia was widely accused of weaponizing its state-backed media outlets to disseminate a pro-Russian version of the conflict (Bradshaw et al., 2024). In an increasingly hybrid media environment shaped by social platforms and transnational information flows, truth has become the first casualty of war. Within this context, the evolution of Russia's international broadcasting—particularly through RT—signals a structural transformation in contemporary information warfare and the exercise of soft power.

To understand RT's editorial strategy in conflict coverage, it is necessary to situate it within a counter-hegemonic framework. This involves not only challenging dominant Western narratives, but also actively delegitimising liberal institutions and promoting the vision of a multipolar international order. Rather than merely presenting alternative viewpoints, RT systematically constructs narratives that undermine epistemic authority itself.

As previously noted, RT's editorial line is rooted on the deployment of strategic narratives. Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) explored how, in the context of Russian media,

narrative strategies constitute “interlocking frameworks of truth” designed to impose coherence on complex geopolitical events in ways that align with state interests. Miller (2024), for instance, challenges this hypothesis by analysing how Russia does not promote a certain narrative but rather attempts to destabilise all competing narratives, thereby fostering epistemic uncertainty and eroding trust in the possibility of objective truth. A central feature of these narratives is their binary structure, typically framed around the dichotomy of aggressor versus victim. This framework enables the legitimisation of military actions as defensive or reactive measures.

Both the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine can be interpreted through this lens, with NATO expansion frequently portrayed as an existential threat and as justification for Russian intervention, particularly in relation to the protection of Russian-speaking populations. In this regard Laurelle (2021) introduces the concept of “niche soft power” to explain how RT targets audiences already sceptical of the liberal international order, positioning Russia as a disruptive but necessary counterforce to Western hegemony.

In addition to geopolitical framing, RT’s narratives draw extensively on historical memory and identity construction. This awakening was linked to a certain national consciousness, which was materialised in soldiers and other civilians who lost their lives to Russia. References to shared experiences –most notably the Second World War, are mobilised to frame contemporary conflicts as continuations of past struggles.

The emotional dimension of these strategies is equally significant. As Bartolucci and Gayol (2025) argue, “there is nothing more political than emotions” since they are what drive moral judgements and orient citizen involvement. By activating collective memories and historical traumas, media narratives can deeply resonate with audiences’ identities. Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019) investigated the role of emotions in the coverage of the Syrian war and identified the use of what they termed ‘affective investments’—that is, anchoring forces that link individuals to their identities constructed through language. The study showed how individuals were affectively invested in the identity of a masculine, collective, effective and anti-terrorist Russia, as opposed to a feminine, imperial and out-of-control “West” in Syria (Chatterje-Doody & Crilley, 2019).

At the level of discourse, RT also employs identifiable disinformation techniques. Abel Suing (2025) in his analysis of RT’s narratives in Ecuador, highlights strategies such as

the blending of verified information with unsubstantiated claims, the use of emotionally loaded language, the deployment of rhetorical questions to guide interpretation, and the omission of alternative perspectives. These techniques contribute to the construction of biased narratives while maintaining a veneer of journalistic legitimacy. Similarly, Kampf and Katriel (2016) demonstrate how blame attribution is framed either through particularistic community values or through appeals to supposedly universal moral principles, depending on the communicative objective.

Another key dimension of RT's editorial strategy concerns its selection and appropriation of sources. A significant proportion of its content is sourced from reputable international news agencies such as Reuters or The Associated Press (AP), through which it seeks to draw on their prestige and credibility. However, this material is often selectively reframed, paraphrased, or decontextualized in ways that align with Kremlin narratives. In this regard, Yablokov (2015) describes RT's reliance on "Western experts" who validate Russian positions as a form of "partisan parasitism", whereby external voices are instrumentalised to enhance perceived legitimacy. Finally, RT's disinformation practices are closely intertwined with its use of social media sources, where verification standards are lower and the potential for amplification is significantly higher.

Finally, it is worth noting that RT's organisational behaviour operates under a model rooted in 'Soviet-style controls' (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). In their article "Anything that causes chaos", Elswah and Howard (2020) found that the internal structure is designed to ensure that senior Russian journalists maintain political control, whilst foreign editors are limited to checking the quality of language and journalistic style.

### III. Theoretical framework

#### a. Framing Theory as a Strategic Meaning-Making in International Conflict

Framing Theory provides a valuable analytical insight for understanding how meaning is strategically constructed and contested in international conflict. The nature of conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is no longer confined to traditional physical domains, rather it has increasingly unfolded new dimensions—most notably the information sphere. Rebecca Mackinnon (2012) predicted that "in the 21<sup>st</sup> century many of the most acute political and geopolitical struggles would involve access to and control of information." Framing

Theory conceptualises conflict not as a merely material or military phenomenon, but as an interpretive process through which actors define events, assign responsibility and acquire international legitimacy. With the expansion of technological abilities, media has become a central battlefield, in which discourse has social consequences and ideological effects (Pasitselska, 2017). This process entails changes in the relative weight or importance individuals give to pre-existing conceptions.

Alfred Schutz (1973) articulated in one of his writings how reality consists of “multiple experiential realms”, each of which involves a different “accent of reality”. This statement implies that subjective experiences are always mediated through socially shared interpretive schemes. Within these subjective experiences, the media guides how the audience evaluates the world by imposing a structure on information. Therefore, from this theoretical perspective, media do not act as passive mirrors of reality, but actively contribute to its construction (Šorgić & Milisavljević, 2025). To do so, they select certain aspects and emphasise, omit or minimise them.

In this sense, media framing refers to the manner in which media outlets present and structure information to shape interpretation of events, issues or individuals (Zaklama, 2025). Entman (1993) added to this that to frame means “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” Frames contribute to the selection, organisation, and classification of occurrences thereby facilitating their interpretation. Neuman et al. (1992) built on this definition that frames can be understood as “conceptual tools the media and individuals rely to convey, interpret and evaluate information.”

Accordingly, the central premise of Framing Theory is that an issue may be viewed from different angles and even construed by a wide variety of values and considerations. It was first coined by Gregory Bateson (1955) to reflect on how groups classify collective experiences to give meaning to new information.

Early studies of mass public opinion carried out during the 1950s and 1960s raised significant doubts regarding the capacity or competence of citizens to participate meaningfully in political affairs (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In light of these studies, a sizable proportion of general public did not hold meaningful attitudes and opinions. What did have an impact on public opinion, researched showed, were the so-called “framing

effects” (ibid). These did not explicitly involve change in individual’s beliefs, but rather alter the relative weight or importance to existing considerations.

Building on this tradition, Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) further contributed to the conceptual groundwork arguing that social reality is produced and maintained through shared meanings and institutionalised knowledge. Certain interpretations become embedded in social institutions such as the media law and politics, appearing as natural and credible. De Vreese (2005) further argued the concept of frame-building, to explain the interaction between internal journalistic practices and external influences, such as elites or social movements.

Nevertheless, Framing Theory originated in the field of sociology and communication studies during 1970s trying to give response to the role of media in shaping public opinion and discourse. The most decisive early contribution came from Erving Goffman (1974) in *Frame Analysis*. The author defined the concept “frames” as interpretive schemata that individuals use to organize experience and make sense of everyday life (Goffman, 1974). This conceptualisation of frames as socially interpretative shared structures would later become a cornerstone of communication research.

Robert Entman’s (1993) article on “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm” addressed the ambiguity surrounding the definition of the concept. Entman’s model marked major theoretical advance toward identifying four core framing functions—problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Under his model, framing essentially involves selection and salience (Zaklama, 2025). To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient. Salience means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to the audience, ergo increasing the probability of individuals restoring it in memory (Ibid.). This can be achieved through placement, repetition or symbolic association.

Over time, Framing Theory has matured, leading scholars to highlight its close relationship with power and political influence. Gamson (1992) argued that frames are not neutral but sites of symbolic struggle, reflecting competing interests and ideologies. It has been refined and expanded to address media environments and global conflicts. Journalistic objectivity is increasingly obscured by narratives shaped by national interests and geopolitical alliances. The power of narrative and its framing can impact conflict de-

escalation processes, the marginalisation of certain groups, the legitimisation of theory, and even public confidence in the mass media (Šorgić & Milisavljević, 2025). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) believed that through analysing predefined frames, one could identify their frequency in corpuses, which resulted in the identification of 5 generic frames—conflict, human interest, economic consequence, morality and responsibility frames.

Specifically, reporting on the conflict surrounding Russia's invasion of the sovereign state of Ukraine leads to the audience perceiving the conflict as justified, avoidable or legitimate (Rahman & Aoni, 2025). This is evident in the differences in language used to refer to the invasion, ranging from 'special military operation' to 'armed conflict' or 'full-scale invasion'. Russian strategic communication interprets international conflict as a struggle over narrative dominance, not as a contest over objective fact. From this perspective, the goal of the Russian state is not to persuade viewers to support Russia, but to destabilise existing interpretative frames in western media ecosystems.

By focusing on how conflicts are defined, actors are positioned, and moral evaluations are constructed, Framing Theory enables the analysis of Russia Today not merely as a news outlet, but as an actor engaged in geopolitical contestation over narrative authority in the international media sphere.

#### **b. Securitisation theory and the discursive construction of threats**

It is widely acknowledged that states are currently framing global challenges as existential threats to the survival of nations. Within this pervasive culture of fear, political elites define antagonist against whom protective action must be mobilised, thereby legitimising the adoption of extraordinary measures that exceed the normal bounds of political governance (Innes, 2024). International politics demonstrate this: migration is discursively constituted as a threat to national identity and social cohesion; economic interdependence has been framed as strategic vulnerability; and technological development is being securitised as an existential risk to data sovereignty and privacy; among numerous other domains.

This is possible to the imposition of strategic frame embedded in a social context (Balzacq, 2011), In this sense, Securitisation Theory implies the application of Framing

Theory through which political actors impose a security frames that constructs an issue as an existential threat.

The usage of the term security implies an attack towards one's cultural roots, history and tradition. It reinforces who is part of the state – “us”— and hence, who constitutes an external threat. Additionally, it marks a disjuncture between top-down and bottom-up identification of threat, often focused on minoritized groups whose identity is not considered part of national identity narratives (Innes, 2024).

In light of this account, the Theory of Securitisation rejects the objective existence of threats, seeking to explain how states construct them and why the use of the term legitimises actions that would be unacceptable in other political frameworks. These framing processes inherently reflect power structures of those political actors who can overview moral politics.

Seeking to explain the impact of language on these dynamics, the Copenhagen School developed Securitisation Theory, which conceptualised security as a speech act. From this perspective, security is not limited to military threats; rather, it constitutes a specific, high-stakes mode of framing through which an issue is presented as an existential threat. Austin and Searle (1962) were the main figures in developing the performativity of language in Philosophy. For these authors, language does not only describe reality but it brings about social realities and political effects. By saying security, a state representative moves a particular development into a specific area (Wæver, 1995).

Building upon a mixture of theories of IR, securitisation addresses how no issue is by essence a menace; but becomes a security problem through discursive politics. Buzan et al. (1998) argued the relational character of security, defining securitisation as “a critical discursive approach that deconstructs how a speech act can performatively render a problem as an existential threat” and includes the acceptance of the securitising action by an audience. Under this definition, it is indeed the securitising actor that benefits from securitisation.

However, some scholars believed that the Copenhagen School reduced security to a conventional procedure (Balzacq, 2011). Rather, security must be understood within a social context and structures of power that are inherited in these framings. While media framing reveals who has the power to define what reality is; Securitisation Theory reveals

which states have the power to suspend moral politics. Adding to this; Thierry Balzacq (2011) believed that securitisation constitutes “brute threats that are more likely to succeed because to win an audience, security states must, usually, be related to an external reality.” While the Copenhagen School believed it to be a mere linguistic procedure; Balzacq challenges this premise by understanding securitisation as a strategic, context-dependent process of persuasion involving multiple and non-discursive practices.

Under this argument, security is not constructed by language alone but by the relation between language and power structures, proving its asymmetric and inter-subjective dimension. Holger Stritzel (2007) builds on Balzacq’s critique and argues that securitisation succeeds because power relations already make some speech acts more acceptable than others.

Sarah Leonard & Christian Kaunert (2011) additionally analysed the role of the audience in the process of securitisation. For the authors, audiences cannot be treated as passive receivers, but as active actors whose acceptance are biased by cultural narratives, institutional trust and prior beliefs (Léonard & Kaunert, 2011). Baele & Thomson (2017) in an attempt to analysis why some securitisation efforts success or fail analysed three key components: actions (message format), agents (the interactions between the audience and securitising actor) and the context (situational or structural). All taken together, it would be insufficient to consider language alone as the sole medium that shifts an issue to be perceived as a menace.

International security is indeed rooted in structures of power politics. It is the engine through which political actors sustain discursive coordination around shared ideas of international security and order. Holomar & Turner (2024) defined “narrative alliances” as “stories of (un) acceptable behaviour equips political actors and audiences with a shared geopolitical gaze and establishes to act in defence of particular visions of international organisation.” What may seem in fact a legitimate securitisation within a political community may not be accepted by other. That is why securitisation sets the boundaries on whose existence is being threatened; those who follow the rules, and those who have brokered them.

Arnold Wolfers (1961:61) differentiated objective threats from subjective perceived threats, which do not ensure its alignment. Under the events of the Russian invasion, Western states mobilised a shared narrative that frames Russia as a fundamental threat to

the liberal international order, thereby legitimising coordinated sanctions, military assistance, and long-term strategic containment.

### c. **Soft power reconsidered: media, credibility and counter-hegemony**

It is widely acknowledged how different schools of thought in international relations have attempted to answer the question of how states perceive power. In particular, under the view of realism, Hans Morgenthau (1948) outlined how “the main element that allows political realism to find its way in the international policy landscape is the concept of interest defined in terms of power.” He conceptualised power as the relative material capability of states—especially military strength—that allows them to survive, deter rivals, and shape outcomes in an anarchic international system (Morgenthau, 1985). Traditionally, the definition of power put its emphasis on military force. Structural realists, such as Kenneth Waltz (1964) asserted that it is indeed the distribution of material power among states that determines patterns of behaviour, alliance formation or even structural stability (Waltz, 1964).

Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War marked a key turning point in the revaluation of power in terms of not being structured by a single, overriding military threat. The decline of the traditional bipolar confrontation led to a shift towards globalisation and an increasingly interconnected world shaped by international institutions, global media and cultural exchange. In this regard, the precedent to this event was the overall reconsideration of security dimensions. National security began to be compromised not only by the use of force, but also by the emergence of vulnerabilities in trade, finance and even security due to the interdependence established between states. This interdependence, in turn, today has made the use of military force much costlier.

The complexity of today's world lies in understanding how the spheres of world politics have different power structures: armament, trade, normative... which each responds to different polarities (Nye, 1990). This fragmentation of politics has made power increasingly diffuse and states are beginning to diversify their ways of coercing or changing the priorities of other actors. Although the protective role of military force is evident, in many issues' states are beginning to exercise what Nye (1990) conceptualised as ‘soft power’. It arose as a response to the changing dynamics of world politics, where

persuasion and credibility began to influence in a similar way as in the military or economic sphere.

Soft power can be understood as a “nation’s ability to influence others through the attraction rather than force or payment” (Ibid.). This conceptualisation targets power as attraction; this being, the state’s ability to make its power legitimate in the eyes of others, and hence, the acquisition of diminished opposition to its aims. Making a state's culture, ideology or vision attractive to others can have numerous benefits for that state, aligning its interests with those of others. In contrast to hard power, soft power operates through intangible resources such as culture and ideology. Its effectiveness rests on the ability to generate attraction, exercise persuasion, and shape the political agenda (Canyurt, 2025, p. 199).

Nevertheless, the concept is currently being reassessed by scholars in light of evolving global dynamics. Sardor Boratov (2025) challenge Nye’s traditional definition by theorising soft power as “hegemonic technology of consent” used to acquire legitimacy and order through narrative co-construction. Under this view, soft power is not a neutral strategy but one with political effects. An example of this is the European Union, characterised by being a regulatory power that seeks to expand its influence by exporting its standards through ‘conditionality’. Here, soft power acts the source to build new social relations and identity blocks (e.g. Cold War).

But, the use of soft power does not imply the lack of coercion. Xiaoyu Hu (2025) critiques how the use of soft power by political elites and external organisations often leads to “post-politicisation”, governed by unequal power relations that eliminate genuine political debate. Sonny Osman (2025) goes one step further and re-evaluates the idea of consent within hegemony theory, conceptualising what he calls ‘coercive tolerance’. This consists of compulsory behaviour towards policies established through the discourse of the great powers (Osman, 2025).

It has become evident that in the post-Cold War era key international players prefer to exercise soft rather than hard power. Cevik & Padilha (2024) developed a new frame to measure soft power more systematically, providing comparative index that evaluates countries according to indicators such as cultural influence, global outreach, and institutional credibility among others. Their findings reveal significant growth by developing countries, in some cases surpassing traditional key actors such as the United

Kingdom. China, for example, increased its soft power indicator substantially, rising from 0.70 in 2004 to 1.17 in 2021, reflecting its expanding cultural projection and broader international presence (Cevik & Padilha, 2024).

The Russian Federation constitutes no exception to this broader trend. The future of Russia as a great power will depend upon its ability to generate and increase its impulses of soft power. As the successor to the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has inherited key components of Soviet soft power, including its enduring cultural and scientific prestige, founding role in the United Nations, and extensive connections with intellectual and political elites worldwide (Andreev & Andreev, 2024). Russia's interest in soft power emerged in the mid-2000s, driven by the need to maintain its influence in the nearby 'post-Soviet space' in the face of colour revolutions and to improve its image after the conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015).

#### d. Propaganda, post-truth, and hybrid information warfare

*“We turn away from truth in fear... We even seek the government to protect us from the truth”*

Steve Tesich, 1992

The concept of post-truth, though critically relevant today, was originally introduced by Steve Teisch (1992) in his seminal article “The Government of Lies”, Tesich (1992) defined this phenomenon as a set of “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion or personal belief”. By coining the term, the author sought to illustrate how the propaganda of the George H.W Bush administration was accepted by the public as absolute truth, materialising the beginning of an era in which society willingly chose to be “protected” from the truth in favour of emotional comfort.

Building on the groundwork laid by Teisch, Ralph Keyes (2004) provided further conceptual depth to the term in his book *The Post-Truth Era*. He argued that the immediate consequence of this was the rise of “post-veracity” (Keyes, 2004). According to Keyes, lack of trust in public discourse arises, not due the content, but because of the fact that the message can serve a hidden purpose that is not desired by the audience (Ibid.). This dynamic is sustained because individuals become accustomed to living in an

environment where they justify their own lies, effectively discriminating against the truth to suit their personal interests.

In fact, scepticism about the possibility of reaching the truth has increased exponentially. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, analysts speak of the 'Post-Truth Era' to describe how, in today's society, objective facts are less influential than emotions, self-interest or even personal belief. This has fundamentally altered how societies process information due to the emergence of mass media and social media platforms. No longer is propaganda a mere tool to support a war, instead it has become a key cornerstone of "hybrid information warfare".

Modern information operations, mainly those related to revisionist state actors, have resulted in a culture of suspicion and mistrust. As Peter Pomerantsev (2014) famously noted in *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, the goal is often to create a state of epistemic confusion where the public begins to doubt the existence of any objective truth at all. As international politics shifts into this "pseudo-public sphere", the erosion of a shared reality threatens the very foundation of the democratic system.

Faced with the perception that one cannot attain the truth, citizens give up the search for it and settle for a convenient opinion based purely on emotion. Hence, to influence public opinion should focus on a discourse that is easy to accept and that will "feed" the emotions and beliefs of the audience.

The digital environment ergo, once believed to act as a global forum for democratic exchange, has transformed into what Daniël de Zeeuw (2025) calls a pseudo-public sphere, operating under the logic of "communicative capitalism". In this sense, profit derives not from the attainment of truth but from engagement, shifting traditional "pull logic", where the consumer was drawn to the product, to contemporary "push" model, where products are algorithmically delivered directly to the consumer. With all this, the public sphere is no longer acting as a mediator between the state and civil society, but rather as a hostile arena characterised by media warfare strategies fighting over whose story wins through algorithms (de Zeeuw, 2024). As a consequence, the nature of warfare has shifted towards cognitive dominance, that is, the alteration of human perception of reality.

However, Zembylas (2025) argues that the problem of post-truth is not limited to the epistemological sphere (a crisis of facts) but is linked to politics. That is, the loss of a shared vision built through politics. Hannah Arendt (1967) put words to this phenomenon, the *alienation of the world*, to express the process through which lies and fabrications of truth destroy the trust necessary to navigate reality collectively. The philosopher reiterates the need for multiple perspectives to construct it, and it is when this fails that the state imposes a single, homogenised vision. In short, when facts are treated as mere opinions, this “world alienation” of the individual increases, leading to a retreat into subjective realities and radicalisation.

In this sense, it seems imperative to highlight that the spread of disinformation is merely a reflection of the decline of ethics in society.

#### IV. Objectives and hypothesis

The main objective of this study is to examine how RT uses conflict-denying representations and historical analogies to indirectly change the interpretative framework through which Western audiences understand the war in Ukraine. The originality of this study lies in its analysis of a subtler communication mechanism: the construction of discursive parallels between conflicts that can serve to normalise, relativize or legitimise Russia's geopolitical position.

This approach is grounded in the assumption that contemporary information warfare does not rely solely on explicit propaganda or the direct defence of controversial actions. Rather, influence can be exerted through indirect framing strategies, in which narratives about third-party conflicts create interpretative spaces that reshape the audience's perception of other geopolitical events. In this context, RT's coverage of conflicts involving the West –such as NATO operations or US-led military actions– can operate as a reference framework through which the war in Ukraine is implicitly contextualised and reinterpreted.

More broadly, the study seeks to explore how strategic narratives serve as instruments for shaping the international order and in constructing particular geopolitical worldviews.

To achieve this overarching goal, the study pursues several specific objectives:

First, it seeks to identify the dominant frames used by RT when covering non-Russian international conflicts. In order to fulfil this, it will be necessary to understand how the issues are defined, the attribution of responsibility, the actors, and the final moral evaluation, among other things. This leads to the premise of a “mirroring” effect, where it is hypothesized that RT utilises the coverage of external conflicts to create “discursive mirror” that normalise Russia’s military actions in Ukraine by framing them as standard international practice (H.1).

Second, the analysis will examine how RT constructs responsibility and moral asymmetry, focusing on the attribution of blame and the hierarchical positioning of actors as legitimate or illegitimate within the conflict. A central hypothesis of this work is that the primary function of RT’s conflict reporting is not to provide an alternative truth, but to highlight Western "selective humanitarianism," thereby eroding the moral authority of Western institutions to criticize Russian sovereignty violations (H.2).

Third, the use of historical analogies and legal precedents as discursive instruments that serve as a bridge between the past and the present will be analysed. This strategy points toward a final hypothesis of epistemic destabilization: by selectively sourcing from Western agencies such as Reuters or AP while simultaneously reframing their content through emotionally charged narratives, RT fosters a state of "epistemic confusion" in its audiences (H.3). Finally, the aim is to assess how RT's narratives can influence the broader discursive landscape surrounding Western foreign policy by challenging the normative consensus on sovereignty, intervention, and legitimacy.

## V. Methodology

The methodology of this research is grounded in a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that integrates Framing Theory and Securitisation Theory to deconstruct the strategic communication of Russia Today (RT). The work employs a critical discourse analysis of a 40-article corpus from RT's Russian-language digital ecosystem, specifically focusing on the coverage of three pivotal "external" conflicts: the Syrian Civil War, the Kosovo precedent, and the 2023 escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These cases were selected not for their intrinsic geographical proximity to Russia, but for their high

"analogical potential," serving as discursive mirrors through which RT reframes the war in Ukraine for Western and domestic audiences.

The study cases of Gaza, Kosovo and Syria were selected because they constitute a comprehensive typology of narrative tools: Kosovo provides the legal precedent, Syria provides military/state legitimacy, and Gaza provides moral erosion. Other conflicts lack this multidimensional “mirror” capacity necessary to reframe the perception of the war in Ukraine for a sceptical Western audience.

The timeframes selected for each of the conflicts have not been chosen at random, but rather based on turning points that offer significant historical parallels. This is why coverage of Syria begins in 2015, as this marks the Russian Federation’s first direct military intervention outside the post-Soviet space. The inclusion of Kosovo between 2022 and 2026 is based on two historical milestones that RT constantly revisits during the current invasion of Ukraine. These are the NATO intervention in 1999 and the declaration of independence in 2008. Finally, the selection of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on 7 October 2023 is justified because it acted as an immediate catalyst that brought this conflict back to the forefront of the international agenda.

During the research phase, a qualitative and comparative content analysis of the selected corpus was carried out. To ensure scientific rigour and the traceability of the findings, the analysis was structured across three levels, represented in coding tables:

- 1- **Macro-level**: Identification of frames. Each article was subjected to a basic classification matrix in order to identify the dominant framing.
- 2- **Meso-level**: Narrative deconstruction. For each article, key textual fragments were extracted where the selected categories were evident:
- 3- **Micro-level**: Analysis of analogical language. To this end, comparative tables were developed to detect terminological mimicry

The corpus for this analysis consists of articles from the Russian outlet RT, originally published in Russian and subsequently translated into English. Given the current legal restrictions within the European Union that limit direct access to RT’s digital platforms, this approach was adopted to ensure a more rigorous and comprehensive data set for examination. Furthermore, it should be noted that for future research, it would be highly

valuable to conduct a comparative linguistic analysis to determine how RT adapts its framing, tone, and use of language across different languages to suit specific regional audiences.

Ultimately, this research deliberately moved away from purely quantitative methods or automated sentiment analysis, as these often fail to capture the subtler nuances of analogical reasoning and mnemonic modes like resonances and continuities. While a purely quantitative approach might show frequency, it would bypass the "Expertise Shell" analysis, which reveals *who* delivers the message and *how* that delivery bypasses cognitive resistance. Furthermore, traditional propaganda studies were set aside in favour of a "counter-hegemonic" framework. This choice was made because the term "propaganda" often fails to grasp the complex interplay of public engagement in modern digital ecosystems and RT's specific goal: not necessarily to make audiences "pro-Russian", but to foster epistemic uncertainty and erode trust in Western normative authority. By focusing on these interpretive strategies, the methodology uncovers how RT transforms third-party conflicts into instruments for the moral and legal relativization of the Ukrainian invasion.

## VI. Development and Discussion

### a. Conflict as narrative instruments in RT

#### 1. Selection of "external" conflicts and their discursive function

*"Nemo auditor propriam turpitudinem allegans"*

*"A person who invokes their own reprehensible conduct cannot be heard"*

As Carl von Clausewitz (1976) argued, "war is not an independent phenomenon, but the continuation of politics by other means." Russia has successfully recognized the utilitarian nature of information and the value of victory not only in terms of territorial gains or the imposition of new policies and ideologies, but also in terms of using it to destabilize the internal politics of its adversaries. As previously argued, RT's objective is not necessarily to increase support for the Russian state, but rather to sow chaos and epistemic confusion.

With that being said, this research will draw on three conflicts—Gaza, Syria and Kosovo—to argue that RT uses these wars to activate a distinct frame that indirectly legitimises a specific aspect of the invasion of Ukraine. These conflicts are not covered as isolated events; rather, they are mobilised as “discursive mirrors” designed to reflect a worldview that justifies Russian revision. This strategy can be understood through Framing Theory, as RT selectively highlights external conflicts to structure meaning and guide audience interpretation beyond the immediate event.

By analysing these cases, it becomes evident that RT employs a strategy of analogical reframing, where the "sins" of the West in these regions are used to provide the moral and legal precedent for Russia's "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine. Each narrative meticulously seeks to normalise certain terminology that is subsequently used to refer to the “Ukrainian special military operation”.

### **The Syrian Conflict: legitimisation of “defensive intervention”**

Syria represents the Russian Federation's inaugural military intervention outside post-Soviet space. In 2015, it launched a direct military intervention at the request of the Syrian government. Moscow stated that its aim was to combat terrorist groups in the region that were threatening Syria's statehood. This involvement marked a strategic departure from previous operations, as the Kremlin began to take advantage of conflict to consolidate its role as a decisive participant in international affairs and the emerging multipolar order.

The discursive function of Syria in relation to Ukraine is threefold. First, the operation was framed as a defensive intervention, under which it legitimised military action and Russia as a stabilising actor narrative. This process reflects elements of securitisation, through which threats such as terrorism or Western intervention are discursively constructed to justify extraordinary political and military measures. Second, it established the precedent of sovereignty under a strict, Westphalian and inviolable interpretation. RT emphasizes that the West does not respect sovereignty, which indirectly supports the Kremlin's claim that Western "meddling" in Ukraine necessitated a Russian response to protect ethnic minorities and its own borders. Third, it utilizes the "White Helmets" Narrative to sow epistemic confusion. By framing Western humanitarian efforts in Syria as "propaganda tools," RT prepares its audience to view Western reports of Russian atrocities in Ukraine with immediate scepticism. In terms of a soft power perspective,

these framings contribute to protecting Russia as a legitimate and responsible global actor within an alternative multipolar order.

### **Kosovo: legitimisation of “precedent-based secession” and selective sovereignty**

In 2008, Kosovo was declared an independent nation and, since then, has been one of the most contested cases in international law, primarily due to NATO’s intervention and the subsequent recognition of Kosovo’s statehood by a significant number of Western states. Indeed, the case of Kosovo is continually revived in the Russian media to reframe and criticise Western institutions, and more specifically, potential Euro-Atlantic integration. In this regard, it serves as a paradigmatic case in which selective sovereignty and Western inconsistency are made evident. To this end, NATO is portrayed as aggressive, hegemonic, provocative and hostile, whilst Russia is presented as the region’s great protector (Metodieva, 2019).

The Balkans have been a region of vital importance due to their geostrategic position between East and West. In this regard, a causal link is established between European values or Western intervention; resulting in instability and political chaos. This chaos is subsequently exploited by Russia to distract the international community from its actions in Ukraine.

A recent study has shown that, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia has intensified its influence in the region through its media outlets (RT Balkans and Sputnik) and the Wagner Group in Serbia (Slavková, Grabovac and Grabovac, 2023, pp. 25–26). RT’s narratives surrounding Kosovo operate within a post-truth logic, in which competing interpretations of international law are amplified in order to blur normative distinctions. In other words, it contributes to an environment in which legal principles appear contingent and politically instrumental rather than universally applicable.

Three primary discursive functions can be identified in this context. First, Kosovo serves to legitimise what can be described as “precedent-based secession”. The recognition of statehood by several Western states diminishes the exceptional nature of Crimea or eastern Ukraine, presenting the principle of territorial integrity not as an absolute but as something applied selectively.

Second, the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia—conducted without explicit authorisation from the United Nations Security Council—is framed as a violation of international law.

This enables RT to construct a narrative of moral and legal equivalence, in which Russia's actions in Ukraine are presented not as exceptional, but as comparable to prior Western practices. In this sense, elements of securitisation are also evident, as the protection of vulnerable populations is invoked to justify intervention, mirroring discursive patterns previously attributed to Western actors.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: legitimisation of double standard**

On 7 October 2023, the terrorist group Hamas stormed Israel's borders, launching a multi-pronged attack by air, land and sea, an event that reverberated across the international stage. The attack came at a time when Israel had begun a process of diplomatic normalisation with other Arab countries through the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020. The attack functioned as a catalyst for reintroducing the Palestinian conflict into the forefront of the international agenda.

The discursive function, within RT's broader geopolitical communication strategy regarding this protracted and complex conflict, is divided into three main themes. The key focus of its utility lies in highlighting Western hypocrisy in international politics. Within this narrative framework, RT emphasises how Western governments strongly condemn the invasion of Ukraine, amongst other things, whilst showing tolerance towards the atrocities committed by the Israeli government in the Gaza Strip following the attack on 7 October. In this regard, the coverage focuses on the humanitarian cost of the conflict, as well as the ongoing human rights violations attributed to Israel as a Western ally. Through this narrative construction, the Russian state—and consequently RT—seeks to delegitimise the moral discourse of Western powers, presenting them as inconsistent actors within the very normative system they claim to defend.

The second discursive function of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies in the moral equivalence drawn between conflicts. By juxtaposing situations such as Gaza and Ukraine, this narrative framework promotes the idea that all wars cause human suffering and civilian casualties. In this way, it undermines the perception of the Ukrainian conflict as exceptional, presenting it as just one among a series of conflicts characterised by humanitarian consequences

Finally, this conflict has also had a significant media impact in terms of public trust in news sources. Discrepancies in casualty figures reported by different media outlets, as

well as the use of differing terminology to describe events and the actors involved, have contributed to greater scepticism among audiences regarding potential political bias in media discourse. This climate of mistrust fosters the emergence of a public that is more sceptical of Western institutions and governments, thereby creating conditions conducive to the circulation of alternative and counter-hegemonic narratives, such as those promoted by RT.

## 2. Construction of responsibility and moral asymmetry

A necessary starting point for the analysis is the examination of how responsibility is constructed and how this process gives rise to what can be understood as “moral asymmetry.” The attribution of responsibility is defined as ‘the explicit assignment of moral responsibility for problems in society to individuals and groups, achieved through the construction of causality and blame frames’ (Simonsen, 2024).

### Figure 1: Israeli-Palestinian Coverage: Attribution of responsibility

"This is what **Washington** and its **allies** had to do (...) But instead of actively working on the Palestinian-Israeli settlement, these idiots climbed into our house and help the **neo-Nazis (...)**"

Source: ["Iron swords" in response to the "Al-Aqsa Flood": what is known about the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict — RT in Russian](#) (October 7 2023, 14:19)

"Lloyd Austin (...) said that the Pentagon intends to provide Israel with **everything it needs (...)**"

Source: [Biden called Netanyahu and supported Israel's right to defend itself – RT in Russian](#) (October 7 2023, 17:31)

"At least 100 people were killed [Israel](...) The death toll as a result of Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip has reached 198 [Gaza]."

Source: [The Israeli army confirmed that Hamas captured prisoners and took them to the Gaza Strip – RT in Russian](#) (October 7 2023 17:50)

“The Israeli Minister of Energy signed a decree to cut off the supply of electricity to the Gaza Strip”

Source: [Death toll as result of escalation in Israel rises to 250 — RT in Russian](#) (October 7 2023, 22:38)

Additionally, Gail Sahar’s book *Blame and Political Attitudes* (2023), established how the current literature on political opinions has been summarised into two main elements: a person’s belief system (conservative or liberal) and their attitudes towards specific political issues. However, the author suggests that it is not these elements in isolation, but the attribution of the perceived cause of a given issue that determines political positioning (Sahar, 2023). Blame has played a fundamental role in shaping public opinion on issues such as race, terrorism, poverty and even conflicts. Attributing responsibility is, by its very nature, a political act.

### Figure 2: Syrian Conflict: Attribution of responsibility

*"(...)the leader of the Syrian armed opposition, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, said that Syria gave Russia the opportunity(...)"*

Source: [Syria's opposition says it gave Russia a chance to reconsider relations with Syrians – RT in Russian](#) (December 14, 2024, 19:17)

"This is a kind of litmus test of how other countries treat the establishment of peace... If they [foreign states] remain committed to maintaining tensions... they can make a comment that is not very pleasant."

Source: ["A terrorist attack has been committed": 14 Syrian servicemen were killed in a bus explosion in Damascus – RT in Russian](#) (October 20, 2021, 13:29)

"This is not the first time that Russians have been portrayed as villains in Call of Duty games."

Source: ["White Helmets" against Russians: the creators of the Call of Duty game showed their version of good and evil — RT in Russian](#) (June 1, 2019, 21:06)

*"(...)leading TV channels talk about the threat to the entire mission and the betrayal of allies by Washington."*

Source: [Opinions are divided: what the United States thinks about Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria — RT in Russian](#) (December 21, 2018, 18:39)

“The White Helmets (...) was previously accused of staging chemical attacks (...) everything is pre-staged, everything is so neatly filmed.”

Source: ["I will be expelled from the United States": Roger Waters on his civic position, the White Helmets and the anti-Russian campaign in the West – RT in Russian](#) (September 7, 2018, 20:26)

“The White House also believes that US strikes on these forces could draw the Americans deeper into the Syrian conflict.”

Source: [Media: The White House fears that the US base in Syria may be captured by Iranian forces – RT in Russian](#) (May 13 2018, 10:39)

However, when we focus on specific actors, the concept of blame sustains a dichotomy between good and evil; the accused and the accuser; the morally wrong and the morally justified. In turn, it determines who belongs to ‘us’ and who belongs to ‘them’ – and is therefore part of a common enemy.

In conflict reporting, assigning blame can lead societies to view war as a normal part of the state of affairs. This frame, of “us vs them” can lead to the perception of conflict as “nationalistic, crisis-driven, win-lose situation and the attribution of blame to specific values (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). Not only that, but it can even desensitise the audience to the suffering of the adversary, creating a public opinion that is passive in the face of the atrocities committed (Nagar and Maoz 2017).

As aforementioned, RT’s coverage reveals a pattern of attributing blame to the West, which in turn facilitates the construction of a moral hierarchy in which Russia appears as a reactive or comparatively legitimate actor. This is achieved by appealing to the ‘hypocrisy’ of Western actors and Russia’s ‘responsibility’ to respond to it, thereby, in a sense, providing a moral justification for its actions.

In the articles selected for this analysis, we have also identified what Thomas R. Wells (2017) terms ‘whataboutism’—that is, a rhetorical tactic whereby those accused of wrongdoing shift the focus away from absolute moral judgement by drawing relative comparisons. In this regard, the West has provided Russia with arguments to make this appeal to Western hypocrisy regarding the discrepancy between words and deeds. RT’s success in this regard has lain in its ability to identify these inconsistencies and amplify them to create a certain moral equivalence.

These three cases highlight the hypocrisy of the West, accused of “selective humanitarianism”, under which it condemns some wars under humanitarian rhetoric whilst remaining silent on others. This selective interpretation is utilised to erode the normative authority of Western institutions.

<b>Figure 3: NATO’s intervention in Kosovo: Attribution of responsibility</b>
<i>"The United States (...) wants to curtail the activities of the NATO-led forces in Kosovo (KFOR) (...)"</i>
Source: <a href="#">Politico: US is putting pressure on NATO to end alliance missions in Iraq and Kosovo – RT in Russian</a> (February 19 2026, 10:06)
Dmitry Medvedev ironically appealed to the American president to accelerate the issue of Greenland's accession (...)"
Source: <a href="#">Serbian President Vučić drew parallels between the situations with Greenland and Kosovo – RT in Russian</a> (January 12 2026, 16:49)
"If we are offered to recognize Kosovo and become a member of the EU, we will never do it."
Source: <a href="#">Vulin: Serbia will never recognize Kosovo in exchange for joining the EU – RT in Russian</a> (October 25 2024, 04:09)
"People can no longer tolerate 'such a dose of hypocrisy and untruth'."
Source: <a href="#">Vučić: Serbs are tired of hearing about the integrity of Ukraine against the backdrop of ignoring Kosovo – RT in Russian</a> (October 22, 2024, 01:12)
The EU cannot require the country to join anti-Russian sanctions against the backdrop of the discussion of Serbian borders."
Source: <a href="#">Vučić: Withdrawal of peacekeepers from Kosovo is not a reason to support sanctions – RT in Russian</a> (July 22 2024, 10:07)
"The United States... will allocate up to \$650 thousand for 'strengthening independent media' (...) in partially recognized Kosovo.
Source: <a href="#">U.S. to allocate up to \$650,000 for "strengthening independent media" in Kosovo — RT in Russian</a> (February 22 2023, 18:51)
"(...) assigning Belgrade the role of an aggressor (...) events that took place on May 26 (...) are real terrorism against civilians."

### 3. Implicit references and narrative parallels

In the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas stated that when we speak of things we do not know directly, we use words drawn from what we do know through experience. In these situations, we use language analogically. Language allows us to extend our knowledge from the known to the unknown through relationships of similarity. The use of analogies in IR can be understood as “a comparison of a known past event or person with a contemporary but unfamiliar event or person in order to identify common aspects between the two” (Noordenbos et al., 2025).

Hence, words constitute ‘labels for meanings’ (Shaqaqi, 2025). However, there is a divide between those who consider meanings to be fixed and to share a common essence (Plato’s world of ideas); and others, such as Wittgenstein (1953), who argue that words do not necessarily have a common referent and therefore, depend on social context. The latter adds that the focus should be on how people perceive and use words.

In contemporary politics, and indeed in so-called hybrid warfare, a pattern has been identified whereby the closer the past is made to appear present, the more actively involved audiences may become (Ibid.). It is this operationalisation of memory that is embedded in kinetic and informational warfare.

In an analysis of media coverage of the war on Aydiyyka in 2022, Noordenbos et al. (2025) discovered how the use of memory strategies adapts to the dynamics of the battlefield. They identified four mnemonic modes through which this historical narrative can be employed: resonances, analogies, repetitions and continuities. In the following sections, these four elements will be identified to test the hypothesis that RT does indeed use these resources to create ‘discursive mirrors’ of external conflicts.

## b. Analogical reframing of the war in Ukraine

### 1. The role of historical and legal precedents

The Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory has highlighted the existence of divergent regional interpretations of international law (Labuda, 2025). In this context, the international legal order is undergoing a phase of adaptation due to the multipolarity and pluralism of values that this entails. In this vein, Kocak (2023) argues that current dynamics reflect a clear “polysemy in universal values”; that is, the same terminology is used to refer to them, but they possess different meanings.

Indeed, this multipolarity has had structural effects on the legitimacy of intervention, international justice and global governance. International law is not immune to power dynamics, and in this regard, the media act as agents that amplify these dynamics (Selvarajah & Fiorito, 2023). In doing so, they amplify the narratives of the elites in order to legally legitimise their strategic objectives. Historical and legal precedents thus constitute tools of power, legitimisation and mobilisation that operate structurally in times of crisis.

On the one hand, historical memory shapes behaviour: it acts as a prism through which citizens reinterpret current conflicts. In this sense, collective memory can act as a catalyst for mistrust or resentment through the use of historical analogies, which allow past events to be compared with present situations. However, this approach carries risks, as such memory can be selective and operate as a cognitive shortcut aimed at garnering support for strategic objectives.

RT usually tends to frame these memory narratives by quoting or commenting foreign leaders while borrowing profusely from statements by Russian Foreign Ministry:

*"Netanyahu announced that Hamas must be destroyed as a whole and as a military force. It sounds like demilitarization. He also said that extremism must be eliminated in Gaza. It sounds like denazification."*

Source: [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with RIA Novosti and Rossiya 24 TV on current foreign policy issues, Moscow, December 28, 2023 - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation](#)

Such rhetorical parallels suggest a strategic effort to universalise this terminology, thereby reducing its perceived specificity and controversial nature in relation to the Ukrainian case. The use of terms such as ‘denazification’ evokes a sense of historical awareness and continuity among the Russian audience, as it carries strong moral connotations from the Second World War, without the need for an explicit comparison. Noordenbos et al. (2025) labelled the use of key words with strong moral associations as “resonance”.

<b>Figure 4: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Narrative parallels and historical precedents</b>
<p>“Now there is a <b>“special security situation”</b> throughout the country”</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Death toll as result of escalation in Israel rises to 250 — RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023, 22:38)</p>
<p><b>“(…) captured</b> Israeli citizens and took them to the Gaza Strip. The exact number of prisoners is unknown.”</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">The Israeli army confirmed that Hamas captured prisoners and took them to the Gaza Strip – RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023 17:50)</p>
<p>“(…) assured him that Washington would support the Israeli side <b>in the right to defend</b>”</p> <p>“Netanyahu thanked Biden for his support and told him that <b>“it will take a long and powerful campaign in which Israel wins”</b></p> <p>“(…) previously said that the Pentagon intends to provide Israel with everything it needs to <b>defend and protect its citizens in the coming days</b>”</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Biden called Netanyahu and supported Israel's right to defend itself – RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023, 17:31)</p>
<p>“Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu(…) saying that the country is in a state of war, not a military operation”.</p> <p>“The Palestinian Radical Organisation Hamas announced the start of a large-scale operation against Israel”.</p>

“They did not succeed, because the Americans quickly transferred the latest weapons and as a result, Israel won an obvious victory. So here, too, if necessary, the Americans will help with weapons. This is not Ukraine”.

Source: ["Iron swords" in response to the "Al-Aqsa Flood": what is known about the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict — RT in Russian](#) (October 7 2023, 14:19)

"The beginning of the clashes (...) occurred 50 years after the start of the Yom Kippur War (...) Then a coalition of Arab states tried to reconquer the territories seized by Israel."

Source: ["Iron swords" in response to the "Al-Aqsa Flood": what is known about the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict — RT in Russian](#) (October 7 2023, 14:19)

"The Agreement (...) on the Prosecution and Punishment of the Major War Criminals (...) in 1945 [Nuremberg], is fundamentally different from the founding document of the Hague Criminal Court [ICC].

Source: [Lost Illusions, or How the International Criminal Court Became a Legal Entity — RT in Russian](#) (April 24 2025, 07:30)

On the other hand, the fundamental legal framework has an impact in terms of legitimacy and international support. Rules constitute standards of appropriate conduct between states and seek to provide predictability to their behaviour. However, the current distancing from multilateral institutions and growing mistrust of international law favour the reinterpretation of principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and the prohibition on the use of force. In this regard, states resort to previous legal decisions, treaties and norms to justify certain actions. Regarding the invasion of Ukraine, Allison (2024) argues that an attempt at recolonization underlies it, which “breaks the post-Second World War foundational norm regarding the prohibition of the use of force for territorial conquest”. In turn, RT frames its discourse in humanitarian terms in order to mobilise domestic support and lend moral weight to the intervention.

**Figure 5: NATO's intervention in Kosovo. Narrative parallels and historical precedents**

*"Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić compared US plans to annex Greenland with the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo..."*

Source: [Patriarch of Serbia asks Putin to prevent expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo – RT in Russian](#) (March 13 2026, 16:54)

"The West selectively interprets the principle (...) to self-determination. allowing its application in Kosovo, but not with the population of Crimea (...) where there was not even an expression of the will [referendum]."

Source: [Nebenzya on the West's consideration of the right to self-determination: there is in Kosovo and not in Crimea – RT in Russian](#) (January 30 2026, 12:19)

*"Vučić drew a parallel between US plans to annex Greenland and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence."*

Source: [Serbian President Vučić drew parallels between the situations with Greenland and Kosovo – RT in Russian](#) (January 12, 2026, 16:49)

The withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping contingent (...) in 2003 is not a reason for Serbia to now support sanctions."

Source: [Vučić: Withdrawal of peacekeepers from Kosovo is not a reason to support sanctions – RT in Russian](#) (July 22, 2024, 10:07)

"Brussels has no legal and moral right to tell Serbia to conduct politics."

Source: [Russian Foreign Ministry: EU has completely failed the role of mediator between Serbia and Kosovo – RT in Russian](#) (April 8, 2025, 12.49)

"The West is rewriting history to divide Russia."

Source: [The Russian Embassy in Serbia condemned the restoration of a Nazi's house in Kosovo – RT in Russian](#) (July 15, 2024, 18:39)

"The supply of weapons to the Kosovars... by NATO grossly violates the fundamental UN Security Council Resolution 1244."

Source: [Lavrov expressed Russia's concern about the situation in Kosovo – RT in Russian](#) (September 23, 2023, 19:28)

This mistrust towards international law gives rise to a reinterpretation of principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and the prohibition on the use of force. States draw on past legal decisions, treaties and norms to justify certain behaviours. Allison (2024) argues that the invasion of Ukraine constitutes an attempt at recolonization that “breaks the post-Second World War founding norm regarding the prohibition of the use of force for territorial conquest”. RT frames its articles within a humanitarian context in order to mobilise domestic support and imbue this intervention with moral weight and a sense of duty.

In the case of Russia, what stands out is its distortion of the principle of self-determination, presenting it as the basis for self-defence. This principle functions not only as a legal principle, but also as a discursive and performative one, enabling the West to be portrayed as an existential threat and justifying the adoption of extraordinary measures, such as military intervention. Welker (2025) analyse the role of myths and narrative in the Russian invasion of 2022 in how it was framed as something inevitable. This construction of a national threat is built through political rhetoric that makes strategic use of these historical and legal precedents. This legal framework is subsequently used to shape how the public should think about the matter.

## 2. The "Expertise" Shell: Analysing the Source of the Analogy

*‘Would they distort stories, or invent facts, or rework things, or twist a narrative?  
Absolutely. It’s less about changing history, and more about omitting facts.’*

***Interview to anonymous RT worker*** (Elsawah & Howard, 2020).

A defining characteristic of RT’s communicative strategy is its reliance on a sophisticated “expertise shell”, through which discursive layers are designed to detach the Russian state narratives within a veneer of Western professional “objectivity”. In multiple occasions, who delivers the message is even more important than the message itself because it

dictates the perceived objectivity by the audience. The primary method of authentication in RT is to select sources that the local audience considers credible, as this strategic choice of voices serves as a vehicle for constructing certain narratives. The persuasive effectiveness of a message is, in fact, intrinsically linked to the perception of truthfulness that the audience attributes to the source.

<b>Figure 6: Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The “Expertise shell”</b>	
<p>“This is reported by Al Jazeera”</p>	<p>Source: <a href="#">The Palestinian movement Hamas announced the start of an operation against Israel – RT in Russian</a> (October 7, 10:11)</p>
<p>“The Israel Defense Forces are currently attacking the Gaza Strip. This was reported by the Israeli Ministry of Defense”</p>	<p>Source: <a href="#">The Israeli Defence Ministry reported strikes on the Gaza Strip – RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023, 09:38)</p>
<p>This is reported by the Jerusalem Post// According to The Times of Israel</p>	<p>Source: <a href="#">Death toll as result of escalation in Israel rises to 250 — RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023, 22:38)</p>
<p>“Hagari’s words are quoted by The Times of Israel”</p>	<p>Source: <a href="#">The Israeli army confirmed that Hamas captured prisoners and took them to the Gaza Strip – RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023 17:50)</p>
<p>"AP © Manuel Balce Ceneta (...) This is reported by The Times of Israel."</p>	<p>Source: <a href="#">Biden called Netanyahu and supported Israel's right to defend itself – RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023, 17:31)</p>
<p>“(...) says political scientist and orientalist Oleg Gushchin. 'Now, behind all this nightmare (...) everyone has begun to forget about Palestinian affairs'."</p>	<p>Source: <a href="#">"Iron swords" in response to the "Al-Aqsa Flood": what is known about the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict — RT in Russian</a> (October 7 2023, 14:19)</p>

<p>"(...)TASS quoted him as saying. Earlier, The Times of Israel, citing medical services, reported (...)"</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Foreign Ministry: Russia calls on Israel and Palestine for immediate ceasefire — RT in Russian</a> (7 October 2023, 13:44)</p>
<p>"Strictly speaking, contradicts the principle of nemo iudex in propria causa(...) ut res magis valeat quam pereat(...)"</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Lost Illusions, or How the International Criminal Court Became a Legal Entity —RT in Russian</a> (April 24, 2025, 07:30)</p>

Not only that, but high perceived credibility reduces the recipient’s cognitive resistance, making it easier for them to accept interpretative frameworks that would otherwise be rejected as biased. In its coverage of the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October, RT drew on official Palestinian sources for the figures from Gaza and Israeli sources for the Israeli casualties, thereby creating the illusion of balanced reporting. This delegate authority enabled RT to avoid accusations of pro-Hamas bias.

The network’s main tactic is the manipulation of sources through omission (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). Disinformation is therefore achieved by omitting key facts to shift the public’s perspective. To this end, they quote Western authority figures, omitting certain aspects or taking them out of context. RT uses these figures to counter the media dominance of outlets such as CNN and the BBC.

<p><b>Figure 7: Syrian Conflict. The “Expertise Shell”</b></p>
<p>"This was reported by Syria TV (...)said Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Knifati, director of the Public Security Directorate (...)"</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Syria TV: New Syrian authorities detained Bashar al-Assad's cousin – RT in Russian</a> (January 31, 2025, 19:21)</p>
<p><i>"(...) the leader of the armed opposition(...) Abu Mohammed al-Julani, announced his intentions to conclude defense agreements with a number of countries."</i></p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Opposition in Syria intends to almost completely abolish compulsory conscription – RT in Russian</a> (December 16, 2024, 00:01)</p>

<p>"Earlier, Bloomberg wrote that the authorities of the Russian Federation are negotiating (...) on the preservation of military bases (...)"</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Syria's opposition says it gave Russia a chance to reconsider relations with Syrians – RT in Russian</a>(December 14 2024, 19:17)</p>
<p>"Vladimir Olenchenko, a senior researcher at the Institute of World Economy (...) political scientist Yuri Svetov (...) TASS quoted [Alexander Lavrentiev]."</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">"A terrorist attack has been committed": 14 Syrian servicemen were killed in a bus explosion in Damascus –RT in Russian</a> (October 20, 2021, 13:29)</p>
<p>“This is evidenced by documents published by the Anonymous group... according to American journalist Benjamin Norton, author of an article published on The Grayzone (...)"</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">"A terrorist attack has been committed": 14 Syrian servicemen were killed in a bus explosion in Damascus –RT in Russian</a> (October 20, 2021, 13:29)</p>
<p>"With details - RT correspondent Caleb Maupin."</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Opinions are divided: what the United States thinks about Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria –RT in Russian</a> (December 21, 2018, 18:39)</p>
<p>According to the head of the Center for Middle East Studies, Joshua Landis..."</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Competition between the parties to the conflict: what prevents the complete defeat of ISIS in Syria –RT in Russian</a> (October 31, 2018, 17:00)</p>
<p>Roger Waters is no expert in international relations, but RT treats him as such. His ‘authority’ stems from his status as a Pink Floyd icon.</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">"I will be expelled from the United States": Roger Waters on his civic position, the White Helmets and the anti-Russian campaign in the West –RT in Russian</a> (September 7, 2018, 20:26)</p>

The analysis of the 45-article corpus reveals that RT rarely presents its analogical reframing of the selected conflicts through the voice of the Kremlin alone. Instead it borrows the credibility of Western figures of authority—former military officers, politicians, diplomats—to deliver its strategic parallels. The pertinence of this strategy

lies in its ability to facilitate validation, as it will no longer be perceived as external Russian propaganda but “internal criticism Western voices”. As Elswah and Howard (2020) observe in their study of RT’s organizational behaviour, the network systematically recruits "Western dissidents" to act as narrative proxies.

These actors, in short, provide the “expertise shell” that bypasses the audience’s cognitive defences; not being told what to think by Russian authorities, but by a figure who shares their own cultural and institutional background.

Furthermore, this shell is reinforced by strategic appropriation of established Western news agencies, such as Reuters, AP, or AFP. This borrowed journalistic authority is identified by Hutchings and Tolz (2024) as a “dialogic interaction” with the liberal media order. It uses the “raw data” provided by these agencies but the framing of the fact is entirely constructed by RT.

In the specific cases of Syria and Kosovo, the use of the "Expertise Shell" serves an emotional and legal function. Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2021) argue that RT’s use of "alternative experts" is designed to challenge the epistemic authority of the West. By giving a platform to those who claim NATO’s 1999 intervention was a "criminal precedent," RT builds a technical, pseudo-legal shell around its own violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.

All taken together, achieve what is called narrative laundering mechanism, ensuring the normalisation of military intervention and the dilution of moral responsibility is not dismissed as state-sponsored disinformation.

### **c. Strategies for interpretive fragmentation in the digital ecosystem**

#### **1. Erosion of normative authority and moral consensus**

Having analysed the selected corpus of RT content, one might conclude that RT’s communication strategy has indeed evolved towards epistemic sabotage. This objective does not seek to define or publish an alternative Russian ‘truth’, but rather to fragment the viewer’s ability to distinguish between what is true and what is false. This has been possible to a large extent by the vulnerabilities of the digital ecosystem and the growing scepticism towards Western media, accused of biased reporting.

Rather than persuading the audience of the legitimacy of the Special Military Operation, RT uses external conflicts such as those in Gaza, Syria and Kosovo to flood the digital space with conflicting narratives. This creates a state of cognitive overload in which the truth comes to be perceived as unattainable or purely subjective. The Russian state thus benefits, as any normative condemnation of Russia is met with scepticism.

The erosion of normative authority is the second pillar of this strategy. According to Richter (2017), RT not only questions individual news stories, but directly attacks the ‘arbiters’ of international reality: the UN, the courts of justice and reputable journalism. The international order established after the Cold War designated these institutions, by consensus, as guarantors of truth and impartiality. However, RT fuels mistrust by portraying these institutions as political arms of Washington.

In the articles analysed on Kosovo (2022–2026), this pattern of portraying the West as corrupt is evident; consequently, the rules once imposed by the West cease to be valid. This functional delegitimization, as a result, allows Russia to operate in a regulatory vacuum where force prevails over the rule of law. Not only that, but Russia also uses funding to capitalise on external instability and conflicts to divert the international community’s attention and overwhelm institutions.

Finally, the fragmentation of the moral consensus is achieved through the narrative that the West has no moral right to criticise (whataboutism). As Yablokov (2015) aptly describes, RT uses conspiracy theories and accusations of Western hypocrisy to undermine any ethical superiority its opponents might claim. In its coverage of the conflict in Gaza, the channel does not seek to defend the Palestinian cause per se, but rather to highlight the United States’ ‘double standards’. This strategy fragments the audience’s moral perception: if all international actors are equally hypocritical and violate human rights, the invasion of Ukraine ceases to be a unique moral transgression and becomes standard geopolitical practice.

All of this points to a structural shift in the international system, with the universality of human rights now being selectively exploited. It does not attribute responsibility to the direct actors but to the US government, which appears incapable of guaranteeing order. “RT constructs a narrative in which Russia transcends its role as a party to the conflict to position itself as a guarantor of state stability. In this sense, RT presents itself as an

alternative voice that co-opts scepticism towards power and redirects it to destroy any basis of trust”.

<b>Figure 8: Syrian Conflict. Erosion of normative authority and moral consensus</b>
"Syrian Transitional President Ahmed al-Shara' will visit Moscow (...) to meet with Russian leader Vladimir Putin."
Source: <a href="#">Syria TV: Syrian leader al-Sharaa to visit Moscow on Wednesday to meet with Putin –RT in Russian</a> (January 27 2026, 00:18)
"The Syrian leadership sought not to provoke Russia and gave it the opportunity to reconsider relations with Syria."
Source: <a href="#">Syria's opposition says it gave Russia a chance to reconsider relations with Syrians –RT in Russian</a> (December 14, 2024, 19:17)
The terrorist attack occurred against the backdrop of the sixth round of discussions on constitutional reform in Syria (...) in Geneva."
Source: <a href="#">"A terrorist attack has been committed": 14 Syrian servicemen were killed in a bus explosion in Damascus –RT in Russian</a> (October 20, 2021, 13:29)
“After the start of the Syrian conflict, the British authorities created an extensive media infrastructure in order to discredit official Damascus”
Source: <a href="#">British Media Strategy: What Anonymous Documents on Syria Say –RT in Russian</a> (September 28 2020, 15:45)
"The notorious organization 'White Helmets' (...) associated with terrorists and engaged in staging chemical attacks (...) In the game, people in white helmets fight the Russian military."
Source: <a href="#">"White Helmets" against Russians: the creators of the Call of Duty game showed their version of good and evil –RT in Russian</a> (June 1 2019, 21:06)

"(...)some of them are exploited by criminals. RT talked to homeless Syrian children."

Source: "I want everything to be as it was before": how street children in Syria have to survive on the streets –RT in Russian (May 3, 2019, 20:37)

"Back in early 2018, Washington stated that the international coalition had completely defeated the Islamic State. However, a recent terrorist attack... killed more than 40 fighters... and the territory controlled by IS expanded."

Source: Competition between the parties to the conflict: what prevents the complete defeat of ISIS in Syria –RT in Russian ( October 18, 2018, 17:00)

"The Dutch government stops funding (...) due to the recognition of this strategy as ineffective."

Source: The Netherlands will stop funding the White Helmets organization –RT in Russian (September 10, 2018 15:05)

### **Figure 9: NATO's intervention in Kosovo. Erosion of normative authority and moral consensus**

"(...) loss of jobs (...) mass exodus of Orthodox Serbs (...) where there are about 1,300 Orthodox churches and monasteries, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites."

Source: Patriarch of Serbia asks Putin to prevent expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo – RT in Russian (March 13 2026, 16:54)

"Explained Guterres' words about the inapplicability of the right to self-determination to Crimea and Donbass, unlike Greenland, by the fear of losing his job against the backdrop of US President Donald Trump's initiative to create a Peace Council."

Source: Nebenzya on the West's consideration of the right to self-determination: there is in Kosovo and not in Crimea – RT in Russian (January 30 2026, 12:19)

"International law suddenly comes into force (...) I'm just afraid of the time we're entering (...) the open 'Pandora's box' can no longer be controlled."

Source: Serbian President Vučić drew parallels between the situations with Greenland and Kosovo – RT in Russian (January 12 2026, 16:49)

<p>"The West does not abandon coup attempts in Serbia."</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Vulin: Serbia will never recognize Kosovo in exchange for joining the EU – RT in Russian</a> (October 25 2024, 04:09)</p>
<p>Citizens (...) are tired of (...) the hypocrisy of international politicians who emphasize the high importance of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and ignore the territorial integrity of Serbia."</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Vučić: Serbs are tired of hearing about the integrity of Ukraine against the backdrop of ignoring Kosovo – RT in Russian</a> (October 22, 2024, 01:12)</p>
<p><i>"The European Union has completely failed the role of a mediator(...) the EU for many years has failed to fulfill its commitment to create a community of Serbian municipalities."</i></p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Russian Foreign Ministry: EU has completely failed the role of mediator between Serbia and Kosovo – RT in Russian</a> (April 8 2025, 12:49)</p>
<p><i>"Pristina acts with the tacit consent of the West and does not pay attention to the indignation of Belgrade (...)"</i></p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">The Russian Embassy in Serbia condemned the restoration of a Nazi's house in Kosovo – RT in Russian</a> (July 15, 2024, 18:39)</p>
<p>"As the sponsor is, so is the result (...) Brussels is imposing its 'mediation services' on Azerbaijan and Armenia, bringing destabilization."</p>
<p>Source: <a href="#">Lavrov expressed Russia's concern about the situation in Kosovo – RT in Russian</a> (September 23, 2023, 19:28)</p>

## 2. Fragmentation of conflict perception

Through all this, RT uses its articles to fragment perceptions of the conflict and highlight the lack of cohesion within the Western bloc. It is not so much a matter of disseminating isolated facts, but rather of seeking to dismantle the narrative coherence of these conflicts in order to prevent the audience from forming a unified critical opinion on Russia's actions. Through the creation of alternative news spaces, it is possible to fragment public perception by means of disruptive analogical framing and the reversal of causality.

As has already been argued, RT rarely reports on Ukraine in isolation. Instead, it frames the conflict through the prism of Homs, Syria or Gaza. By forcing these comparisons, RT succeeds in making the viewer cease to perceive the invasion of Ukraine as a specific violation of sovereignty and instead see it as just another episode in a ‘global border crisis’ provoked by NATO. Through this constant analogical framing, the viewer’s attention is fragmented, as the exceptional nature of Russian aggression on Ukrainian soil is diluted.

RT, on the other hand, achieves this fragmentation by dissolving the notion of causality. In conventional journalism, a conflict is perceived through a cause-and-effect logic. However, RT’s narrative and its use of conspiracy theories as a form of public diplomacy (Yablokov, 2015) fragments this logic. Thus, Russian interventions are not presented as political decisions by Moscow, but as inevitable reactions to Western provocations. Consequently, RT fragments the perception of human and political agency. By highlighting the bias of Western media, it also fragments any possibility of an informed consensus based on an analysis of the structural causes of the war.

Ultimately, RT’s fragmentation of perceptions of the conflict aims to paralyse judgement. By presenting a world in flames where ‘everything is connected’ but ‘nothing has a clear explanation’, the channel succeeds in making Western audiences give up on trying to understand the conflict in Ukraine. The resulting perception is not one of support for Russia, but one of geopolitical fatigue and cynicism, a state in which the audience accepts territorial revisionism as a natural consequence of a chaotic and irreparable world order.

### **Figure 10: Syrian Conflict. Fragmentation of perception**

"The decision... caused a flurry of anger in the mainstream media... However, the public takes a different position: according to polls, the American people do not support US military intervention."

Source: [Opinions are divided: what the United States thinks about Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria –RT in Russian](#) (December 21, 2018, 18:39)

"Why is it considered acceptable to talk about Russians in this way? ... If any American... said such things about Jews or blacks, his career could be put to an end!"

Source: ["I will be expelled from the United States": Roger Waters on his civic position, the White Helmets and the anti-Russian campaign in the West –RT in Russian](#) (September 7, 2018, 20:26)

### **Figure 11: NATO's intervention in Kosovo. Fragmentation of perception**

"These initiatives of the Americans provoke a negative reaction from a number of NATO members."

Source: [Politico: US is putting pressure on NATO to end alliance missions in Iraq and Kosovo –RT in Russian](#) (February 19 2026, 10:06)

"Belgrade considers a referendum on joining the BRICS or the EU realistic."

Source: [Vulin: Serbia will never recognize Kosovo in exchange for joining the EU –RT in Russian](#) (October 25 2024, 04:09)

"People can no longer tolerate 'such a dose of hypocrisy and untruth'."

Source: [Vučić: Serbs are tired of hearing about the integrity of Ukraine against the backdrop of ignoring Kosovo –RT in Russian](#) (October 22, 2024, 01:12)

## **VII. Conclusion**

This analysis has sought to demonstrate how the war in Ukraine is being legitimised in the realm of information and symbolic discourse. Following a detailed analysis of the selected corpus, it can be concluded that the three hypotheses put forward have been confirmed. Regarding H.1, the study confirms that RT uses the conflicts in Gaza, Syria and Kosovo as 'discursive mirrors' and mechanisms of 'analogical reframing' to normalise the invasion of Ukraine. Regarding H.2, the research has demonstrated that RT succeeds in eroding the moral authority of Western institutions by highlighting their "selective humanitarianism" and "double standards", which consequently dilutes the perception of the exceptional nature of the Ukrainian conflict. Finally, Hypothesis 3 is validated by evidence of a strategy of epistemic sabotage based on the use of a 'shell of experts', appropriating Western sources and agencies to foster confusion and geopolitical

fatigue among the audience. All of this makes it difficult for the audience to distinguish between the truth and a biased narrative.

In this context, Russia Today emerges not merely as a state-run channel, but as a strategic actor in the ‘contemporary cognitive war’. Through an exhaustive analysis of the articles, it has been observed that the channel’s construction of its narratives does not merely seek the direct legitimisation of Russian actions, but has also consolidated a strategy of epistemic sabotage to fragment the ability of Western audiences to distinguish between the truth and a biased narrative.

In this regard, the theoretical framework provided by Framing Theory and Securitisation Theory enables us to understand precisely how RT selects and structures information on external conflicts—Gaza and Israel, Syria and Kosovo—so that they function as “discursive mirrors”. These conflicts are not presented in isolation, but are exploited so that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine ceases to be perceived as an illegal incursion and comes to be presented as a reactive and necessary response to an order led by a decadent and hypocritical West.

In short, the presented research has confirmed the initial hypothesis: RT uses analogical reframing mechanisms to normalise this invasion. Through content analysis, significant findings have been identified.

### **Israeli-Palestinian conflict: conclusion**

In its coverage of the conflict that began on 7 October, RT employed a strategy of terminological mimicry and moral asymmetry. It is through the use of “strategic objectivism” that RT employs to avoid the term “terrorist attack”. Instead, it develops technical, neutral language such as *krupnomasshtabnaya operatsiya* (large-scale operation) and *vzyali v plen* (taken prisoner). These terms were identically employed by Russia in the so-called “Special Military Operation”, evoking the narrative of rescuing civilians in the Donbas.

This discursive construction relies on attributing responsibility externally, shifting the blame from local actors to Washington. The conflict is thus presented as a failure of US leadership, suggesting that global instability is the result of US interference in Ukraine and its material support for Israel.

### **The Syrian conflict: conclusion**

In its coverage of the conflict in Syria, RT employs a strategy of tactical pragmatism aimed at consolidating Russia's image as a guarantor of stability, whilst undermining the moral authority of the Western powers. The channel has managed to transform its discourse on the armed opposition—previously labelled as terrorist—to present it as a “pragmatic partner” offering avenues for negotiation, prioritising the preservation of Russian strategic assets over ideological consistency.

RT draws on the Syrian conflict to reinforce the idea that the US is an unreliable ally and fiercely attacks the White Helmets as a symbol of Western hypocrisy and its ostensible humanitarian motivation. In short, it presents Russia as the builder of order, capable of adapting to changes in government; whilst the West, through association or silence, is portrayed as the saboteur.

### **NATO's intervention of Kosovo: conclusion**

Kosovo's narrative role has become evident in this investigation: RT has employed selective legalism and a barrage of extreme analogies designed to portray the Western-led international order as hypocritical and selective. Through what might be termed “whataboutism” or “*tu quoque*”, Russia has been legitimised to do the same in Crimea or the Donbas. This narrative relies on attributing responsibility for hypocrisy and abandonment, portraying Washington as an unreliable partner that stirs up conflicts only to then abandon its allies.

RT reinforces this erosion of normative authority by equating the grievances in the Donbas with the situation of the Serbian minority, elevating territorial disputes to the level of existential threats and “clashes of civilisations” against a supposed resurgence of Nazism in the Balkans. Through this fragmentation of perception, RT seeks to induce geopolitical fatigue and systemic cynicism in the Western audience. The ultimate aim is for the viewer to cease viewing the invasion of Ukraine as an illegal act of aggression and to accept it as the inevitable consequence of a “Pandora's box” opened by the West's hypocrisy in 1999 and 2008.

To conclude, this research demonstrates that RT has evolved from traditional propaganda towards a model of malicious information influence (MII) adapted to the digital age. By presenting a world in turmoil where ‘everything is connected’ but nothing has a clear

explanation, the channel succeeds in persuading the public to abandon the quest for ‘the truth’, accepting Russian territorial revisionism as a natural consequence of an irreparable world order.

## VIII. About the use of Artificial Intelligence

In the preparation of this Final Year Project, limited use has been made of artificial intelligence tools, exclusively to assist with practical tasks (e.g. style checking, organising ideas, summarising articles or generating citations in APA format). Under no circumstances have these tools replaced the research, writing and personal analysis that form the basis of this project.

In accordance with University policy, it is expressly stated that:

- Artificial Intelligence has not been used for the entire text or for the drafting of substantial parts of the thesis.
- Any use of AI tools has been critically and independently reviewed, reworked and adapted by the author.
- Ultimate responsibility for the content, analysis and conclusions lies entirely with the author.

Consequently, this Final Year Project complies with the provisions of the University’s General Regulations, which consider the use of AI to create complete works or significant parts thereof without proper citation, authorisation or acknowledgement to constitute plagiarism.

## IX. References

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