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"Telling the China Story Well"?
A Study of Chinese Discursive Influence in the European Union

Claudia Rives Casanova

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PhD Thesis

“Telling the China Story Well”? A Study of Chinese Discursive Influence in the European Union

Claudia Rives Casanova

Supervised by Dr. Oriol Costa Fernández

Academic tutor: Dr. Esther Zapater Duque

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"After spending decades in politics, I am convinced that probably the most important ingredient for success is shaping the narrative. This is the real currency of global power."

Josep Borrell Fontelles, HRVP.

Europe in the Interregnum. Groupe d'études geópolitiques. 2022

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SUMMARY

In today's interconnected world, the EU finds itself immersed in a global "battle of narratives" where discourse, power and communication come together to play a significant role through the shaping of norms and ideas. In this battle of narratives, China has become an increasingly proactive actor deploying numerous narratives about itself, its domestic and external policies, and about its vision for the international system. These narratives have a *strategically* intended audience which lays beyond China's domestic public and they are aimed at garnering support and legitimacy for Beijing worldwide. Within the EU, China holds varying degrees of sway among Member States, which further complicates the EU's ability to "speak with one voice" with regards to Beijing. This complex relationship, reflected in the often-criticized description of China as a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival, is something that Beijing is keen to exploit to its advantage through several means, including discursive influence aimed directly at EU audiences.

The study of narratives has traditionally remained at the margins of the IR discipline, with the exception of security studies, which have long accounted for how states strategically narrate war and conflict. In the current context of the geopoliticization of international relations, where actors increasingly contest established norms and ideas, new ways of communicating and exporting these norms and ideas have placed the study of discursive power back at the center of IR debates. Strategic Narrative Theory provides scholars with a sound theoretical and analytical toolbox to take communication seriously in these debates based on the premise that actors employ strategic narratives to exert discursive power and shape notions of what is accepted and not accepted in international affairs.

The literature of China's strategic narratives (SNs) has focused mostly on the formation and projection of these narratives, leaving the analysis of their reception understudied. This dissertation focuses on Chinese discursive power in the EU and builds on Strategic Narrative Theory to assess, on the one hand, how Chinese SNs are received among 13 EU Member States' traditional media through the analysis of 1577 news articles; and on the other hand, to understand why the reception of Chinese SNs varies across EU Member States by conducting a QCA analysis on this reception's variation. This research aims at improving our understanding of Chinese discursive power in EU domestic contexts by focusing on how discursive influence operates through the analysis of Chinese SNs as perceived by EU

traditional media, ascertaining the degree to which EU Member States' traditional media align or do not align with Chinese SNs, and unveiling potential explanatory factors of the variation in this reception of narratives. The focus is placed on audiences consumed messages (media) rather than on official discourse. In this sense, *influence* is understood as the ability to get foreign media to "buy into" specific messages about China itself, the Belt and Road Initiative, and China's vision of the international system as a "community of common destiny".

The results of this research show that most EU Member States' traditional media observed in this study hold negative views of China's projected narratives. However, a bit more than a third of EUMS observed receive these narratives positively and reproduce, with varying levels of similarity, China's projected messages. When trying to understand why the reception of Chinese SNs varies across Member States, the results of the QCA analysis revealed one general conclusion and three key insights: on a general note, this study showed that Chinese SNs' success is heavily context dependent. More specifically, this dissertation argues the following: firstly, that EUMS' traditional media alignment or non-alignment with China's SNs cannot be explained by one factor alone but rather a combination of these. Secondly, that while economic inducement is *enough* for EUMS to align with Chinese SNs, having a domestic context which exhibits certain "illiberal tendencies" is *necessary* for this discursive alignment to happen. In the case of the EU, discursive cooptation by Chinese narratives is not explained by economic need alone but rather it also requires governmental will through ideational kinship.

This research contributes to current debates in three ways. Firstly, from a theoretical and conceptual standpoint, it expands our understandings of the mechanics of strategic narratives by on the one hand, putting forward the notion of normativity to clarify the role that strategy plays in narrative action; and on the other, providing a rigorous operationalization of SNs to be applied in further studies. Secondly, this research has concrete methodological added value because it employs a novel mixed methods approach which bridges the quantitative-qualitative divide to demonstrate the usefulness of QCA analyses for IR. Lastly, from an empirical point of view, this dissertation contributes to the existing literature by 1) filling a gap in the study of the reception of strategic narratives, 2) concretely expanding our knowledge of Chinese discursive power in the EU by providing a novel typology of Chinese SNs and a variation spectrum of the reception of said narratives, and 3) providing an initial understanding of the domestic conditions which enable or limit Chinese discursive influence in the EU.

RESUMEN

En el mundo interconectado de hoy en día, la UE se encuentra inmersa en una "batalla de narrativas" global en la que discurso, poder y comunicación juegan un papel cada vez más importante debido a su capacidad para redefinir normas e ideas. En esta batalla, China se ha revelado como un actor proactivo que ha desplegado diversas narrativas sobre sí misma, sobre sus políticas domésticas y su política exterior, y así como sobre la visión que tiene para el sistema internacional. Estas narrativas están estratégicamente diseñadas para una audiencia que yace más allá de las fronteras domésticas de China, y tienen el objetivo de recabar apoyos para Pekín en todo el mundo. En la UE, China goza de diferentes grados de apoyo entre los Estados Miembros, lo que complica aún más la ya de por sí delicada tarea de "hablar con una voz única" en lo que a China se refiere. Esta compleja relación, reflejada en la referencia a China como un socio comercial, un competidor económico, y un rival sistémico, es algo que Pekín no duda en explotar para su beneficio a través de diversos medios, entre ellos la influencia discursiva que tiene como objetivo al público europeo.

El estudio de las narrativas ha permanecido tradicionalmente al margen de la disciplina de las RRII, con la excepción de los estudios de seguridad, que desde hace tiempo se ocupan de cómo los Estados narran estratégicamente la guerra y los conflictos. En el contexto actual de geopoliticización de las relaciones internacionales, en el que los actores impugnan cada vez más las normas e ideas establecidas, las nuevas formas de comunicar y exportar estas normas e ideas han vuelto a situar el estudio del poder discursivo en el centro de los debates de las RRII. La Teoría de las Narrativas Estratégicas proporciona una herramienta teórica y analítica sólida para estudiar el papel de la comunicación en estos debates, partiendo de la premisa de que los actores emplean narrativas estratégicas para ejercer poder discursivo y conformar las nociones de lo que se acepta y lo que no se acepta en los asuntos internacionales.

La literatura sobre las narrativas estratégicas de China se ha centrado en la formación y proyección de estas narrativas, dejando de lado el análisis de su recepción. Esta tesis doctoral analiza el poder discursivo chino en la UE y se basa en la Teoría de las Narrativas Estratégicas para evaluar, por un lado, cómo se reciben las NEs chinas en los medios de comunicación tradicionales de 13 Estados Miembros de la UE a través del análisis de 1577 artículos de noticias, y por otro lado, para entender por qué la recepción de las NEs chinas varía entre estos Estados realizando un análisis QCA sobre la variación de esta recepción. Esta investigación

pretende mejorar nuestra comprensión del poder discursivo chino en los contextos nacionales de la UE centrándose en cómo opera la influencia discursiva a través del análisis de las NSs chinas percibidas por los medios de comunicación tradicionales de la UE, determinando el grado de alineación o no-alineación de los medios de comunicación tradicionales de los Estados Miembros de la con las SN chinas, y desvelando posibles factores explicativos de la variación en esta recepción de narrativas. El foco se pone en los mensajes consumidos por las audiencias (medios de comunicación) en lugar de en los discursos oficiales. En este sentido, la influencia se entiende como la capacidad de conseguir que los medios de comunicación extranjeros "compren" mensajes específicos sobre la propia China, la Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta, y la visión china del sistema internacional como una "comunidad de destino común".

Los resultados de esta investigación muestran que la mayoría de los medios de comunicación tradicionales de los Estados Miembros de la UE observados en este estudio tienen opiniones negativas sobre las narrativas proyectadas por China. Sin embargo, algo más de un tercio de los Estados Miembros observados reciben positivamente estas narrativas y reproducen, con distintos niveles de similitud, los mensajes que proyecta China. Al analizar la variación en la recepción de las NSs chinas, los resultados del análisis QCA revelan a nivel general que el éxito de las SN chinas depende en gran medida del contexto. Por otro lado, los resultados resaltan las siguientes conclusiones: en primer lugar, que la alineación o no alineación de los medios de comunicación tradicionales de los Estados Miembros con las NSs chinas no viene dada por un único factor, sino más bien por una combinación de varios. En segundo lugar, que, si bien el incentivo económico es *suficiente* para que los Estados Miembros se alineen con las NSs chinas, para que se produzca esta alineación discursiva es *necesario* contar con un contexto nacional que muestre ciertas "tendencias antiliberales". En el caso de la UE, la cooptación discursiva por parte de las narrativas chinas no se explica únicamente por la necesidad económica, sino que también requiere la voluntad gubernamental a través del alineamiento ideacional.

Esta investigación contribuye a los debates actuales en tres maneras. En primer lugar, desde un punto de vista teórico y conceptual, amplía nuestra comprensión de la mecánica de las narrativas estratégicas, por un lado, proponiendo la noción de normatividad para aclarar el papel que desempeña la estrategia en la acción narrativa y, por otro, proporcionando una operacionalización rigurosa de las NSs para su aplicación en estudios posteriores. En segundo lugar, esta investigación tiene un valor añadido metodológico concreto al emplear un novedoso

enfoque de métodos mixtos que salva la distancia cuantitativa-cualitativa para mostrar la utilidad de los análisis QCA para la disciplina de las Relaciones Internacionales. Por último, desde un punto de vista empírico, esta disertación contribuye a la literatura existente al 1) llenar un vacío en el estudio de la recepción de narrativas estratégicas, 2) ampliar concretamente nuestro conocimiento del poder discursivo chino en la UE al proporcionar una tipología novedosa de las NSs chinas y un espectro de variación de la recepción de dichas narrativas, y 3) proporcionar una comprensión inicial de las condiciones domésticas que facilitan o limitan la influencia discursiva china en la UE.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CIBN	China International Broadcasting Network
CNC	China Network Corporation
DCD	Deviant consistency in degree
DCK	Deviant consistency in kind
DEM	Democracy condition
ECON	Economy condition
ESA	Enhanced Standard Analysis
EUMS	European Union Member States
GOV	Government condition
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ID	Identity
IDNA	Identity narrative
IS	Issue
ISNA	Issue narrative
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NP	Newspapers
PRESS	Freedom of the press condition
PRI	Proportional reduction of inconsistency
QCA	Qualitative Comparative Analysis
SNs	Strategic narratives
SNT	Strategic Narratives Theory
SUIN	Single condition that is an unnecessary part of a combination that, in turn, is insufficient but necessary for the outcome
SY	System
SYNA	System narrative
TRADI	Trade and investment condition

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

"[...] que siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio, y que de tal manera lo siguió, que juntamente començaron, crecieron y florecieron, y después junta fue la caida de entrambos."

Antonio de Nébrija,
Prólogo a la Gramática de la Lengua Castellana. Salamanca, 1942.

In 1492, Spanish scholar Antonio de Nebrija cautioned its patron, Queen Isabella I of Castile, that language is an instrument of [political] power. This advice came at a pivotal time for the Spanish crown, as Christopher Columbus would soon shore in the Americas and the Empire would be including overseas subjects alien to the culture of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. With it, he aimed at convincing Isabella of the relevance of a compendium on Castilian grammar, which she doubted. Nebrija, a trained humanist, was aware of the power of language as a tool for empires to imprint their legacy in History. In his prologue, he sought to remind his Queen that a common language was indispensable to make those "barbaric" peoples which her Majesty was about to subjugate fully understand the "laws that the conqueror mandates over the conquered" (translated by the author from Nebrija y Lozano 2011, p. 6). 15th century politics are hardly comparable to those of the contemporary world -thankfully-, yet the idea that discourse, communication, and power are intrinsically related and increasingly important begs as much royal attention today as it did six centuries ago. It is at the intersection of these three elements where this dissertation departs.

This introductory chapter is divided in three sections. The first one (section 1.1) aims at framing this dissertation's approach in the context of current debates about discourse, power, and communication, and illustrating how these three elements align in the shape of strategic narratives. The second one (section 1.2) puts forward the dissertation's research design, delving into aspects of scope, research questions, objectives, and specific research design choices. The third one (section 1.3) presents the overall structure of the remaining chapters.

1.1 Discourse, power, and communication

Discourse

In Nebrija's reminder we observe two different yet interrelated facets of language. One, of language as a container, which remarks on the vehicular power of any given language understood as a singular system of oral and written signs or codes to facilitate communication. The second facet Nebrija reminds us of is that of discursive power, which refers to the contents of the discourse itself, i.e., what in 1492 Nebrija referred to as "the laws" that would govern the relationship between the crown and its new subjects in the Americas. It follows, then, that agency in discourse enables the creation of specific knowledge or information and its eventual absorption by the receiving audience.

That discourses hold power is a well-established notion. Unsurprisingly, the power of naming was a common genesis tale for all monotheistic religions and as many cultures. "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"[1] and existence thus materialized by the power of words. In early Mesopotamian and Sumerian cultures, the first recorded actions both human and godly are of semiotic origin. Naming is a meaning-enabling action. Linguistics theories, such as the debated Sapir-Whorf hypothesis[2], tell us that languages have an ideational and explanatory impact on language-users. By naming and explaining things, language users make sense of the world. In other words, the acts of naming and interpreting -and the right to do so- are basic tenets of discourse power because they presuppose the acts of *viewing* and *interpreting*, which inform individual/social cognitive and value-based processes. We should differentiate here between two types of power inherent in discourse. The first one, already mentioned, is the power of naming reality. Being able to enunciate what we see in a manner that aligns with what we think or feel, like Adam naming the animals in Eden. Assuming Adam spoke modern English, *that* black and white striped animal *is* now a zebra.

The second type of power is the one derived from the authority to claim veracity in naming. That is, the power of discourse not abstracted from social relationships, but inhering social meaning. Agency in discourse as a world constructing tool. This aspect of discursive power is

[1] John 1:1, King James version of the Bible.

[2] The theory of linguistic relativity, developed independently by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf.

better illustrated by Foucault's theory of language and social power[3]. In his work, Foucault pays particular attention to the role of discourse in the nature and structure of subjectivity. Foucault's concept of discourses contains specific versions of knowledge, or "epistemes", which are part of the broader discursive battle over *meanings* in social relationships. Because discourse is inalienable from power and structures of power are historically contingent, the relationship between power and discourse is characterized by a back and forth between the presence and absence of control between discourses and audiences.

Continuity is therefore not a given in discourse. Discourses are limited, delineated, negotiated, and constructed by historically specific contexts. This relationship is mediated by the "apparatus of truth" (Michel Foucault, 1997), or the institutions which produce and disseminate said truth(s). They are the institutional sites of discourse that are responsible for the socialization of the subject, and they are tasked as well with articulating what is accepted or *normal* and what is rejected or *abnormal*. In other words, discursive power inheres the authority to dictate what is "true" from what is "false". However, as mentioned before, continuity does not naturally occur in discourse(s), as these cannot be cut off from their historical contexts. Discourse is thus in constant conversation with its contemporary structures of power, and since there are not one but multiple loci of power, discourse is continuously constrained, negotiated, and constructed by specific power struggles in what Foucault calls "the battle 'for truth'"[4]. The battle for discursive hegemony.

Let us go back to our English-speaking Garden of Eden, where Adam has used his God-given authority to designate what the black and white striped animal is (a zebra), and what it is not (other excluded options). Let us imagine Eve had somehow gotten a seat at the naming table. She may have contested the term *zebra* in favor of *striped horse*, which would have created friction over the animal's "real" name. Let us further imagine that Adam and Eve had an audience waiting to know-how to make sense of Eden and its animals. Suddenly, having a say

[3] A small disclaimer: this dissertation does not employ Foucault's conceptual framework, but his arguments are nevertheless very useful to illustrate the mechanisms which articulate the discourse-power relation upon which this thesis' premise is built.

[4] For more see Foucault, 1966, 1989 (original in French); Gordon 1980 (English translated collection of essays and interviews).

is key to legitimizing reality. Lucky for Adam, God did not seem keen on diversifying power and thus Eve wielded little authority to claim any "truth".

Discursive contestation, however, abounds in today's world as part of a global strife for power. The end of the Second World War brought along an international order with US dominance over ideas, norms, and models. The term "Pax Americana", further reinforced by the fall of the Soviet Union, was itself part of a discursive hegemony which would last until today. The Cold War was also a battle of two opposing narratives on how the world should be. The US' discursive hegemony, ultimately integrated in the concept of Western discursive hegemony, would act as the 1945-2010's regime of truth. The past fifteen years have been marked by contestation to Western hegemony in all dimensions of power (Badescu & Weiss, 2010; Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2013, 2019; Johansson-Nogués et al., 2020; Wiener, 2014, 2017), including a relatively new discursive dimension of power brought to the fore by new information technologies. Power struggles generate change in the established frameworks that underpin the general order of things and, quite relevantly, in the nature of power itself.

Power

Power and order are intrinsically related in the study of international relations. The discipline of IR has tried to make sense of continuity and change in the international order since its inception, with very little dispute over the centrality of power in this debate. The same cannot be said about the conversations around the nature of power and the mechanisms through which power is exerted in the international order. For realists and neorealists, the key to a stable international order lay in the balance of power between two great powers (Waltz, 1979). English School theorists argued that the international society was in tacit "orderly" agreement so as to manage anarchy (Bull, 2002). Neoliberals remarked on the role of institutions as paramount sites of power in an international order where states have more to gain from cooperation than from aggression (Keohane, 2005; Keohane & Nye, 1977). Analyses based on the Gramscian tradition see hegemonic orders as the perfect combination of power, ideas, and institutions (Cox & Sinclair, 1996) while constructivists move away from traditional interpretations of power and focus on the normative and ideational underpinnings of international order, how they shape actors' behaviors and how they are contested over time (Wendt, 1995, 1999).

For the most part, mainstream interpretations of the concept of power have been monopolized by a Western production of research aimed at understanding and interpreting Western powers' place in the international system, particularly US foreign policy. If we look at Power Transition Theory (Organski, 1958) or Hegemonic Stability Theory (Gilpin & Gilpin, 1987; Kindleberger, 1973; Krasner, 1976), order change is brought about when a new power which has achieved the same material capabilities (hard power) as the established hegemon, challenges this established hegemon by re-defining the rules of the international system. Be it in a bipolar or unipolar scenario, power has generally been understood in terms of material capabilities (Waltz, 1979). Traditional war and hard power were central elements of this worldview as they reflected a world marked by two world wars and the primacy of the US in world politics. Similarly, later accounts continue to place hard power at the center of debates around order and power transition by arguing that the source of stability in the international order comes from major players seeking to maximize their respective power to divert competitors (Mearsheimer, 2001).

As the historical context changed, other understandings of power entered the conversation about order and change. Perhaps the most well-known attempt to dethrone hard power as the main enabler of change in the international order is Joseph Nye's concept of soft power (Nye, 1990, 2021). Soft power as a concept was arguably originally aimed at countering realist interpretations of the inevitable downfall of the US as a superpower and it garnered much criticism even among its own proponents. And yet, one cannot ignore its value for the research agenda as it kickstarted a major trend in IR scholarship which moved away from a focus on the material nature of power -to greater and lesser success-, but nonetheless enabled analyses of non-material sources of power in a globalized and increasingly interdependent international system (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Nye, 2004, 2011).

In his work on the liberal international order, G. John Ikenberry argues that the US set up its desired framework for international rules and norms while cementing its influence over the international order through international institutions and the expansion of a capitalist economic order. States, including those aspiring at competing with the US, will abide by the established set rules and norms of the US-led world order as long as they stand to gain materially from participating in it (Ikenberry, 2009). Ikenberry implicitly ascribes relevance to the power of ideational orders as potential tools for socializing states. Likewise, one of the preeminent conceptualizations of the European Union's international role is that of Ian Manners'

"normative power Europe". Far from exerting the type of hard power that the US commands, the EU finds a source of international leverage in the promotion of a set of norms, rules, and principles which are closely tied to its identity as a hybrid actor (Hill et al., 2023). By exporting these norms, rules, and principles to the international scene, the EU garnered the legitimacy to establish what is *normal* in international relations. The discursive dimension of non-material power gains certain track in these approaches, as exemplified by Manners' argument that "the ability to define what passes for 'normal', in world politics is, ultimately, the greatest power of all." (Manners, 2002, p. 253). Manners' concept is also contested, for accounts of non-material power often preclude the pooling of material resources as influencing variable in desired outcomes. After all, even the EU exercises considerable coercive leverage as an economic and trading heavyweight in the world. Nevertheless, the non-material dimension of power and its implications for the international order became more relevant in the post-2008 world. In his famed 2008 "Post-American world" book, journalist Fareed Azaria prophesied that the next decade would be marked a shift in dominance over ideas, agendas, and models in what he called the "rise of the Rest" (Zakaria, 2008).

In the years after the global economic crisis of 2008, the rise of emerging powers and particularly that of China led to a shift in the balance of power towards a more multipolar system. This diffusion of power has brought about a corollary struggle for the support of norms and ideas which, due to the historical specificity of Western [discursive] hegemony, were considered universal, or in Foucauldian terms "true". An example of this is the responsibility to protect (R2P) norm, which has been challenged by China in international fora in favor of the rule of non-interference in domestic matters (López i Vidal, 2020). These developments have prompted a wave of IR scholarship which focuses on illustrating what the future international order will look like. In his inaugural Kenneth N. Waltz Annual Lecture "A World Order Without Superpowers", Barry Buzan pointed to a scenario in which multiple narratives and voices coexist, central to a varying degree and in constant competition in what he labelled "decentred globalism" (Buzan, 2011) . Buzan further noted that the key factors in the US' loss of power vis-à-vis powers like China would be of social, rather than material, nature. He pointed out that these factors would be triggered both domestically, -where the American public might lose interest in the US' status as a superpower-, and abroad, where other audiences might have less incentives to follow or may simply choose other leaders (Buzan, 2011, p. 6). Buzan's 2011 predictions came true during the late stage of the second Obama administration and even more so during Donald Trump's presidency. In a similar fashion, Amitav Acharya

likened the international system to a "multiplex world". In this metaphor, the international system is a multiplex cinema which offers an increasing variety of choices in terms of plots (ideas, world views), directors (power) and scripts (norms) where the making and management of order is no longer located in Western hegemons, but it is more diversified, less centralized, yet increasingly more connected by complex processes of interdependence (Acharya, 2017) .

Both Buzan's and Acharya's arguments resonate with emerging powers' tendency to not openly challenge the US but rather consistently push to claim their space in great power politics by presenting alternative notions of what is acceptable and what isn't in international relations. This is particularly relevant for this dissertation, as it indicates that the change in the balance of power is not only limited to the distribution of power in the international system, but it is also a change in the nature of power itself. This is not to say that material power is no longer relevant or that discourse was not a source of power in the past, as Nebrija indicates. Rather, it is precisely because of an increase in material power that emerging and emerged powers have found the confidence and the legitimacy to "speak up" and express their ideas, their opinions, their experience and interpretation of History, and more importantly, their view of how the world should be. Thus, it has become increasingly clear that material power is no longer enough in a state's pursuit of global influence. The ability to claim discursive space and articulate what is accepted or rejected in international affairs is equally relevant and it warrants as much scholarly attention. Such assumptions can be derived from the observation of China's deployment of a comprehensive set of tools to get its "voice" heard, to dissent from established narrative frameworks and enable new ones.

To summarize, discursive power is gaining track as a relevant source of influence in the world, ideational and normative frameworks are increasingly contested, and this warrants closer inspection. This dissertation stems from the premise that China, as a contender to global power, has recognized the value of discursive power in today's world and is arduously pushing for the acceptance of their own narrative frameworks, which articulate different views of what is *normal* and *abnormal* in international politics. The ways in which China goes about this push to claim discursive space will be explored in Chapter 2.

Communication

China has undoubtedly recognized the possibilities that new communication channels and new information technologies present for the projection of specific narratives. Technological

developments and a global media environment have transformed the ways in which actors use communication and discursive power *in* and *for* international relations. A relevant observation which articulates this thesis' research puzzle is that the combination of new channels of communication and discursive power constitutes a crucial tool for states claiming representation in the international arena.

Communication can be understood as the sharing of meaning(s) through information (Castells, 2009, p. 54). Communication has always been a central element of international relations, and our understanding of it has evolved alongside world events, and social as well as technological developments. IR has traditionally focused on political communication which, outside of domestic contexts, refers to diplomacy -particularly public diplomacy. In his 1994 book, Henry Kissinger meticulously weaves the story of contemporary state interaction reminding us that what happened in the international sphere used to be in the hands of elites (Kissinger, 1994). Diplomacy was something that happened behind closed doors, and transparency around world events was usually contingent on states' governments' will to disclose information to their population. The communication channel between government/elites and population was efficiently one way. Communication around state decisions happened *vertically* from top to bottom. By the second half of the 20th century, the advent of the digital age has triggered a shift in the structure of communication enabling a new type of communicative process around world affairs. This is what we now refer to as "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009, p. 55).

While traditional political communication has historically had a vertical top-to-bottom structure, the impact of "mass self-communication" in world affairs has generated a scenario in which communication flows in all directions, it encompasses an ever-expanding range of actors, and it is less limited by temporal and spatial constraints. This reduction of rigidity in the communication process has specific consequences for the communication environment and for the battle to control the messages expressed. Changes in the communication environment are perhaps more obvious. Developments in information technology have triggered the proliferation of media outlets, -including non-governmental sources-, while fast dissemination platforms and other tools such as social media and mobile phones have altered the way in which power is exerted through the acts of communicating and transferring information. This leads us to the question of control over the messages and over meanings. In the digital age of mass self-communication, sender and receiver are not static categories anymore. Anybody can, in

theory, take on each or both roles in different instances. The advent of mass self-communication and its impact on discourse power in political affairs can be defined in two general trends: the first one alludes to a diffusion of agency and authority over the messages communicated. The second one relates to how transparency and salience of world events increases, but so does the variation in *meanings* or interpretations around these world events (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

Traditional national media outlets tend to focus on issues that are relevant to that national community, but issues that are perceived as relevant for sections or the whole of the population are increasingly brought to the fore of the communication process by means beyond traditional media. When issues become debates on the Internet and social media, traditional media respond by participating and often legitimating a debate (Castells, 2012). This back and forth of agency over the issues that make it to national conversations opens up opportunities for other actors to steer said debates. Thus, controlling the information agenda or directing public interest becomes increasingly difficult for leaders. In other words, nowadays, a changing communication environment impacts how power is perceived and exerted through a diffusion of agency over the communicative process and authority over the messages communicated.

Through new communication channels and platforms, novel networks of communication allow for innovative forms of social and political organization and response to arise, often triggering repressive attempts to manage them by states' apparatuses. A most obvious example of these were the Arab Spring protests in 2011, but we find instances of similar events worldwide. In Latin America: protests regarding the economic situation exploded in Venezuela (2014), Guatemala and Ecuador (2015), and Brazil (2016); in Europe: from the Greek labor protests in 2012 to the 2020 Belarus protests, including 2015 Spain's Indignados, the 2018 Yellow Vests protests in France, and the UK pro-and-against Brexit demonstrations in 2016. In the US we witnessed mass demonstrations with the Black Lives Matter movement, the 2017 Women's March, and the December 6th, 2021 Capitol Raids; lastly, Asia has been no stranger to these online social movements[5] a clear example being the Umbrella Movement of Hong Kong in 2014.

[5] Term included in the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology. Refers to movements who have originated and are organized and coordinated through online platforms. Their actions are not necessarily limited to the online sphere. (Scott, J. 4th ed. 2015)

All these instances share another characteristic: they were narrated and monitored internationally. Given conditions of economic, cultural, and social interconnectedness, the discursive boundaries between the *individual*, the *local*, the *national* and the *global* are increasingly blurred (Sassen, 2008). This applies as well to communication and discursive power. IR literature has long accounted for how political actors are influenced by the interaction between the international and the domestic (Gourevitch, 1978), however these accounts generally ascribed to the tools and dynamics in the pre-mass self-communication era. As domestic audiences grow [more] invested in learning about issues outside of their own national spheres (Zürn, 2014; Zürn et al., 2012) and traditional and non-traditional media channels accommodate that interest (increased salience of international issues) (Oppermann et al., 2011), international political communication is unavoidably embedded in an environment where the sheer number of interpretations around world events also increases, exposing a multiplicity of perceptions and "points of view".

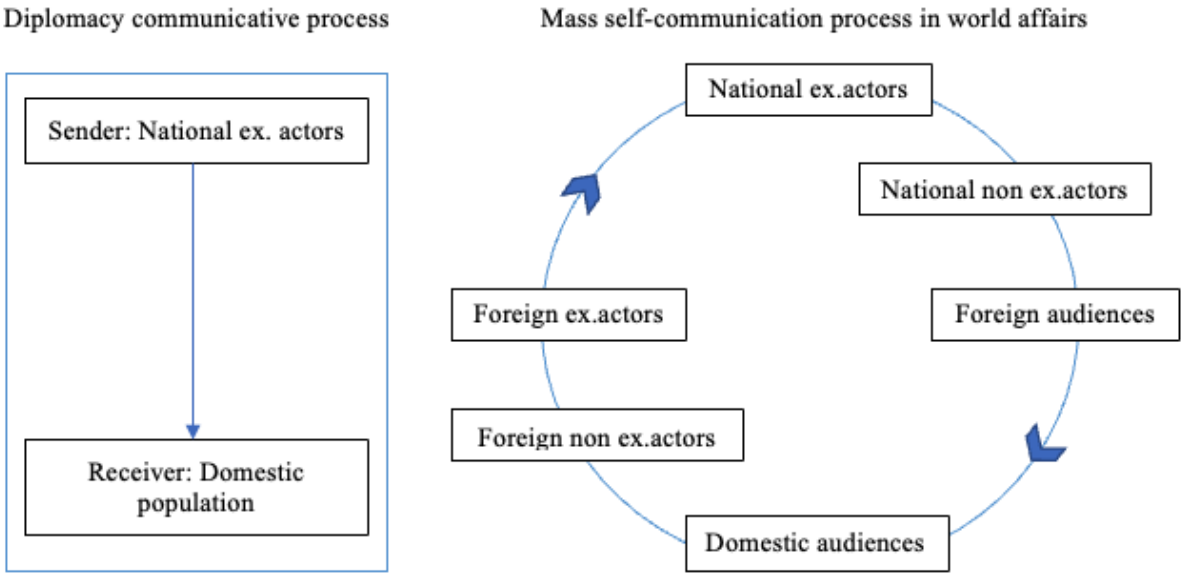


Figure 1: Communicative processes. Own elaboration

Given the diffusion of agency/authority and multiplication of interpretations in the current communications environment, political leaders have realized the potential that international broadcasting holds for the narration of their interpretations of world events. Foreign perceptions of a state's affairs have always had an impact on their legitimacy on the world stage. However, in the current communications environment, those foreign audiences are

within the reach of any state with the means to internationally broadcast their own points of view. Not only are networked events happening worldwide, but they are also broadcasted worldwide. The aforementioned organized protests echoed internationally, and states' attempts to control or repress them were equally aimed at managing global perceptions of their actions.

As a result, the current communication environment hinders the ability of governmental official channels to control the messages their populations receive, even in the case of extreme control over these channels such as in China. Recent instances which illustrate a combination of these two side effects of mass self-communication are certain responses to state-mandated COVID-19 vaccination, the emergence of the QAnon movement in the US, the response of certain sections of Russian society to the invasion of Ukraine, and the growing sense of dissent towards China's "zero Covid" policy.

Paradoxically, while the relationship between political leaders and domestic audiences becomes less "curated" or "controlled" in the mass self-communication era, this environment also opens up more opportunities for leaders to have a direct channel of communication with foreign audiences. Today's great powers have realized this potential and have invested in international broadcasters. Channels like the BBC, and France TV, or even more clearly propagandistic media such as Radio Free Europe, have been narrating world affairs to Western audiences through their international divisions for years. More recently, the scope and reach of other channels like Al-Jazeera, Russia Today, and China International Broadcasting Network (CIBN) has increased quite notably.

Alongside these more traditional media outlets, the advent of social media has also contributed to states' ability to influence conversations around world affairs. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter facilitate direct communication between overseas political leaders and foreign audiences and fuel the rapid dissemination of certain interpretations of world events. Taken together, traditional media, international broadcasters, and social media platforms conform a sort of global media environment. The idea of a global media environment stems from the natural world in that it projects the notion that information, media, and users - whether these are message senders or receivers, or both - exist in a symbiotic environment characterized on the one hand by fluid geographical, social, and linguistic boundaries, and on the other, by a direct and often instant transmission of messages (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017).

In this global media environment, political leaders and governmental actors seek to participate in the making of world affairs through the so-called "public diplomacy 2.0"[6], facilitated by the changes in the communication environment I have illustrated in the previous paragraphs. States' attempts to influence the conversation around world events vary in shape and scope. Going back to the example of organized social protests, the governments involved felt the need to counter a sudden vulnerability by controlling global communications (Steele, 2012). Sometimes this control takes the shape of radical disruption of communication flows, for example, in the case of democratic elections and regime change in Africa (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018), or the blocking of access to websites or apps that are considered harmful to a state's objectives that is routinely enforced in China and Russia (Feldstein, 2022). Other times, states attempt to project specific images or ideas to engage with audiences and to shape interpretations around world events. One recent example of an attempt to project a specific message surrounding an internationally perceived event to convince audiences worldwide is Russia's media campaign to present the invasion of Ukraine as a legitimate act of self-defense in the face of NATO expansionism *and* as an altruistic effort to rid Ukraine of rampant Nazism (Davies, 2022; Smart, 2022). Another example is China's internationally broadcasted vaccine and mask diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic aimed at projecting the image of a responsible and altruistic actor (Sun & Yu, 2023; Van Staden & Yu, 2021).

These internationally broadcasted attempts, which are reproduced in different languages and through a variety of channels depending on the preferred audience, amount to a specific communicative strategy. Political communication has been studied under many lenses, a recent one being that of Strategic Narrative Theory (SNT). SNT is a powerful tool to illustrate the nexus between discourse, power and communication, particularly in the context of mass self-communication, where narratives travel faster, are more diversified, and discursive hegemony is easier to contest. Against this backdrop, "strategic narratives are also an instrument of power by constituting the experience of international affairs" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 111). This thesis' approach to discourse power builds on the previous statement in three ways. Firstly, strategic narratives often articulate ideas and meanings about the world. Secondly, strategic narratives can have order-making power, depending on their degrees of success. SNs success

[6] If public diplomacy is the combination of practices that aim at presenting a country's policies, values, and culture to the people of another nation, public diplomacy 2.0 is the art of utilizing the tools that the Internet provides to do so. For more see (Arsenault, 2009; Graffy, 2009).

depends on elements such as the historical context, the framing, the message, the timing, and the predisposition of the audience. Thirdly, the study of the reception of narratives is crucial to understand how discursive influence works in specific contexts. Feedback from audiences plays a central role in the legitimation or contestation of ideas as the reach of strategic narratives increases fueled by the new mass self-communication environment. The more people one can convince to buy into their message, the stronger and more lasting the message will be. Some successful narratives have enough power to convince audiences that specific world events happen in a way and not another, or that the definition of some norms is one and not another. For example, China's discourse around the concept of democracy has been nothing short of conspicuous in its attempt to re-write the meaning of democracy according to its own ideational frameworks. For China, democracy is not the same everywhere (i.e., universal), but rather country dependent. And as such, it should not be judged by those who have different definitions of it. Moreover, China has fought hard to achieve this "better, more just" democracy through different historical moments, including but not limited to, the Cultural Revolution (or as it often appears in Chinese official documents: the socialist revolution and reconstruction) (China's State Council Information Office, 2021). In exporting this narrative, China is selling a new model of "democracy that works" to the rest of the world. And the world is listening.

If we approach the study of strategic narratives from an agency/structure standpoint, we may ascertain the following: on the one hand, increased agency and authority over the narration of international events contributes to a change *of* order, understood here as who gets to shape this system. On the other hand, the increased number of messages, interpretations, and meanings around and of the international system facilitates a change *in* order itself, understood as the mechanisms via which power operates. By articulating and projecting specific narratives, actors imbue them with constitutive power, insofar as they represent *that* actor's particular view or understanding of specific aspects of the world. Recalling Foucault, the current communication environment has enabled a battle "for truth" which has the potential to constitute entirely new discursive hegemonies at a global scale. As knowledge and meaning(s) tend to change over time, discursive hegemony is contested, toppled, and re-established. In this sense, narratives can be understood as instruments or tools operated by actors to enable their truth. Herein lies their appeal. Actors who recognize the opportunities that the communication environment offers may take advantage of the widened space to contest established ideas and meanings. Such is the case of China, who has long invested in the pooling of material resources to participate in the "making" of world politics through the deployment of strategic narratives.

The EU's HRVP Josep Borrell took stock of this in his opening remarks to the EU Heads of Delegation Meeting of 2020 when he spoke of a global "battle of narratives" around the COVID-19 crisis (EEAS, 2020). While Borrell referred to the global scope of this narrative battle, he was singling out China as a particularly active player in it.

Let us take stock of the main points addressed so far in this introduction. I started by stating that language and discourse are power wielding instruments capable of establishing what is normal and accepted, and equally, what is true from what is false, in any social interaction. I then sought to account for the discursive facet of power in IR scholarship, which revolves around interpretations of soft or non-material power and is increasingly taking more space in power transition theories, as emerging and already emerged powers seek to project their own voices and ideas in but also *about* the international system. Which brings us to the inevitable principal role of communication in this changing international system where actors embrace the opportunities that the new communications environment offers. In this scenario, the study of strategic narratives can help us account for how actors, in this case, China, use discursive power in the new communications environment to shape the ideas, meanings and behavior in the international order.

1.2 Research Design

1.2.1 Scope of the research, research questions and objectives

This thesis aims at improving our understanding of Chinese discursive power over EU Member States' traditional media. I do not strive to link Chinese discursive action to policy change, as making any causal claims in this relationship would prove difficult without taking into consideration non-discursive aspects. Rather, this thesis focuses on how discursive influence operates through the analysis of audiences' perceptions and their potential explanatory factors. There is an obvious connection between audiences' perceptions of specific topics and governmental decision making, as attested by the rise of topics such as polarization, misinformation and discourse power in research and policymaking. Yet whether discursive action influences policymaking is a topic that falls beyond the scope of this thesis. When I speak of ascertaining Chinese discursive power *over* EU Member States' traditional media, I am referring to the general aim of observing and quantifying China's attempts to influence

foreign audiences. In this sense, *influence* is understood as the ability to get foreign media to "buy into" specific messages. The instrument I use to perform this analysis on Chinese discursive power projected onto EU audiences are strategic narratives (SNs) (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017), and the focus is placed on audiences consumed messages (media) rather than on official discourse.

The specific objectives of this research are the following: 1) analyzing external perceptions of Chinese strategic narratives in EU traditional media, and 2) ascertaining the conditions under which these Chinese strategic narratives are either accepted or rejected in EU traditional media. In line with these objectives, this dissertation answers two research questions:

(RQ1) *How are Chinese strategic narratives received in 13 EU Member States' traditional media?*

This question follows a descriptive research objective aimed at systematically mapping and measuring perceptions of Chinese strategic narratives in EU Member States' national media debates.

(RQ2) *What conditions explain variation in the reception of Chinese SNs in EU Member States' traditional media?*

This question departs from descriptive objectives to unveil structural domestic factors (conditions) that explain why reception varies. Both research questions are answered in two different research stages described below. In the first stage, I conduct a narrative and discourse analysis on the media discourse of the 13 selected cases. The aim of this analysis is twofold: firstly, to identify which Chinese strategic narratives populate EU Member States' traditional media discourse. To guide this identification of Chinese strategy narratives, I ask three further questions[7]:

a. Strategic Narrative analysis: Does the data present the three SN types?
b. Sentiment analysis: How do EU Member States' traditional media interpret these received strategic narratives? (Positive, mixed, negative views)

[7] See Chapter 3, section 3.7.

c. Thematic analysis: What are the specific narratives (1) China as an actor, (2) the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and (3) China's role in the international system per case?

The second aim of RQ1 is to ascertain to what degree these Chinese narratives are pervasive in EU national media discourses. This gradation is reflected in an alignment – non-alignment spectrum of variation in which EU Member States are scored based on the sentiment analysis results.

Most studies on strategic narratives in IR are of descriptive nature. Some IR studies on narratives have sought to explain the meaning behind projected narratives as a way to illustrate the reasoning behind actors' policy responses to these narratives (see Colley & van Noort, 2022). Others have attempted to establish causal links between narrative projection and policy responses (see Langendonk, 2020). However, that causal link between rhetoric and policy change is still elusive without access to policymakers' minds. Quantitative studies on global media sentiment, including EU countries, towards China and the BRI focus on statistical analysis of macrotrends such as change in sentiment (García-Hererro & Schindowski, 2023; Garcia-Herrero & Xu, 2019). These analyses understand sentiment as a binary category and do not provide any insight into the nature of the messages garnering support or generating contestation. In this sense, the added value of narrative study lies in their ability to illustrate changing patterns in projected and received messages over time, thereby shining a light on the "buy-in" potential of narratives. This thesis follows Krebs and Jackson's advice to move away from "unanswerable questions about actors' true motives" (Krebs & Jackson, 2007a, p. 36) and examines how Chinese narratives are *received* (interpreted). In this way, rather than focusing on establishing causality between rhetoric and policy change, one can identify which rhetoric elements are more pervasive and vice versa among EU Member States, considering case-based idiosyncrasies. By looking at EU domestic media, it is possible identify which claims made by China about a series of topics are accepted, contested, or rejected by EU Member States' discursive environment. This can in turn help illustrate the strategic narratives EU Member States use to explain or justify their policy responses to the Belt and Road Initiative, or in a wider sense their positions regarding the shifting balance of power towards China.

It is practically impossible to analyze an entire national public sphere in today's global mass self-communication environment. Andrew Chadwick refers to this caveat as an impossibility to achieve systematic studies due to the simultaneous integration and fragmentation of

communication in new hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2017). Digitization and new dynamics of participation are changing how media systems operate, making it very difficult to study them in a comprehensive and systematic way. Even data access becomes compromised as the potential universe of units of observation expands exponentially with each new app or debate in already existing channels of communication. Karpf echoes this challenge and calls for "messy-but-productive solutions" supported by transparency and accountability in reporting to work around the increasingly unattainable goal of comprehensiveness in data collection (Karpf, 2012, p. 642). Bearing this in mind, I have chosen to analyze traditional media channels as partial representatives of national public spheres because they illustrate elite journalists and experts' opinions and, to a certain degree, they echo political inclinations and policy positions (governmental actors), while also informing public opinion (domestic audiences). For a detailed explanation of this decision see Chapter 4, section 4.1.

To answer the second research question, in the second stage of this dissertation, I conduct a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) on the results of the narrative analysis of stage one (i.e., the spectrum of variation, where each observed Member State has scored from 0 = non-alignment to 1 = alignment). QCA is both a research approach and a research method, and it is characterized by its set-theoretic foundation, its approach to causality in terms of causal complexity, and its adequacy to address "causes-of-effects type of research questions that ask for the reasons why certain phenomena occur" (Oana et al., 2021, p. 5) rather than attempting to explain the impact of a single variable in a given outcome. Taking a deductive approach, I construct a set of domestic structural conditions (e.g., economic factors, democratic resilience indicators, populism indicators, etc.) which are expected to have an explanatory relationship with the presence or absence of discursive alignment between Chinese narratives and EU Member States' domestic media debates. Taking the variation spectrum generated by the first analysis, QCA uses logical minimization to illustrate which conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for the alignment and non-alignment of EU Member States' traditional media with Chinese strategic narratives. In essence, the QCA tells us which structural conditions are present across all 13 cases when there is either alignment or non-alignment, and which are not, thus shedding light on which EU Member States are more or less likely to be influenced by Chinese discursive power. QCA is conducted with R programming language in the RStudio environment (now Posit). The different steps followed during the QCA analysis will be described in Chapters 4 (section 4.2) and 6. The figure below summarizes this dissertation's research design and stages:

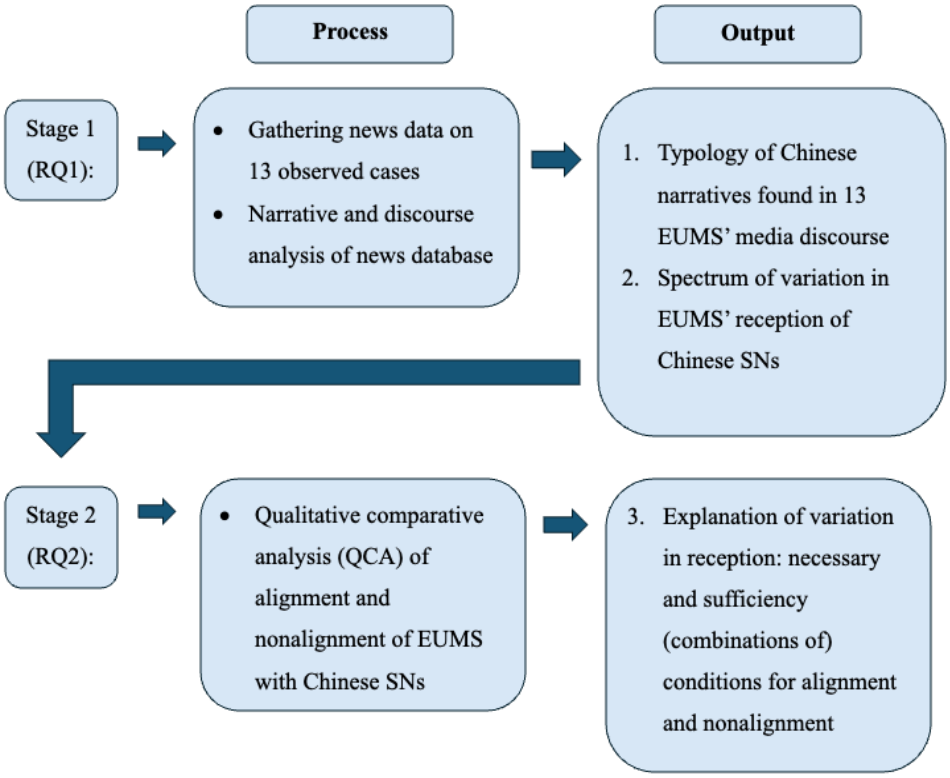


Figure 2: Diagram of research stages and output

1.2.2 The choice of Qualitative Comparative Analysis as a research approach in IR

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is part of a wider group of set-theoretic methods stemming from John Stuart Mill's five methods of induction (Mill, 1851) which includes Boolean methods (Caramani, 2009), comparative methods (Ragin, 2014) and Configurational Comparative Methods (CCM) (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008). Originally developed by Charles Ragin (Ragin, 1989, 2008; Ragin & Rihoux, 2004), QCA has been conceptually and methodologically expanded over the last decade (Oana et al., 2021; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012) and currently it can be understood as both a research approach and a systematized software-based method. This section describes the arguments for the choice of QCA as a research approach in the context of this thesis.

QCA has been widely applied in political science, sociology, business studies and several other disciplines. Its application in IR studies is relatively more novel yet it has increased exponentially since 2015 and, particularly since 2018, applied QCA articles are being

published more rapidly in IR journals than the overall number of non-QCA articles[8] (Ide & Mello, 2022). Its most prominent application in IR is on peace and conflict studies, followed by environmental studies and foreign policy analysis[9]. As outlined in the previous section, QCA is useful when studying complex causal relations by identifying interactions between conditions and outcome rather than the net effects of individual variables. This approach proves particularly useful in IR, where statistical studies may fall short of accounting for specific context-driven phenomena as QCA strikes a balance between generalization and accounting for the specifics of each case. For example, in their statistical study of international environmental regime effectiveness, Breitmeier, Underdal, and Young (2011) found that majority voting rules are marginally relevant. However, when they employed QCA for the same analysis, majority voting proved to be a key explanatory factor in combination with a deep knowledge of environmental issues and the presence of advocate states. Similarly, when seeking to explain peacekeeping operations success, Gromes (2019) employed QCA to demonstrate the relevance of interacting conditions based on in depth case analysis. Altogether, QCA is a tool to build bridges within the IR discipline, specifically, between theoretical approaches and case studies on the one hand, and empirical quantitative studies in the other.

The choice to employ QCA responds to the specific needs and objectives of any research. As such, it has implications for the operationalization of the research elements which traditionally populate both qualitative and quantitative studies (e.g., dependent and independent variables, hypothesis, etc.). QCA is built around three core characteristics: a) understanding the phenomena being studied in terms of set relations, b) articulating cases in terms of membership scores in those predefined sets, and c) the relationships between these sets are interpreted in terms of sufficiency and necessity (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Additionally, QCA is often used in studies with medium-N cases (10 – 50) as it "enables systematic comparisons of relatively small to large numbers of cases" (Oana et al., 2021, p. 6) . Thus, applying QCA as a research approach requires considering the adequacy of the phenomena of study and research question(s) to these criteria.

[8] This assessment excludes those QCA articles on IR topics that are published on journals not classed as part of exclusively IR journals by the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI).

[9] For more on this see Ida and Mello's review of published QCA studies in IR journals.

In the case of this thesis, the second research question fits this frame perfectly as it a) posits the existence of a set of EU members states which show alignment with Chinese strategic narratives, a set of EU members states which show no alignment, and all EU Member States can be organized in subsets according to their score in specific "causal conditions" (e.g., the set of EU Member States which shows alignment with Chinese SNs is a subset of the set of EU Member States which are involved in the BRI); b) it argues that alignment and non-alignment are not binary categories but rather a spectrum in which variation among cases can be observed; and c) it looks for combinations of sufficient and necessary conditions which explain the outcome (alignment with Chinese strategic narratives) and the absence of the outcome (non-alignment with Chinese strategic narratives).

QCA uses its own terminology when it comes to the central elements of research design. Far from this being a mere aesthetic proposition, QCA language reflects specific conceptual and methodological differences between mainstream designs in social science (King et al., 1994) and the requirements of set-theoretic approaches (Ragin, 1989, 2008). The first of these differences is the nature of causality in social phenomena. A key factor when choosing QCA should be the match between the type of literature and theory-driven causal implications suspected to exist in the phenomena under scrutiny and the type of causal assumptions that set-theoretic methods allow us to formulate. Set-theory approaches are based on the premise that some social phenomena are better explained through the concept of *causal complexity*. This type of causality is defined by three characteristics: *equifinality*, or the existence of multiple non-exclusive explanations for the same phenomenon; *conjunctural causation*, or the assumption that a single condition may be explanatory only in combination with other specific conditions; and *causal asymmetry*, the combination of conditions which explain the presence of the outcome cannot automatically be assumed to be the exact opposite of the combination of conditions which explain the absence of the outcome (Ragin, 2014, Chapter 2; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012, p. 78). In consequence, QCA is inherently unsuitable for the kind of linear-additive causal assumptions made in variable-oriented studies aimed at theory testing. Rather, QCA focuses on the *interaction effects* of *combinations of conditions* rather than on the *net effects* of one single explanatory *independent variable* (Ragin, 2008, p. xx). In relation to these causal mechanisms, QCA terminology avoids the term *hypothesis* in favor of *theoretical expectations* (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012, p. 295). In this sense, a QCA approach seems to better fit the scenario of a group of arguably similar EU Member States – liberal western democracies and developed economies – which showcase distinctive variation in specific

categories such as type of government, status of the economy, involvement with China, degree of support for the EU, etc. The theory-driven expectation in this case is that multiple conditions are necessary *and* sufficient in different configurations for the alignment of media narratives with Chinese strategic narratives. Moreover, sufficient and necessary conditions may differ. In this sense, QCA allows us to extract limited, cross-case generalizations while paying attention to the complexity of in-depth case analysis in a practical search for balance between parsimony and nuance.

The second important difference has already been mentioned and refers to the understanding of the phenomena of study in terms of *sets* and *subsets* instead of *variables*. The third relevant change in QCA research designs is the centrality of the term *outcome* which (roughly) serves the methodological purpose of the *dependent variable* in mainstream research designs. In this case the outcome is the alignment or non-alignment of EU domestic mainstream media with Chinese strategic narratives. There are intricate differences between these two concepts which illustrate the different methodological aims of each research tradition (e.g., whether we are formulating individual causes-of-effects questions or questions about how combinations of conditions generate an outcome[10]) thus while I am equating them here for purposes of clarity, it should be noted that they are conceptually significantly different[11]. As regards the independent variable(s), in QCA this can be roughly translated into the condition or conditions (oftentimes combinations of conditions) which explain variance in the outcome. Depending on one's research design, these conditions may come from previous steps in the analysis, or they may stem from existing knowledge (e.g., extant literature, common sense, theoretical expectations, or combinations of these). In the case of this dissertation, the selected explanatory conditions stem from the latter, a combination of the above-mentioned elements[12].

1.2.3 Expectations

While QCA mechanics govern RQ2, RQ1 is descriptive in nature, and thus the use of the QCA term "expectation" might seem questionable. However, considering the exploratory focus and the absence of a theory-testing aim in RQ1, the use of the term "expectation" is semantically

[10] For a more detailed discussion on these differences see (see Ragin, 2014; and Rihoux & Ragin, 2008).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Detailed in Chapter 4, section 4.2.

and practically consistent with the research design. The expectations associated with each research question are the following:

Expectation 1: Chinese strategic narratives are received to varying degrees of acceptance and rejection among EU Member States. This variance can be traced to specific rhetorical elements in the strategic narratives. These rhetorical elements change from narrative to narrative, and China tailors narratives based on the target audience (i.e., each Member State). Therefore, Chinese strategic narratives' pervasive nature is not given, but rather case dependent (i.e., it varies depending on the domestic conditions of countries).

Expectation 2: Two assumptions underpin this expectation; on the one hand, the literature on countries' response to the rise of China and the BRI tells us that China's influence is primarily exerted through material means, but also that non-democratic governments are more inclined to engage with China. All EU Member States are consolidated democracies but the material need for trade and investment from China is relatively low. On the other hand, China's position on human rights is that of the non-universality of a concept that originated in Western norms and values. Countries sharing this position are also more likely to engage with China without political costs. Based on this, I expect case dependent variation to be linked to the condition of democracy or the condition of government in terms of necessity. However, given the relevance of China's economic engagement with some EU Member States, I expect other conditions such as case-specific involvement in the BRI to play a role in terms of sufficiency[13].

1.2.4 Case selection

While QCA is often presented as a middle path or mixed-methods approach between qualitative and quantitative methods, the underlying logic of set theory is akin to that of qualitative research. Thus, while quantitative authors warn against selecting cases based on the dependent variable (King et al., 1994, p. 130), this concern does not apply to QCA mechanics. According to QCA's creator Charles C. Ragin, "the comparative method does not work with samples or populations but with all relevant instances of the phenomenon of interest" (2014, p. 15). In essence, in QCA, case selection is purposive. The objective is to maximize heterogeneity among cases while maintaining certain scope conditions constant (Jordan et al., 2011), ensuring

[13] The concepts of necessity and sufficiency are explained in Chapter 4.

homogeneity within the universe of cases and determining the generalizability of the results. Within QCA studies, selecting on the outcome (i.e., the dependent variable) is generally accepted (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008, pp. 20–25). Standard procedure dictates that it is not desirable to have only cases where the outcome is present, yet there must be a high enough ratio to find reliability in the results.

The QCA in this study takes a most similar, different outcome (MSDO) approach to selecting cases (Berg-Schlosser & Meur, 2009): scope conditions are set to include cases that are then selected to ensure heterogeneity. A first design for this thesis included all 27 Member States, but this proved highly impractical and compromised the feasibility of the project. For example, in the cases of Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Czech Republic, only one newspaper source was found in the Factiva and LexisNexis databases for the time frame selected. This occurs when databases only have access to a newspaper during specific years, or when the access contract has expired. Having only one source which, in some cases delivered less than 30 articles (the minimum units of observation threshold), failed the data selection criteria established for the project (see Chapter 4, section 4.1) and would have compromised the reliability of any argument made on such a small population. Therefore, following standard procedures, I selected 13 EU Member States: Austria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Spain. This selection strives for balance in geographical placement, population size and date of entry into the EU. This dissertation does not take into consideration all relevant instances of the phenomenon under scrutiny (i.e., all EU Member States) due to time constraints and the availability of sources. While this must be considered when making generalizations about the results of the QCA analysis, the selected cases meet the expected requirements regarding N size and homogeneity/heterogeneity. All cases are comparable, as they share the general characteristics of EU Member States, hence ensuring homogeneity. Accordingly, heterogeneity is maintained by selecting on the three categories mentioned above. Furthermore, all cases are relevant for the QCA study for they are all members to varying degrees of the outcome (hence ensuring an analysis of also the absence of the outcome), and the conditions expected to have causal implications for the outcome (see Chapter 4, section 4.2).

Case	*Geographical placement*	*Population*	*EU Accession*
1. Austria	North-Western Europe	Small	1995
2. Denmark	North-Western Europe	Small	1973
3. Estonia	North-Eastern Europe	Small	2004
4. France	North-Western Europe	Large	Founding member
5. Germany	North-Western Europe	Large	Founding member
6. Greece	South-Eastern Europe	Small	1981
7. Hungary	South-Eastern Europe	Small	2004
8. Italy	South-Western Europe	Large	Founding member
9. Lithuania	North-Eastern Europe	Small	2004
10. The Netherlands	North-Western Europe	Large	Founding member
11. Poland	North-Eastern Europe	Large	2004
12. Portugal	South-Western Europe	Small	1986
13. Spain	South-Western Europe	Large	1986

Table 1: Summary of case selection criteria

1.3 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured as follows. Following this introduction which has presented an overview of the research puzzle and a description of the research design, including research objectives and questions, Chapter 2 is dedicated to the literature review which underpins this project. This literature review illustrates the nexus of the three different strands of literature where this dissertation is anchored. Firstly, it explores the role of Strategic Narrative Theory in current IR debates, secondly, it traces China's quest for discursive power in the current geopolitical turn in international affairs. Thirdly, it describes the specific strategic narratives that China has projected about itself, the Belt and Road Initiative, and its governance model for the international system. Chapter 3 describes this dissertation's theoretical framework, based on Miskimmon et al., (2013; 2017), introducing the concept of normativity developed in this project to better account for strategy in narrative action. This chapter also presents a three-level operationalization for the analysis of strategic narratives to be applied in Chapters 5 and 6. This operationalization is constructed to guide the narrative, sentiment and thematic analyses which aim to answer RQ1. Chapter 4 presents the methodology applied in this project,

employing two methods in two respective research stages: section 4.1 recounts the methods employed in the discourse analysis of news articles in Stage 1, and section 4.2 describes the pre-analytic steps taken in Qualitative Comparative Analysis in preparation for the data analysis performed in Stage 2. Each section details all aspects related to data collection and data analysis strategies, as well as offering some reflections on the caveats derived from these strategies. The subsequent two chapters present the results of these two analyses in the following manner: Chapter 5 describes the narratives found in 1577 news articles from two traditional media outlets from each of the 13 EU Member States. The chapter is organized following the three-level structure proposed in the operationalization (Chapter 3) whereby results are presented first in terms of the three types of narratives, and then reporting on the sentiment and thematic analysis of each of these types. The discussion in these sections focuses on the messages conveyed in these narratives as well as the structure of the narratives themselves, while remarking on which EU Member States' traditional media replicate which specific messages so as to unveil preferences and perceptions. The chapter ends integrating the results in a spectrum of variation in the reception of narratives and a typology of narratives grouped per sentiment and country. Chapter 6 then moves on to stage 2 and presents the results of the QCA analysis. This chapter is arguably more technical and it is written according to current QCA reporting standards. To ease its understanding, the presentation of the results has been placed at the beginning of the chapter, and it is expanded in the later sections, which present first the results of the necessity analysis and then the results of the sufficiency analysis, to end on a review of those deviant cases which were not explained by the QCA model. The dissertation concludes with Chapter 7 offering a summary of the findings and a brief commentary on the wider debates about Chinese discursive influence where this research is anchored, and finally reflecting on the contributions and limitations of this study.

CHAPTER 2. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN IR DEBATES AND CHINESE DISCURSIVE POWER

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present a review of the three literature bodies which inform this research. The first one illustrates where Strategic Narrative Theory (SNT) fits in the literature about power in IR and how strategic narratives have been used to empirically assess the role of discursive power. The second one aims at providing an overview of the main arguments the literature has put forward which explain China's bid for discursive power and the relevance of this phenomenon for the European Union. The third one seeks to summarize the main strategic narratives which the literature has documented as central to Chinese foreign policy and outward representation. These narratives are then taken as a template to guide the narrative and discourse analysis which is described in Chapter 5. Taken together, these three sections point out the gap in the literature that this thesis aims to fill: a theoretically grounded empirical study of the reception of Chinese strategic narratives among EU Member States.

Narrative study in the discipline of International Relations is concerned with questions related to the role that discursive action plays in the dynamics of power and influence in the international system. Although the role of narratives has long been the focus of research in other social sciences, it has traditionally been secondary in IR research, mostly relevant within the area of security studies. This significantly changed with developments in ICT, the advent of mass media, and the diffusion of power in the international system, all of which granted narratives increasing relevance in international affairs over the course of the last decade. As a result, we have witnessed a narrative turn in IR taking different shapes (see Carthy & Sarma, 2023; de Wilde, 2023; Gagliardone, 2013; Lanoszka, 2019; Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022; Wagnsson & Lundström, 2023). One of those shapes is Strategic Narrative Theory, put forward by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017). Anchoring their conceptual framework in the constructivist tradition, the authors carefully craft a direct path between the study of discursive action and the study of how

influence operates in the international system, taking "seriously the nexus of international relations and communication" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017, p. 9).

By placing the social role of communication at the center of arguments around power and influence, strategic narrative theory is somewhat indebted to the main arguments in soft power approaches. An obvious example, SNT assumes soft power' argument about the relevance of non-material power for international affairs. In this sense, strategic narratives operate in the "soft power marketplace" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017, p. 24). However, SNT stems from the many critiques of soft power and the need to better articulate the relationship between influence, communication, and power to solve or respond to the ontological and methodological challenges that soft power presented. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the debate around soft power contributes to putting some conceptual and theoretical distance between the concepts of strategic narratives and that of soft power.

The conversation about the current power transition cannot be had without addressing the role of China. Despite its often-acute partisanship, the increased production of research about China and its role in the current transition of power in the international system is contributing to inform and shape a timely and complex debate. What does China want? How should Western countries approach China? What role is there for the EU in its relationship with China but also vis-à-vis China's engagement with the rest of the world? China spurs questions galore. However, much of the conversation around China as a powerful player still revolves around its material capabilities. Only recently has this debate started to look at what exactly China is saying about the world and the impact of these messages. The last two sections of this chapter will explore respectively (i) how China has come to regard discursive power as an instrumental tool in its foreign policy, and (ii) what China's strategic narratives tell us about its projected self-image and its understanding of how the world should be.

2.2 Soft power and strategic narratives in the debate on communication and influence

2.2.1 Four conceptual critiques of soft power

Soft power has received substantive attention from academic and practitioners alike both as a research agenda to either dismiss or refine, and as a diplomatic tool with considerable potential. IR research, often mimicking or accommodating trends in day-to-day international relations, has been as equally enchanted with soft power as it has been ready to bypass it. Rightly so, even for those in IR scholarship who recognize its analytical value, soft power remains a highly problematic concept. In spite of this, there has been a surge in the production of soft power related research in the past decade, likely inspired by the current power transition in the international order. These studies have focused strongly in overcoming the shortcomings of Nye's original approach and providing better accounts of the new ways in which power is exercised in today's world.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, we owe the notion of soft power to Joseph S. Nye's attempt to articulate a response to realist predictions of a demise of US power in the 1990s. Nye was particularly concerned about the effects of growing interdependence in a debate marked by the pre-eminence of balance-of-power interpretations of world politics. He sought to capture alternative facets of power at an ontological level, rather than presenting an analytical tool to observe or measure influence and power. In his earlier definition, Nye argued that "[...] power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states" (Nye, 1990, p. 155) not by "ordering others to do what [a country] wants" but by getting "other countries to want what it wants" (Nye, 1990, p. 166).

The literature has since contended Nye's conceptualization of soft power in many ways, which could be roughly summarized as illustrating four main issues. Firstly, there is general criticism towards Nye's actor-centric nature of power. Theory-centred authors like Gallarotti (2011) argue that Nye openly ignores the structural dimension of power which not only limits observation but can also generate biased interpretations. To remedy this Gallarotti brings forth the concept of the "bargaining space" to account for the dynamics of power relations which take place within greater contexts of social relations, as it follows that those social relations also have an impact on the outcomes of actors' interactions beyond the a priori distribution of

power (Gallarotti, 2011). Likewise, other authors remark on the need to expand the reach of soft power analysis to account for the effects of specific actor subjectivities in the exercise of soft power (Bilgin & Elis, 2008). Putting this idea to practice, case-centred works have questioned the actor-centric nature of soft power by accounting for its structural dimension in different ways. Kiseleva argues for the relevance of discourses as hegemonic structures enabling soft power (Kiseleva, 2015). Likewise, other authors emphasize the centrality of language, history, and culture as structural loci of soft power in case-specific context such as Russia and Ukraine (Cheskin, 2017; Feklyunina, 2016).

Secondly, these insights into the limitations of the scope of Nye's conceptualization of soft power are accompanied by a section of theory-centred literature dedicated to the contested nature of attraction. According to Mattern, Nye's approach is based in a conceptual incongruency derived from framing attraction both "as essential condition and [...] as a result of social interaction" (Mattern, 2005, p. 591). Mattern contests the natural occurrence and universality assumptions in Nye's approach to attraction and argues that it makes more sense to understand "attraction as a relationship [sociolinguistically] constructed through representational force" (Mattern, 2005, p. 583). Her concept of representational force is an early attempt to account for the coercive dimension of non-material power which best operates through the deployment of discursive tools such as narratives. She describes this as "a form of power that operates through the structure of a speaker's narrative representation of 'reality'"(Mattern, 2005, p. 586). In line with this argument, some authors point out that Nye fails to differentiate between two analytically relevant facets of attraction: attraction as a condition (related to the resources of power) and attraction as an action (related to the exercise of power) (Kearn, 2011; Solomon, 2014).

Thirdly, the literature has highlighted the existence of a Western bias in Nye's conceptualization. Building on Mattern's rebuttal of the universality of attraction, the original approach to soft power poses two specific problems: firstly, Nye imbues Western liberal-democratic values with an inherent universally attraction quality, and secondly, by corollary, the concept's analytical utility is limited to instances of Western soft power (Fan, 2008; Hall, 2010). Other authors do not reject the potential of the concept on the grounds of its limited exportability to the study of non-Western liberal-democratic exercise of power, but rather remark on the relevance of ascertaining this aspect of [Western] soft power to improve our understanding of an inescapable facet of world politics (Gallarotti, 2011; Kearn, 2011).

Fourthly, a recurrent point of contention among scholars is the distinction between soft power and hard power. In Nye's most cited iteration of the concept, he famously states that "soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 1990, p. x). This definition clearly opposes hard power (coercive power) to soft power (cooptive power) and anchors the nature of power as a relation between agents or actors which is enabled through behavior, be this exercising coercion, payment or generating attraction. By opposing these two types of power, Nye encapsulates the key differentiating aspect of power in said behaviors. This aspect of Nye's framework has been widely debated in the literature and some theory-centred authors point out certain logical and conceptual inconsistencies in the 2004 and 2011 books. For example, Bakalov remarks that in his original definition, Nye omits resources as a differentiating factor between hard and soft power but later includes both (behavior and resources) as part of a difference in degree between the two types of power (Bakalov, 2019, p. 4) .

In later works, Nye highlights said distinction as one of difference in degree rather than one of difference in kind and clarifies which types of resources generate soft power: culture, values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004, p. 11, 2008, p. 96, 2011, p. 21). However, the distinction between hard and soft power remains abstract in nature and unclear in practice, which impacts the production of case-centered research. By placing both types of power at opposite ends of a continuum, observation of the causes or effects of soft power for any case located in the middle or near the middle point of the spectrum may yield inaccurate results, as the differentiation between behaviors and resources at said middle point is not clear-cut. In this sense, Mattern argued that soft power is not juxtaposed to hard power but rather "a continuation of it by different means" (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 583). Some authors have attempted to resolve this hurdle by suggesting other ways of measuring that difference between soft and hard power, such as the use of "interest" as an observable variable (Gallarotti, 2011). Analysis-driven authors either acknowledge this challenge in their work and concede to the vagueness of soft power application (G. D. Rawnsley, 2015; Stuenkel, 2016) or they bypass the hard/soft power discussion by employing ad hoc case conceptualizations, such as the case of soft power in China (Breslin, 2011; Callahan, 2015) and Brazil (Chatin, 2016).

Perhaps motivated by the critiques, Nye undertook a conceptual revision of soft power which placed further relevance on the concept of smart power. As an ontological tool, smart power[14] aims at reducing the conceptual distance between soft and hard power as well as remarking on the analytical relevance of that middle point of the spectrum by arguing that power is maximized by actors who can utilize both types of power (Nye, 2009, 2013). Nye responds to Mattern's argument of soft power behaviors including coercive action in the form of manipulation and presents a different formulation of power than that of a continuum with soft and hard power at its opposing ends. He suggests the idea of including symmetrical/asymmetrical voluntarism and direct/indirect manipulation in a two-by-two matrix which delivers a more comprehensive categorization of power behaviors: coercion, manipulation of structure, and payment, on the hard power side; positive attraction and persuasion on the soft power side (Nye, 2021, p. 202). Indeed, this new formulation is influenced by the appearance of new types of power in the age of advanced information technology.

2.2.2 The need for better analytical frameworks

At this point of the soft power debate, much of the production of empirical studies has revolved around two issues: the development of more rigorous methodologies and the study of the impact of soft power. Most case-centred studies have employed qualitative methods such as content and discourse analysis (Çevik, 2019; Chen, 2021; Szostek, 2014). Mixed and quantitative studies on the impact of soft power have been published but to a much lesser degree (Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012; Holyk, 2011; Vladimirova, 2022). As regards the study of soft power causal effects, this remains complicated for many of the reasons explained above derived from the conceptual and calibration indeterminacies of the concept, but also due to the difficulty of linking foreign policy decisions to direct observable soft power behaviors. Some authors have made limited strategic incursions in causality attribution, take for example Langendonk's study of Chinese discourse power impact on Dutch foreign policy, where he uses a mix of content and discourse analysis alongside semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders of different domestic sectors to seek out traces of Chinese influence in political decisions (Langendonk, 2020).

[14] Authorship of the concept is also attributed to Suzanne Nossel, Deputy to the Clinton Administration Ambassador to the UN, for her 2004 article in Foreign Affairs (Nossel, 2004).

While the conceptual framework for soft power is to this day still a moving target, research on how it operates has delivered much more consensus. Nye posits that soft power 1) is better suited for long term strategic frameworks, as opposed to hard power yielding quicker results over specific outcomes, and 2) is enacted by changing the minds or transforming the attitudes of audiences in third countries. Nye's 1990 conceptualization rests on the basic assumption that an actor's power can impact other actors directly, but it can also do it indirectly by impacting the conditioning environment surrounding another actor's decision-making process. Nye presents this as "power over other countries" and "power over outcomes" (Nye, 1990, p. 156). Perhaps a better way to express this operational distinction would be a) directly, by impacting leaders decision-making process and getting them to change their position on specific outcomes, and b) indirectly, by impacting target audiences which then exert pressure onto leaders to change their attitudes or behaviors related to specific outcomes (Nye, 2011). The literature concurs with both aspects (Fan, 2008; Gallarotti, 2011; Miskimmon et al., 2013), but the search for more refined frameworks has departed in many ways from Nye's original approach.

Over the course of the last decade, new communication trends and information technology developments have completely transformed the way people talk about domestic and international issues. Never has communication been so instantaneous, nor information so accessible to audiences. The current environment has dramatically raised the stakes (i.e., generated incentives) for actors in the international system to not only try to control communication channels[15] but more importantly, to control the narratives themselves. And so, too, have soft power academics advocated for new conceptualizations which better account for changes in how power and influence are exerted in today's world[16]. As Gallarotti argued: "theories of power must be continually questioned and power audits continually undertaken with significant sensitivity to the changing face of power in world politics" (Gallarotti, 2011, p. 39).

[15] To the point where a change in the management of an app like Twitter has complicated national security implications for the US (Mock, 2022).

[16] See: Fan, 2008; Hall, 2010; Hall and Smith, 2013; Sherr, 2013; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013; Solomon, 2014.

2.2.3 The narrative turn in IR literature

In the global media environment, there is a stronger incentive for storytelling, which has become a key ability in international politics as leaders strive to assert their own positions and contest those of others in an environment which is highly sensitive to the stories that are told. Against this backdrop, narratives are not just tools for military or diplomatic purposes; they become instruments of wider relevance to understand how influence and power are exerted through communication. Of course, we cannot discount the fact that the last five years have been marked by an increased relevance of more traditional material sources of power. Yet the way in which the world *discusses* international affairs has irrevocably changed and if one is to account for dynamics of influence, we must strive to further decipher how actors make use of discursive strategies in a highly interconnected world.

As the role of mass self-communication grew central to international affairs during the late 2000s and early 2010s, authors have brought discourse and rhetoric to the fore in the soft power research agenda. A precursor of strategic narratives, Rothman focuses on conceptualizing the specific direct and indirect mechanisms through which soft power is exerted using categories such as "rhetoric and discourse control" (2011, p. 49) and "attraction through norm diffusion" respectively (2011, p. 56). In this way, Rothman highlights the relevance of discursive power as part of the operational mechanics of soft power both directly (leaders controlling the discourse) and indirectly (epistemic communities act as message diffusors of accepted codes and meanings). This brings us to the aforementioned 'narrative turn' among soft power scholars (Lams, 2018, p. 389).

The academic study of narratives has traditionally been ascribed to the Humanities, in its more relativist sense. Narrating, as the act of storytelling that originates in a narrator, inheres the individual point of view of who tells the story, hence narrative study holds great appeal in disciplines such as Literary Studies, Psychology, Anthropology, and Linguistics. However, narratives present an array of analytical and methodological issues for social scientists who are skeptical of the applicability of such an apparently imprecise concept so heavily dependent on subjective interpretation. Indeed, one could take issue with the interpretative nature of narrative research, however rigorous and relevant work can be produced if researchers pay attention to the limitations of narrative study, and they employ adequate research methodologies (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017, p. 24). Ultimately, ignoring narratives as sites of

cultural and political contestation would be a greater mistake for the observation of current dynamics in international affairs.

In the late 2000s, the concept of narratives gained certain track in the discipline of political science, specifically, for scholars of political communication within domestic contexts. The 2008 Obama "Yes we can" campaign was the center of many studies about the use of narratives, language, and communication (e.g., the narrative of hope and the strategic use of empty signifiers such as "we"[17]). Later on, within the area of political psychology, studies have documented how certain societal groups use and abuse specific identity and actor narratives to further marginalize other often disadvantaged groups (Andrews et al., 2015; Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2013). Within the discipline of IR, the first author to employ the concept of strategic narratives was Lawrence Freedman (2006) in his study of how narratives were deployed strategically during the Gulf War and the Iraq War to undermine the ideas or positions upon which enemies base their appeal. Strategic narratives are viewed by Freedman as a tool to challenge the legitimacy of enemy forces subordinate to military strategy. However, with perhaps the notable exception of historians, who routinely use narrative analysis to sequence events and structure their accounts, narrative study in International Relations has remained limited until recently.

Narratives gradually gained conceptual definition through mostly case-based and area studies. Public diplomacy is a fertile ground for narrative study. Indeed, authors have highlighted the relevance of narratives for perception and influence of third states (Brown, 2005; Pamment, 2014b, 2014a). Foreign policy scholars have argued about the centrality of narratives for the construction of actors' identities and their understanding of the international system and as well as their place in it (Berenskoetter, 2018; Porter & Mykleby, 2011). Narratives have also been observed as tools to challenge the status quo (Epstein, 2008; Steele, 2012) and to establish political actors' identities and legitimize policies (Ciută, 2007; Kaldor et al., 2007). Janice Bially Mattern (2005) sought to revisit Nye's approach by proving that narratives are used to coerce actors into accommodating the will of other more powerful actors in international affairs. In her work on Obama's security discourse, Michelle Bentley demonstrated how actors strategically modify their discourse to change international perceptions of threats (Bentley,

[17] Empty signifiers are terms that are so indeterminate that people can "read in" their preferred meaning and find a reason to offer support (Miskimmon et al., 2017:37).

2013, 2014, 2017; Bentley & Holland, 2013). Staying within the area of security studies, scholars have highlighted the use States make of narratives to influence actors' responses to crises (Bucher et al., 2013; Lang, 2006; Miskimmon, 2012). Furthermore, studies have shown that narratives are a central element of national strategies in states' search for influence (Pamment, 2014a). Lastly, important insights about narrative reception have been drawn from Chaban and Holland's work on how third countries perceive the European Union (Holland & Chaban, 2011). In response to the growing interest in the study of narratives, the Journal of Narrative Politics was first published in 2014, with approaches bridging both Political Science and International Relations topics.

From a methodological perspective, most studies across the Political Science and IR disciplines borrowed heavily from other social sciences such as Sociology, Anthropology and even Literary studies and Psychology. From narrative analysis[18] (Labov, 1982; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Riessman, 2008) to qualitative discourse analysis (Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) and thematic analysis (Butler-Kisber, 2010) the methods used rely on rhetoric and textual-visual cognitive representations as analytical instruments. Narrative studies have also been conducted applying content analysis and even process tracing mixed with discourse analysis (Colley & van Noort, 2022; Lackenbauer et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2018; Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022; van Noort, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2022), depending on whether the focus of the study is formation or projection of narratives and whether they look at official documents such as policy and press releases, actor interaction in multilateral negotiations, or if the attention is placed on the projection of narratives in domestic media. As expressed before, the majority of these studies focus on the one hand, on the historical or cultural explanations for certain narratives and the processes through which historical events and cultural traits become narrated (i.e., formation of narratives) (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, 2021; Lams, 2018; van Noort, 2020a, 2022; Y. E. Yang, 2020) and on the other hand, on the ways in which these narratives are presented to the world, either by looking at the engagement of diplomatic channels with a certain narrative or by documenting how a group of media actors deploy said narrative (i.e., projection of narratives) (Y. Zhang & Orbie, 2021). There is a lack of studies focusing on the reception of narratives. Some authors, including Miskimmon et al., have

[18] Narrative analysis is anchored in anthropological research and focuses on the experience of individuals and their lives as part of social research. Not to be confused with strategic narrative analysis, which is the theoretical framework and one of the methods employed in this thesis.

highlighted the need for more research on the reception of narratives (Keuleers, 2020, pp. 167–169; van Noort, 2022, p. 17). In the case of China, some studies have provided insights into Beijing's strategic narratives' ability to influence foreign elites in the Netherlands (Langendonk, 2020), Kazakhstan (van Noort, 2020a), Italy (Colley & van Noort, 2022), Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Winter, 2019), and Singapore (Ba, 2019) but the topic of EU reception remains underdeveloped.

Another aspect of the state of the art in strategic narrative research is that of the qualitative nature of studies, particularly when it comes to the reception of narratives. A majority of studies into strategic narratives are developed using qualitative methodologies, which is indeed only logical. However, most of these studies are undertaken on one or two country-cases and therefore limit any potential generalization or "whole-of-picture" insights regarding narrative action and its effects. Particularly, when it comes to Chinese strategic narratives, some cross-case studies have been published in terms of citizens perceptions of actors or policies, (see, for example, García-Hererro & Schindowski, 2023; Garcia-Herrero & Xu, 2019), but these analyses do not focus on strategic narratives per se. This current lack of cross-case narrative reception analyses is detrimental to our understanding of the mechanisms that underpin influence, attractiveness, and persuasion in discursive action.

2.2.4 Strategic Narratives Theory's response to the critiques on Soft Power

The first major theoretical study on strategic narratives and power in international relations was developed by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle in their 2013 book *Strategic Narratives: Communication and Power in the New World Order* and subsequently refined in two other volumes published 2017 and 2020. The former focuses on further developing the theoretical framework and showcasing its application to different narrative cases around the world. The latter is an in-depth study of different narrative dimensions in the relationship between the EU and China, focusing on the formation of these narratives. In these three volumes, the authors set out to account for the interplay between discursive strategies, the new communications environment and influence/power in the world. In doing so, SNT offers a new theoretical and methodological contribution to the study of non-material power in international affairs by addressing the previously mentioned four critiques of soft power.

Firstly, by understanding discourse as a historically and socially contingent element within the communicative action process, SNT highlights the structural dimension of strategic narratives in so far as narratives cannot be crafted without paying attention to the specific contexts of the narrator and/or the audience. In other words, actors are not disentangled from their structurally defined environment when they formulate strategic narratives about world events[19]. Secondly, and related to the first critique, SNT addresses the second objection to Nye's formulation of the universal nature of attraction by understanding attraction as a result of social interaction, i.e., an actor exerts only as much attraction as their audiences are willing to bestow. Hence successful strategic narratives depend as much on an actor's ability to formulate a coherent narrative as they do on the audience's preparedness to receive that narrative. This aspect of strategic narratives ties into the third critique of soft power which regards Nye's conceptualization as inherently biased towards Western understandings of attraction (i.e., specific western norms, values, and ideas). If we consider strategic narratives to be historically and socially contingent and their success dependent on contextual elements which may lay beyond a narrator's powers, then it follows that no interpretations of, let's say, the international liberal order, or the superior value of democracy will be *necessarily* appealing or attractive to non-Western audiences or audiences in non-democratic systems. That is not to say that Western values would or could not resonate with these non-Western audiences, but rather than assuming attraction-power in analysis of value or norm-based narratives can lead to interpretation bias without proper examination of the contextual elements of the target audience. Lastly, SNT addressed the fourth critique of soft power by understanding soft and hard power as both relevant for the construction and deployment of narratives. Inherent to the ability to formulate and project strategic narratives are the material means to do so: the communication channels through which narratives are presented to the audience. These can vary from literal channels (e.g., TV and radio channels, international broadcasters, social media presence) to diplomatic channels operating in different international scenarios (e.g., UN fora, national embassies, regional organizations, etc.). As van Noort argues "government involvement in international broadcasting affects the persuasiveness of the content among some foreign audiences." (van Noort, 2022, p. 17). Thus, the study of strategic narratives, particularly in their projection[20] phase, involves the observation of an actor's material power to narrate their story. It is worth

[19] The structural dimension of narratives will be further explained in Chapter 3.

[20] SNT distinguishes three phases of strategic narrative action: formation, projection, and reception. See Chapter 3.

noting however, that as Miskimmon et al., argue, the relationship between the deployment of material power to formulate and project narratives and the success of these narratives is not necessarily a direct one (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 97).

2.3 China's discursive power: "Telling the China story well" for European audiences

This section will explore China's bid in the battle of narratives and the relevance of understanding Chinese discursive power *in* and *for* the European Union.

2.3.1 China's quest for Great Power status and Soft Power

In his book *World Order*, Henry Kissinger wrote, "By any standard, China has regained the stature by which it was known in the centuries of its most far-reaching influence. The question now is how it will relate to the contemporary search for world order, particularly in its relations with the United States." (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 225–226). The rise of China and its implications for the international order have been explained in the literature and foreign policy circles largely in terms of a classic geopolitical rivalry over material gains. One side of this debate is embodied by power transition theory approaches (PTT) and the offensive realism view, spearheaded by most of the US' academia and governmental actors. PTT tells us of the inevitability of a clash between a rising power and an established great power. Graham Allison encapsulated the China-US rivalry in the metaphor of the Thucydides trap albeit not without criticism [21] (Allison, 2017). Realists argue that China's rise will only increase strategic competition with the US. However, various strands of realism differ in the outcome of said competition. Offensive realism sees China as seeking to overthrow the US as the dominant power in the international system and predicts that China's growing assertiveness will inevitably lead to confrontation with the US (Mearsheimer, 2010, 2019). In this vein Doshi argues that China has a carefully crafted grand strategy aimed at replacing the US in its leadership position through a series of domestic policies and international initiatives (Doshi, 2021).

[21] See Chan (Chan, 2020), and (Feng & He, 2020).

On the other side of the debate, structural realists and neoliberals argue that confrontation is not a given. Ironically, both structural realism and neoliberal institutionalism understand China to be a proponent of the status quo, albeit due to different dynamics. Structural realism suggests that while China is indeed the US' competitor, the costs of taking the offence in that power relationship might not outweigh the benefits, hence the argument for balance (Waltz, 1979). Following Jervis' concept of the security dilemma (Jervis, 1978, 1985), Charles Glaser maintained that conflict between China and the US is not predetermined but would rather be a result of the intensity of the perceived threat and the possibilities of counterbalancing it (Glaser, 2011). Similarly, Hu argues that China's security strategy, while assertive, shows restraint and moderation, pointing towards a concern amongst the Chinese leadership to be perceived as an expansionist power (Hu, 2020). The neoliberal approach posits that because the international system is governed by dynamics of interconnectedness and interdependence, China has a particular interest in a stable international system considering how much it benefits from it. Specifically, Ikenberry argued that the US and China "will compete for leadership and influence, […] but they will do so within parameters of mutual restraint" (Ikenberry, 2016, p. 43).

The starting point for this dissertation is that China's behavior mimics what Steven Ward calls "distributive dissatisfaction". Distributive dissatisfaction "describes a desire to acquire more of something: more influence, more territory, more wealth, more status" and "it can often be satisfied within the boundaries of the broader [international] order" (Ward & Steven, 2017, p. 2). A look at Chinese official discourse tells us that Chinese elites believe that China suffers a "status deficit" and that the international order should accurately reflect the current redistribution of power (Rex, 2019). In other words, as China's former vice-minister for foreign affairs He Yafei repeatedly argued, Beijing believes its growing economic and military power warrants increased status in global governance (He, 2017, 2018). Furthermore, China believes the liberal international order is ill-equipped to answer current and future challenges (Deng & Sujian, 2011; Sutter, 2020; Tang, 2018). As a result, China seeks to reform and reshape certain aspects of the international system but maintain others. China expert and Sinophile, Martin Jacques argued that China's behavior in the international liberal order would display partial engagement and partial rejection "seeking to transform that system while at the same time, in effect, sponsoring a new China-centric international system which will exist alongside the present system" (Jacques, 2012, p. 362). Said partial rejection is playing out in the normative dimension. As Johnston pointed out, China opposes those norms or institutions designed to

uphold Western values such as those related to the defense of human rights and the responsibility to protect. Yet it supports the current normative framework around issues like climate change, public health, and nuclear non-proliferation. In the case of emerging policy areas where normative frameworks are still to be decided, such as the case of Internet governance, China seems determined to have a say (Johnston, 2019, p. 12). In this sense, China seeks increased status in the international order and a selective reshaping of the international system.

China's search for increased status is not something new. Chinese political scientist and dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, Yan Xuetong, wrote in 2001 that the term "national rejuvenation" amply used by generations of Chinese leadership is deeply rooted in the Chinese people's psychological understanding of China's rise as a return to the natural order of things after the Century of Humiliation. Therefore, in the Chinese view, regaining its long-lost global status would be a 'restoration of fairness' as China *belongs* at the top of the international food chain (Xuetong, 2001, 2014). It follows that China has been trying to return to its rightful place since the founding of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. What is indeed new in China's approach to its international stature can be summarized in the foreign policy change between Deng Xiaoping's famous 1990s slogan 'keeping a low profile' or 'hiding one's capacities and biding one's time' (*tao guang yang hui*) and Xi Jinping's 'striving for achievement' (*fen fa you wei*) (Xuetong, 2014). In that goal of 'achievement' there is an implied wider 'us'. The subject is China as a nation, but what is to be achieved encompasses the rest of the world, as China's economic and social stability relies partly on a stable international environment. The Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping have determined not only that China *deserves* to be a contributor to the international system but that it should take on that mantle to avoid 'global chaos or disorder' (Jisi, 2022, p. 141).

In this sense, China's search for Great Power status hinges on a risky bid: that it can offer a better model of global governance and -implicitly- a better model of domestic governance for the world than that of the Western led liberal international order. As if the launch of a new, untested product it were, the rolling out of this model (so-called Beijing Consensus) requires a marketing strategy aimed at convincing audiences of its appeal. The first step in any marketing strategy is publicity. You need people to know about your product if they are to buy it. China has traditionally struggled in this department, as other nations have viewed its rise with fear and suspicion, a sentiment amply echoed by Western discursive hegemony (P. S. N. Lee, 2016).

Aware of its discursive shortcomings before international audiences, China has put discursive engagement at the top of its foreign policy priorities (Lee, 2021). In his August 20th, 2013 speech to the National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference, a newly appointed Xi Jinping would remind the relevant agencies of China's need to enhance its publicity (*duiwai xuanchuan* 对外宣传) apparatus: "It is necessary to do a good job in external publicity work, innovate external publicity methods, and strive to create new concepts, new categories, and new expressions that integrate Chinese and foreign countries, tell Chinese stories well, and spread Chinese voices well." (Xi Jinping, 2013).

Since that 2013 speech, mentions to discourse power and the need to project specific narratives about China have multiplied in Chinese official documents, pointing towards a realization on behalf of the CCP leadership of the increased relevance of narratives[22] both domestically (C. Qing, 2019) and internationally (Repnikova, 2022). Much scholarly attention has been devoted recently to China's engagement in soft power projection as part of its national grand strategy[23] . Particularly common are critiques of China's soft power engagement as deliberate attempts at controlling public opinion. According to Repnikova, these critiques have not deterred China from exhibiting "relentless curiosity and obsession with soft power" (Repnikova, 2022, p. 2) and seeking increased "global media reach" (Repnikova, 2022, p. 21). According to Lams, Xi Jinping's 2013 speech was the telltale of China's new approach to soft power as it heralded three clear objectives:

> *"1) Further promote the China Dream overseas; use [it] it as the guideline to present good information about China; 2) Strengthen the effort to develop overseas publicity and spread China's voice; 3) Strengthen the work to build a discourse system and put effort into creating new concepts, criteria, and expressions that will fit both the domestic and the international environment."* (Lams, 2018, p. 393).

In this sense, as its ambitions have grown, China has come to see in discourse power a useful tool to add to its foreign policy toolbox in the quest to achieve Great Power status through the

[22] SeeWen, 新时代党的宣传思想工作的根本遵循 [The Fundamental Principles of the Party's Propaganda and Ideological Work in the New Era]. People's Daily, January 4th, 2021. Available at: http://chuxin.people.cn/n1/2021/0104/c428144-31987915.html

[23] See Flew, 2016; Lin Xiaonan, 2012; Nye, 2012; Qing, 2014; G. Rawnsley, 2015; Xie, 2015; G. Zhang, 2016.

challenging of established norms and ideas and the legitimization of new ones that is inherent to its proposed model for global governance (Rolland, 2020).

2.3.2 China's right to speak and the means to "tell the China story well"

Discursive power or discursive influence has found its way into the central tenets of Chinese foreign policy and official party discourse under Xi Jinping. It has primarily developed into two benchmark understandings which are closely related[24]: international discursive power (国际话语权 *guoji huayu quan*) as an extension of soft power, which in Chinese IR departs in various conceptual and ideological ways from western conceptualizations (Zhao, 2016), and as embodied in the notion of the "right to speak" (*huayu quan*). Used generously by Chinese officials and academics, both understandings are summarized in this interview excerpt:

> *"[…] the ability to influence and control international opinion; with the control of the right of discourse in international affairs, one can influence and guide the direction of international public opinion and manipulate the mainstream international community and the mainstream media so that China's development has a favorable international environment and China's voice becomes an important force for world peace and development. This is the ultimate reason for our fight for the international discourse right."*[25]

The right to speak stands on the premise that China has a discourse power deficit vis-à-vis Western discursive hegemony. This deficit plays out in two ways: on the one hand, China has a right to have a say in global affairs as the increasingly materially powerful actor that it is. Chinese media studies scholar Yu Guoming articulated this feeling as follows: "the strength of

[24] These two understandings originate, ironically, in an unclear translation. In Chinese, discourse power or discourse right is *huayu quan* 话语权. However, *quan* 权 has two meanings: *quanli* (权利) in the sense of 'rights' and *quanli* (权力) in the sense of 'power' or 'authority'. This ambiguity has generated two translations in English. The former refers to the privilege of being able to speak. The latter is related to the embodiment of power through discourse. Chinese official texts do not, neither translated nor published in the official English version when available, clarify this ambiguity, to the extent that I have been able to verify. The debate continues amongst Western academics. For the sake of this thesis, I interpret both meanings as part of the same concept, locating the right to speak as an initial passive claim and discourse power as the active enactment of that claim.

[25] Wang Gengnian, China Radio International president, as quoted in Lams (2018: 394).

our voice does not match our position in the world. That affects the extent to which China is accepted by the world. If our voice does not match our role, however strong we are, we remain a crippled giant" (Guo & Lye, 2013, p. 14; see also Repnikova, 2022). On the other hand, Western discursive hegemony has damaged China's fair shot at regaining its rightful place in the world by presenting "untrue" and "misinformed" representations of China to the world. For example, a 2017 article published on People's Daily argued that China should build its own "democratic discourse system" to counter Western discursive hegemony's attacks on Chinese values and the current mainstream understanding of "universal values". Furthermore, it argued that "the Western democratic model does not have value as a model; only has reference value" (Zhou, 2017). Thus, China's claim to this right to speak is deeply rooted in a perceived grievance and an imbalance. Not only is the West, in China's view, presenting the wrong idea of China and its purpose in the world, but China must counter this from a disadvantaged position, as it lacks the discourse power means which underpin Western discursive dominance. This is where the somewhat defensive notion of the right to speak gives way to a proactive stance in Chinese foreign policy: the search for more discourse power via 1) a coherent and attractive story to tell; and 2) the means to tell it (i.e., the internationalization of Chinese media).

The notion of the right to speak already existed under Hu Jintao (Liu, 2010; Wang, 2009; Zhao, 2016) however, its relevance in China's foreign policy increased significantly with Xi Jinping's assertive pivot towards discursive hegemony (Marsh et al., 2023; Repnikova, 2022; Rolland, 2020). On February 19th, 2016, President Xi Jinping addressed several hundred party members and representatives of the three main media agencies[26] at the CCP Conference on News and Public Opinion Work. This conference takes place annually, but before 2016 the Chairman's speech was more of a formality than anything else. That year, however, the event was surrounded by rumors of an important announcement. President Xi proceeded to describe new media regulations, to which all outlets should thereon adhere in pursue of a most important objective:

> *"We must strengthen the building of our international transmission capacity, and enhance our international discourse power, telling China's story properly in a centralized manner. At the same time, we must optimize our strategic deployments,*

[26] People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television.

working hard to create flagship media for external propaganda that have relatively strong international influence." (Translation from the Chinese language report on Xi's speech, (2016).

The rest of this speech highlights the need to deal with the profound changes brought on by information technology, and the urgency of projecting China's voice in an international public opinion ecology unfavorable to China. It represents one of Xi Jinping's early uses of the catchphrase "telling the China story well" (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*; 讲好中国故事). This expression alone has generated a myriad of studies on what that story is and how it's being told (Daniele Carminati, 2018; Edney et al., 2020; Lams, 2018; Repnikova, 2022; Rolland, 2020). While these interpretations vary widely, Xi Jinping's move to further centralize media regulations around the story to be told solidified consensus about its purpose: to present a compelling and attractive view of China and its vision for the world; in other words, to strengthen China's external propaganda[27]. Some words of caution here. Firstly, it is worth noting that the notion of propaganda in Chinese political thought is different from that of Western approaches, and so is the notion of ideology (Lams, 2018). Secondly, I refer to external propaganda because it is the term most commonly used in Chinese official discourse alongside discourse power. Thirdly, this does not imply confusion or equation of the concept of propaganda (Western or Chinese) with the working analytical concept of strategic narratives used in this thesis. These two are structurally and conceptually different, yet they are related in that they serve a similar purpose. Thirdly, there's a certain tension in the idea of external propaganda. Propaganda, understood as discourse generated by political power, has always been a crucial domestic instrument in authoritarian regimes. Its purpose is to convince audiences of the veracity of the message and the authority of the narrator in power (as discussed in Chapter 1). Societies articulated around hegemonic political power, that is, societies with little space for ideological dissent, rely on the generation of consent via the assimilation of hegemonic values or ideas with "common sense"[28]. In the case of China, the very survival of the CCP depends on its ability to establish certain indisputable truths linking the Party's existence and mission with the goals of the Chinese people and the nation of China (Lams,

[27] The terms "external propaganda" or "publicity" are used interchangeably in official translations of Chinese governmental documents. The Chinese equivalent is 对外宣传 *duiwai xuanchuan*. Recent official documents often also refer to "international communication" (国际传播 *guoji chuanbo*).

[28] Antonio Gramsci. Cuadernos de la cárcel I (1929-1932) – II (1930-1933). Akal, 2023 edition.

2018). In this sense, propaganda spreads the Party's ideological guidelines to be legitimized by the people as naturalized common sense. But the usefulness of propaganda only goes as far as the boundaries of any imagined community because the legitimization of political power, the acceptance of historical truths and the mechanisms behind mythmaking require certain mental frames which differ from community to community. How, then, does China generate external propaganda?

In section 1.1 I discussed how the advent of the mass self-communication era and the development of a global media ecosystem have further blurred the cultural and discursive boundaries between the individual, the local, the national and the global in a process ignited by globalization. The paradox of this situation for China is that it must employ propaganda mechanisms, which in domestic contexts rely heavily in nationalistic evocations, to appeal to an international public whose mental frames cannot be triggered by Chinese nationalism. Repnikova argues that Xi Jinping's "telling the China story well" differs from other types of external propaganda such as that of Russia in that it seeks to explain China from a constructive point of view instead of simply projecting direct attacks at others (Repnikova, 2022, p. 23). Similarly, Lams argues that in repeatedly integrating the "Chinese characteristics" in all aspects of global affairs and opposing them to the Western experience of international relations (i.e., particularism vs universalism), China seeks to fix a meaning of *us* which encompasses the experience of "the rest" vs a meaning of *them* which articulates a common Other in the West (Lams, 2017, 2018). In addition to this, Xi Jinping's emphasis on making China's story appealing for foreign audiences indicates a change in the way China narrates its story that is palatable for different foreign audiences. Therefore, "telling the China story well" contains at least two functions: one, making the story about China and China's model for the world attractive, and two, speaking up against hegemonic discourses by the West in a dissenting act, something which may resonate with other dissatisfied or aggrieved non-Western nations. One can only marvel at the irony of China's international plight as the carrier of the banner of dissent.

Earlier in this section I mentioned that in Chinese foreign policy, discourse power is attained in two ways: by presenting an attractive and compelling story about China and its role in the world, and by amassing the necessary material means to tell the China story well in an age of mass self-communication. The former will be addressed in section 2.4 as it requires a more detailed review of the strategic narratives against which the data gathered will be analyzed in

Chapter 5. The latter merits a brief mention so as to further illustrate the premise that China is indeed using discursive power to influence other foreign audiences.

The literature on Chinese soft power has documented the ways in which China has sought to increase its "global media power" (Repnikova, 2022, p. 21). Two patterns emerge: firstly, we observe the institutionalization of external propaganda, which includes 1) the creation of specific international communication channels; and 2) the centralization of the management of these channels. With regards to the creation of international communication channels, China's major international broadcasters were created between 2009 and 2013 under the "going out" media policy (Hartig, 2019). With a budget of 6€ billion, the three major news companies launched what are now the main sites of Chinese news in English (Jiang & Zhang, 2019). Xinhua established the CNC World News, China's Central Television channel (CCTV) launched broadcasting services in English, Arabic, Spanish, French and Russian (Repnikova, 2022, p. 22) and two of the main Chinese newspapers, Global Times and China Daily, launched English language versions. In 2016, already under Xi Jinping, CCTV would unify its international broadcasting with the launch of the global media conglomerate China Global Television Network (CGTN). As for the centralization of Chinese media operations, new regulations[29] and laws were approved under Xi Jinping aimed at strengthening the Party-state's control over the contents of news. The State Council Information Office and CCP's Central Propaganda Department increased their control over content projected through Chinese media outlets. For example, with the March 2018 reforms, CGTN and the two main radio channels, China National Radio and China Radio International were placed under direct supervision of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department[30] (Bachman, 2020).

The second clear pattern under Xi Jinping is the localization of these new international communication channels. This is done in two ways: 1) via partnerships with foreign local news outlets; and 2) the direct acquisition of news outlets in other countries or investing in foreign

[29] For example, the March 2018 "Program for Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs" included a section on regulations related to foreign-directed media (Bachman, 2020). For a detailed review of these reforms and more documented ways in which China exerts media influence related for example to the activity of Confucius Institutes, journalists training programs, or diplomatic engagement through social media see Bachman, 2020; Repnikova, 2022.

[30] This new organization is called the China Media Group (CMG) internally but in content addressed to foreign audiences it is referred to as 'the Voice of China'.

media companies' shares[31] (K. G. Qing & Shiffman, 2015). In addition to this, the overall number of offices and local agencies of Chinese media outlets dedicated to reporting at domestic level in Africa and Latin America has significantly increased in the last decade (Lim & Bergin, 2018). The goal of these initiatives is to increase the production of content tailored to foreign audiences. A further decision under Xi Jinping has been to increase the number of content sharing agreements, through which non-Chinese media outlets share CCP's approved content. These are a sort of publicity partnership that have been documented, for example, between China Daily and outlets of the likes of the British tabloid Daily Mail (Graham-Harrison, 2016), but also respected newspapers such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post (Lim & Bergin, 2018) and specifically, in the cases of Italy, Czech Republic and the Philippines (Kumar, 2021). In relation to Chinese media 'sharp power', these types of outlets acquisitions and content agreements have certain implications for journalism standards of transparency and freedom worldwide (Cook, 2020). In a particularly infamous incident, journalist Azad Essa was fired from his long-held position at a South African newspaper after he wrote an investigative piece about the treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang. Two Chinese state-backed companies owned 20% of said newspaper's parent company's stocks[32]. According to a recent report by Freedom House, "the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its proxies are using more sophisticated and coercive tactics to shape media narratives and suppress critical reporting" which poses specific challenges for democratic countries (Cook et al., 2019, p. 3).

2.3.3 The EU as an audience: united in diversity of opinions

Not all democracies are equally vulnerable to Chinese global media influence. In the above-mentioned report by Freedom House, out of thirty countries examined worldwide, China's media influence efforts have been more intense in Taiwan, the UK and the US, with Spain, Italy and France ranking 5th, 6th, and 16th, respectively (Cook et al., 2019, p. 26). Resilience against Chinese efforts depends greatly on each country's social, economic, and political context and the response to Chinese media influence efforts varies amongst democracies in the

[31] Something referred to by Chinese officials as "buying or borrowing the boat to go out to sea" (*jiechuan chuhai,* 借船出海).

[32] Azad Essa, *China Is Buying African Media's Silence*. Foreign Policy, September 14th, 2018. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/china-is-buying-african-medias-silence/

world (Cook et al., 2019). Undoubtedly, China is a polarizing topic worldwide. Within the EU, perceptions on China have become somewhat schizophrenic. A survey conducted in thirteen EU Member States between July and August of 2022 showed that while public opinion on China had overall worsened, this was as a result of China's relations with Russia in the context of the invasion of Ukraine. Barred the Russia variable, China was regarded favorably as an economic partner, specifically, its model for economic development (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2022). The same report showed that the second most relevant factor in a country's overall positive perception of China is Beijing's management of the Covid-19 crisis, which resonates with findings about China's efforts to project an image of responsibility and generosity during the pandemic (Chen, 2021; Lee, 2021). Another report showed that "despite the negative views and the lack of trust, Europeans still want to cooperate with China when it comes to global issues, such as climate change, pandemics, and counterterrorism" (Turcsanyi et al., 2021, p. 3). A third report, conducted by the Bruegel Institute analyzing worldwide perceptions of the BRI showed that EU Member States' citizen's perceptions of China's flagship initiative vary widely, with Poland and the Netherlands scoring on different ends of the spectrum (Garcia-Herrero & Xu, 2019).

This variation in the perception of China by EU citizens is matched by political disunity. The EU and China have an uneasy relationship, governed by economic reliance on each other but plagued with accusations of unfair game-playing and mistrust. The Union, playing to its *forte*, is China's main trading partner, while China became the EU's in 2020 (European Commission, 2023). This growing interdependence places the EU in a delicate position when confronted with the challenges that a risen China poses. On the one hand, the EU is in a somewhat "middle child" position between the two opposing poles of power that are China and the US. On the other hand, China's ambitions in the international order are a threat to its liberal dimension (Dukalskis, 2021), which impinges on the very values the EU is built around. Furthermore, the EU does not seem to be able to find its single voice and articulate a coherent position towards China (Casarini, 2022; Li & He, 2022). The positions of EU Member States on China differ across the board due to diverging national interests which further exacerbates EU potential weaknesses by virtue of the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign policy. This complex scenario is reflected in the EU's current position on China, published in 2019 and endorsed by the Council in 2020, which refers to Beijing as a partner, a competitor, and a systemic rival (European Commission, 2019).

The lack of a unified EU position towards China is something Beijing is keen to exploit. China's preferred approach to the EU is through bilateral relations with its Member States (Casarini, 2022), which has seen members making choices that have generated uneasiness on the whole of the Union. Examples of this include the signing of a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding on BRI investment and infrastructure between China and Italy in March of 2019 which saw the first G7 country entering into the BRI[33], Greece and Hungary opposing a draft declaration on The Hague's ruling on a South China Sea Arbitration in 2016 (Gotev, 2016) and Greece's veto to an EU statement on human rights issues on China at the UN in 2017 (Emmott & Koutantou, 2017). Furthermore, China has fueled the creation of regional groupings aimed at increased cooperation and negotiation with some EU Member States – but not others. Some authors have suggested that Beijing is aware of the leverage it holds over certain EU Member States and is keen to pursue a "divide and conquer" approach (Casarini, 2016). Pointedly, the EU is a complex institutional and political entity, and since the 2008 economic crisis, internal struggles and imbalances have played some Member States against others, a reality which allows China to play to its advantage in bilateral settings.

To be sure, the Covid-19 crisis highlighted the risks of supply chain disruptions, and some in the EU have called for a reconsideration of its dependency on China (Chimits et al., 2023; Raza et al., 2021). However, the EU is a complex political animal, and Member States' stances on China still vary widely. As one recent report by the European Think Tanks Network on China (ETNC) argues: "approaches towards the aspiring world power vary depending on the intensity of relations, the extent and nature of economic dependence as well as attitudes towards the authoritarian government in China." (Bartsch & Wessling, 2023, p. 10). This collage of national approaches to China contributes to an overall disadvantage when it comes to effective response and ignites questions around China's influence among EU Member States. Recently, the European External Action Service (EEAS) itself has turned to the issue of discursive influence in the shape of disinformation, misinformation[34] and propaganda. In February 2023, the EEAS published its first report on what it has been officially designated as Foreign

[33] The MoU is up for renewal in 2024 and Italy's PM at the time of writing has indicated that the agreement was "a mistake". See J. Yang & Gattolin (2023).

[34] For the difference between misinformation and disinformation see Strategic Communications, Task Forces and Information Analysis (STRAT.2) (2023), *1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats*, EEAS.

Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) [35] published by the newly created Information Sharing and Analysis Center within the existing Stratcom division at the EEAS. This division focuses on analyzing, preventing and countering FIMI and currently focuses on Russia and China as the main actors involved in these practices. The creation of this division and the publication of this report is a testament to the increasing relevance of discursive influence for EU institutional actors. As Miskimmon et al., put it, "[China and the US'] competing policy narratives will no doubt spark considerable debate, and their reception is likely to shape the future of EU foreign policy towards China and the US." (Miskimmon et al., 2020, pp. 230–231).

Let us summarize the main arguments presented so far in this section. China is in a quest for great power status in the international order. Alongside material inducements, it uses discourse power to increase its influence in a manner that specifically targets and takes advantage of the current global communications environment. This is embodied in the "telling the China story well" slogan, which encompasses a series of initiatives and regulations aimed at convincing foreign audiences of China's appeal, as well as the appeal of the Beijing model for global governance. These efforts have so far have mixed results, with democracies being less likely to find China's narratives appealing. However, these democracies' ability and willingness to respond to Chinese influence vary greatly, even within the European Union. The reasons behind this variation are unclear, but they largely point to states' grievances/dissatisfaction and national interests in the context of their own regional or international environments. Recent research has pointed out the need to "evaluate fully how effectively Chinese external propaganda resonates among foreign audiences." (Bachman, 2020, p. i). Against this backdrop, Chinese narratives picture prominently in what the EU now considers FIMI. The Stratcom report argues:

> *"Over the years, China has been building its presence in the global information environment, including increased worldwide presence of its state-controlled media. China has been seen using both its own global media footprint and economic leverage over other outlets to influence media coverage, while at the same time*

[35] "A mostly non-illegal pattern of behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory" Ibid, 4.

> *heavily restricting reporting by foreign correspondents in China. While building up its messaging machine, China has made systematic efforts to suppress competing and potentially critical stories about itself, using a wide range of often covert tactics"* (StratCom Force Task. EEAS, 2023, p. 10).

The EEAS report focuses on illustrating the ways in which actors such as China and Russia engage in FIMI. It does not analyze the specific messages that China projects, nor their level of assimilation in Member States' domestic media or the reasons for these underlying discursive preferences. Thus, this thesis builds on the same type of arguments presented in reports such as the one by the EEAS, and aims to further observe and document the extent of China's discursive influence in the EU. As per the EEAS:

> *"Only by consistently observing and documenting these activities can we understand and illustrate their vast scope, manipulative nature and harmful consequences. It is the entirety of these observations that paints a full picture of the threat and allows us to formulate effective and targeted responses from the short to the long term, from countering individual attacks to closing vulnerabilities and increasing our collective resilience"* (StratCom Force Task. EEAS, 2023, p. 9).

The next section will illustrate the main strategic narratives projected worldwide that the literature has found through the analysis of Chinese official documents and media. These narratives are taken into consideration during the analysis of the 1577 articles, acting as a template for what to look for.

2.4 Chinese strategic narratives for a new international order

Chinese strategic narratives deployed worldwide can be seen as a sort of marketing strategy to promote Beijing's model of global governance and China's view for the international order. The literature on the formation and projection of Chinese strategic narratives is, as we touched on before, ever growing. A good place to start is Paul Lee's article on the Rise of China and its contest for discursive power (Lee, 2016; Miskimmon et al., 2020). Particularly relevant for this thesis is Lutgard Lams' work on the formation of specific strategic narratives in contemporary

Chinese official discourse (Lams, 2017, 2018) and Caroline van Noort's in depth exploration of Chinese projection of infrastructure narratives around the BRI (van Noort, 2020a, 2022). Both authors take Miskimmon et al., framework for strategic narratives as a theoretical starting point to articulate their studies of the formation and projection of narratives in Chinese official discourse. I take their findings on China's narrative about itself, about the world, and about the BRI as a template for the discursive analysis of news articles in EU traditional media.

Lams' work finds that Chinese official discourse presents two sets of strategic narratives, one aimed at domestic audiences, and another designed for foreign opinion management (Lams, 2018, p. 394). Considering that this dissertation focuses solely on the reception of Chinese narratives in EU Member States, only those aimed at foreign audiences are taken into account. She identifies five strategic narratives: a) the "Discourse Right" to "Explain the China Story Properly and Thoroughly"; b) the universalism versus particularism narrative; c) China as a "harmonious, peaceful nation", but "entitled to defend its legitimate sovereignty and security claims"; d) the need for global connectivity via China's OBOR initiative; and e) the "Community of Common Destiny/Shared Future". Of these five, I take the last three as constitutive of what Miskimmon et al., conceptualize as identity, issue, and system strategic narratives respectively (2013; 2017). I do not take into consideration Lams' first two narratives in my data analysis because I consider that they lack the structural elements of a strategic narrative as delineated by Miskimmon et al. and expanded in my own operationalization (see Chapter 3.)

2.4.1 China as a "harmonious, peaceful nation but entitled to defend its legitimate sovereignty and security claims"

China's projected narrative about its international identity is formulated, according to Lams, around the idea of China's path or the *China dream*. This idea, rooted in Confucian notions of community and the societal expectation to be a good citizen and trust the authority with enthusiasm[36], articulates a nation in which governmental actors and societal actors have clearly

[36] Ironically, under Xi Jinping, CCP members were instructed to study the same Confucian texts which had been censored during Mao's regime. These Confucian notions of moral leadership inhere the correctness in the top-to-bottom relationship between the leadership and the people, and promote the values of benevolence, righteousness, dignity and fidelity to the master amongst Chinese citizens. For more on this topic see Octavio Paz (2017).

defined roles and they both work in unison to the betterment of the nation (González, 2021). In this representation, the CCP takes on the mantle of guiding the Chinese people towards the completion of its dream of a modern, fully developed nation, that is, the China dream[37]. This perfect alignment between leadership and people is what Chinese official discourse refers to as "the harmonic society" (González, 2021; Lams, 2018). A society where good citizens are happy citizens, where dissent is non-existent and the good of the community prevails over the interests of the individual, because the former *are* the latter. The harmonic society has been a staple of Chinese outward discourse since before Xi Jinping came into power. With Xi at the helm, the idea of the successful harmonic society has been brought to the fore as part of Xi Jinping's Though, and presented as indispensable for stability and prosperity and, while not stated overtly, it is indirectly opposed to that of the Western style of society, i.e., a democratic on where individual rights and freedoms are put before the "good of the community". As Lams argues, "Party directives are discursively conflated with the Chinese *people's* wishes" (Lams, 2018, p. 400). In this sense, the Confucian notion of a meritocratic system which produces benevolent and wise leaders is embedded in the Party's discursive self-deification[38] and filters down into the self-representation of a stable, happy, and harmonic society.

The next core tenet of China's image/identity projection is that of its peaceful nature. According to Lams, "advocating multilateralism and global dialogue, President Xi often assures the international community that China is a peaceful nation, does not harbor hegemonic intentions, and does not aim to play power games" (Lams, 2018, p. 12). Aware of the suspicion its rise generates among neighbors and rivals, China seeks to ease concerns by promoting an image of a good neighbor. This image is often projected in opposition to that of Western powers who have engaged in expansionism or imperialism. By differentiating itself from these Western powers, China introduces the idea that it brings a new way of doing politics, integrated in Beijing's model for global governance which respects territorial sovereignty and political legitimacy. This affirmation by self-othering mechanisms is commonly used across Chinese official communication (Lams, 2017). Thus, the identity narrative projected is one of

[37] In some instances the Chinese Dream is equated with "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴; 中華民族偉大復興; *Zhōnghuámínzú Wěidà Fùxīng*).

[38] In *The Governance of China* Xi Jinping argues for the CCP's adequacy to direct the people of China towards its goals due to, amongst other things, its unique ability to understand the Marxist doctrine of dialectic materialism and apply historical materialism to the laws that govern societal development (Xi, 2014).

distinctiveness (Chinese characteristics) but assimilation in group binarism (West vs non-West). This is particularly interesting when analyzing the reception of China's identity strategic narrative in Western countries such as those in the EU.

Lams' second observation in the analysis of China's identity narrative takes us to Beijing's growing assertiveness. While projecting an image of a peaceful nation, China's narratives around its national security and territorial integrity seem to project an element of aggressiveness. Perhaps one the three most obvious examples of this are the treatment of Uighurs in the westernmost Xinjiang region, the Taiwan issue, and China's contested claims in the South China Sea. As Lams points out, Xi Jinping stated in a televised speech that China adheres "to the path of peaceful development and resolutely safeguard our territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests of China. No matter who seeks to make an issue of this, the Chinese people will never give way." (Xi Jinping[39], as quoted in Lams, 2018, p.13). In China's official discourse this aggressive stance is therefore justified through the inclusion of China's interests as part of the *people's* interests. It is interesting to see how, as the literature suggests, this image of assertiveness is a desirable one in Xi Jinping's Thought, for it purports a state that is ultimately magnanimous insofar as it is benevolent and peaceful, but it is also strong and capable of defending the nation from external enemies, which are aplenty. Mitchell (2019) referred to this in his article about the antiliberal rationale of Chinese ideology and the relevance of Carl Schmitt's work among Chinese academics.

In her work on states quest for identity, Janice Bially-Mattern argues that "where disorder exists, the emergence of an identity would replace an unstable and uncertain environment with precisely the kind of shared epistemological backdrop from which stable expectations and behaviors are forged." (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 4). With this in mind, the analysis of China's strategic identity narrative in EU traditional media will follow the identification of the notions of China as a harmonious nation, a peaceful actor, and one which is ready to defend the principle of territorial integrity and national security. In this sense, the expected Chinese strategic narrative about its own identity shall also include depictions of a "responsible actor",

[39] Xi Jinping (2017). New Year address, with English subtitles, retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzbkGXUFaiY. Accessed August 23rd, 2023.

a “benevolent actor”, and a “trustworthy partner”, insofar as these are the derived behavioral expectations from China’s formulated/projected identity narrative.

2.4.2 The Need for Global Connectivity through the BRI

Lams identifies the strategic narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative as an enabler of connectivity and economic development for all. As Lam’s notes, this narrative is in originally presented as “a gift to the world”, with Xi Jinping presenting it in the first BRI Forum as an “initiative [which] would offer a series of foreign assistance programmes, cooperate with many international financial institutions in financing investment projects, and forge partnerships of dialogue with no confrontation” (Lams, 2018, p. 11). The BRI is presented as a continuation of China’s identity as a benevolent, responsible, and peaceful actor in the system, which seeks to see all other nations succeed – following the Chinese example – by engaging with this new initiative.

To add to Lam’s interpretation of the BRI as an issue narrative, I rely on Caroline van Noort’s insights on China’s projection of the BRI strategic narrative (van Noort, 2022). In her book she distinguishes two dimensions of the BRI strategic narrative: one related to infrastructure and another one linking the ancient Silk Road with the contemporary Belt and Road policy initiative. Van Noort deconstructs these two dimensions into several discursive elements that feature prominently in Chinese discourse. The infrastructure dimension contains six features: (i) spatial, (ii) temporal, (iii) political, (iv) economic, (v) technological, and (vi) perception. The Silk Road dimension contains four discursive elements: (i) nostalgia, (ii) people mobility, (iii) landscape and (iv) exchanges. According to van Noort, China uses these features in its communication of the BRI[40] to construct a narrative that highlights China’s success in building infrastructure which then boosts connectivity ultimately delivering economic benefits to countries along the BRI and the enrichment that comes from cultural exchanges as it did in the case of China itself. By presenting this logical evolution of a country’s engagement with the BRI, China connects the BRI and China’s own example of an infrastructure-based economic development with the notion of positive economic development. When it comes to the spatial and temporal features

[40] Communication here refers to official discourse action via standard diplomatic channels (i.e., ministry statements, policy documents, MoUs, etc) and also so-called diplomacy 2.0 channels (i.e., social media and news outlets).

of the infrastructure dimension identified by van Noort, these can be mentioned hand in hand with the three features of the ancient Silk Road dimension: nostalgia, people mobility, landscape and exchanges. China harnesses the power of the imagined past through the inclusion of these features in the BRI issue narrative. In this sense, the BRI invokes a historical mythical dimension of the ancient Silk Road and recalls the centrality that the old trading route had for the world (van Noort, 2022, pp. 33–35). Lams' work on the discursive processes through which China constructs narratives highlights a clear tendency to "mythmaking by fixing contingent processes into static accounts of China's past, present, and future" (Lams, 2018, p. 2). By linking the ancient Silk Road and its importance for the development of many nations through trade with the modern BRI and with China as its promoter, Beijing portrays China as at the center of world trade – with evocations of the traditional image of China as the middle kingdom between heaven and earth. This infuses the image of the BRI and China with a historical grandeur and with, potentially, the legitimacy to operate as the new center for trade and development.

Furthermore, from the second BRI Forum onwards, Chinese official discourse will widen the scope of the benefits which countries can obtain from solely economic and people-to-people exchanges to positive interpretations of the BRI as green and clean (Xi, 2019). Van Noort conceptualizes this in the political dimension of the BRI narrative. An example of this would be Xi Jinping's 2019 speech at the second BRI Forum in which he emphasized a new view of the BRI after receiving heavy criticism for the way investments and agreements were reached in often coercive circumstances (see also Lam, 2020; Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019):

"We need to pursue open, green and clean cooperation. The Belt and Road is not an exclusive club; it aims to promote green development. We may launch green infrastructure projects, make green investment and provide green financing to protect the Earth which we all call home. In pursuing Belt and Road cooperation, everything should be done in a transparent way, and we should have zero tolerance for corruption." ***(Xi, 2019).***

This refers to both environmental and sustainability concerns and corruption and transparency claims: (i) the infrastructure projects meet environmental regulations and standards and (ii) they aim at providing developing nations with sustainable and long-term green solutions to connectivity and infrastructure problems.

Another crucial aspect of the BRI strategic narrative is that of political non-conditionality. Van Noort argues that China projects a narrative of "no strings attached" agreements juxtaposed to those economic development agreements that Western powers prefer which carry political concessions agreeing parties must commit to (van Noort, 2022, p. 36). As for the technological feature of the BRI, Chinese official discourse highlights that technology is a fundamental aspect of any development strategy for any country in today's world. Framed as a bridge between economies and industries, countries alongside the BRI will benefit from technological and know-how exchanges with other nations which may prove pivotal for the sustainable development and interconnectedness of industries across the Eurasian continent. These arguments, put together in a single strategic narrative projected and multiplied through multiple discursive channels amount to the win-win aspect of China's offered deal to the world.

2.4.3 The "Community of Common Destiny/Shared Future"

One of Xi Jinping's most recognizable slogans is that of the community of common destiny[41]. The most complete definition of this slogan appeared in the Beijing Declaration, a text that would come out of the First South-South Human Rights Forum held in December of 2017. The broader meaning of this community of common destiny alludes to a "world of lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness, tolerance and cleanness", in which humanity "is free from fear, from poverty, from disease, from discrimination and from isolation" (Beijing Declaration, 2017, sec. Article 2). Anchored in Marxist historical materialism, it continuously mentions 'the peoples' as the primordial actor and history generating agents, and it invokes a sense of similar experiences in the developmental track of friendly nations which create bridges for cooperation and lead to a common fate or destiny (Lams, 2018, p. 11). These similar experiences and shared goals or future create the titular community, in which China is master to include or exclude as it sees fit according to its foreign policy interests. Originally, this notion was employed in the context of China's relations with its Asian neighbours and with African partners. As Lams notes, the notion "refers to regional alliances, in creating bonds between neighbouring communities or developing nations" (Lams, 2018, p. 12). With the gradual internationalization of the BRI, China adjusted the narrative to appeal to developed nations. At this point, the common destiny part was dropped from Chinese English-language

[41] The sentence was first used by Hu Jintao in his report to the 18th Party Congress in 2012. It has since evolved as an objective enshrined in Chinese foreign policy.

official discourse, and it was replaced by the "shared future" expression. Whereas the "common future" openly recalls this sense of similarity among equals, a "shared future" conveys more positive connotations without remarking on any identity traits. When it comes to the renewed meaning, Lams remarks that the slogan is expanded to emphasize the need for "mutual collaboration instead of the old zero-sum model associated with a Western Cold War mentality" (Lams, 2018, p. 11).

Furthermore, this narrative allocates actorness to those countries it is directed to, and it constructs an international system governed by solidarity, connectivity and cooperation, non-aggression, and respect for differentiated identities. However, this strategic narrative also conveys the leadership of China in this community, as its main discursive elements were included in the Chinese constitution in 2017 as an essential part of Xi Jinping's Thought. The slogan "a community of shared future" was also incorporated into several UN resolutions such as the 2017 Security Council Resolution on the extension of the Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UN Security Council, 2017) and a 2017 Human Rights Council on the contribution of development to the enjoyment of all Human Rights (UN Human Rights Council, 2017) and it features prominently in a Human Rights Council study on "the ways in which development contributes to the enjoyment of all human rights by all" (UN Human Rights Council Advisory Committee, 2019) and a 2021 sister Resolution (Human Rights Council, 2021). In some instances, these documents also include direct references to win-win cooperation, an integral part of this community of shared future.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL APPROACH AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 will present this dissertation's approach to strategic narratives built on Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle's theory on communication and power. It will proceed as follows: the first section will discuss what strategic narratives are. Section 3.3 will then explain this thesis' approach to strategy in narrative which introduces the notion of normativity building on Miskimmon et al. (2013; 2017). Sections 3.4 and 3.5 will describe what the different types of narratives are and what the three phases of narrative action entail, respectively, to contextualize this study's focus on the reception of narratives. Finally, sections 3.6 and 3.7 will describe the approach to strategic narrative analysis and the operationalization of narratives followed during the data analysis, introducing the three-level narrative analysis design.

3.2 What are Strategic Narratives?

Stripped down to its Aristotelian core, a narrative is a story[42]. A story told by someone to someone else. A story which carries a certain meaning. As such, narratives have been around for as long as humans have sought to make sense of their experience of life - often as opposed to that of others. As personal stories, narratives originate in the individual. However, narratives are also an integral part of humans' social experience of life and as such, they have a life beyond the individual. In that regard, narratives speak to the life experience of groups or parts of society, such as those developed around ethnicity, religious or cultural identity. Moreover, narratives

[42] In different social sciences disciplines, some authors equate narrative with story while others differentiate between a story as a singular structure and narrative as a "system of stories". For the purpose of this analysis, which is circumscribed to IR's approach to narrative theory, I do not make such differentiation, as there is no substantial analytical difference between studying narratives as containing multiple stories or as a singular meta-story. In this dissertation, story and narrative are often used interchangeably.

are also important sense-making instruments for those imagined communities[43] anchored in national identities and may thus also be found in more delineated organizations such as governments and other institutional groups. These two dimensions of narrative as originating in the individual but developing a life of its own in different types of societal groups reflects narratives' epistemological transformation from a purely literary concept to an instrument of power in international politics and an object research in social sciences.

Narrative is quite a universal concept. According to Roland Barthes and Lionel Duisit, narratives can be found in "countless forms" and "vehicles", and "like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural" (Barthes & Duisit, 1975, p. 237). Nowadays, narrative has come to mean anything from a personal memoir to a governmental position in response to an event, to the communications strategy of any actor, to a statement tweeted at three a.m. by an unsupervised head of state (Drezner, 2020). In truth, all those elements may be part of larger narratives, particularly in today's mass self-communication environment, but nevertheless, the popularization of the term has come at the expense of specificity and concretion. The very universality of narratives calls for stringent definitions of what narrative is, what it is not, and how to use it in research.

The definition, purpose and methodological application of narratives varies across the human and social sciences discipline spectrum. We can identify certain commonalities which speak to that universality of narratives. Like any story, a narrative inheres certain structural elements: a beginning, a middle, and an end. In narrative theory parlance we speak of an established order, an event which disrupts said order, and an outcome or resolution which often reorganizes or modifies the original order into a new one (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 17). In addition to this, generally, narratives require a narrator and an addressee, although these vary greatly among disciplines. These elements serve as a framework through which humans connect phenomena around them and assign meaning and order to their reality. It follows then that narratives have a function, a purpose. Narrating the world, or storytelling, is how we make sense of complex social, historical, and political reality. As Riessman puts it, "[…] Narratives do political work. The social role of stories – how they are connected to the flow of power in the wider world – is an important facet of narrative theory" (2008, p. 21). Narratives have a sense-making

[43] See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, 1983, Verso, London.

function which places them in the realm of power. Commonalities among conceptualizations and applications of the concept of narratives practically end here.

A relevant question now would be: what is the difference between narratives and *strategic* narratives? The former is an umbrella term anchored in literary approaches which includes different conceptualizations applied in a variety of ways in anthropological, sociological and IR research. The latter refers to a specific such conceptualization developed by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013; 2017) and taken as the backbone of this study's theoretical approach.

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle define strategic narratives as: "A means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (2017, p. 6). The key to strategic narratives' potential lies in their ability to convince audiences that any given reality is as the narrator projects it to be, and not any other way. Strategic narratives therefore hold great appeal for leaders seeking to establish specific understandings of how the world works. The acceptance of a proposed interpretation of reality, a common or shared understanding over an event or an issue, shapes reality itself insofar as it informs individual and social cognitive and value-based processes which articulate how people experience life. Remembering Foucault's regimes of truth, this "shaping of reality" paves the way for contestation of established understandings (e.g., norms, standards, world views…) and legitimation of political action. Strategic narrative theory is anchored in the constructivist tradition of IR theories. The focal point of strategic narratives is located on how actor behavior is shaped by narrative action in the international system. In this sense, strategic narrative theory addresses the agency/structure divide in constructivist literature by 1) imbuing actors with agency in world construction through the categorization of actors as narrators in the structure of strategic narratives[44], and 2) by focusing on context-specific characteristics of the strategic narrative action which is being studied. In the authors' words: "narratives structure behavior even as actors are afforded agency", a process through which "actors are given meaning to themselves and to others by narrative" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017, p. 46).

[44] See section 3.7 of this Chapter for a detailed description of the elements which conform the structure of strategic narratives.

The strategic use of narratives is not a recent occurrence in international affairs. Throughout history, narratives have played a central role in the unfolding of international events, from diplomatic crises or military campaigns to civil protests. Specifically relevant is the role of narratives in the military and diplomatic fields where leaders have long employed narratives to *strategically* communicate with both allies and enemies and take advantage of a given moment or scenario. Starting from the beginning, Thucydides himself used discourses and dialogue as tools to narrate key moments in the Peloponnesian War. During the Cold War, US and URSS leaders employed narrative storytelling to create self-other images which informed citizen's perspectives on the conflict and garnered political support. More recently, during the mid-2000s, politicians projected specific narratives of the world to legitimize political decisions. During the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the subsequent wars that followed, the "war on terror" and "the axis of evil" narratives were vehemently projected onto audiences to justify a battery of measures which aimed at reordering national priorities and international politics. Narratives have also been used to justify or legitimize political decisions regarding domestic affairs. Such was the case of the narratives surrounding the 2008 economic crisis, when politicians turned to narratives to generate common understandings of such dire economic situation, of the selected causes of the crisis, and more importantly, of the sacrifices to be demanded of citizens in order to collectively come out on the other side of it . The narrative of austerity, of the collective tightening of belts, was employed systematically to convince populations of the necessity of certain -controversial- policy reforms (i.e., the narrative of productive and frugal Northern European Member States vs the lazy, spending-prone PIGS in the South). Narratives have also played a very important role among civil society actors, who often seek to establish or subvert identities and status quo dynamics by shifting audiences focus and channeling specific narratives. Take, for example, the early 1980s SOS Racisme anti-racism slogan "*touche pas à mon pote*", used as the tagline for a wider French Socialist narrative of multiculturalism which sought to get French audiences to see migrants as part of a collective *us.*

Whether or not strategic narratives are successful is a complex matter. In his opening speech at the EU Ambassadors Annual Conference of 2022, HR/VP Josep Borrell exhorted: "I need you to be much more engaged in this battle of narratives. It is not something secondary. It is not just winning the wars by sending tanks, missiles, and troops. It is a big battle: who is going to win the spirits and the souls of people?" (Borrell, 2022). Borrell refers here to two interesting aspects of this narrative turn in international relations. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 2, the

democratization and widespread use of narratives as discursive tools of attraction. Narrative use is no longer solely circumscribed to strategic areas such as the military or diplomatic fields, but it has become the primary weapon in a "global battle" for [discursive] power fought in all fronts of political and social interaction. Secondly, Borrell hints at a theme which is present in all major works about social communication and social relations: that of the structural and historically contingent nature of all communicative action, including narrative projection and reception. In his speech, Borrell calls upon EU ambassadors to recognize the urgency of the situation the Union finds itself in, having been as usual slightly slower than other actors in recognizing the value of designing a coherent narrative around the COVID-19 crisis. Timing is crucial in the winning of minds and hearts, for once successful narratives are set, it may prove difficult to contest them particularly if one has lost the momentum. But equally relevant is the historical and external contexts onto which narratives are projected. Let's bring back the case of the austerity narrative post-2008 crisis. Populations were by and large not convinced, and it is safe to say that over the course of the next decade, audiences would come to reject some of the narratives, particularly those related to where the blame lay and the efficacy of the austerity measures. This comes to show that narratives are heavily context sensitive, and their efficacy and success may vary depending on a series of variables. For example, while the war on terror narrative garnered sufficient support in the US to deliver a second Bush presidency, domestic audiences in Spain and the UK generally opposed involvement in the war, despite their majority leaders' staunch support for President Bush's foreign policy decisions and their adoption of the narrative discourse of explicitly controversial elements such as the existence of weapons of mass destruction. Strategic narratives are thus historically and contextually sensitive.

In sum, this section has highlighted that narratives are story-telling tools imbued with power by their ability to make sense of the world. This increases their value in the discursive market of international politics as actors operate in a world of mass self-communication with more tools to discursively reach foreign audiences and increased salience of international issues for domestic audiences. However, narratives, as expressions of communicative action, are limited or enabled by the structural, historical, and cultural contexts in which they are embedded both in their projection and in the reception. In this sense, aspects such as timing and context affect the effectiveness of narratives. The next section will further explore this.

3.2.1 What strategic narratives are not

This thesis differentiates strategic narratives from other common types of communicative action studied in IR such as frames and discourse on account of their specific structure, their typology, and their strategic nature. According to Entman, framing is "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution," (2004, p. 5). As such, framing can be embedded in strategic narratives and understanding the meaning of specific frames helps trace strategic narratives. But frames remain "relatively short-term heuristics" (Entman, 2004) crafted around events that can be included in narratives.

Narrative also differs from discourse in that the latter is understood in this thesis as per Epstein's definition as "long-term bodies of knowledge in specific fields of practice that create stable subject positions or actor roles" (Epstein, 2008 cited in Miskimmon et al., 2020, p. 30). Both frames and discourse differ from narratives in their structure and scope, and more importantly, neither of the former contemplate plotting or timing in the structuring of linked events sense that narratives do. Narratives, through their specific attention to time as a structuring element, facilitate the attribution of causality and conditionality to the past or the future. The same cannot be said about frames or discourse.

That said, attention to both frames and discourse can be helpful when analyzing strategic narratives. As previously mentioned, narratives can include specific framing of events as they happen in real-time. At the same time, understanding or being aware of the specific discourses already existing in national, regional, or any delimited spaces in which strategic narratives operate can help us understand the mechanisms through which a narrative is successful (that is, accepted or rejected by specific audiences). In this sense, studying narratives includes the study of framing of issues and attention to discourse as part of those "raw materials" already present in international politics as it requires paying attention to contextual elements that fall outside of the realm of framing (e.g., the specific cultural frames of the receiving audience, not just of the projecting actor). Furthermore, the study of narratives allows us to better observe and understand intentionality behind discursive action because crafting and projecting a strategic narrative is a concerted endeavor; narratives must be coherent and resonate with other aspects of actors' behavior. Lastly, narratives have a more pervasive purpose than framing and discourse since they are connected to actors' identities and motives much more organically.

For example, faced with an international crisis, actors may frame a particular event in a particular way and their official discourse reflects this framing. It enacts it in that specific moment in time. Narratives go beyond concrete events; they integrate that specific framing into a wider story about the actor or the actor's role in the development of international relations. Studying narratives offers a better understanding of overarching trends -and their goals- in the search for discursive hegemony.

3.3 When are narratives *strategic*?

The notion of "shaping of reality" inheres an action carried out by an actor. It presupposes intention and direction. However, narrative is not necessarily synonymous with the intent to change the perception or position of those who listen to the narration. A narrator may be passive, unaware that they are replicating or projecting a specific narrative. A narrator may not have a specific *strategic* goal in mind when engaging in narrative projection. The affirmation that narratives exist and that they are sense-making instruments is not naturally followed by the assumption that all narrative action is strategic. Which begs the question: when are narratives *strategic*? Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle developed their theory of strategic narratives as a way to account for the role of communication and its relation to power in the exercise of influence in international affairs. While they make systematic use of the adjective *strategic*, they equate strategy with intentionality. According to the authors, a narrative is strategic when we can clearly identify *how* actors create it. They posit that "analysis of the role of narratives in international relations requires attention to how actors select from the raw materials of international affairs to lend narrativity to the experience of international affairs so as to try to create the intended meaning to the political past, present, and future" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 25). It follows that actors cannot freely design narratives to help them achieve their goals, but that the use of narratives as a tool in international relations is limited by the existence of these raw materials of international politics.

Identifying the intended meaning becomes the key to understanding strategy in narratives. What Miskimmon et al., are referring to is what is commonly known as the plot of a story, or rather the act of plotting elements in a story. A narrative becomes strategic when specific elements become *plotted* into the story. Plotting is a way of structuring events within a narrative by "turning an otherwise disparate set of events into a coherent whole" (Colley & van Noort,

2022, p. 37). They argue that the way in which plotting takes place in narrative is instrumental in identifying motives and they suggest that "the most often cited in the international relations literature are persuasion or argumentation and representational force or coercion." (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 21). Thus, plotting takes specific forms in strategic narrative action: "narratives are strategic if and only if they have the purpose of assuring that the story predicted or ordered by the narrative will take place or threatening severe consequences to relevant actors if it does not." (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017, p. 192).

Miskimmon et al. suggest looking at these different ways in which plotting happens in strategic narrative action by employing appropriate methodological approaches depending on the focus of the research question. On the one hand, they suggest that researchers should focus on *how* narratives are crafted in terms of the underlying motives or interests actors may have. Relevance is given to the analysis of communicative exchange in concrete events and interstate or domestic reverberation. On the other hand, researchers are encouraged to focus on *how* narratives are crafted from the specific discourses which already exist as part of the subjective experience of human life. Miskimmon et al. refer here to "the 'raw materials' from which political leaders can craft strategic narratives" (2017: 37). This notion of raw materials links back to previous narrative theory debates about the existence of prenarrative experience[45] (Riessman, 2008, p. 19). Riessman, quoting Cronon, argues that speakers "create plots from disordered experience, giving reality 'a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly"[46] (2008, p. 19). According to Miskimmon et al., these raw materials of existence, these disordered experiences are *intentionally* ordered by actors in narrative formation and projection. It is in this ordering that researchers can pinpoint intentionality to evaluate strategy, hence researchers are encouraged to widen the temporal scope of their observations to account for how discourse changes over time.

Surely, analyses which account for *when* and *how* actors change specific elements in their narratives allow for more nuanced narrative analyses than that of concrete narrated events, untangled from historical or temporal context. However, equating strategy with intentionality without further clarification on the mechanisms through which intention is transformed into strategy in narratives presents certain challenges. Interpreting intentionality in plotted elements

[45] For a summary of the debate see Brockmeier & Carbaugh (2011, pp. 14–15).

[46] (Cronon, 1992, p. 4)

risks generating assumptions over the narrator's motives based on the researcher's subjectivity. This proves particularly problematic in scenarios where one cannot directly ask the actor about said motives, or when honesty and transparency are not a given. In this sense, researchers are limited to what they can discursively observe which generally means taking discourse as units of analysis and assuming intentions or motivation behind interpreted meanings (Krebs & Jackson, 2007b; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017). The problem with this approach, particularly when it comes to actors whose official discourse can be more than ambiguous, is that if strategy is derived only from actor intentionality, then how do we tell the difference between narratives as tools for persuasion (in the realm of soft power action) and narratives as the discursive structuring raw materials of international affairs. When are actors simply reproducing these already existing discursive elements and when are they projecting a concrete narrative crafted out of them?

To address this conceptual bump in the road I suggest looking at strategy in narratives as the result of normativity. I define normativity in narrative action as the potential to trigger or evoke specific mental frames[47] of what is accepted or normal in any given situation. Normativity presupposes that there is an audience and that said audience already has established historical and cultural preferences which inform their cognitive connections (i.e., their mental frames). Therefore, strategy lies in accounting for said specificity in your audience when projecting a narrative. Narratives are strategic when they are specifically *designed* for an audience. As researchers, how do we identify the blueprint of said design? Here is where normativity may help.

I understand normativity as constituted by two elements: timing and internal-external coherence. Since all narratives carry meaning, all narrative action is thus normative in nature, regardless of whether the act of projecting a specific narrative is aimed at swaying hearts and minds for a specific purpose, if it simply reproduces already existing discursive elements or if it has a specific aim at all (actors may not always have a strategy in mind). Theoretical approaches to narratives in literary science tell us that narratives can be defined as existing or operating at two different levels: (1) as the act of narrating – in an active voice; (2) as a cognitive process, a "mental image", constructed by the audience in response to the narration.

[47] Frame here is to be understood as akin to 'structure' in and referring to cognitive connections in audiences' minds. This connotation remains whenever used throughout the rest of the dissertation.

Only there is no need for a narrating act performed by an actor for audiences to begin the cognitive processes of interpretation. Audiences may build those mental images in response to their particular reality and experience of life. This is illustrated in studies on literary narratology as "possessing narrativity vs being a narrative" (Ryan, 2005, p. 6). Events in international affairs may possess narrativity in as much as they constitute an action, framed within a particular temporal scope, and they may even be attributed with causality. They have the potential to evoke a mental image, to trigger that cognitive process that takes place almost reflexively in people's minds because we exist in a historically and culturally contingent reality that is built on specific semiotic material (i.e., bodies knowledge from a Foucauldian point of view). But that potential for narrativity can only be seized in a timely manner and ensuring the internal-external coherence of the narrative itself.

The point of a narrative is to resolve an imbalance, to restore order by establishing what *is* and what *should be*. There is a temporal dimension inherent to these two positions: *is* anchors the action in the present while encompassing the past, *should be* transports us to the future. It follows that timing has a basic function of narratives. By spatially organizing events, narratives imbue discourse with order. In storytelling this is called sequencing. Timing or sequencing is crucial for narratives to achieve normativity in international relations. Because bodies of knowledge are not static and events in international affairs take place within these bodies of knowledge, they are susceptible to be interpreted from the moment action begins. Narrativity lies not there passively waiting to be shaped, it is a living active element of reality. What *is* and what *should be* cannot be crafted at any given moment, but rather actors must be able to read the room and identify when the discursive opportunity arises to achieve a higher degree of normativity.

Timing can be conceptualized as an integral mechanism of strategy in narrative action. The EU's HRVP Josep Borrell put it bluntly in a 2020 speech about the impact of COVID-19 for the European Union: "There is a global battle of narratives going on in which timing is a crucial factor" (EEAS, 2020). Narratives have a distinctive double-temporal structure: they are time-sensitive interpretations of reality which present discursive elements that are sequenced in a specific way. As researchers, we can identify how actors seek to time their narratives by analyzing *when* they plot discursive elements into international events and what the internal sequencing of these is within the narrative. This requires attention to structural and context-specific situations of the moment in which we first identify what we suspect is a strategic

narrative. We can only assess if a narrative is strategic after we have sequenced it against the backdrop of its contextual environment. Miskimmon et al., do address the relevance of the temporal dimension of narratives, but they do so in relation to how narratives change over time. For them, the monitoring of changes in discourse over time can signify whether or not a narrative is successful, and it can also point at actor intentions in a reactive sense.

For example, as we will see in Chapter 5, the traditional media analyzed in the case of Greece significantly replicate Chinese strategic narratives about China's identity. And the narratives about China's identity found in Greece's traditional media are unique, in that they remark on China's benevolent nature far more than any other case observed. For Greek audiences, China is a friend that helps by investing and lending money, not a greedy actor seeking to take advantage of smaller, weaker countries (as is the perception of China in France). China was able to recognize, not only the economic interest, but also the discursive opportunity in Greece's tribulations post-2008 economic crisis. In Spain, however, China has not been able to identify such discursive opportunity. In Spain, China's messages generate certain dissonance, as China is viewed as an aggressive actor. Which brings me to the next element to observe when analyzing strategy in narratives.

The second element informing normativity is coherence. Narrating a story belongs to the realm of discursive action and as such, its relation to power is marked by a pre-existent requirement: the will of an audience to listen. One does not simply command through narrative projection. As we have seen before, narrative action does not exclude the pre-existence of structural conditions of the established reality nor the performative limitations of the shaping-of-reality process. In other words, the transformation from *is* to *should be* needs to make *some* sense to the audience so as to entice them to listen. A proposed narrative cannot be too alien to its intended audience for the departure from point A to point B to seem unfathomable given that audience's body of knowledge. Here is where internal narrative coherence and external context coherence come into play. Strategic crafting of narratives out of the raw materials of international relations requires a balance between a narrative's internal semiotic elements and the cues or codes which compose the specific body of knowledge (i.e., a specific external context) in which the intended audience is embedded. An actor seeking to turn a narrative into a strategic narrative must be able to understand the cues of a specific audience and infuse a narrative's semiotic elements with a close-enough meaning which can then be taken up by the subconscious -culturally embedded- mental frames of the audience. Let us go back to the case

of Greece. China speaks to Greece reminding her of its glorious past as the cradle of Western civilization, and the promise of a bright future. Moreover, it does so as the cradle of Eastern civilization – enabling an identification of self in the other (see Chapter 5). This resonates with Greece and its traditional media replicate these messages. In layman terms, China is accounting for what Greece *wants* to hear when projecting its identity narrative of trustworthiness and benevolence. There is little dissonance between the messages projected and the cues which populate the Greek collective psyche.

In order to identify internal-external coherence, researchers must be familiar with both the narrator's and the intended audience's bodies of knowledge. Granted, this proves more demanding the greater the distance between contexts, as could be the case between culturally and politically different countries like Greece and China. Nevertheless, researchers should be looking at internal or domestic (national, cultural, historical.…) established narratives of the studied strategic narrative's intended audience(s) to identify any mental frame triggers in the narrator's strategic narrative. In this sense, we can understand strategic narratives as not just interpretations of sequenced events, but as sequenced constellations of [visual or textual] elements which resonate with an audience's body of knowledge (i.e., its cultural and historical cues) and prompt new mental frames.

In sum, narratives are strategic in so far as actors account for the context in which their narratives are going to operate. Taking timing and internal-external coherence as constitutive elements of normativity, strategy in narrative action can be observed in the degree of normativity that a narrative presents. The more accurate the timing and the stronger the internal-external coherence of a narrative, the higher the degree of normativity. A high degree of normativity indicates a deliberate and elaborated effort on behalf of the narrator to imbue narrative action with the potential to trigger or evoke certain mental frames in the audience. Researchers can use this framework of normativity to identify intentionality in strategic narratives aimed at persuading and differentiate them from the discursive raw materials already existing in international affairs in a manner that takes into consideration (1) the actor-centric dimension of intentionality and (2) the structure-centric dimension of the communicative environment, but also the historical, cultural, and political context of communicative action.

It is important to differentiate between strategy and success. Analyzing the strategy behind a specific narrative can help us understand its success or failure. However, timing and internal-

external coherence are not guarantors of success in narrative action as strategies can very well fail. A narrative can be strategically conceived (i.e., be projected with accurate timing and present strong internal-external coherence) and yet fail at convincing audiences. Such is the case of China's strategic narratives in Spain (see Chapter 5). If we assume that success in narrative action equals acceptance or positive reception of the specific message in the narrative, then we can ascertain that success or failure of a strategic narrative depends both on the strategic formation and projection of said narrative *and* on the specific conditions or circumstances of the reception context.

3.4 Types of Strategic Narratives

Following Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle's framework, this thesis also adopts their suggested categorization of three types of strategic narratives: identity, issue, and system narratives. These three terms are not hermetic, nor do they stand isolated from one another. Identity is a central concept in IR constructivist theories approaches to questions related to anarchy, sovereignty, statehood, and the functioning of the international system[48]. Broadly speaking, constructivism focuses on how ideas and identities shape interests and how this can ultimately impact actor behavior in the international system. Strategic narrative theory understands actor identity as instrumental in actor behavior and focuses on how the communication of narratives impacts the (re)construction of actors' identities over time. Perceptions of power, the Self and the Other, inform political decisions according to interest

[48] Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Yosef Lapid and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, eds., The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996); Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Vendulka Kubálková, Foreign Policy in a Constructed World, Vol. 4 (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001); Ted Hopf, Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Jeffrey T. Checkel, Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Social Constructivisms in Global and European Politics: A Review Essay," Review of International Studies 30, no. 2 (2004): 229–44.

alignment or threat perception. Assumptions regarding interests and threats (that is, preferences) are based on beliefs, reputation, credibility, etc., all of which are related to actor identity[49].

According to the authors, an identity narrative establishes "what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2017, p. 8). Identity narratives may shape perceptions of what an actor's appropriate behavior is or should be based on the character story that has been presented. An example of identity narrative would be the great power narrative which the US has identified with since the end of the Cold War. Identity narratives can be projected about oneself or about other actors. Narratives which define others as friends, enemies, developing countries, "shithole countries" [50] establish relationships and dynamics among actors, and they legitimize perceptions and expectations of behavior.

Issue narratives are designed to present "political action in a context" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 8). They establish the relevance and necessity of a policy, they provide a tailored context to a situation which calls for a specific policy, highlighting how that policy will be deployed or that issue will be resolved. Examples of issue narratives include the austerity measures narrative projected in the EU in the wake of the 2008 crisis, or the migration as a security problem narrative through which right wing parties in the EU capitalized on the migration crisis of 2015[51]. Actors interpret world events, such as economic or security crises, which can unfold in national, regional, or international scenarios, in specific ways and they suggest how to proceed, how to resolve the situation through policy.

System narratives present a particular view of the world, its structure and how it operates. Actors employ system narratives to project their understanding of what is normal in the system, promote or legitimize specific dynamics, and express what the desirable way forward is. The scope of these narratives is wider than that of issue narratives, and it specifically refers to universal themes or all-encompassing approaches to the international system or "the world".

[49] When I speak of actor identity, I am referring to state identity, since for the purpose of this research, the narrator of the narratives is a state (China). But of course, actor can refer to a multiplicity of narrators: international organizations, civil society actors, individuals, etc.

[50] US former President Donald J. Trump referred to several Central American and African countries as 'shithole countries' in 2018 while discussing a new immigration package.

[51] See Müller et al. (2018) and FES (2019) respectively.

An example of system narrative is the Cold War narrative, which establishes a "fairly clearly defined bipolar system" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 8) and presents scripts defining the expected behavior of the characters involved (e.g., the mutual assured destruction (MAD) principle of deterrence).

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle highlight the importance of the linkages between these three types of strategic narratives. They posit that "an actor able to align system, policy, and identity narratives has a greater chance of influence" (2017, p. 3). Furthermore, they argue that "contradictions between narratives at different levels can undermine the effectiveness of strategic narratives related to policy" (issue narratives). This thesis adopts this principle and moves further to argue that it is not only issue narratives that can be negatively affected by contradictions, but also identity narratives and to a lesser degree, system narratives. When an actor projects a specific image of themselves (e.g., the victim in a situation) but then projects an issue narrative which revokes or distorts that image (e.g., supporting engagement in unprovoked aggression), the dissonance between these two stories might be too "loud" for audiences to receive the narrative of victimhood positively (see Chapter 5).

3.5 Phases of Strategic Narrative Action

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle divide strategic narrative action in three phases: narrative formation, narrative projection, and narrative reception. This thesis focuses on the analysis of the reception process of Chinese strategic narratives in EU Member States public spheres. Nevertheless, formation and projection of certain narratives are also referred to in the analysis, therefore a brief explanation of each will follow suit.

3.5.1 Narrative formation

The authors posit that the key to unveiling narrative formation processes is understanding the narrator's strategic goals with regards to the narrative. These goals may be long-term or short-term, in relation to the actor's wider interests. They may also vary in accordance with each specific real-life context in which the narrative action is embedded or related to. Examples of goals include "agenda setting, legitimation, diversion of attention, securing acquiescence, enhancing popularity, and mobilization" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 20). A way to ascertain

goals is analyzing the type of communicative action being enacted through the narrative. Here the authors suggest a two-type categorization of communicative action, reminiscent of the types of behaviors present in the literature on soft power. We may observe communicative action in the shape of persuasion or argumentation on the one hand, and representational force or rhetorical coercion on the other. Persuasion, understood as argumentative rationality (Risse, 1999), is a common occurrence in political communication. From a Habermasian perspective, persuasion or argumentation is a type of discursive interaction in which an actor's interests and perceptions are not fixed but subject to change through the challenge of its validity claims. The goal of persuasion is reaching mutual understanding and it requires a certain level of internalizing of values or ideas (Habermas, 1984). Representational force in discourse is related to the ability to challenge an actor's subjectivity (their idea of self), for example in times of crisis, to *force* them to adapt or conform to previously established narratives (often indicating accounts of past, present, or future events) (Mattern, 2005). Similar to Mattern's account of discursive power as force, Krebs and Jackson highlight the role of non-persuasive discursive power in international politics. For them "rhetorical coercion occurs when this strategy proves successful: when the claimant's opponents have been talked into a corner, compelled to endorse a stance they would otherwise reject." (Krebs & Jackson, 2007b, p. 36). When looking at the formation process of an actor's narratives, we must ask whether the mechanisms underlying those narratives are persuasive or coercive, and if it is the latter, which form it takes, representational force or rhetorical coercion.

3.5.2 Narrative projection

Narrative projection requires attention to the channels through which a narrative is projected. As established previously, contemporary communication is marked by the appearance of the global media ecosystem. Not only the nature of communication is different, but also the shape of it. Information infrastructures are becoming increasingly relevant sites of agency and power for political actors and individuals in a world with eight billion people and more than 15 billion mobile devices[52] (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017). Questions like "who narrates and how?" or "who has a voice in international affairs?" become more relevant given an increasing trend in digital connectivity. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle argue that narrative research must consider "complex interdependencies between internet systems,

[52] (Laricchia, 2023)

technology firms, and state regulators" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017, p. 13). This calls for attention to the specific channels within which narratives are projected domestically and internationally: investment in international broadcasters, elite media can be co-opted and influenced, media companies' stocks can be bought, and company ownership changed.

Moreover, this points at an important factor to keep in mind when analyzing how narratives are formed and projected: "that some actors will be more adept at communicating in different media than others" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 22). This is particularly relevant in the case of actors whose relationship with the media and other communication channels is dictated by the political system in which they operate. For example, liberal democracies have set in place systems for political accountability of which both traditional media and new media platforms are active members. Granted, these work to varying degrees, yet media independence is still a distinctive trait of such political systems. This curates a specific type of relationship between political leaders and the media, which imbues political communication with a certain awareness of the benefits *and* the limits of narratives. In autocracies, on the other hand, there are few to no systems of checks and balances, and thus political communication often turns into propaganda. These two realities often confront one another when political communication goes beyond domestic frontiers and its consequences are observable when studying the reception of a country's projected narratives in the domestic public spheres of other countries.

3.5.3 Narrative reception: How do we measure success in strategic narrative reception?

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle argue that "identifying and explaining reception is perhaps the most difficult but important aspect of this emerging field of narrative analysis" (Miskimmon et al., 2020, p. 29). Reception is a social process whereby narratives are absorbed and processed with the collective or individual cultural cues or signifiers in which the audience is embedded. These cultural cues impact the degree of positive or negative reception of a narrative, in other words, they condition the assimilation or contestation of a narrative. The study of the reception of strategic narratives can be undertaken in terms of the scope and reach of a narrative, the emotional or affective responses to that narrative, the ways in which a narrative is portrayed in other media, and the ways in which a narrative has been interpreted, that is, how has it changed or rearticulated in new fora. Identifying narratives in a public sphere and looking into how those narratives are presented, how close or distant that representation is

from the original projected narrative, or the degree of emotional cues (positive or negative) designed to echo with audiences in a particular way. These analyses can focus on the individual level (responses of people as audience: e.g., via surveys, focus groups, social media analysis) or the national level (e.g., looking at public spheres, elite media, official discourse analysis, diplomatic responses/interactions).

If we focus on the national level, public spheres, understood as environments populated by elite media, new media, and social media communication, can play two roles in narrative action. They can act as part of the projection machinery or as part of the reception mechanisms. When we look at the reception of a country's narratives *in* another country, we are taking that country's public sphere as participating in the reception process. Reception of a narrative is subject to the existence of media through which narratives travel. Audiences respond to the projection of the narrative, which is mediated by actors such as traditional media, which then re-enact the narratives according to their own mental frames constituting reception. In this sense, formation *is* projection, and the combination of both enables and impacts the reception of the narrative. Therefore formation-projection-reception are interlinked. The boundaries between these three processes are porous, and they often impact one another. One example of this is the aforementioned complex relationship between policymakers, internet providers, and media channels. In sum, studying the reception of narratives in domestic contexts naturally implies studying interpretations of these strategic narratives mediated by the media which reproduce them among their domestic audiences.

3.6 A poststructural approach to strategic narrative analysis

In their central work on strategic narrative theory, Miskimmon et al., offer a general methodology for strategic narrative analysis. They build their approach on an operationalization of the structure of strategic narratives which this thesis takes as the backbone of the analytic process. Said structure contains character or actors, setting or environment, conflict or action, tools or behavior, and resolution (for a description, see section 3.7). This thesis adopts this structure to identify concrete strategic narratives in the data. When it comes to the specific methods applied in the analytic process, they put forward a framework comprising four approaches to the study of persuasion as theorized in IR, each highlighting specific elements of narrative action. These are the rationalist approach (*very thin*), the

communicative action approach (*thin*), the reflexive approach (*thick*), and the poststructural approach (*very thick*). Choosing the right approach is a decision that ultimately rests on the type of question asked and the theoretical tradition and methodological considerations (type and availability of data) the researcher feels more comfortable with (Miskimmon et al., 2017, pp. 27-52). This dissertation takes a poststructural approach to the study of strategic narratives with some elements of reflexivity. The following table summarizes each approach in context.

	Rationalism	*Communicative Action*	*Reflexive*	*Poststructural*
Ontology of IR	Interactions between actors with given preferences within a given structure of anarchy	Actors have given identities. They interact, leading to shared understandings of international affairs; preferences can be changed	Actors whose identities are mutually implicated and whose identities and actions generate responses from others	Discourse (power-knowledge systems) are manifest in practices (linguistic and material). Discourse informs identity, preferences, etc.
Level of analysis	Either interstate or two-level game of elites and domestic forces (media, publics, parties)	Institutional forums where claims are made, bilateral state-state interactions.	Elite-focused, accounting for public sphere interaction. Journalists, NGOs, etc.	Any of the previous ones.
Methods and methodology	Texts, surveys, and decisions. Content analysis of speeches and news reports, correlated with political decisions and shifts in public opinion	Inferences from positive data, sequences of interactions charted over time (process tracing). Attention also to actors' identities.	State language and gestures. IR akin to theater, so visuality and emotion are important. Multimodal and cultural analysis.	Trace through time how discourses produce relations, effects, identities. Identify how actors use language in specific ways.

Table 2: Approaches to the study of strategic narratives. Source: Miskimmon et al., 2017.

These four approaches vary in their understanding of the scope of rhetorical action and the means through which persuasion can be observed. Analyses located on the thin end of the persuasion spectrum focus on how narrators seek to maximize discourse utility by looking at individual discourses around specific events. The focus is placed in tracing causality between direct rhetorical interaction and policy outcomes, based on the assumption that actors seek to coerce or convince other actors into adopting a specific position. Rationalist authors limit the scope of rhetorical action to specific time-limited claims. Authors employing the communicative action approach tend to widen the scope of the observed episodes to include before and after rhetorical moments, looking not only at leaders' discourses but also at the narratives present in the public sphere. In both of these approaches, communication is understood as a kind of "cheap talk" (Risse, 2000), a rhetorical skill employed by states or their leaders to get others to change their positions – but not necessarily their minds. Treating language as instrumental translates into analytic simplicity, but thin analyses often bypass the structural, ideational or emotional dimensions of language in their search for parsimony. While rationalist authors claim that they cannot "capture the long-term processes by which the underlying discourses of international relations are formed, contested, and deployed" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 28), this is precisely what the other side of the analytic spectrum seeks to achieve. Here we find reflexive (thick) and poststructural (very thick) analyses, which aim at observing cognitive-behavioral processes enacted in and through narrative action. This is where I place the methodological focus of this research.

Understanding language as a reflexive exercise, *thick* end-of-the-spectrum analyses posit that actors not only use language to "realize given preferences" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 33), but rather that communication is understood as an arena where expectations about behavior, emotional state, or anxieties about status or recognition can be exploited, played to, eased, or accommodated. The analytical starting point is that studying instances of language used as "expressive, not just instrumental" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 33) can be helpful to illuminate mechanisms through which power is exerted. Poststructural accounts of IR go even further and argue that international politics are embedded in Foucauldian systems of power/knowledge enacted through "institutions, practices and language" which we call discourses (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 37). These discourses are the aforementioned raw materials of international relations, and they establish what is said (ideas, norms), who voices it (authority, legitimacy), and the rules that apply in the communicative moment (accepted behavior). People, populations, leaders, states, we are all embedded in these discourses, of which we are a product.

The poststructural perspective thus inheres the observation of discourse transformation over time not only in terms of official positions over specific events but wider aspects of discursive action such as language use, cultural cues employed, emotional cues triggered, etc. There is a constant tension between established and new discourses. Actors, as much as they are a product of established discourse, they also may seek to forge new discourses. The main difference in the understanding of the potential of rhetoric between more rationalists approaches and reflexive and poststructural perspectives is that for the latter, narratives are not just tools for inducement, but also beacons for self-identification. Thus, observing discourse transformation has a lot to do with observing how actors (intended audiences) react [to]-and-enact received discourse. In her often-cited work on humanitarian campaigns, Chouliaraki points to a responsive disposition cultivated through strategic narrative action. She studies how narratives in texts "produce power effects", i.e., affect audiences' identities and self-perception (Chouliaraki, 2017, 2020, 2013). Miskimmon et al., point out that the weakness in poststructural analyses is that they tend to look at the projected narratives, whether in text or other format, and interpret the impacts they have on audiences. This thesis seeks to offer a workaround to this issue by working in an inverse way. It looks directly at the received narratives, albeit with a preliminary blueprint of projected narratives, to observe if these are accepted and to what degree (which elements, with what variation). Considering that *thick* analyses pay special attention to the interactive dimension of communication, rather than the simple goal of rhetoric, this inverse approach is particularly useful as it focuses on the reception phase of strategic narratives. This allows me to highlight the reaction of the intended audience (third states) to narratives projected by an actor (China).

Considering that the focus of this thesis is how the reception of narratives about China and the BRI varries across EU Member States, I pay special attention to portrayals of what is *sensed* or *felt* in relation to China, its behavior and its self-projection. Following Miskimmon et al., I have sought to observe "how a state depicts a scene, the obstacles they face, the action they decree necessary" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 34). This inevitably increases the complexity of the analysis, as any arguments related to emotions such as states' insecurities, their conception of Self (Steele, 2011, in Miskimmon, 2017, p. 33) or perceptions of failure, need to be methodically and consistently supported by the data. Methodologically, this is addressed in two ways: 1) by widening the scope of observation to include changes in discourse over time while also accounting for contextual and structural elements; and 2), by illustrating the ways in which

the selected media "amplifies or contains these feelings and senses" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 34). To this end, the time frame used for data analysis in this thesis expands beyond one single contentious event or crisis to comprehend three full years. Likewise, the key words used in the data collection reflect the goal of broadening the scope to any communicative instance regarding China found in EU Member States selected media in the time frame selected. Lastly, the coding process is designed to code contextually and to reflect expressions of sentiment (see Chapter 4, section 4.1).

3.6.1 A clarification: public spheres, media ecologies, or traditional media?

All four approaches suggested by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle place the focus on the study of discursive action, with thin approaches focusing on specific exchanges (content analysis of decisions, speeches, or news reports, inferences from positive data, sequenced interactions) and thick analyses widening the scope to other actors and practices beyond interstate elite observation. In terms of methods, content analysis transitions to discourse analysis as we move from thin to thick approaches. The closer we get to poststructural studies, the greater the relevance of language, rhetorical gestures, cultural analysis and the observation of emotion embedded in visual or textual data.

Public spheres or public discourse are often the preferred arena to observe these elements of strategic narratives in thick-end-of-the-spectrum analyses. Yet some studies refer to public spheres when looking only at journals or newspapers (de Wilde, 2023; Monza & Anduiza, 2016; Zamponi & Bosi, 2016), while others look only at social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook (Huang & Wang, 2019), and others support one or the other with practitioners' interviews (Langendonk, 2020). There is an overall pliability to the term "public sphere" that is exploited in research production for practical purposes. This pliability lends itself to inconsistencies between observed data and stated results or even wider conclusions about the questions posed to the detriment of the quality of the research. In lieu of these practices, I shall quickly clarify the specific arena where strategic narratives are observed for the purpose of this research.

There are many approaches to the concept of public spheres. This project's understanding follows Thomas Risse's Habermasian inspired conceptualization of the public sphere as an

“open forum of communication for everybody who wants to say something or listen to what other speakers have to say” (Risse, 2015, p. 6). As we know, public spheres are not homogeneous, nor are they neutral spaces (Brantner et al., 2021; Dahlgren, 2005). Furthermore, in the current mass information era, public spheres are not only populated by traditional media or elite discourse, but by an array of non-traditional, non-elite actors (Stewart & Hartmann, 2020). Researchers face an increased complexity when approaching public spheres as our data universe. In addition to this, the literature on political communication tells us that the medium has an impact in the way the message is projected and perceived (McLuhan, 2003). As a result, studying the reception of narratives in public spheres nowadays requires a precise delineation of the actors or structures we are selecting to observe.

Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle employ the concept of media ecologies to frame the universe of actors and the type of communicative action one can analyze. Media ecologies can be conceptualized as a type of public sphere which includes “environments, actors, and technologies” where “the distribution of access and voice and the norms of civility, style, and genre shape how debates unfold” (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 30). Selecting media ecologies as arenas within public spheres already narrows down the scope of actors involved in the communicative action: we are observing media actors within domestic spheres, exclusively, as opposed to looking at individuals interacting with news in platforms like Twitter or Facebook. This is an important and useful distinction which informs research design decisions. However, Miskimmon et al., conceptualize media ecologies as public spheres and use both terms interchangeably. In addition to this they provide little guidance as to how to structure data analysis based on the observation of narratives in different media.

Whether it is newspapers, television or radio, and the several different options among these three, the characteristics of the medium impact the projection and reception processes of the narrative. Some actors are more apt at communicating than others, some are designed to present information in ways which impact transparency or even general comprehension. These are all relevant aspects of research design. Thus, attention must be placed on the nature of the media selected. Due to data accessibility and manipulability (storage of data and usage in a printed document), I have selected written media. One could transcribe radio and television communicative actions, but this would go beyond the material capabilities of one researcher and the time limits of one doctoral project. A further relevant distinction when selecting data universes is the one between traditional media and non-traditional media. Without going into

too much detail on the differences between these two groups, a line is drawn regarding the increased reach or scope of traditional media and their ability to reflect a topic with relative expertise, complexity, and nuance. Given the purpose of ascertaining whether Chinese discursive power transcends foreign domestic discourse, a logical first step would be selecting traditional media as it is still considered mainstream media or "critical middleman in the information flow between the leadership and the public" (Baum & Potter 2008 in Miskimmon 2017, p. 124). According to Miskimmon et al., the role of traditional media in gatekeeping and steering narratives is still pivotal in domestic discourse, despite an initial sense of power loss to the reality of the Internet (2013).

To summarize, this research will refer to traditional media as the specific arena to observe the reception of strategic narratives in textual form within public spheres. Altogether, this approach allows the researcher to empirically substantiate arguments related to the capacity strategic narratives have to convince audiences to buy into their projected messages.

3.7 Operationalization of strategic narratives

This section details the operationalization of strategic narratives and the previously mentioned inverse approach to narrative analysis, which has been designed to reflect three different but interrelated levels of observation. For Miskimmon et al., narratives present a relatively fixed structure, which this thesis builds on in order to identify Chinese strategic narratives in EU Member States' traditional media. This structure is composed of five elements which respond to the different elements of discursive action. Each narrative structural element has a narrative purpose, i.e., an instrumental purpose within the narrative action being communicated. This purpose is enacted in language through specific signifiers or linguistic markers. This structure allows researchers to filter through all discursive data and identify narratives specifically, differentiating them from other types of rhetorical action such as framing or branding (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p.7).

Structural element	*Discursive element*	*Narrative purpose*	*Discursive enactment*
Character(s)	Agent	Perspective setting	Self-other markers: 'Us, we, all', 'They, them'.
Setting	Scene	Establish order	Positional markers: 'how things are/were before'
Conflict	Act	Disrupt order	Positional markers: 'X has happened'
Behavior	Agency	Expectation setting	Sentiment markers: suspicion, outrage, agreement…
Resolution	Purpose	Establish preference	Normative markers: 'X will happen', expression of consequence (pos/neg)

Table 3: Operationalization of strategic narratives in communicative action. Own elaboration based on Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle's conceptualization of strategic narratives (2013, pp 2017, pp 7)

Identifying the structural elements of a strategic narrative alone does not illuminate the reasons why this narrative is effective. It is particularly relevant to be able to explain the ways in which a narrative is accepted or rejected when studying narrative reception. Acceptance or rejection, which I refer to in this thesis as alignment or not-alignment, take place through the activation of associations, which one can observe in the enactment of discourse through the use of linguistic markers. These markers indicate positions (in the story), sentiment, preference, and perspective. Associations can also be activated using metaphors, figures of speech or cultural cues which resonate with the intended audience. As explained in Chapter 3, section 3.3, misalignment among the three types of strategic narratives can create dissonance and hinder the narrative's normativity.

3.7.1 Level 1: Narrative analysis

The first level comprises coding to the three strategic narrative types: identity, issue, system. For the purpose of this research, these three types of narratives serve as general issue areas to which specific themes will be coded later in the analysis (level 3). These three narrative types were broadly presented in the previous chapter, but this section will explain them from an analytical standpoint. Simply put, identity narratives "are about the identities of actors in international affairs that are in a process of constant negotiation and contestation" (Miskimmon

et al., 2013, p. 19). More specifically, "[strategic] narratives set out who the actors are, what characterizes them, what attributes they possess, what actions they take, and what motivates them." (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 45). When analyzing identity narratives, this thesis focuses on two dimensions of identity which can be useful in this context: a) the expression of subjectivity (self) (Bially Mattern, 2005) and b) the type of relationship between subjects portrayed in the narrative (self-other).

Dimension A, the delineation of individual identity takes place through the expression of subjectivity. Accounting for subjectivity in discourse requires paying attention to expressions of the connection of the self with history, place, and moments in time (Bially Mattern, 2005). Because we are talking about states as actors, when I speak of individual identity, I refer to national identity. Berenskoetter argues for the existence of a nation-state *biographical* narrative "designating an experienced space (giving meaning to the past) intertwined with an envisioned space (giving meaning to the future) and delineated through horizons of experience and of possibility, respectively." (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 264). Thus, analyzing subjectivity expressed in narrative about one's self-identity requires looking for representations of history, myths, symbols, and cultural norms and other portrayals of "natural behavior" which are used to define an actor.

Dimension B requires paying attention to discursive elements which point at collective[53] or positional representations of identity. This expression of the self/other dichotomy follows Alexander Wendt's logic of identity as a structuring element in friend/enemy perceptions (and behavior expectation) in relations among states (Wendt, 1999). Collective self identity is expressed in terms of positive linkages between the self and the other. These linkages can take the shape of common or shared characteristics, attributes, abilities, or interests. Through these linkages, the relationship between the self and the other is strengthened, portraying elements of a common or shared identity to varying degrees, i.e., a "we feeling". The opposite process happens when the relationship between the self and the other is expressed by establishing negative representations of the other (the original projecting actor) against which the self is juxtaposed. Through these negative representations, the narrator (self) distances itself from the

[53] The term "collective identity" is used in this thesis in a relational sense (Wendt 1992, 1999; see also Adler & Barnett 1998) as opposed to William Bloom's conceptualization of the "mass national public" as a collective (Bloom, 1990).

other, and further delineates its own identity (as markedly different from that of the projecting state). These linkages can also take the shape of characteristics, attributes, abilities, or interests.

Issue narratives are concerned with how an actor goes about enacting its identity in terms of policies. Crises and events in the international system are great arenas for issue policies to be deployed, as states seek to respond to them in a way that aligns with their identity, their interests and their desired outcomes. The scope of issue narratives is often reduced to one policy or one event around which actors weave a narrative which puposely defines that issue in terms that align with said actor's objectives, highlighting specific aspects or dimensions while either actively refuting criticism or ignoring it by avoiding any reference to it. Identifying the reception of issue narratives requires having a prior awareness of the projection of that narrative and discerning which elements are maintained in the reception. The process involves paying attention to how an audience receives and then replicates an issue narrative by observing how certain facets are highlighted and others are not. Questions such as "how is the issue portrayed?", "is this issue portrayed as linked to the interests or the identity of the receiving country?", "is the linkage positive or negative?", or "what outcomes or consequences are portrayed as a result of the issue?" are useful guidelines when analyzing issue narratives.

Identity narratives are a crucial starting point to understand how actors see themselves in the system, but also to understand what the behavior expectations are for those actors in the system, and as a corollary, what this system should look like. In other words, identities will trickle down on to policies and up on to world conceptions. For example, if a state identifies itself with the type of actor who acts to, let's say, address climate change, and portrays itself as such in its identity strategic narrative, it has come to see itself as a state-who-addresses-climate-change. It becomes part of its identity, it reinforces self and others' perceptions of the kind of behavior to be expected in the international arena, and it informs as to the type of issues that should take center stage in the system (e.g., the fight against climate change vs respect for human rights). Likely, policies, behavior, and worldview will thereafter take after this self-perception. Hence, it follows that we can expect issue and system strategic narratives to be aligned with the themes or topics of identity narratives. When this does not happen and we encounter narrative misalignment, it becomes more difficult for actors to convince audiences of their message. In this sense, system narratives seek to establish the role that the actors engaged in the narrative (as receivers or objects in it) have in the international system by describing the relationships of friendship, alliance, animosity, rivalry, etc., that govern them.

These three types of strategic narratives are labelled as "parent codes" for coding purposes. The objective of this first process is (i) to select and extract the relevant data from newspaper databases and (ii) to classify the data into the three general strategic narrative categories according to theoretical and empirical literature.

3.7.2 Level 2: Sentiment analysis

The second level aims at ascertaining the difference in degree of alignment among Member States in the three general strategic narrative categories. In the *Level 1* section I mention that on the one hand, representations of collective identity can include the rejection of that *collectivity* by remarking on the distance between the self and the other. The same dynamic applies to the issue and system narratives. Observing whether representations of identity, issue, and system, are positive, negative, or perhaps mixed tells us a lot about which narratives are accepted/rejected and to which degree. Knowing this degree of acceptance in turn informs the analysis of the varying positions of EU Member States vis-à-vis China.

Therefore, in this second level, coding focuses on identifying which are the positions or reactions of Member States' traditional media to the identity, issue, and system narratives of China in terms of sentiment. Sentiment analysis is a common approach in discourse studies which aim to ascertain reaction or response to specific topics or events (Wodak & Forchtner, 2018; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). To reflect the dimension of sentiment, the data in each of the three general thematic categories is coded following a positive views – mixed views – negative views spectrum. A reference is coded to positive views when it presents a clear positive representation of an image, an idea, or direct discourse which can be traced to Chinese official discourse with no counterargument or adversative expressions. A reference is coded to mixed views when positions expressed in a same section of an article or whole article express both positive and negative arguments, i.e., when the article expresses arguments and counterarguments on a specific topic. It is important to reflect this nuanced position to avoid simplistic accounts of binary reactions or positions towards China. A reference is coded to negative views when it presents a clear negative representation of an image, idea or direct discourse which can be traced to Chinese official discourse with no counterargument in the same section or the whole article.

3.7.3 Level 3: Thematic analysis

The third level of analysis seeks to observe differences in kind among the reception of Chinese narratives. This third step extracts concrete but differentiated themes or topics within each sentiment category. This is relevant because while two countries can both have a positive reception of specific narratives (e.g., the BRI narrative), the data shows a variety of different positive arguments which differ among Member States. This variation of arguments points to nuance in Member States' alignment with or rejection of Chinese official narratives. This nuance holds empirical value as it not only marks EU member state policy preferences and priorities, but it also highlights strengths and weaknesses in Chinese discursive power. For example, both Greece and Hungary show a high score in positive reception of the Chinese narrative around the BRI. However, their representation of this positive sentiment varies. In the case of Greece, the majority of references express arguments countering Western narratives around China's predatory practices (i.e., highlighting the transparency of investments and the "good work" of the Greek government in achieving ethical investment agreements which comply with EU standards). This indicates a sensibility towards wider EU positions and an active effort to assure audiences of the unique trusting relationship between Greece and China. By contrast, when we look at Hungary, we observe little interest to contrast the narrative of China as conducting predatory practices. The brunt of this member state's positive references about the BRI revolves around the trope of "benefits for BRI participating countries". This is an idea directly extracted from Chinese official documents and media about the BRI. It is part of the win-win cooperation message projected by China. In this sense, while there is not a difference in degree of alignment (both Member States show high scores in positive views) there is a difference in kind (the narratives reproduced are different).

The following figure and table summarize the analytical structure and purpose of this operationalization.

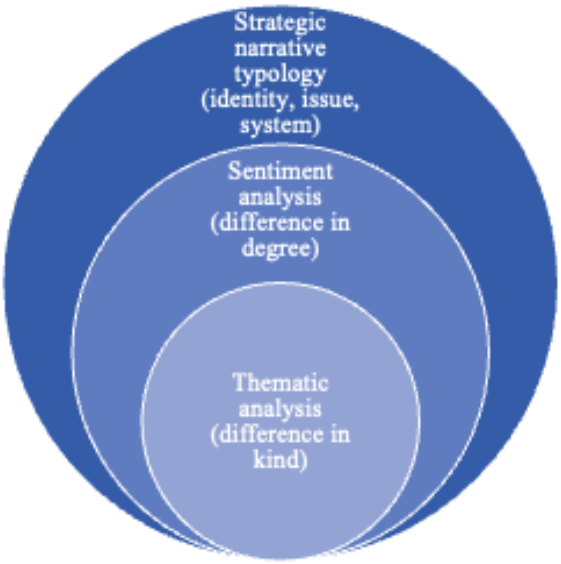


Figure 3: Three level structure of discourse analysis. Own elaboration.

Analytical level	Answer to
1. Strategic Narrative Typology	Does the data present the three SN types?
2. Sentiment Analysis	How do EU Members States' traditional media interpret these received strategic narratives? (positive-mixed-negative views)
3. Thematic analysis	What are the specific narratives (1) China as an actor, (2) the BRI, and (3) China's view on the international system?

Table 4: Summary of each analytical level's purpose.

3.8 Concluding discussion

Narratives have been a part of human experience since the dawn of time. Their application in different areas of knowledge contributes is vast; they have long been studied not only in Literature, but also in Communication, Political Science, and of course, International Relations. IR in particular has experienced a relatively new narrative turn spurred by the changing international order and a more decentered and flexible communications environment. The Theory of Strategic Narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017) defines strategic narratives as "a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present,

and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (2017, p. 6), a definition to which this dissertations subscribes.

However, intentionality and strategy are still opaque elements of narratives. Miskimmon et al., argue that strategy can be observed in intentionality, in the motives of actors projecting narratives. This dissertation suggests that rather than ascribing intentionality to motives thereby embodying strategy, what tells *strategic* narratives apart from regular narratives is the contents of the narratives are tailored to the audiences' context (i.e., cultural and historical cues, mental frames, etc.) In this sense, strategic narratives vary in accordance not only with the narrator's objectives, but also with the wider context in which the narrative action takes place; strategic narratives are therefore structural and historically contingent.

To observe strategy in narrative action and help differentiate strategic narratives from those raw materials already existing in international affairs, this dissertation puts forward the concept of normativity. Normativity is constituted by timing (i.e., the seizing of the discursive opportunity in a timely manner) and internal-external coherence (i.e., the designing of a strategic narrative in a manner that aligns with what the audience feels and thinks). Furthermore, the more attuned the narrative is to the audiences' context (that is, the more strategic the narrative is), the more likely a narrative is to resonate positively with its intended audience.

When analyzing strategic narratives, researchers may approach their study by focusing on the different types of strategic narratives (identity, issue, system), or by focusing on one or more of the different phases of strategic narrative action (formation, projection, reception). In terms of the methodological approach to the study of strategic narratives, options range from the more rationalist to the more poststructuralist approaches. This dissertation is anchored in the latter, focusing on discourse and subjectivity, and aims to analyze all three types of strategic narratives within the scope of their reception in EU Member States' traditional media.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

This dissertation seeks to answer two research questions: *RQ1: How are Chinese strategic narratives received in EU Member States' traditional media?* And *RQ2: What conditions explain variation in the reception of Chinese SNs by EU Member States' traditional media?* Ontologically, they both belong in the realm of strategic narrative research. Methodologically, answering them requires two different analyses. To answer the first question, which seeks to ascertain which are the strategic narratives about China present in EU public spheres, I adopt a Strategic Narratives Theory approach[54] and employ Discourse Analysis[55] and Qualitative Content Analysis methods, following Riessman (2008) and Mayring (2022). To answer the second question, which seeks to explain the variation in the narratives found in the data, I adopt a set-theory approach and conduct Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 1987, 2004; Ragin, 2008; Oana et al., 2021; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). This chapter presents the selected methods in detail in the following manner. Section 4.1 describes the methods employed for discourse analysis (RQ1) and elaborates on the different methodological choices made in the iterative process of data collection and data analysis. Section 4.2 describes the specific methodological choices made with regards to QCA as a data analysis technique in the preparatory steps for the QCA analysis (RQ2).

4.1 Methods for discourse analysis of traditional media

This section describes the logistical plan and coding process for the execution of the strategic narrative analysis of media discourse on the three relevant issue topics: (1) China's identity (identity narrative), (2) the Belt and Road Initiative (issue narrative) and (3) China's role in the transformation of the international order (system narrative).

The discursive data analysis was conducted via the qualitative data analysis (QDA) software package NVivo (versions 12, 1.0, and 14) (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). While Riessman (2008)

[54] See Chapter 3, section 3.7, table 2.

[55] Discourse Analysis (DA) is a general methodology comprising several types of text and discourse analysis used in social science research, e.g., Content Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Grounded Theory, etc.

provides guidelines as to what to look for in the discourse and how to interpret the discursive data, Mayring (2022) provides a systematic way to apply discursive data analysis to current software such as NVivo. The selected methods produced a codebook composed of 66 coding categories (i.e., main codes/parent codes, subcodes/child codes) and 3259 observations (coded references [56]). This codebook informed a deeper understanding of existing perceptions (narrative reception) on these three topics as well as the debates around them among EU Member States particularly with respect to identifying variation in the reception of Chinese strategic narratives. The raw data (articles) used to construct this dataset is taken from two news media databases: Factiva (Dow Jones Search Engine) and LexisNexis (Reed Elsevier Data Analytics).

4.1.1 Newspaper selection

The selection of newspapers (NP) responds to the following criteria:

Criteria	***Rationale***
Sources	To ensure a minimum amount of 30 articles per member state and variation in source political orientation, the threshold is set at two newspapers per member state. Exceptions are made in the following two instances: a) the two NP provide less than 15 articles each in which case a third NP is added; (b) there are not enough NP in a given member state which comply with the publishing, political orientation, and readership criteria, in which case, only one NP is used.
Content and coverage of international events	NP cannot be catalogued as a tabloid. Each NP must have a section for international news. NP cannot be focused on sports, fashion, or other non-related niche topics.
Readership	NP must be published nationwide. Preference is given to publications with high levels of readership which might be considered opinion leaders. These may be but are not necessarily the most widely read newspapers in each country.

[56] A quick note on terminology: *reference* is a term used within the NVivo environment to refer to the text segments extracted from the raw data and coded into categories or codes (i.e., units of observation). Raw data can be any type of file that the researcher works with, from textual to audio or visual data. Textual data can include any type of document used in social research, such as interviews, questionnaires, literature reviews, or in the case of this thesis, newspaper articles.

Frequency	Preference to NP published daily, however, content and coverage of international news are prioritized over frequency. In the case of Portugal, *Expresso* is published weekly and has slightly fewer readers than *Correio da Manha*, but the latter is catalogued as a tabloid.
Political orientation	NP sampling includes one generally liberal leaning NP and one generally conservative NP. The newspaper selection accounts for the traditional left-right societal cleavages. If newspaper availability allows, a balance of pro-European and Euro-critical orientations is also sought.

Table 5: Criteria and rationale for newspaper selection

4.1.2 Articles selection

4.1.2.1 Time frame for data 2017-2018-2019

The time frame selected includes the years 2017, 2018, and 2019, from the months of January to December. The selection of these years responds to the aim of maximizing article production within the confines of the topics of relevance, particularly the BRI. The main driver for this selection is thus the celebration of the 1st and 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 and April 2019 respectively. These fora serve as negotiation arenas for countries involved or interested in participating in the BRI, with invitations sent out to leaders of countries along the BRI routes.

China and the BRI had received increasing but still relatively low attention in European media since the launch of the Initiative in 2013. It was with the announcement of the first BRI Forum that salience began to grow, being well received in European media with a considerable increase in articles published about it relative to 2016. At this point most EU Member States had little idea of what the Initiative entailed, and debates revolved around its nature and the possibilities it may hold. The second BRI Forum attracted considerably more attention given China's influence in some eastern and southern Member States. This was a pivotal moment for China, as the countries were taking more solidified positions around the BRI and early criticisms had been publicly expressed. It is around this time when China starts to amend its projected narrative around the BRI to counter those concerns and convince those who had expressed doubts about the benefits of participating. The literature has observed this change in the discourse in Chinese official channels (van Noort, 2020a, 2022). By 2019, some EU Member States had already signed MoUs with China and had greenlighted their involvement

in varying capacities in BRI projects. This is therefore another pivotal moment to analyze in terms of strategic narrative projection and reception, particularly if one is interested in observing variation in the reception.

The data time frame ends on December 31st, 2019, leaving the Covid-19 crisis out of the analysis. The developments of 2020 would have indeed been very interesting to observe, as it marked a point of no return in Chinese strategic narratives specifically and in the public and officials' awareness of the now famous battle of narratives (Borrell, 2020). However, the scope of this thesis is limited to what a single researcher can feasibly achieve with the time that is allocated for the completion of a self-funded PhD project. Further analyses shall be considered for future projects.

4.1.2.2 Search strings and key words

Article population for each country and newspaper is generated through Boolean keyword searches of the two used databases. The initial three search strings are China AND Belt and Road Initiative OR China OR Belt and Road Initiative. This selection of key words ensures access to all articles relevant for the analysis. At this point a clarification is perhaps welcomed: while the unit of analysis of this project are each of the 13 selected EU Member States, the units of observation[57] in the narrative and discourse analysis (Stage 1) are the references coded in each article. Given the constraints on the case selection, it is in the interest of reliability to compile the most complete population of articles. *Complete* might mean different things depending on the corpus-building approach. There are three general such approaches used in discourse analysis, two of which are sampling and cyclical corpus-building. Sampling involves building a population of articles through random selection and aims at ensuring representativeness while avoiding potential researcher bias inherent to discourse analysis. Cyclical corpus building requires building a small initial corpus which ensures homogeneity, analyzing it, and then adding more data (articles) until, following the law of diminishing returns, there are no more new representations (patterns or findings) in the added data having reached

[57] The term unit of analysis is notoriously problematic in the social sciences. In general, the literature differentiates between the methodological meaning and the analytical meaning of the term. Different authors have suggested a variety of terms to reflect this difference. This thesis follows Ragin's classification of *observational unit* (data category) and *explanatory unit* (theoretical category) and refers to these as unit of observation and unit of analysis, respectively. See Ragin, 2014 for a discussion on the subject.

a saturation point (Bauer & Aarts, 2000, p. 31). The *right* choice of corpus building method is ultimately dependent on the research project specifics, e.g., scope, research questions, hypotheses, general methodological approach, etc., yet a good rule of thumb is to follow and justify a coherent rationale and fit concerning selected cases, corpus size, and representativeness (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 149).

Since I am interested in all instances of variation in any given member state, I chose to analyze all articles available for each newspaper in the selected time frame. This approach follows the rationale of taking the whole universe of possible texts (Titscher & Jenner, 2000, p. 33), maximizing representativeness within the established temporal and case selection criteria. This decision allows me to account for all relevant instances of variation in the reception of the selected topics, however it also presents certain caveats. Taking all possible articles within the selected criteria means that article population varies widely among cases. As a result, varying totals of articles speak to the accessibility of sources of different EU Member States (Le Monde/Le Figaro have a wider readership than Lietuvos Rytas) which may in turn misinform conclusions about the salience of these topics *for* each member state. I therefore do not take into consideration total salience of the topics in my analysis, focusing conversely on topic (narrative) density within each total amount of articles per member state.

Secondly, this decision entails certain methodological implications. France, for example, scores the highest number of articles related to the key words selected at 295 articles. Lithuania, on the other hand, scores the lowest, with a total number of 31 articles. As a result, all observations (i.e., number of references coded) must be converted into percentages to be comparatively relevant. Let us say that I have coded a total of 165 references from France to Code A, and a total of 30 references from Lithuania to the same Code A, there is not much to say comparatively with these cardinal numbers. But knowing that 71% of France's references and 65% of Lithuania's references were coded to that Code A presents me with a much different and specific picture. Besides maximizing representativeness of variation, this approach presents yet another benefit for it eliminates any instance of skewed sampling, i.e., cherry-picking texts which may support the initial hypothesis.

A third caveat has to do with the established minimum threshold of articles. This is not related to the whole-of-universe corpus-building approach, but rather the executive decision of cutting data collection at a point which would allow for thesis completion in time. Having set the

minimum threshold of articles per member state at 31, some of the codes contain relatively few references. This happens particularly in the mixed views code within the system narrative. For some Member States, this low density of coded references means that any argumentation or conclusions related to this code must be taken with a pinch of salt. Specific disclaimers will be included in the results chapter when necessary. The table below details which news outlets were selected and displays the number of articles per newspaper, year, and EU Member State.

Database of 1577 news articles

Country	***NP (1.CL; 2.CR[58])***	***2017***	***2018***	***2019***	***Total NP[59]***	***Total MS[60]***
Austria	1. Der Standaard	7	12	9	28	77
	2. Die Presse	12	19	18	49	
Denmark	1. Politiken/Ritzau	1	2	2	5	81
	2. Jyllands Posten	20	23	33	76	
Estonia	1. Eesti Päevaleht	5	0	10	15	42
	2. Postimees	7	5	15	27	
France	1. Le Monde	52	70	95	217	295
	2. Le Figaro	21	33	24	78	
Germany	1. Süddeutsche Zeitung	22	22	30	72	130
	2. Die Welt	15	21	22	58	
Greece	1. ------	-	-	-	0	135
	2. Kathimerini	51	31	53	135	
Hungary	1. Világgazdaság	21	11	29	61	105
	2. Napi Gazdaság	33	11	-	44	
Italy	1. La Repubblica	31	53	76	160	267
	2. Corriere della Sera	46	33	28	107	
Lithuania	1. ------	-	-	-	0	31
	2. Lietuvos Rytas	5	12	14	31	
Poland	1. Gazeta Wyborcza	9	3	7	19	88
	2. Rzeczpospolita	45	13	18	69	
Portugal	1. Público/Expresso	6	11	15	32	54
	2. Diário de Notícias	11	11	-	22	
Spain	1. El País	16	29	56	101	143
	2. El Mundo	17	9	16	42	
The Netherlands	1. De Volkskrant	15	17	28	60	129
	2. NRC Handelsblad	13	20	36	69	

Table 6: Summary of news outlets and articles database

[58] NP = Newspaper. CL = Center Left; CR = Center Right.

[59] Total number of articles per newspaper.

[60] Total number of articles per EU Member State.

4.1.2.3 Dealing with multilingual data

The article search was conducted in the 13 different languages of each member state. Since the initial key words are in English, I looked for the official translation which was relatively straightforward for the key word *China* but required multiple alternative translations for the key word *Belt and Road Initiative*. Alternatives included *One Road, One Belt; Road and Belt; Silk Road; New Silk Road; Chinese Initiative of the Road and the Silk.* These alternatives were obtained and verified through official channels such as the Belt and Road Forum website which provides site versions in all languages of participating members. In the case of those EU Member States not participating in the BRI, the original language terms were verified by searching for news with specific combinations of terms and by comparing these with institutional documents whenever available.

The articles were downloaded from the two databases in their original languages. They were later translated into English for the analysis using the machine translation software DeepL Translate. DeepL uses the Linguee database, and it is currently one of the most widely used machine translation software in the world due to its suitability to translate long coherent word sequences.

4.1.2.4 Cataloging and storing data

After removing duplicates, the final dataset is composed of a corpus of 1577 articles. Files downloaded from the two used databases carry metadata related to the newspaper, author, year of publication and/or country both in the name file and in the articles. This metadata could indirectly impact coding decisions. Because discourse analysis is an inherently subjective process, I sought to counter any possible coding bias by taking the following three steps: 1) the original files were stored with the metadata in a separate folder. 2) A second folder was created to store copies of those downloaded original files. In these copies all metadata was removed leaving only the bare text of each article. 3) NVivo organizes files alphabetically, hence I assigned randomized numerical file names to these metadata-free copies. An excel sheet was then created to keep an index of which randomized numerical file name matched with each downloaded original file with metadata to be able to reassign identifiable names to the files once coded. When these files with randomized names were imported onto the software, they were not identifiable with any metadata which could inform the coding and increase coding bias.

4.1.3 Coding method and process

This section will quickly summarize the basic tenets of coding in NVivo and will describe the different steps of the discourse analysis coding process. In the results chapter I will be using the term *code* profusely, hence a brief explanation of what codes are and how they are used in the data analysis is in order. A code is the thematic container to which we assign references, in other words, a category. Codes are related to theoretical or literature-based knowledge and often reflect a prior thematic categorization that the researcher develops to ensure coherence with the research design and analytical consistency. In other words, the themes in the containers must reflect that which the literature or theory suggest, and they must also make sense within the general aims of the research, i.e., the research question and hypotheses (Mayring, 2022). There are two types of codes in NVivo: main codes and subcodes. The former are higher order concepts also called "top-level codes" or "parent codes" which can comprise smaller thematic containers, also called child codes. The relationship between these two types of codes must be conceptually relevant. Together, they represent different levels of analysis a researcher can observe in their data. It is not necessary to have both types of codes in a codebook[61], this is ultimately a decision which hinges on the type of questions and data the researcher is dealing with. In this thesis I have sought to reflect three levels of analysis and therefore used both parent and child codes.

Coding can be inductive, deductive, or both, depending on whether the research aim is to develop or test a theory. The aim of this discursive analysis is to create a typology of the existing Chinese strategic narratives that are "out there" in traditional media while accounting for variation in their reception, a goal which can benefit both from taking into consideration existing knowledge and going back to the source data to revise and update said knowledge. Thus, the coding approach is both deductive and inductive. The coding process comprised three rounds of coding. The first round involved two steps: 1) creating a general blueprint of codes based on the theoretical underpinnings of Strategy Narrative Theory and the literature on Chinese discourse, and 2) deductively coding the data to these categories. This basic blueprint contained mostly parent codes, but initial child codes were already observed when an issue or

[61] A codebook is the backbone of an NVivo project. It is a list of all the codes used to categorize data and it includes code descriptions which help set conceptual or thematic limits and keep track of the work.

topic was portrayed with significant differences or nuances in the data. This stage of coding took approximately seven months.

The second round of coding focused on a deeper thematic analysis. The aim of this second round was to identify further specific nuances in themes. This round of coding took another five months. The third round of coding aimed at identifying sentiment in the data and cleaning up irrelevant codes (i.e., containers that are too similar are merged if the conceptual scope allows it) or duplicated codes, (i.e., making sure that no references were coded to more than one code). This last round took approximately two months. Occasionally, thematic codes portray representations which would fit in two different parent codes. This often happens with the Issue and System Narratives codes. When talking about the BRI, many references express one common representation is that it serves the purpose of increasing Chinese influence by creating a system of subsidiary or subservient countries which are subject to China's will by means of economic coercion. In this representation, there are two main objects with negative connotations: the BRI as a tool for China's web of influence and the international system in which China seeks to attain a prominent position. When this is the case, references are coded to only one parent code (let's say, the Issue Narrative code) but they are linked to the System one using memo links[62], which then helps trace this connection in the analysis.

4.1.3.1 Normative evaluation and systematization

Choosing when to code a reference to a specific code is a crucial step, particularly when the reference could fit into two different codes. In order to ensure the highest degree of fit between the chosen methodology and the universe of narratively relevant codes, references have been coded contextually. Articles have been read in full, selecting on a most relevant sentence or paragraph which is representative of an idea or a sentiment, but taking the whole of the text as thematic justification for the coding selection. In the case of the above-mentioned example of a reference which would fit into both the negative views Issue Narrative parent code and the negative views System Narrative parent code, the decision to code is taken on the basis of the whole article. Coding includes not only selecting specific thematically relevant references, but

[62] Memo links are a note taking tool in NVivo software which allows the researcher to write notes containing anything which could be relevant for the coding process or analysis and link it directly to any reference or code. Then, when analyzing results, the researcher can quickly identify any particularities in the coding process that might be relevant for the analysis.

also considering any other elements in the article such as the title, paragraph distribution, or arguments/counterarguments distribution which might provide justification of fit.

Articles are read in full and categorized thematically based on their main topic. Then, they are categorized according to their expression of sentiment (positive, mixed, negative) regarding each theme or topic. If an article expresses more than one topic, references are coded to multiple codes so long as this does not contradict the above-mentioned rule. For example, this is the case when the same article presents references which can be coded to both Identity and Issue Narrative parent codes. In addition to this, articles and references have only been selected if they fulfill the requirement of providing a normative evaluation on the topic they are discussing. Normative evaluation happens when the author expresses position and opinion regarding a specific topic. Articles which present simple facts or compilation of facts with no expression of judgement are irrelevant for this study.

4.1.4 Caveats

It is worth noting that some codes contain few references therefore making generalizations or even concluding statements based on these codes should be done carefully and in any case it is always preceded by a disclaimer in the results chapter. For example, Austria ID_Mixed contains only 4 references. This code is not taken into consideration in the analysis. In any study requiring the codification and interpretation of references there is an implied level of subjectivity. As previously mentioned, this thesis seeks to offset said subjectivity by removing the metadata on the raw data to ensure "blind coding". A third potential caveat is derived from the automated translation of original language data into English. A degree of information or meaning can be lost in translation. A way to resolve this is to only code that which is absolutely clear in the translated texts. Lastly, because of the unequal access to newspapers, the final database has varying amounts of articles per member state, which would make cross-case comparison impossible. This was resolved by transforming coding references in absolute terms into percentages.

4.2 Data analysis with QCA

While Chapter 1 gives an overview of the main elements of an applied QCA research design[63] in general, this section will describe the specific methodological steps and choices made with regards to QCA as a data analysis technique. The basic objective of QCA is causal inference: finding (combinations of) causal conditions which lead to a phenomenon observed.

> *"QCA as a data analysis technique refers to the data analysis based on standardized algorithms and the appropriate software. In essence, this analysis consists of finding (combinations of) conditions that are subsets or supersets of the outcome and thus to arrive at sufficient and necessary (or INUS[64] or SUIN[65]) conditions. In order to find such set relations, QCA relies on so-called truth tables and straightforward rules of logical minimization."*
> (Schneider & Wageman, 2012, p. 13)

Conducting a QCA requires different steps summarized in the figure below[66] and discussed wherever necessary in Chapter 6. Divided in three stages: before, during, and after the analytic moment, the main goal of these steps is to perform an analysis of necessity and an analysis of sufficiency on the selected conditions for the presence and absence of the outcome. These analyses are performed using the R/RStudio environment software (Duşa, 2019; Thiem & Dusa, 2012), however, the most important choices are done by the researcher before the analytic moment. These involve several processes of conceptualization of conditions, elaboration of sets and calibration of both condition sets and the outcome set in an "iterative dialogue between prior theoretical knowledge and empirical insights" (Schneider & Wageman, 2012, p. 277).

[63] For a more in-depth description see Ragin, 2004 and Schneider & Wageman, 2012.

[64] INUS stands for a single condition "that is *insufficient* for producing the *outcome* on its own but which is a necessary part of a *conjunction* that, in turn, is unnecessary but *sufficient* for producing the outcome. For instance, in the term A*B + C*D → Y, each single condition (A, B, C, D) is an INUS condition'. (Schneider and Wageman, 2012, p. 328).

[65] SUIN stands for a single condition that is "an unnecessary part of a *logical OR* combination that, in turn, is insufficient but *necessary* for the outcome […] In (A+B) * (C+D) ← Y, the conditions A, B, C, and D are SUIN conditions." (Schneider and Wageman, 2012, p. 333).

[66] For more details on the different steps of a QCA, including post-analysis diagnostics see (Oana et al., 2021; Oana & Schneider, 2021; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012; Thiem et al., 2016).

What this means for the actual QCA process is that researchers may run multiple necessity and sufficiency analyses, and, in the process, they might re-assess the choices made in the "before the analytical moment" stage. Depending on what methodological choices the researcher makes, the outcome of a QCA can vary tremendously. Against this backdrop, this thesis follows current standard QCA procedures and best practices on transparency (Oana et al., 2021; Schneider & Wageman, 2012). The specific "before the analytic moment" choices are described in detail in the following sections of this chapter. The "analytic moment" (i.e., the analysis results) and "after the analytic moment" (i.e., the interpretation of the results) steps are described in Chapter 6.

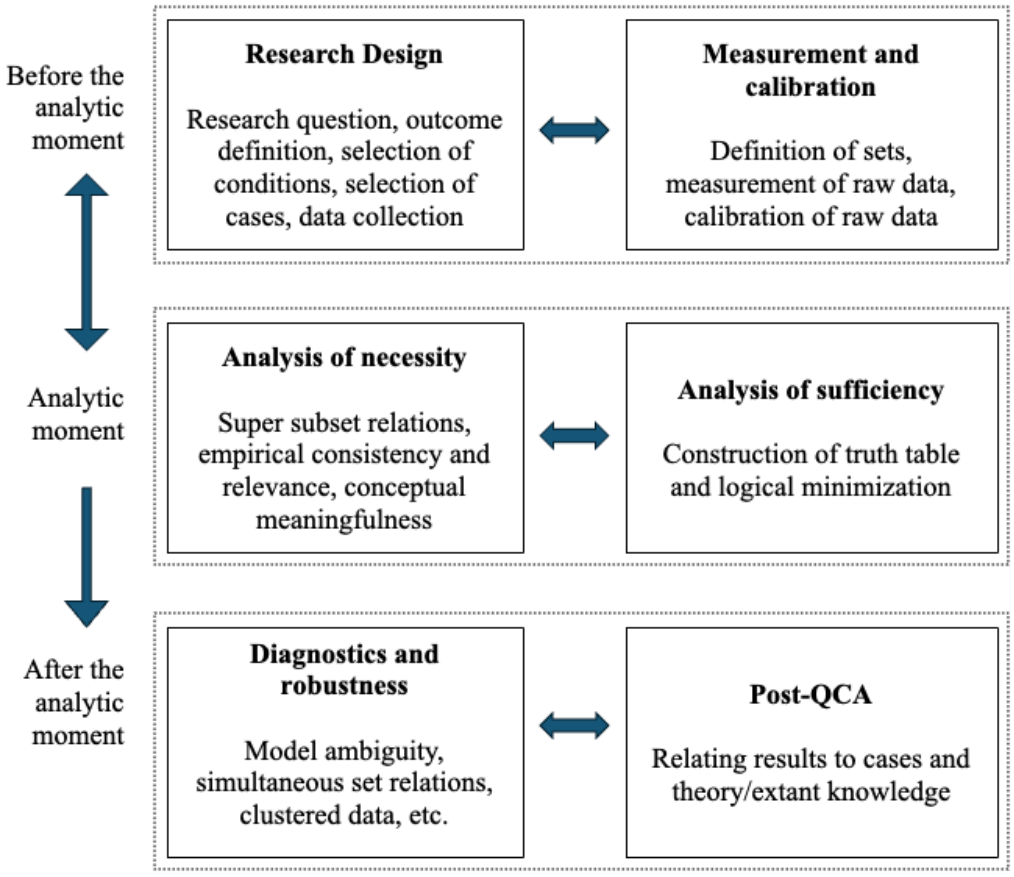


Figure 4: Steps in QCA (Own illustration of Figure 1.1 "Steps of QCA and relevant book chapters" and Figure 7.1 "Analytic steps in QCA" with slight modifications, both in: Oana et al., 2021, p. 4, and Oana et al., 2021, p. 202, respectively)

4.2.1 Before the analytic QCA moment

In QCA, one selects cases based on whether they "fit within the boundaries of a set" (Mahoney, 2010 cited in Schneider & Wageman, 2012, p. 24). Sets are the backbone of applied QCA. We

distinguish two types of sets: the outcome set (essentially the dependent variable), and the conditions sets (the explanatory factors or independent variables[67]). We also differentiate between two types of QCA analyses: crisp set and fuzzy set. Crisp set QCA only distinguishes between cases that are members of a set (score of 1) and cases that are not members of a set (score of 0). Instead, fuzzy set QCA takes into account the *degree to which* cases are members of sets. In this sense, fuzzy sets are "simultaneously quantitative and qualitative" (Ragin 2014: xxiv) and often, they reflect more accurately the fuzzy boundaries of social phenomena, and the categories we researchers use to study them. In this sense, despite its name, fuzzy set QCA actually provides more information and nuance about the relationships between the sets observed (e.g., the degree to which the condition of having a populist government is necessary for the outcome of alignment with Chinese identity narratives). This dissertation thus employs fuzzy set QCA. The units of analysis in this QCA are each of the 13 EU Member States within the same time frame observed in stage 1 of this study (2017-2019).

4.2.1.1 The outcome sets IDNA, ISNA, SYNA

In this study, the outcome set is defined by the results of stage 1: the spectrum of variation (i.e., the raw data), which tells us the degree of alignment (and therefore non-alignment) of the 13 EUMS. Since I have observed three types of narratives in the media discourse debates of the cases, I have run three separate QCAs each with their own outcome: identity narrative alignment (IDNA[68]), issue narrative alignment (ISNA), and system narrative alignment (SYNA). These three outcome sets are defined as representing those cases with presence of narrative alignment with Chinese discourse in them.

Cases are assigned a membership score in both the outcome set and the conditions sets, to establish to what degree they are part of said sets and better reflect the reality of social phenomena (e.g., Hungary's media show higher alignment with Chinese narratives than Italy's media, even though they are both inside the group of countries whose media show alignment

[67] A reminder that set-theoretic methods do not focus on the effect of one single variable, but rather on the relationship between a combination of conditions (variables) and the occurrence of a phenomenon. For a discussion on the differences between sets and variables, see Ragin (2008, 2014), Schneider & Wageman (2012), and Oana et al., (2021, p. 35).

[68] In QCA, it is encouraged to give capitalized short names to outcomes and conditions both to simplify the coding process in R and for ease of visualization.

with Chinese narratives). Assigning a membership score to a case is a process which requires collecting raw data and interpreting the information that this raw data gives us about cases in a way that is readable in QCA. This is referred to as the calibration process. In QCA, there are several calibration methods depending on the type of raw data and general research considerations[69]. For the outcome I chose the direct method of calibration, indicated when raw data in numerical decimal form is available. Calibrating raw data into set membership scores requires establishing three *calibration anchors* which are numerical points between 0 and 1 establishing which cases are fully out of the set of the outcome (anchor of exclusion: "e"), which cases are fully in the set of the outcome (anchor of inclusion: "i"), and most importantly, the cutoff or crossover point: "c" (Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wageman, 2012; Oana et al., 2021, p. 31). In this QCA, the cutoff point marks the qualitative difference in kind between narratively aligned countries and narratively nonaligned countries. Additionally, it also marks the exact point at which we do not know whether a case is more in or out of the set (the point of maximum ambiguity) (Oana et al., 2021, p. 49). This point is set at the average of each outcome's raw scores (IDNA = 0.39; ISNA = 0.39; SYNA = 0.47). Since these raw scores were obtained inductively from the sentiment analysis, in other words, it is the spectrum of alignment and non-alignment what allows me to interpret what narrative alignment is, the choice of cutoff was generated by the data itself. The point of exclusion (fully out of the set) was chosen at the divided average (IDNA = 0.19; ISNA = 0.20[70]; SYNA = 0.24), and the point of inclusion (fully in the set) was chosen at the multiplied average (IDNA = 0.78; ISNA = 0.79; SYNA = 0.95). To give an example, cases presenting a significant level of ID narrative alignment can score between 0.40 (just above the cutoff point of 0.39) and 0.78 (the point of inclusion: twice the average), which represents the group of cases that are more *in than out* of the set of the outcome, and they can also score above 0.78 (in this case, only Hungary is fully in the set of the outcome). The mathematical selection of anchors avoids any potential bias. This is only indicated when there are no substantive reasons to position the anchors at any other specific point, which is the case for this exploratory research. The following table presents cases' raw and calibrated membership scores in the three outcomes.

[69] For more on this see Oana et al., 2021, pp. 25 - 59.

[70] Thresholds are rounded. Averages are 0.388 (IDNA) and 0.393 (IDNA), hence the slight difference in the divided and multiplied average.

Case	Raw Scores			Calibrated Scores		
	ID	*IS*	*SY*	*IDNA*	*ISNA*	*SYNA*
Austria	0.27	0.31	0.28	0.15	0.28	0.08
Denmark	0.50	0.44	0.86	0.72	0.64	0.92
Estonia	0.31	0.29	0.25	0.25	0.22	0.06
France	0.14	0.19	0.15	0.02	0.06	0.02
Germany	0.29	0.30	0.21	0.2	0.25	0.03
Greece	0.65	0.65	0.81	0.89	0.9	0.89
Hungary	0.81	0.77	0.88	0.97	0.96	0.93
Italy	0.52	0.55	0.42	0.52	0.09	0.35
Lithuania	0.40	0.27	0.75	0.54	0.18	0.85
Poland	0.29	0.45	0.59	0.2	0.65	0.68
Portugal	0.48	0.40	0.32	0.68	0.56	0.13
Spain	0.21	0.24	0.31	0.07	0.12	0.11
Netherlands	0.18	0.25	0.33	0.04	0.13	0.14
ANCHORS	*5.05*	*5.11*	*6.16*	*SUM*		
Exclusion Anchor	***0.19***	***0.20***	***0.24***	**= Fully out of the set (0.05)**		
Cutoff Point	***0.39***	***0.39***	***0.47***	**= Neither in nor out (0.5)**		
Inclusion Anchor	***0.78***	***0.79***	***0.95***	**= Fully in the set (0.95)**		

Table 7: Raw and calibrated scores for the three outcomes, including anchors

4.2.1.2 The condition sets: ECON, DEM, GOV, TRADI, PRESS

As mentioned before, the conditions of a QCA refer to the explanatory factors for the outcome; they are akin to variables in a way. The selection of conditions must make sense conceptually and theoretically with the phenomenon observed (Schneider & Wageman, 2012, pp. 23 – 40). QCA seeks to find patterns of necessity and sufficiency for the outcome, therefore researchers are encouraged to consider conditions in so far as they would produce the outcome individually or in combination. Standard procedure dictates that for a small N study such as this, one should aim at five or less conditions, as with each added condition the number of potential combinations increases, which later might generate issues with regards to validity and robustness of results (i.e., limited diversity, or not enough real-life cases to cover all potential explanatory scenarios) (Ragin, 2014). Five conditions have been selected for this study, and they remain constant across all three QCAs since all three outcomes are similar and cases also remain constant: economy (ECON), democracy (DEM), government (GOV), trade and investment (TRADI), and freedom of the press (PRESS).

The table below illustrates the operationalization of each condition. Conditions are selected based on theoretical and literature-based knowledge, on the basis of their likelihood to act as enablers of causal linkages with the presence and absence of the outcome (i.e., national media's alignment or non-alignment with Chinese strategic narratives). The rationale behind this selection of conditions is simple: ECON and TRADI aim at reflecting the material dimension of EUMS relations with China; DEM, GOV, and PRESS seek to reflect the ideational/institutional dimension of these relations. Material and ideational/institutional are understood in a broad sense as types of forces that may influence state behavior[71].

Like in the case of the outcome, calibration refers to the transformation of raw data scores (i.e., indicators' data) into [condition] membership scores. In this study's QCAs, two methods of calibration are employed. The first one is the direct method of calibration, recommended for numerical data, already introduced in the outcome section. The second method used is the theoretical calibration method with several raw values, indicated in the instance of several indicators composed of qualitative data. The conditions of TRADI and GOV are composed of two individual indicators each, as there is a theoretical expectation that the presence of both indicators contributes to each condition's causal linkages with the outcome (this being the alignment of national media with Chinese strategic narratives). Independently of whether the QCA is designed as crisp or fuzzy, conditions and their indicators can be calibrated as either. The choice depends on how well crisp or fuzzy sets capture the concept at hand. Each case's score in each individual indicator is calculated following a crisp or fuzzy set logic: binary scores of 0 – 1 show whether that indicator is present in each country, or decimal scores show the degree to which that indicator is present between 0 and 1.

[71] This approach stems from Robert W. Cox's conceptualization of historical structure (Cox and Sinclair, 1996) but it employs Cox's work as a tool for categorization rather than a way to explain change in the international order.

Conditions	***Economy (ECON)***	***Democracy (DEM)***	***Trade and investment (TRADI)***	***Government (GOV)***	***Freedom of press (PRESS)***
Set description	Below EU average GDP level	Below EU average democracy level	Dependent trade and investment relations with China.	Governmental nature of behavior facilitating alignment	Below EU average freedom of the press
Indicators (crisp set / fuzzy set)	1. EUMS GDP scores (fuzzy)	1. EUMS democracy scores (fuzzy)	1. Signed cooperation agreements (crisp) 2. Chinese investment by GDP (fuzzy)	1. Populist parties in gov (crisp) 2. Blocked statements on Xinjiang (crisp)	1. Below EU average freedom of press score (fuzzy)
Aggregation method	Direct method of calibration	Direct method of calibration	Theoretical method of calibration	Theoretical method of calibration	Direct method of calibration

Table 8: Operationalization of conditions.

Below EU-average GDP levels (ECON)

This condition is defined as reflecting the set of countries with below EU-average GDP levels. China is known for offering economic aid and assistance in different shapes to its partner countries and using said aid as leverage to influence political positions. Countries with stronger economies are less likely to be dependent on its economic ties to China and thus less likely to be pressured. While all EU Member States are classed as developed economies, there are still important differences among them in terms of surplus and deficit of national accounts. This condition is designed to reflect a domestic economic dimension which may impact a country's economic weakness vis-à-vis China and thus lead to the presence of alignment of national media with Chinese strategic narratives.

Indicator 1: EU Member States' GDP scores. Source: Eurostat, GDP per capita in PPS. Dataset: (prc_ppp_ind). Expressed in relation to the European Union (EU27 = 100[72]), a country with a value higher than 100 means that this country's level of GDP per capita is higher than the EU average (Eurostat, 2024a). The theoretical expectation is that countries with below EU-average GDP are more likely to show alignment with Chinese strategic narratives. Thus, cases' membership scores are calibrated as follows: the point of exclusion (e = fully out of the condition) is set at 130, the cutoff point is located precisely at 100 (EU average), which acts as the qualitative crossover point differentiating between cases that are more in or out of the set of countries with below EU-average GDP, and the point of inclusion (i = fully in the condition) is located at 70. The table below summarizes cases' raw and calibrated membership scores in this indicator.

ECON: Below EU average GDP

Cases	**Raw scores**	**Membership scores**		
		e=130	**c=100**	**i=70**
Austria	126,7		0.07	
Denmark	128,3		0.06	
Estonia	81,3		0.86	
France	104,7		0.39	
Germany	123		0.09	
Greece	66,3		0.96	
Hungary	71		0.95	
Italy	97,3		0.57	
Lithuania	81,3		0.86	
Poland	71		0.95	
Portugal	78		0.9	
Spain	91,7		0.69	
The Netherlands	128,3		0.06	

Table 9: Raw and calibrated scores for ECON.

[72] Basic figures are expressed in PPS, i.e. a common currency that eliminates the differences in price levels between countries allowing meaningful volume comparisons of GDP between countries. Please note that the index, calculated from PPS figures and expressed with respect to EU27_2020 = 100, is intended for cross-country comparisons. For more, see (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/prc_ppp_esms.htm).

Below EU-average democracy levels (DEM)

This condition is defined as reflecting the set of below EU-average democracy level countries. The notion of democracy level is operationalized as containing several individual indicators such as the well-being of the democratic institutions, the transparency and pluralism of the electoral process, the functioning of the government, the level of political participation, the status of political culture, and the status of civil liberties. Although primarily a given across all cases (i.e., all are members of the EU), democratic levels still vary across the EU, warranting a closer look into its potential explanatory value in the face of alignment of national media with Chinese strategic narratives. For this purpose, the raw data is extracted from The Economist's yearly Democracy Index reports. Since these are three distinct yearly reports (2017, 2018, 2019), overall scores of all three years observed are averaged to obtain a single value. The condition is conceptualized as showing the difference in kind between the two qualitative states of below and above EU-average freedom of the press, and the difference in degree among cases (fuzzy set). For this condition where raw data is presented in numerical values, the direct method of calibration is used again.

Indicator 1: Democracy scores. Source: The Economist Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017, 2018, 2019). Expressed in relation to EU average[73]. Average of overall scores for 2017, 2018, 2019. The theoretical expectation is that countries with below EU area democratic scores are more likely to show alignment with Chinese narratives. Cases' membership scores are calculated according to the following three anchors: the point of exclusion (e = fully out of the condition) is set at 9.50, the cutoff point is located precisely at 7.89 (EU average), which acts as the qualitative crossover point differentiating between cases that are more in or out of the set of countries with a below EU-average democracy level, and the point of inclusion (i = fully in the condition) is located at 6.0. The table below summarizes cases' raw and calibrated membership scores in this indicator.

[73]EU average as noted in the Democracy across regions section of The Economist Democracy Index.

DEM: Below EU average democracy levels

Cases	Raw Scores				Membership scores		
	2017	2018	2019	Average	**e=9.50**	**c=7.89**	**i= 6**
EU	*7,88*	*7,89*	*7,91*	*7,89*			
Austria	8,42	8,29	8,29	8,33		0.29	
Denmark	9,22	9,22	9,22	9,22		0.08	
Estonia	7,79	7,97	7,9	7,89		0.46	
France	7,8	7,8	8,12	7,91		0.45	
Germany	8,61	8,68	8,68	8,66		0.18	
Greece	7,29	7,29	7,43	7,34		0.68	
Hungary	6,64	6,63	6,63	6,63		0.87	
Italy	7,98	7,71	7,52	7,74		0.52	
Lithuania	7,41	7,5	7,5	7,47		0.63	
Poland	6,67	6,67	6,62	6,65		0.87	
Portugal	7,84	7,84	8,03	7,90		0.46	
Spain	8,08	8,08	8,18	8,11		0.37	
Netherlands	8,89	8,89	9,01	8,93		0.12	

Table 10: Raw and calibrated scores for DEM

Dependent trade and investment with China (TRADI)

This condition is defined as reflecting countries' dependent trade and investment relations with China. The expectation is that a high score in this condition may contribute to the presence of alignment of national media with Chinese strategic narratives. TRADI is composed of two individual indicators described below.

Indicator 1: Countries with a cooperation agreement signed with China at the time of observation (short = CA). Source: MERICS (Poggetti, 2021). The theoretical expectation is that countries which have signed cooperation agreements, either BRI-related or other, are more likely to show alignment with Chinese strategic narratives. In this case, crisp set membership score calibration is applied as follows: Absence of signed agreement = 0; Presence of signed agreement = 1.

TRADI Indicator 1: Signed cooperation agreement (CA)

Cases	**Agreement**	**Membership score**
Austria	(Joint statement, 2018)	1
Denmark	-	0
Estonia	(MoU, 2017)	1
France	-	0
Germany	-	0
Greece	(MoU, 2018)	1
Hungary	(MoU, 2015)	1
Italy	(MoU, 2019)	1
Lithuania	(MoU, 2017)	1
Poland	(MoU, 2015)	1
Portugal	(MoU, 2018)	1
Spain	-	0
The Netherlands	-	0

Table 11: Raw and calibrated scores for TRADI indicator 1.

Indicator 2: Percentage of Chinese investment in observed countries (FDI) by GDP in million €. Since Chinese investment is naturally greater in bigger economies, looking at absolute figures does not allow for cross-country comparisons. I have therefore opted to calculate investment relative to GDP. Taking OECD and Eurostat data, relative figures are obtained after averaging three years of Chinese FDI and GDP. Then, the percentage of averaged FDI in millions on the total of each country's averaged GDP is obtained, allowing for a clear cross-country comparison. Most cases show a percentage of 0.1% of Chinese investment, and thus it is intuitive to designate it as a cut-off point marking the qualitative *difference in kind* spot between countries that are more in than out in the condition. Sources: Dataset 1, Chinese FDI: FDI by counterpart area and by economic activity BMD4 and BMD3, net inflows, BoP, (OECD, 2024). Dataset 2, cases' GDP: GDP at market prices (Eurostat, 2024b).

The theoretical expectation is that countries with higher Chinese investment per GDP are more likely to show alignment with Chinese strategic narratives. For this indicator, the set of IN (investment) was created showcasing cases' raw scores (see table below). To calibrate the condition of TRADI with both indicators' raw data, countries' raw scores in the set of IN (investment) are then aggregated to the crisp scores of indicator 1 (signed cooperation agreements) using the theoretical method calibration with four fuzzy-set values[74]. This four-value distribution aims at capturing the different qualitative states cases can have in this

[74] For an explanation of this calibration method see Oana et al., 2021, pp. 35 – 41.

condition of TRADI. Countries that have more than 0.01% of Chinese investment AND have signed a cooperation agreement score 1 (fully in the set of the condition). Countries that have more than 0.04% but no less than 0.01% of Chinese investment, AND have signed a cooperation agreement score 0.67 (more in than out in the set of the condition). Countries that have less than 0.04% of Chinese investment but have not signed a cooperation agreement, and countries that have less than 0.01% of Chinese investment but have signed a cooperation agreement both[75] score 0.33 (more out than in the set of the condition). Finally, countries that have less than 0.01% of Chinese investment AND have not signed cooperation agreements score 0 (fully out of the set of the condition). The table below illustrates raw and calibrated scores for this condition:

TRADI: aggregated indicators 1 & 2

Cases	**CA score**	**Invest. as % of GDP**	**Membership score**
Austria	1	0,01	0.67
Denmark	0	0,002	0
Estonia	1	0,01	0.67
France	0	0,01[76]	0.33
Germany	0	0,01	0.33
Greece	1	0,08	1
Hungary	1	0,01	1
Italy	1	0,01	0.67
Lithuania	1	0,001	0.33
Poland	1	0,01	0.67
Portugal	1	0,12	1
Spain	0	0,03	0.33
The Netherlands	0	0,01	0.33

Table 12: Raw and calibrated scores for TRADI.

[75] There is an expectation that the signing of cooperation agreements impacts the outcome more the higher the percentage of Chinese investment is.

[76] Balance of Payments includes sold assets. When the total of sold assets by a counterpart is higher than the total of bought assets, the balance is negative. Such is the case of France. This does not mean that there is less investment in France than there is in Lithuania. Comparatively, France still receives considerable Chinese investment. However, in aggregate terms, a negative BoP points at a decrease in investment for the years observed. Given the difficulty of calculating percentages with a negative BoP and considering the above, France is scored as within the average (0,01).

Government (GOV):

The condition of GOV is defined as reflecting dimensions of governmental nature or leaders' behavior which may facilitate the presence of alignment of national media with Chinese strategic narratives. This condition, like the condition of TRADI, is composed of two individual indicators: (1) the presence of populist parties in government, and (2) lack of governmental support for statements condemning human rights violations in Xinjiang. Both factors are expected to contribute to the presence of the outcome.

Indicator 1: Presence of populist parties in government (majority or coalition) during the period observed. Party selection is based on Pew Research Center's classification of European political parties and country reports of the research project The Populist (Wike et al., 2024). For this indicator, which presents qualitative data, membership scores are presented in crisp-set form (0 – 1). The theoretical expectation is that governments with populist parties are more likely to show alignment with Chinese narratives. Thus, membership scores are calibrated as follows: absence of populist parties in government = 0; presence of populist parties in government = 1. The table below summarizes cases' calibrated membership scores in this indicator.

GOV indicator 1: presence of populist parties in government

Cases	**Populist Party**	**Membership score**
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ	1
Denmark	Danish People's Party, DF	1
Estonia	-	0
France	-	0
Germany	-	0
Greece	Syriza + Independent Greeks (ANEL)	1
Hungary	Fidesz	1
Italy	M5S + Lega	1
Lithuania	-	0
Poland	Law and Justice, PiS	1
Portugal	Bloco de Esquerda, BE	1
Spain	-	0
The Netherlands	-	0

Table 13: Details and crisp set scores for GOV indicator 1.

Indicator 2: Lack of support for statements on Human Rights violations in Xinjiang. Sources: Human Rights Watch. Statements referred to are:

- July, 2019, Letter to the President of the UN Human Rights Council on, (Signatories, 2019) .
- October, 2019, Joint Statement on Human Rights violations and abuses in Xinjiang, (Signatory Countries, 2019)

The theoretical expectation is that countries which do not express condemnation of China's human rights abuses are more likely to show alignment with Chinese narratives. Thus, crisp set membership score calibration is as follows: support of condemnation (YES) = 0; lack of support of condemnation (NO) = 1. See the table below for a summary.

GOV indicator 2: Lack of support for HHRR statements

Cases	**July 2019 Letter**	**October 2019 JS**	**Membership score**
Austria	YES	YES	0
Denmark	YES	YES	0
Estonia	YES	YES	0
France	YES	YES	0
Germany	YES	YES	0
Greece	NO	NO	1
Hungary	NO	NO	1
Lithuania	YES	YES	0
Italy	NO	NO	1
Poland	NO	NO	1
Portugal	NO	NO	1
Spain	YES	YES[77]	0
The Netherlands	YES	YES	0

Table 14: Details and crisp-set scores for GOV indicator 2.

The membership scores of each case in these two indicators are then aggregated through the theoretical calibration method of three fuzzy-set values to obtain a combined membership score. This aims at capturing the different qualitative states cases can have in this condition of GOV. Here, both indicators have been calibrated as crisp-set scores (0 – 1) since their presence can only be either/or. There are only three possible qualitative states in the condition of GOV.

[77] Spain's government had been dissolved in September 2019 in view of general elections which would take place in November 2019 and was thus not able to act as official signatory of the joint statement. Having signed the previous one just a couple of months before and considering that the resulting government included the same majoritarian party and head of state (Pedro Sánchez, PSOE), I operate under the assumption that similar behavior towards this issue would ensue, therefore allocating a score of 0 to Spain.

Countries with a score of 0 in both indicators score 0 (fully out of the set of the condition). Countries with a score of 1 in one indicator score 0.6 (*slightly* more in than out in the set of the condition). Lastly, countries with a score of 1 in both indicators score 1 (fully in the set of the condition). The table below summarizes the calibration for GOV.

GOV: aggregated indicators 1 & 2

Cases	**Indicator 1 calibr.scores**	**Indicator 2 calibr. scores**	**Membership score**
Austria	1	0	0,6
Denmark	1	0	0,6
Estonia	0	0	0
France	0	0	0
Germany	0	0	0
Greece	1	1	1
Hungary	1	1	1
Lithuania	1	0	0,6
Italy	0	1	0,6
Poland	1	1	1
Portugal	1	1	1
Spain	0	0	0
The Netherlands	0	0	0

Table 15: Calibrated membership scores for GOV.

Below EU-average freedom of the press (PRESS)

The last condition is PRESS and it is defined as reflecting below EU-average freedom of the press levels. Like with the dimension of democracy, all EU Member States present high levels of freedom of the press vis-à-vis other regions of the world. However, individual factors that make up what we understand as free press vary among countries. Considering that this study focuses on Chinese discursive influence in the traditional media of EU Member States, any insights on this matter require taking into account the environment in which these media outlets operate in each observed case. Hence, the condition of PRESS aims at accounting for any potential influential factors stemming from this media environment which may lead to the presence of media alignment with Chinese strategic narratives. For this purpose, the raw data is extracted from the three pertinent yearly World Press Freedom reports of Reporters Without Borders. The index from which the QCA country raw scores are taken measures seven individual indicators including (1) media pluralism and (2) independence, (3) the legislative framework of each country, (4) the political environment and the level of self-censorship, (5)

the levels of transparency of the institutions involved in media production, (6) the quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information, and (7) the level of abuses and violence against journalists.

Indicator 1, Freedom of press. Source: World Press Freedom Index[78], (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Country scores are presented globally, with higher scores representing more freedom for the press. EU average is obtained from the sum of all EU Member States' scores. Since these are three distinct yearly reports, all three years observed are averaged to obtain a single value. The condition is conceptualized as showing the difference in kind between the two qualitative states of below and above EU-average freedom of the press, and the difference in degree among cases (fuzzy set). The theoretical expectation is that countries displaying below EU-average freedom of the press scores are more likely to show alignment with Chinese strategic narratives. For this condition where raw data is presented in numerical values, the direct method of calibration is used again. Cases' membership scores are calculated according to the following three anchors: the point of exclusion (e = fully out of the condition) is set at 95, the cutoff point is located precisely at 80.2 (EU average), which acts as the qualitative crossover point differentiating between cases that are more in or out of the set of countries with below EU-average freedom of press, and the point of inclusion (i = fully in the condition) is located at 60 (there is no reason to go lower than this since, as explained before, all countries are EU Member States and all display relatively high freedom of the press scores globally). The table below summarizes cases' raw and calibrated membership scores in this indicator.

[78] For more on the methodology used to create this index, see: https://rsf.org/en/index-methodologie-2013-21?year=2017&data_type=general

PRESS: Below EU-average freedom of press

Cases	2017	2018	2019	**Average (raw data score)**	**Membership score**		
					e=95	**c=80.2**	**i=60**
EU	80,65	80,03	79,79	80,2		-	
Austria	86,53	85,96	84,67	85,7		0.25	
Denmark	89,64	86,01	90,13	88,6		0.16	
Estonia	86,45	85,92	87,73	86,7		0.22	
France	77,76	78,13	77,79	77,9		0.58	
Germany	85,03	85,61	85,4	85,3		0.27	
Greece	69,11	70,81	70,92	70,3		0.81	
Hungary	70,99	70,89	69,56	70,5		0.8	
Italy	73,74	75,88	75,02	74,9		0.68	
Lithuania	78,63	77,8	77,94	78,1		0.58	
Poland	73,53	73,41	71,11	72,7		0.75	
Portugal	84,23	85,83	87,37	85,8		0.25	
Spain	82,64	79,49	78,01	80,0		0.51	
Netherlands	88,72	89,99	91,37	90,0		0.12	

Table 16: Raw and calibrated scores for PRESS.

CHAPTER 5. MAPPING NARRATIVES: A TYPOLOGY AND A SPECTRUM OF VARIATION IN THE RECEPTION OF CHINESE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to answer the first research question: *How are Chinese strategic narratives received in EU Member States' traditional media?* To do so, it presents the results of the discourse analysis conducted on 1577 news articles of traditional media outlets from 13 EU Member States. The chapter follows the three-level structure for discourse analysis presented in Chapter 3, Section 3.7, which aims at examining the reception of these three strategic narratives[79]: (1) China's projected identity as a "harmonious, peaceful nation but entitled to defend its legitimate sovereignty and security claims" (identity narrative), (2) the need for global connectivity via China's BRI initiative (issue narrative) and (3) China's role in the transformation of the international order through the projected narrative of the "Community of Common Destiny/Shared Future" (system narrative).

This three-level structure is akin to a matryoshka, describing first the wider, more general contours of data patterns to then unveil smaller nuanced configurations. Level 1 (narrative analysis) classifies the data in the above mentioned three main strategic narrative types of Identity, Issue, and System, illustrating issues of salience of these three strategic narratives in the traditional media spheres of the selected cases. Then, for each narrative type, Level 2 reflects a sentiment analysis of the news articles, dividing them into positive, mixed, and negative views, which provides differentiated data on Member States' reception of Chinese strategic narratives. This data is later calibrated into a spectrum of variation in the reception of narratives (quantitative variation). Once cases have been grouped into these three sentiment categories, Level 3 presents the specific narratives about China, the BRI and China's vision for the international system which are present in each case. This illustrates the ways in which Member States' traditional media perceive these three topics (qualitative variation). As

[79] Based on Lams and van Noort's findings (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4).

explained in Chapter 3, Section 3.7.3, a more in-depth analysis of the specific narratives found in the data provides nuance to the discussion about the power of strategic narratives.

5.2 Narrative analysis

Miskimmon et al (2013, 2017) posit that actors employ three types of strategic narratives in their pursuit of [discursive] power: identity, issue, and system narratives. The identity strategic narrative analysis requires identifying representations of China found in the 13 cases observed. Specifically, the process aims at codifying references to China's nature/character and the nature of its actions. These representations may or may not align with China's projected identity, as pointed out in section 5.3 of this chapter. The issue strategic narrative analysis requires identifying and processing references concerning the Belt and Road Initiative, its nature, goals, and effects. Once again, the discursive representations of the BRI populating EU domestic media may or may not align with the way(s) in which China publicizes its flagship initiative. This process will illuminate which discursive elements of China's projected BRI strategic narrative prevail across EU audiences. Lastly, the identification of the reception of a Chinese system strategic narrative is a more elusive process, yet a relevant one nonetheless. It identifies which elements of the Chinese discourse about how the international system should be and what is considered good global governance resonate -and which do not- among EU audiences.

The data analyzed suggests that indeed all three types can be observed to varying degrees of salience. The following figure shows the percentages of total references coded to each identity (ID), issue (IS), and system (SY) parent codes for the three years analyzed (2017, 2018, 2019).

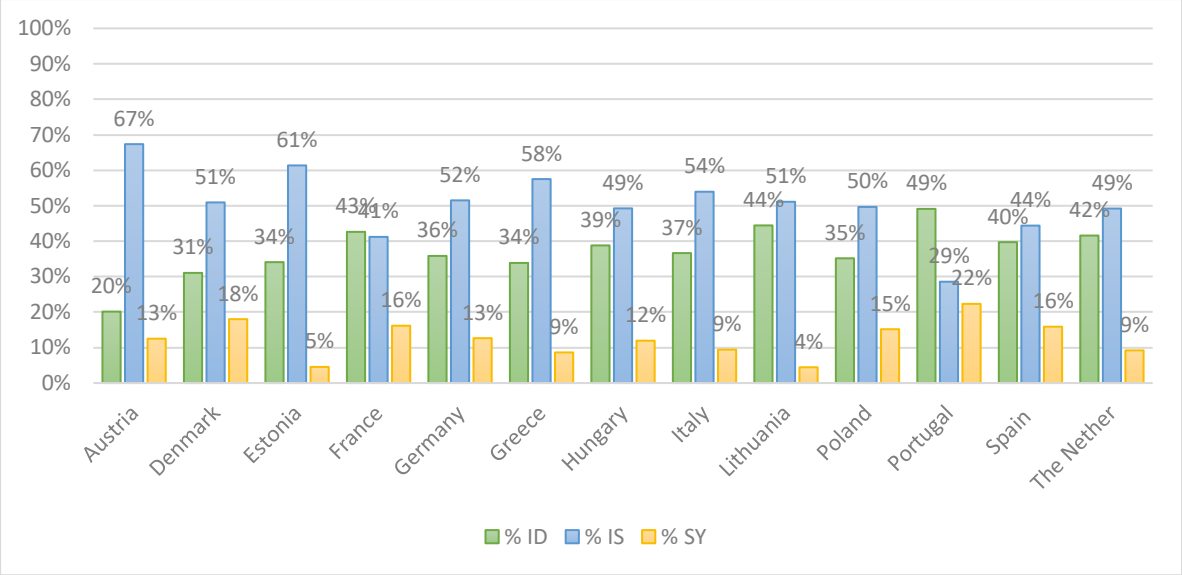


Figure 5: Salience of ID, IS, and SY narratives in all cases. All years.

Analyzing salience in the reception of narratives serves as a way to take the temperature of domestic debates around certain topics and gives us a general idea about the priorities and perceptions of domestic audiences. However, observations about narrative salience can be skewed due to varying access to data sources. Chapter 4, section 4.1 explains the analytical corollaries of having varying numbers of news articles per case (e.g., France = 295 articles, 563 references; Lithuania = 31 articles, 90 references). Turning absolute numbers into percentages partly eases the problem, allowing a cross-case comparison of salience.

A first general observation is that, unsurprisingly, the BRI (issue narrative) is the most relevant topic for national audiences, followed by the nature of China as an actor (identity narrative). The topic of the role of China in the international system and China's projected understanding of "good global governance" is less salient, although this could be related to the limitations of the medium (news articles) and the relatively more complex and less mainstream nature of the topic itself, which may not be as engaging for mainstream audiences. Two outliers stand out to this general trend: France and Portugal, where the conversation about China as an actor generates more traction than the conversation about the BRI. While the difference is minimal in France (ID = 43%; IS = 41%), the case of Portugal is significant (ID = 49%; IS = 29%). Further thematic analysis in Level 3 will illustrate the differences in kind among these two cases (i.e., in which way these two cases diverge).

5.3 Reception of China's identity narrative of a harmonious, peaceful nation

The primary objective of the sentiment analysis is to ascertain *how*[80] Chinese strategic narratives are received in the national media of 13 EU Member States. Reception is a social process whereby narratives are absorbed and processed with the collective or individual cultural cues or signifiers in which the audience is embedded. These cultural cues impact the degree of positive or negative reception of a narrative, in other words, they condition the alignment with and contestation of a narrative. If we understand the degree of alignment with the projected narrative as the measure of a successful strategic narrative, and the degree of contestation of the projected narrative as the measure of its failure, analyzing media discourse in terms of positive, mixed, and negative views helps to identify which strategic narratives are successful (i.e., national media discourse is aligned with the projected narrative) and which are unsuccessful (i.e., national media discourse is not aligned with the projected narrative). Taking the strategic narratives identified by the extant literature (Lams, 2018; van Noort, 2022) as a starting point to build the codebook[81], this sentiment analysis revealed clear patterns of alignment and non-alignment of national traditional media with the identity, issue, and system strategic narratives in the 13 cases studied.

However, analyzing sentiment only offers half of the picture (quantitative variation). To fully understand *how* strategic narratives are received by target audiences, sentiment analysis must be complemented with a thematic analysis (qualitative variation). Sentiment and thematic analysis go hand in hand in the process of ascertaining in which cases do Chinese narratives permeate national discourse and in which they do not, thus generating discursive contestation. This thematic analysis presents thematic containers -think of these as sub-narratives- with higher code density per sentiment and per country. In other words, for each sentiment category within each narrative[82] this section indicates which themes resonate more with cases. This process illustrates nuances in Member States' perceptions of each of the three general topics, highlighting the difference in kind in each case's reception of Chinese narratives.

[80] The ways in which, not the means through which.

[81] See Chapter 2, section 2.4.

[82] ID (pos, mix, neg); IS (pos, mix, neg); SY (pos, mix, neg).

The codebook that resulted from the data analysis contains a series of thematic "child codes"[83], hereinafter referred to simply as "sub-narratives" or "thematic codes". These have been generated both deductively, according to the existing literature (see Chapter 2), and inductively, in a bottom-up approach where codes are suggested by the data itself as the analysis progresses. After identifying those themes with higher density for each case, attention is turned towards describing the narrative structure they contain, as outlined in the operationalization detailed in chapter 3, section 3.7. This process is illustrated with examples from the data itself.

5.3.1 Sentiment analysis

When it comes to the reception of the strategic narrative around China's identity between 2017 and 2019, eight out of thirteen cases presented a majority of negative views: Austria, Estonia, France, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, and The Netherlands; four showed a majority of positive views: Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Portugal; and one presented an even split between positive and negative views: Denmark. Mixed opinions are relatively few, although they supersede positive views in those cases with overwhelmingly negative views, and vice versa in those cases with a majority of positive views, which indicates a certain continuity in terms of patterns of perceptions[84].

[83] Child codes are thematic containers that are relevant enough, according to the literature and the data, to warrant their own category. They are assigned to specific top-level codes or "parent codes", which in in this dissertation are sentiment categories, but they convey specific information that is crucial for the analysis. For more, see Chapter 4, section 4.1.3

[84] For a detailed description of the coding process for each sentiment, see Chapter 3, section 3.7.2.

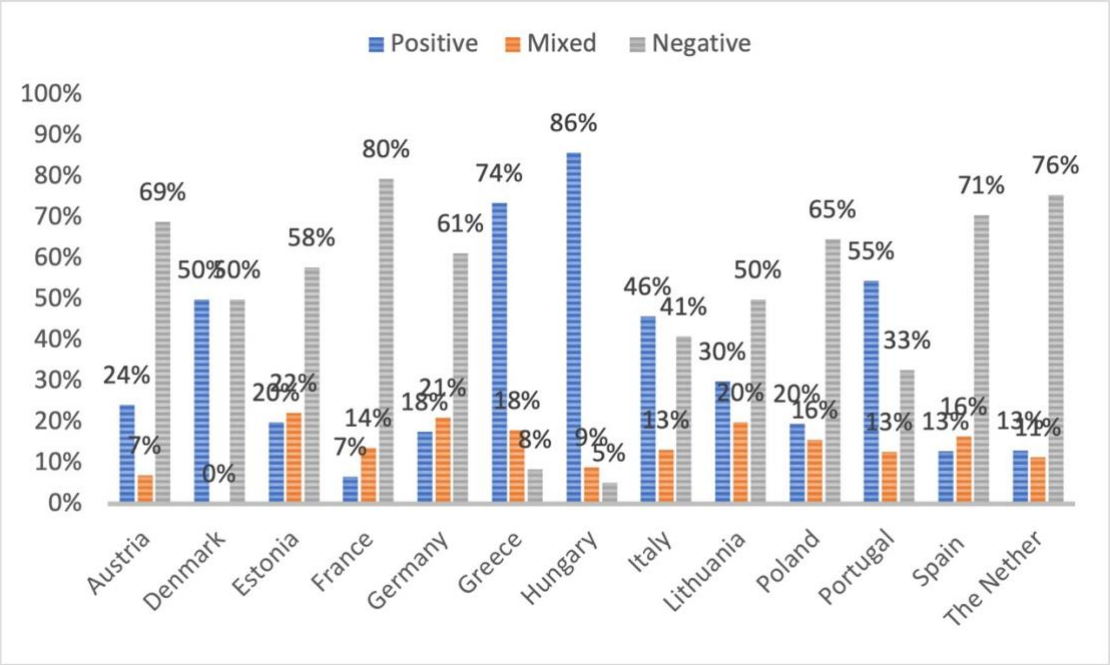


Figure 6: Percentages of references coded to positive, mixed, and negative ID narrative. All years[85]

Amongst those cases scoring mostly on the negative side (>50%) towards China's identity narrative, France and The Netherlands show the highest percentages of negative views, 80% and 76% respectively. France stands out as the paradigmatic case of non-alignment with China's strategic narrative about its own identity, with as low as 7% of positive views and 14% of mixed views in this category. The Netherlands presents a similar pattern, with positive and mixed views stalled at 13% and 11% respectively. Following France and The Netherlands, Spain (71%) and Austria (69%) also show significant negative views towards China's identity, followed closely by Poland (65%) and Germany (61%). While Spain and Germany show higher mixed views scores than positive views scores, following a somewhat intuitive evolution considering their overall mostly negative views, Poland and Austria show more positive views than mixed, with the difference being more acute in Austria. This can be a result of a general consensus regarding China in the media outlets selected, irrespective of their political tendencies, or alternatively, the result of low media freedom. The thematic analysis (level 3) will shed some light on these nuances.

[85] Percentages are rounded up for ease of visualization. In the cases of France, Poland and Portugal, this creates a deviation of >0.5 in some of their percentages from the actual score to those showed in the chart columns. This does not affect results in any substantive way, but readers will observe that for these cases, the sum of the three sentiment percentages amounts to 101.

As regards those cases scoring mostly on the positive side (>50%), Hungary shows the highest percentage of positive views towards China's identity narrative at 86%, i.e., 86% of all references from Hungarian traditional media were coded to codes containing representations of China aligned with the strategic narratives projected by China and documented in the literature (see Chapter 2). As such, Hungary represents the other end of the ID sentiment spectrum to that of France's negative perception of China's identity narrative. Following Hungary, at 74% of positive views of China's identity is Greece. Both countries show similar sentiment distribution in their percentages of mixed and negative views as well, making them the two paradigmatic examples of alignment with China's strategic narrative about its own identity, the specifics of which will be explained in the section on thematic analysis. With regards to the third case scoring >50% on the positive side, Portugal, its stance is less clear-cut, with positive views peaking at 55% on average for all three years analyzed. Considering they share certain geographical, cultural, and economic threats, the positive-leaning patterns revealed in Portugal's and Greece's analysis contrast against Spain's stark negative perception. This difference in pattern will be further analyzed in the following section.

Two other cases deserve attention with regards to their positions on China's identity, Denmark and Italy. These two cases are considerably different in terms of population size, geographical location, status of the economy and type of government, yet they share a similar pattern with regards to China's identity. As mentioned above, Denmark shows an even distribution of positive and negative views at 50%, with no mixed views. Italy, on the other hand, shows slightly more positive views (46%) than negative (41%), with mixed views accounting for the remaining 13% of references coded to this narrative. While the patterns are relatively similar for these two cases, there is nuance in their preferences (i.e., difference in kind) to be explored thematically.

5.3.2 Thematic analysis

Before moving on to the description of results for this section, a few guidelines for the interpretation of data are in order. Firstly, a reminder. As described in Chapter 3, section 3.7.1, when analyzing identity narratives this dissertation looks towards two dimensions of identity which can be useful: a) the expression of subjectivity (self) (Bially Mattern, 2005), and b) the type of relationship between subjects portrayed in the narrative (self-other). Analyzing these

two dimensions requires looking for representations of history, myths, symbols, and cultural norms and other portrayals of "natural behavior" which are used to define an actor, as well as any linguistic markers[86] used to either assimilate or put distance between the self and the other. Additionally, if we think back to the structural elements of narratives and their narrative purpose laid out in the operationalization (Chapter 3, section 3.7) we can identify a distinctive structure in the quote above. The analysis is built around these two dimensions and this structure of narrative.

Secondly, a disclaimer. Data analysis generated 22 thematic codes in the identity narrative parent code, divided among the three sentiment categories already explored. Each code has been assigned a label to simplify visualization. It should be noted that code ID18, *Due to politically sensitive issues* always shows 0% of references and it contains the following four subcodes: *Hong Kong* (ID19); *Negative views on China's HHRR records* (ID20), *Taiwan* (ID21), and *Uighurs* (ID22). This division is a decision based on the data itself (specific mentions to these specific human rights issues vary among cases, an observation that is qualitatively relevant), and NVivo's option to present totals of references in parent codes as aggregating those references coded to child codes or not. Aggregated codes sum the number of references in each child code to the number of references in the parent code, should there be coding to both independently. If one seeks to show references to both, as is the case for this codebook, aggregating them duplicates totals in certain types of queries or visualizations within NVivo. Therefore, codes are not aggregated here, which means parent codes only show percentages of references if these have been coded directly to them, independently of the references coded to their subcodes. This is the case of code ID13 and ID14, which are thematically related, and one stems from the other, but the data shows a significant number of cases with only references to ID13, hence the need to reflect coding to both and avoid losing that information. Going back to ID18 and its subcodes, they are thematically related and could easily have been aggregated, but it is also important to visualize the qualitative difference between those cases where the data shows references to the Uighurs (as a Muslim ethnic and cultural minority) and those where the data only shows references to Hong Kong's and Taiwan's search for democratic and political independence.

[86] As explained in the operationalization of strategic narratives section (Chapter 3, section 3.7), linguistic markers are pronouns indicating who are the actors involved and the distance between them (us, them, our, theirs, we…).

Code	Label	Total
Identity Positive		31%
China as a partner and-or global power	ID1	7%
China as a victim or misrepresented	ID2	2%
China as benevolent or responsible	ID3	27%
China's success story	ID4	14%
Relations with China as a driver of self-worth	ID5	10%
Trade with China as an opportunity	ID6	20%
Identity Mixed		14%
Authoritarian but effective	ID7	2%
Imbalanced relationship	ID8	6%
Neutral ref to China's HHRR	ID9	2%
Pursuing interests or pragmatic	ID10	3%
Uighurs linked to terrorism	ID11	1%
Identity Negative		55%
China as aggressive, colonialist, expansionist	ID12	26%
China as authoritarian-undemocratic	ID13	21%
Red emperor	ID14	3%
China as security threat	ID15	5%
China as taking advantage or coercing	ID16	16%
Counter-narrative on China's success	ID17	5%
Due to politically sensitive issues	ID18	0%
Hong Kong	ID19	2%
Negative views on China's HHRR records	ID20	9%
Taiwan	ID21	2%
Uighurs	ID22	12%

Table 17: Thematic codes, labels and percentages for ID narrative

The following table illustrates code density for each thematic code. Cells with higher coding density are shaded darker within each sentiment category, which begs the reminder that the interpretation of coding density is sentiment sensitive. Percentages in the grey shaded area refer to the total of references coded to each sentiment category. Percentages in the green shaded area refer to the distribution of that total among thematic containers. For example, Estonia shows 78% of references coded to ID3: *China as benevolent or responsible*, which belongs to the positive views category, but overall, Estonia scores 58% of references on the negative views category for this Identity Narrative vs 20% in the positive (see grey rows), thus it is wise to first identify the most densely coded theme within the negative views category for this case as the most representative of its overall perception of the narrative. After that, it is indeed

interesting to observe which are the main themes that resonate with Estonia on the positive views, as it also adds information regarding its positive perception of China.

Identity Narrative

	AU	DE	ES	FR	GE	GR	HU	IT	LI	PO	PR	SP	TN
POS	24%	50%	20%	7%	18%	74%	86%	46%	30%	20%	55%	13%	13%
ID1	21%	24%	0%	6%	43%	23%	21%	36%	17%	0%	13%	18%	29%
ID2	21%	0%	0%	13%	0%	4%	3%	6%	0%	10%	7%	0%	24%
ID3	57%	48%	78%	38%	14%	42%	15%	8%	17%	10%	33%	18%	24%
ID4	0%	28%	22%	13%	29%	9%	1%	18%	8%	10%	17%	27%	24%
ID5	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	31%	12%	17%	30%	10%	0%	0%
ID6	0%	0%	0%	31%	14%	21%	28%	20%	42%	40%	20%	36%	0%
MIX	7%	0%	22%	14%	21%	18%	9%	13%	20%	16%	13%	16%	11%
ID7	0%	0%	50%	24%	8%	5%	29%	26%	0%	13%	0%	7%	7%
ID8	25%	0%	50%	36%	68%	32%	29%	47%	50%	63%	43%	57%	33%
ID9	0%	0%	0%	15%	8%	26%	0%	5%	13%	13%	14%	21%	27%
ID10	75%	0%	0%	21%	12%	37%	43%	16%	25%	13%	43%	14%	13%
ID11	0%	0%	0%	3%	4%	0%	0%	5%	13%	0%	0%	0%	20%
NEG	69%	50%	58%	80%	61%	8%	5%	41%	50%	65%	33%	71%	76%
ID12	50%	20%	19%	19%	23%	0%	0%	36%	15%	30%	39%	23%	32%
ID13	3%	48%	19%	19%	25%	56%	25%	17%	30%	30%	22%	22%	16%
ID14	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	7%	5%	0%	0%	5%	2%
ID15	13%	8%	4%	5%	3%	0%	0%	5%	10%	6%	0%	2%	7%
ID16	8%	8%	0%	16%	27%	22%	25%	27%	15%	9%	17%	12%	14%
ID17	8%	8%	0%	11%	4%	22%	25%	2%	5%	6%	0%	3%	2%
ID18	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
ID19	0%	0%	19%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	0%	1%
ID20	13%	8%	15%	9%	10%	0%	25%	7%	10%	6%	17%	7%	7%
ID21	15%	0%	4%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	3%	0%	0%	0%
ID22	0%	8%	19%	13%	8%	0%	0%	0%	5%	9%	0%	27%	18%
Tot.	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 18: Code density for identity narrative, all years

The table below presents a percentage classification of positive and negative views for a quick glance at overall scores. If we remember from the sentiment analysis, eight out of thirteen of the cases studied scored a majority of negative views in their reception of China's identity strategic narrative, while four scored a majority of positive. Denmark shows an even split, and for the purpose of visualization it is shown in both columns.

Reception of China's Identity Narrative

Positive views		Negative views	
Hungary	86%	France	80%
Greece	74%	The Netherlands	76%
Portugal	55%	Spain	71%
Italy[87]	*46%*	Austria	69%
Denmark[88]	*50%*	Poland	65%
		Germany	61%
		Estonia	58%
		Lithuania	50%
		Denmark	*50%*

Table 19: Score of percentages for ID narrative. All years.

5.3.2.1 Two main negative narratives of identity: China as aggressive, colonialist, expansionist, and China as authoritarian-undemocratic.

Starting with those cases scoring >50% on the negative views, thematic analysis shows that the two main sub-narratives found in the negative reception of China's identity narrative are ID12: *China as aggressive, colonialist, expansionist,* and ID13: *China as authoritarian-undemocratic.* These two representations of China are often found together. Austria and Denmark show particularly high percentages of references coded to these two sub-narratives, with 50% and 48% of their negative views coded to these subcodes. ID12 and ID13 also feature prominently in Lithuania, The Netherlands, Spain, Poland and Germany. To illustrate findings, the next paragraphs provide excerpts of representations of ID12 and ID13. All of the following quotes are part of articles with multiple references coded to negative subcodes within the Identity Narrative parent code.

<u>ID12: China as aggressive, colonialist, expansionist</u>

[87] Italy scores below 50% but is nevertheless included among the positive views cases because it shows more positive than negative views. This is merely for descriptive purposes, not for the creation of the variation spectrum. Mixed views are calibrated into the spectrum accordingly to avoid skewed membership scores, see section 5.6.

[88] Denmark shows an even distribution between positive and negative views.

Quote 1, Austria, Der Standard, 2017: *"This region of the world is the focus of the interplay between Beijing's traditional, narrow interests and its new aspirations for great power. China not only wants to be the hegemonic power in the Far East, as the Middle Kingdom was for thousands of years. China wants to be at the top. To achieve this, the communist leadership is prepared to exert political, economic, diplomatic, military and, more recently, ideological pressure."*

The main character is China, and the perspective of the audience is set by establishing a difference between the audience and "*Beijing's traditional, narrow interests*". The text then expresses how things were, by alluding to historical and cultural cues: *"…as the Middle Kingdom was for thousands of years*". The structural element of conflict is introduced by expressing what disrupts the current order of things: "*China not only wants to be the hegemonic power…"*. The reader's point of view, the self-other perception already established as opposed to that of China, is moved further away by establishing China's agency, which in this case sets a negative expectation about China's behavior: *"China wants to be at the top".* To which the resolution follows by establishing China's preference as opposed to that of the audience through normative markers such as the expression of the consequence of the actor's behavior: "*To achieve this, the communist leadership is prepared to exert political, economic, diplomatic, military and, more recently, ideological pressure."*. This characterization of China as wanting to be at the top and seeking to achieve this by exerting all kinds of pressure connects to a wider narrative found in the data which depicts China as aggressively pursuing its interests and seeking to expand its influence in a variety of ways.

A similar characterization can be observed in another article of the same newspaper, where the author relies heavily on those historical cues stemming from the comparison of imperial China with the behavior of the 5th generation of leaders of contemporary China, all the while emphasizing the distance between *the Middle Kingdom* (the other) and *all others* (the self):

Quote 2, Austria, Der Standard, 2017*: "The Middle Kingdom used to call itself that because it saw itself as the center of the world and all others as tributary vassals - and that is exactly what the Communist Party mandarins in Beijing want it to become again."*

Another example of references coded to this sub-narrative is the following quote, where the journalist explicitly uses the word 'expansionist' to describe China's policies in the South China Sea:

Quote 3, Austria, Der Standard, 2017*: "There, [South China Sea] China is engaged in a territorial dispute over various islands and reefs, primarily with Vietnam and the Philippines, over suspected raw material deposits as well as the vital shipping routes that lead through the Strait of Malacca across the aforementioned sea to the Chinese coast. China is ignoring a decision by the arbitration court in The Hague, which was called upon by Manila and which largely declared the Philippine's claims to be legal last summer, and is continuing to claim islands in the sea. After the Chinese Liaoning sailed there in January, the Americans had an aircraft carrier group led by the USS Carl Vinson demonstratively exercise there in February to document their position: The region, it should be noted, is international waters and should remain so. Most recently, U.S. ally Japan also planned to have ships cruise there, much to Beijing's annoyance. Related to Japan is the third point at which Chinese expansionist policy clashes with America and its allies."*

In this quote, that distance between the self and the other is less marked, but nonetheless implied in the fact that China operates against every other actor in this representation, some of which are referred to as "*America and its allies*" among which, unless otherwise stated, EU Member States include themselves.

The following quote is an example of the aggressive connotation that is often found in negative representations of China's identity:

Quote 4, Austria, Die Presse, 2018*: "China is already pursuing the strategies of earlier regional hegemonic powers (such as the United States, Japan, or the Soviet Union). It is using coercive economic measures to impose its will on other countries. It is building up its armed forces to deter challengers. It intervenes in the domestic politics of other countries to achieve policies friendlier to the People's Republic. And, writes Professor Jennifer Lind: "Previous hegemonic powers have never tolerated the presence of a rival great power in their own zone of influence." The world is about to get even more uncomfortable."*

The narrative structure remains unmoved: China is presented as the other, distancing it from the audience's self. The scene is set at a regional level, where regional hegemonic powers already exist (USA), conflict arises with China pursuing specific strategies: using coercive economic measures, building up armed forces, intervening in domestic affairs; this leads to an expectation on China's future behavior: *"previous hegemonic powers have never tolerated the presence of rival great powers…"* and ultimately a resolution confirming the negative view towards China: *"the world is about to get even more uncomfortable".*

ID13: China as authoritarian – undemocratic

As established in the sentiment analysis, France constitutes a paradigmatic case of negative reception of Chinese narratives in all three SNs types. When looking at the distribution of references for the ID narrative for this case, the resulting picture includes multiple sub-narratives, yet ID12 and ID13 continue to feature prominently. The following quote is an excerpt of a longer article nearly fully coded to ID13. The whole article contains an identifiable narrative structure with an agent, a setting and a conflict, the resolution of which entails the threat of control and surveillance by the Communist Party – embodied in the character of Xi Jinping.

Quote 5, France, Le Figaro, 2019: *"But China's new emperor intends to save face with four counter-modernizations, which share the priority of control over openness. Control of power and the population by the Communist Party, notably through the program of continuous digital surveillance of the population. Control of companies by the State with the sanctuarisation of the public sector, the multiplication of incarcerations of private sector leaders, the curbing of the international opening of Chinese capitalism. Ideological control with the re-imposition of Marxist dogma in the media, universities and businesses. Strategic control with an intense arms race, the takeover of Hong Kong, the strengthening of pressure on Taiwan, the annexation of the South China Sea and the use of North Korea to weaken the American presence in Asia."*

Another example of China's (and Xi Jinping) characterization as authoritarian and undemocratic is the following quote from Spanish newspaper El País. In this case, the narrative structure changes, and the resolution of the conflict is not employed to instill fear but to argue against China's behavior.

Quote 6, Spain, El País, 2018: *"Xi has legitimacy. More than 80% of Chinese believe in the country's course. With the battle against corruption, the emperor has purged more than a million "tigers and flies" who could argue with him from within the CCP. Internet censorship and the merciless repression of dissent are the foundations of Chinese stability. Xi's move from collective autocracy to dictatorship is a risky gamble. Democracy stumbles, but the fragility of this illiberal edifice with all the power accumulated by one man is enormous."*

Both examples are representative of the main negative sub-narratives populating the traditional media of the selected cases. In both cases we see references to Xi Jinping as "emperor", and in some cases, specifically as a "red emperor". This is a small but important change which triggers a connection between the color red, commonly associated with Communism in Western culture, Mao Zedong, often referred informally to by that title, and Xi Jinping himself. This pejorative term is found in the cases of France, Lithuania, Spain, and The Netherlands. It is absent from those cases scoring mostly on the positive side.

The third most coded negative sub-narrative is ID16: *China as taking advantage or coercing others*. While present in all cases except for Estonia, Germany shows a comparatively high percentage, with 27% of its negative references coded to this topic.

5.3.2.2 Two main positive narratives of identity: China as benevolent or responsible, and trade with China as an opportunity.

The two main positive narratives around China's identity are ID3: *China as benevolent or responsible,* and ID6: *Trade with China as an opportunity*. ID3 is particularly prominent in the case of Greece and Portugal, which seem to ascribe to the image of China as a helping hand in times of need. This perception of China is often framed in one of two ways: Firstly, the context of economic difficulties which Beijing eased through goodhearted investment (*China as benevolent*). The following quote is an example of this sub-narrative from Portugal:

Quote 7, Portugal, Público, 2018: *"Chinese investment in Portugal has soared in recent years (it now stands at nearly 9 billion euros, when it was practically zero in 2010), especially during the adjustment programme between 2011 and 2014. As in Eastern Europe or Greece, China saw the euro crisis and the deep recession in which some southern countries fell and offered*

its services in terms of investment, when almost nobody was investing. The most emblematic cases are EDP, REN, BCP and Fidelidade, as well as TAP. The current government does not reject the decisions taken by the previous one, which was strongly pressured by the troika to privatise everything possible. "At a difficult time for Portugal" it was the Chinese who invested when nobody else wanted to invest, the Secretary of State for Internationalisation recently told Público."

If we analyze this excerpt according to the structure of narratives, we find a main character (China), a setting of the scene or explanation of how things were (the previous government having to privatize assets pressured by the Troika) and a disturbing of that order (China investing in southern countries) and an expectation of behavior, an assumption of benevolence triggered by the notion that China invested when nobody else wanted to, "at a difficult time for Portugal".

Secondly, the image of China as responsible appears connected to the issue of climate change. Greece in particular often portrays China as responsible vis-à-vis the US with regards to taking a proactive stance in climate diplomacy. Moreover, in this China-US dichotomy, "traditional US allies" (the self) are portrayed as wanting to bridge the distance between themselves and China by cooperating on climate related issues. The following quote provides an example:

Quote 8, Greece, Kathimerini, 2017: "*China is making an unprecedented shift in energy and environmental policy, which is no longer based on aggressive deals to exploit mineral wealth deposits but on measures such as increasing the use of renewable energy and promoting energy conservation. In 2016, China invested $88 billion in renewable energy, and according to Bank of China Governor Joo Xiaochuan, over the next five years Chinese green investment will exceed $3 trillion. This shift was eloquently reflected at the Global Energy Security Forum held in Beijing in 2016, where Chinese officials focused exclusively on promoting sustainable development measures and addressing air pollution. At the same time, Beijing's energy and environmental diplomacy will bring significant benefits to the country's foreign policy. In the face of President Trump's anachronistic beliefs and policy choices, China's proposals to advance the Paris Agreement and support sustainable development investments will secure strong support from the international community. Leveraging its diplomatic and economic power, China is rallying a large number of states, including traditional US allies, who will*

want to take advantage of initiatives such as the New Silk Road and the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank."

A particular trait of Greece's portrayal of China that no other case features are references to the connections shared by two great civilizations working together. In particular, the notion that Greece as the cradle of Western civilization and China as the cradle of Eastern civilization are natural allies. Many of articles from Kathimerini seem to replicate word by word China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' discourse regarding China's projection of itself as a great civilization (*wenming daguo*), a great power in the East (*dongfang daguo*), and a responsible power (*fuzeren de daguo*). In this way, Greece's media seem to employ China's discursive elements to recall a sense of grandeur and restoration of the dignity lost during the Eurozone crisis.

If we turn our attention to Hungary, the paradigmatic case of positive reception, we see that it differs from Greece and Portugal in the type of positive representation of China circulating in its traditional media. The main sub-narrative found in Hungary's data for China's ID narrative is related to the notion that being China's partner is an indication of Hungary's privileged position as a regional and global actor. Playing to nationalistic themes, Hungary's media focuses on the opportunities that China can bring to Hungary and presents arguments along the lines of China's investment in Hungarian infrastructure will propel Hungary to a position of regional power.

Quote 9, Hungary, Világgazdaság, 2018: *"Speaking at the opening ceremony, attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping and several other heads of state and government, the Prime Minister said that the question arises as to how Hungary was included on the list of "giants" invited to the Shanghai Expo. The answer, he said, is Central Europe. Hungary does not only represent itself: "When they hear the voice of Hungary, they hear the voice of our region, of a region that has become the engine of growth for Europe, he said. Orbán said in his speech, the growth rate in Central Europe is twice the European average, and there is a broad consensus that the region will continue to be a source of European growth in the future." He also pointed out that the coherent economic and social policies of the Central European countries ensured that these states were able to preserve their national, political and cultural identities even under significant illegal migration pressure. The Prime Minister said that he appreciates the presence of Chinese companies in Hungary. He mentioned several of them, such as the Bank*

of China which has established its regional headquarters in Budapest, as well as Huawei and Wanhua. He continued, "These Chinese companies have also contributed to the fact that we have actually achieved full employment in Hungary, and they play a significant role in keeping the Hungarian economy growing at over 4 percent in the long term"."

Quote 10, Hungary, Napi Gazdaság, 2018: *"Our country is on the rise. Hungary has a realistic goal to become China's main export partner in Central Europe and to be a leading player in terms of Chinese investment in Central Europe, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade said in Budapest yesterday. Speaking at a press conference at Budapest Liszt Ferenc International Airport ahead of the arrival of Chinese Premier Li Ko-jiang, Szijjártó said that Hungary has been successful so far in the former, with exports to China up 26 percent in the first eight months of the year, following a 25 percent increase last year. The value of Chinese investment in Hungary now exceeds $4.1 billion, he added."*

In these two excerpts we observe a relation between the self (Viktor Orban – Hungary) and the other (Chinese companies/China) that is naturalized positively through convenience. In the cases of Greece and Portugal, this relation spurs from a perceived uneven previous stance, where China is regarded as the key to that economic growth. In Hungary's media, China is described as an equal, an ally to cooperate with in order to quicken the nation's path towards a position of increased regional relevance. In this sense, Hungary sees cooperation with China as a "win-win situation", employing the very slogan publicized by the 5th generation of Chinese leadership. See the following example:

Quote 11, Hungary, Világgazdaság, 2017: *"Europe has modernised China and Asia with resources and technology, and now the star of the East, China and Asia, is rising, and capital and technology is coming from there to further develop Europe," he said. Cooperation with China is a win-win situation, benefiting all of Europe and China. There are many successful Chinese companies in Hungary, flagships of the digital economy, which will determine the future success of national economies."*

Hungary's positive view of China further defies that of the majority of the EU in its counter-narrative to that of China's divide-and-conquer approach. Several articles present the notion that China does not seek to pitch EU Member States against each other, but rather strengthen both bilateral and regional cooperation. The following quote is but one example:

Quote 12, Hungary, Napi Gazdaság, 2017: *"Thus, EU countries - seeking China's favour, somewhat competing with each other - are separately trying to maintain bilateral relations with the world's second largest economy, but the Beijing leadership does not aim at division, on the contrary: although China remains committed to bilateral negotiations with the leading economies of the EU, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom, it seeks to treat the other countries of the European continent as a unified whole, grouped in regional cooperation forums."*

With regards to the positive, if negligent, notions of China's identity amongst those countries with a mostly negative view, sub-narratives ID3 and ID6 are also those with higher coding density. On the one hand, Austria, Estonia and France, the data shows that the notion of China as responsible tied to issues of global trade and the fight against climate change is prevalent. On the other, Lithuania, Poland, and Spain seem to [marginally] accommodate the notion that trade with China is an economic opportunity not to be disregarded completely. Germany's thematic analysis reveals a divergence with this ID3 and ID6 prevalence. Its positive characterization of China's identity, albeit minoritarian, revolves around the sub-narrative ID1: *Positive views of China as a partner and/or a global power*. These two representations of China are joined because they tend to appear together in articles. Often, one acts as a sort of justification of the other. As explained before, sometimes references could be coded to two of the three main categories, as for example, references to China as a global power can be coded to the system narrative as well as the identity narrative. However, double coding them would result in increased coding density and inaccurate percentages. In order to decide to which category a reference should be coded, the context of the whole article is taken into account. In this case, references mentioning China as a partner and/or as a global power have been coded to the Identity Narrative category because they center on China's character, not on the nature of the international system or the US-China bipolar conflict.

5.3.2.3 Nuances in countries' perceptions

The Netherlands and Spain revealed very similar patterns in the analysis of the reception of China's ID narrative, with negative views around 70%, positive views at 13%, and mixed views below 20%. These two cases present differing geographical and economic circumstances, with

Spain belonging to the group of southern European countries which struggled during the 2008-2014 debt crisis, and The Netherlands enjoying a comfortable 4th position in GDP per capita among EU countries in 2022[89]. Considering these initial disparities, it is worth noting that there are no great differences in kind revealed by the data. In their shared negative view of China's identity, The Netherlands presents higher coding density to ID12, the notion of *China as aggressive, colonialist and expansionist*, already discussed above. Meanwhile, Spain's most densely coded negative views category is ID22: *Uighurs (due to politically sensitive issues)* followed closely by ID12. An interesting, yet small, difference concerns their mixed views. With regards to the Uighur issue, while Spain shows no references mentioning this minority as dangerous or linked to terrorism, 20% of The Netherlands mixed views[90] do so.

Likewise, it is worth looking at the difference in kind between Portugal and Spain, two cases with similar geographical and economic circumstances which present opposite patterns in their reception of China's ID narrative. Spain's mostly negative views (71%) are coded to the already explained ID22: *Uighurs (due to politically sensitive issues)* and ID12: *China as aggressive, colonialist and expansionist.* Whereas amongst Portugal's 55% of positive views show the opposite appreciation of China, with ID3: *China as benevolent or responsible* being the most densely coded sub-narrative. The following excerpt provides an example of narrative structure with cultural/historical cues aimed at naturalizing the self-other relationship between Portugal and China:

Quote 13, Portugal, Diario de Notícias, 2018: *"Portugal-China relations are the oldest and most regular relations of China with a European state," confirms historian Luís Filipe Barreto without any hesitation. "They are maritime, commercial, cultural, also diplomatic relations with the first Embassy of a European State to Ming China. Portugal and China, over almost half a millennium, created the first Modern Global Eurasian platform. Macau is now and was in the past a key pole in the universe of relations between China/Portugal, Eurasia, Africa and America, connecting the seas from China to the Indian Ocean, Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean through the new Maritime Silk Road. Macau is today one of the capitals of global Lusophony. Portugal and China have a common history of over half a millennium, sharing*

[89] Corrected. Source Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=GDP_per_capita,_consumption_per_capita_and_price_level_indices

[90] 11% of the total of references.

knowledge and partnerships," says the director of the Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre. For Luís Filipe Barreto, this historical relationship has advantages today, as "if Portugal was the gateway and border par excellence of China in Europe and Europe in China from the 16th to the 18th century, in the present and in the future it may well return to being one of the great global bridges in Europe, Africa, Brazil, China".

When it comes to Italy, as expressed in the sentiment analysis, while it scores below 50% in positive views, it still presents more positive views than negatives for this narrative. A look at its main sub-narratives shows that, unlike Hungary, Greece and Portugal, Italy's positive view of China revolves mostly around ID1: *China as a partner or global power*, and ID6: *Trade with China as an opportunity*. If we look at its main negative sub-narratives, Italy's negative perception of China is divided in two images: ID12: *China as aggressive, colonialist, and expansionist*, and ID16: *China as taking advantage or coercing*. These four sub-narrative present an interesting difference in kind whereby Italy's stance on China is more subdued, subordinate to economic issues, portraying China as a necessary evil rather than incorporating a subversion of the majority of EU Member States' view of China by presenting it as benevolent or deriving self-worth from China's interest in the nation's sectors, as Hungary, Greece and Portugal do. Italy's thematic analysis reveals the image of a polarized country with regards to China's identity narrative.

As regards the EU's bigger economies, France and Germany, they present similar patterns, with interesting nuances. While France holds a strong antagonistic position with 80% of negative views, Germany presents a softer stance towards China's ID narrative, with 62% of negative views, 21% of mixed and 18% of positive views vs France's 7% of positive views. A majority of Germany's references (27%) are coded to ID16: *China as taking advance or coercing, for the negative*, and a majority of mixed (68%) are coded to ID8: *Imbalanced relationship*, highlighting's Germany's slightly more pragmatic approach to China.

Looking at other significant thematic patterns, Poland is an interesting case of a country which sees China mostly negatively with references to the Communist, illiberal ideology that an aggressive Beijing wants to export, but is aware of the importance of trading with China, as seen exemplified by the switch in perceptions from the ID to the IS narratives which will be explored in the next section. Lastly, Denmark's pattern is quite interesting with an even split between positive and negative views of China. Thematically, it is important to differentiate

between scoring 50% in each pos/neg category and scoring a majority of mixed views. A majority of mixed views would indicate ambiguity in perceptions, whereas an even split between positive and negative views indicates polarization of perceptions. Denmark's media seems to be divided between two main sub-narratives, one positive, ID3: *China as benevolent or responsible*, and one negative ID13: *China as authoritarian and undemocratic*. Unsurprisingly, the positive representation of China relates mostly to Beijing's proactive stance with regards to climate diplomacy, the fight against climate change, and in particular, viewed in light of Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement - topics of significant salience for Danish audiences (European Investment Bank, 2023).

5.4 Reception of China's issue narrative of the need for global connectivity via the BRI.

5.4.1 Sentiment analysis

If we look at the reception of the issue strategic narrative about the BRI, overall positive-negative patterns present a similar distribution to that of the reception of the identity strategic narrative. Seven out of thirteen cases show a majority of negative views: Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Lithuania, Spain, and The Netherlands. Within these cases, France continues to show the highest percentage of negative views (71%), and proportionally the lowest of positive views (10%), repeating the same pattern present in the ID narrative. The cases presenting the second highest percentages in this group are Lithuania and Spain, both tied at 65%. Spain, like France, repeats the same pattern presented in the ID narrative, with a majority of negative views, some mixed views (21%), and fewer positive views (14%). Interestingly, there is an increase of three percentage points on the mixed views for the BRI narrative vs China's identity narrative. Lithuania shows a slight change in its pattern regarding the BRI, showing a more strongly negative stance towards the BRI than towards China's identity narrative. This particularity could be related to domestic priorities, further thematic analysis will shed some light on this. The remaining cases on the >50% negative views side, The Netherlands, Estonia, and Germany, all share similar patterns with negative views at 58%, 56%, and 54% respectively, increased mixed views with respect to the ID narrative at 33%, 31%, and 32% respectively, and positive views of the BRI at 9%, 14%, and 14%, respectively.

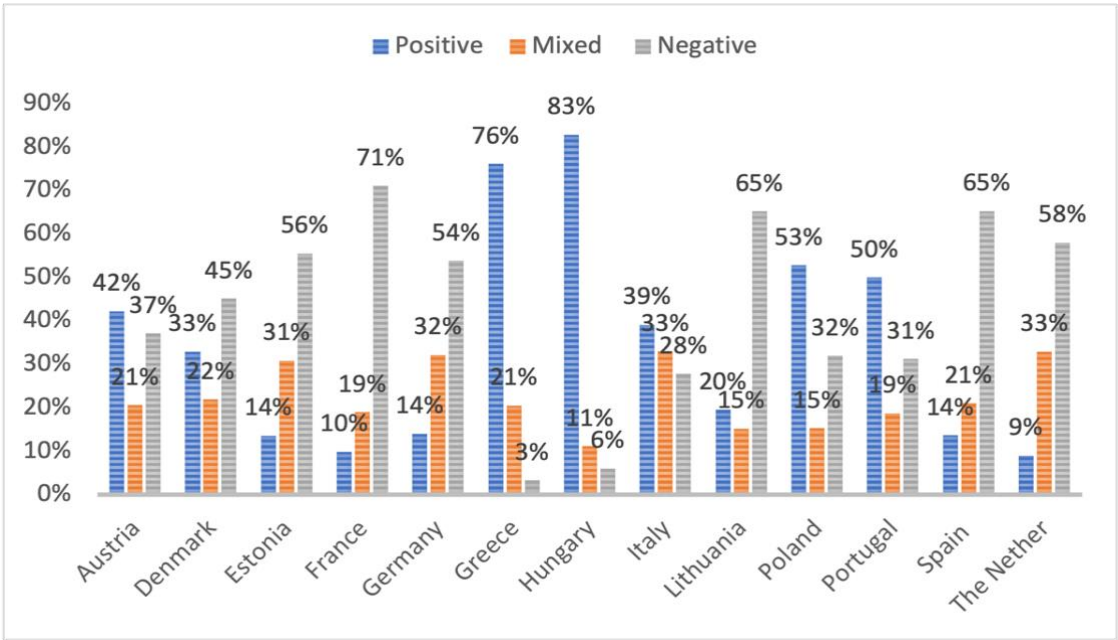


Figure 7: Percentages of references coded to positive, mixed, and negative, IS narrative. All years.

Six cases show a majority of positive views: Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Portugal. Amongst these, Hungary is once again a paradigmatic case with 83% of positive views, with Greece following suit with 76%, and Poland at 53%. The first two cases present a similar pattern than the one they presented with regards to the ID narrative, continuing an established trend. Poland, however, shows a significant change, from a mostly negative (65%) perception of China's identity to a positive perception of the BRI (53%). The case of Italy is particular amongst the selected sample because it presents a relatively balanced distribution of references in the three sentiment categories. As the inverted example of the case of Austria in the ID narrative, this could be a reflection of a wider debate in national media, and greater polarization between the selected outlets on the right and left of the political spectrum. Another relevant difference in the sentiment distribution of the BRI narrative vs the China narrative concerns Austria and Poland. Both countries scored more than 60% of negative views regarding China's identity, yet they present a significant switch in their views of the BRI, scoring a majority of positive views (ID: Austria = 24%; Poland = 20% vs IS: Austria = 42%; Poland = 53%).

The key quantitative difference (i.e., difference in degree) between the reception of both narratives lies in the changes to mixed views. Overall, the percentage of mixed views regarding the BRI is an average of 8.5 points higher than those regarding China's identity, pointing at a more nuanced reception of the BRI narrative vs clearer stances regarding China's identity. Such

are the cases of Austria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and The Netherlands. Of particular relevance are Austria, Denmark, and The Netherlands. These three cases showed little to no nuance in their positions regarding China's identity narrative (7%, 0%, and 11% of mixed views for ID narrative respectively), and all scored above 50% on the negative views towards China's identity, but their positions towards the BRI become more nuanced with 21%, 22%, and 33% of mixed views for IS narrative respectively. This change is particularly acute in the case of Denmark, a country with a very divided reception of China's identity narrative and a relatively balanced one with regards to the BRI with an increase of 22 percentage points on its mixed views. Equally interesting is Italy's increase of 20 points on its mixed views, adding to the already mentioned balanced distribution of references to this particular issue narrative. The following figure shows a comparison of the scores for mixed identity, issue and system narratives across all cases for a quick outlook on this variation in nuance in the reception of these topics.

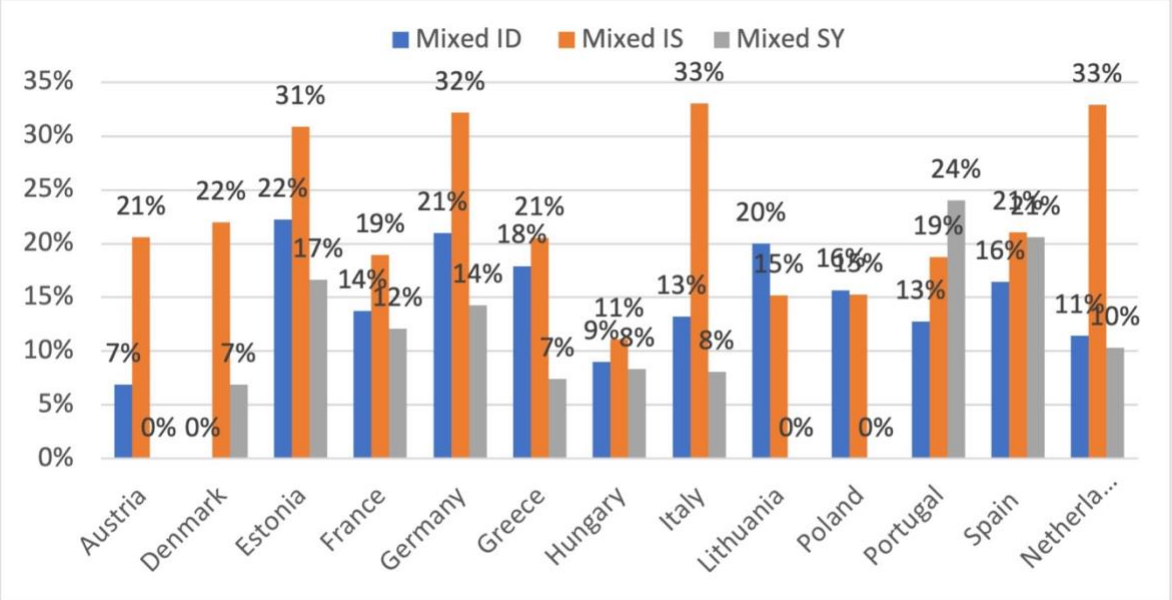


Figure 8: Comparison of mixed views across narratives and cases. All years.

Four outliers stand out from this trend of increased nuance regarding the BRI narrative: France and Spain on the one hand, as cases with a clear negative reception of both narratives and relatively little variation in their score of mixed views of the BRI narrative vs China's identity narrative; Hungary on the other, as a case with a clear positive reception of both narratives and little to no presence of mixed views for any of the three main narratives; and Poland, an interesting case which switches from mostly negative views towards China's identity narrative

(65% negative vs 20% positive) to a positive reception of the BRI narrative (53% positive vs 32% negative), with few mixed views (ID: 16%; IS: 15%) and only one point of variation among them in this transition. Lastly, Lithuania is the only country where mixed views for the BRI narrative decrease, which accompanied with the above-mentioned increase in its negative views, singles out this case as the only one where the BRI narrative is received more negatively than China's identity narrative.

5.4.2 Thematic analysis

Representations of the Belt and Road Initiative vary across Member States, not only from positive to negative, but also through different characterizations within the positive and negative categories. Analyzing an issue narrative involves paying attention to how an audience receives and then replicates an issue narrative by observing how certain facets are highlighted and others are not. Specifically, this process asks questions about how the BRI is portrayed, and what the consequences attached to participating in it or not are. Another useful guideline is to assess whether the issue is portrayed as linked to the interests or the identity of the receiving country or rather the opposite. This helps elucidate if the linkage is positive or negative.

The issue thematic analysis yielded the 26 thematic codes listed below. The same issue around aggregated codes described in the previous section applies here, i.e., IS4 always shows 0% of references because the qualitative relevant information is contained in its subcodes IS5 to IS10), whereas IS20 and IS21 are thematically related but there is a relevant qualitative difference among them.

Code	Label	Total
Issue Positive		34%
BRI as green	IS1	3%
BRI as unprecedented project	IS2	8%
Countering narratives of China's predatory practices	IS3	10 %
Due to mutual benefit and win-win cooperation	IS4	0%
BRI as creating jobs	IS5	3%
Benefits for participating countries	IS6	22%
Development cooperation and trade	IS7	17%
Fear of missing out on opportunities	IS8	12%
People to people exchanges	IS9	4%
Prospects of investment infrastructure and transport	IS10	21%
Issue Mixed		24%
BRI as a tool to achieve China's geopolitical interests	IS11	25%
Due to unclear benefits for participating members	IS12	17%
Due to viability concerns	IS13	22%
Existence of concerns but willing to cooperate	IS14	33%
Meeting overcapacity + infrastructure needs	IS15	4%
Issue Negative		42%
BRI as a tool for influence/exporting China's model	IS16	19%
BRI as debt trap/predatory practices	IS17	13%
BRI associated with dictators, autocrats, etc.	IS18	4%
Due to concerns over Chinese investment in EU	IS19	10%
Due to disruptive dynamics among EU Member States	IS20	12%
Need for united EU front	IS21	10%
Due to impact on local communities	IS22	4%
Due to lack of clarity in project planning	IS23	2%
Due to security concerns (Huawei, 5G, maritime military presence	IS24	5%
Environmental issues	IS25	4%
Related to unfair competition, HHRR, democracy, lack of transparency and corruption	IS26	18%

Table 20: Thematic codes, labels and percentages for IS narrative

The following table illustrates code density for each thematic code with respect to each sentiment category.

	AU	DE	ES	FR	GE	GR	HU	IT	LI	PO	PR	SP	TN
POS	**42%**	**33%**	**14%**	**10%**	**14%**	**76%**	**83%**	**39%**	**20%**	**53%**	**50%**	**14%**	**9%**
IS1	2%	7%	0%	4%	0%	1%	1%	2%	11%	0%	6%	0%	14%
IS2	6%	15%	9%	13%	8%	8%	5%	12%	22%	0%	0%	8%	14%
IS3	0%	15%	0%	4%	0%	23%	12%	0%	0%	3%	25%	15%	7%
IS4	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
IS5	6%	4%	0%	9%	4%	2%	5%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%
IS6	24%	0%	0%	17%	4%	17%	29%	29%	22%	26%	31%	38%	29%
IS7	20%	41%	36%	22%	38%	15%	18%	11%	11%	8%	0%	0%	21%
IS8	18%	4%	18%	4%	4%	7%	7%	23%	11%	16%	6%	31%	7%
IS9	1%	4%	18%	0%	0%	7%	6%	1%	0%	11%	6%	8%	0%
IS10	22%	11%	18%	26%	42%	20%	16%	22%	22%	34%	25%	0%	7%
MIX	**21%**	**22%**	**31%**	**19%**	**32%**	**21%**	**11%**	**33%**	**15%**	**15%**	**19%**	**21%**	**33%**
IS11	28%	39%	36%	25%	33%	16%	9%	27%	57%	0%	17%	25%	12%
IS12	23%	28%	24%	32%	22%	8%	9%	7%	0%	9%	0%	15%	18%
IS13	20%	28%	20%	18%	18%	30%	9%	11%	14%	27%	33%	35%	31%
IS14	28%	6%	8%	23%	25%	46%	73%	53%	14%	64%	33%	20%	31%
IS15	3%	0%	12%	2%	2%	0%	0%	1%	14%	0%	17%	5%	8%
NEG	**37%**	**45%**	**56%**	**71%**	**54%**	**3%**	**6%**	**28%**	**65%**	**32%**	**31%**	**65%**	**58%**
IS16	13%	24%	7%	26%	32%	17%	0%	15%	10%	13%	40%	13%	14%
IS17	4%	11%	11%	15%	7%	0%	67%	31%	27%	9%	0%	10%	8%
IS18	0%	3%	9%	5%	4%	0%	0%	0%	13%	0%	0%	5%	3%
IS19	21%	8%	2%	8%	10%	0%	0%	8%	0%	9%	10%	19%	13%
IS20	28%	11%	7%	5%	12%	17%	0%	5%	0%	13%	30%	18%	14%
IS21	4%	11%	7%	15%	13%	33%	0%	7%	10%	13%	10%	15%	2%
IS22	1%	3%	0%	2%	1%	33%	0%	5%	3%	9%	0%	6%	11%
IS23	0%	3%	13%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	3%
IS24	1%	5%	16%	6%	7%	0%	0%	3%	7%	0%	0%	0%	2%
IS25	0%	0%	0%	4%	5%	0%	33%	5%	7%	4%	10%	0%	8%
IS26	28%	22%	29%	13%	9%	0%	0%	20%	20%	30%	0%	15%	20%

Table 21: Code density for issue narrative. All years

The table below presents a percentage classification of positive and negative views for a quick glance at overall scores.

Reception of China's Issue Narrative

Positive views		Negative views	
Hungary	83%	France	71%
Greece	76%	Lithuania	65%
Poland	53%	Spain	65%
Portugal	50%	Estonia	56%
Austria[91]	*42%*	The Netherlands	58%
Italy	*39%*	Germany	54%
		Denmark[92]	*45%*

Table 22: Scores of percentages for IS narrative. All years

5.4.2.1 Two main negative issue narratives: the BRI as a tool for influence/exporting China's model and negative views associated with unfair competition, human rights abuses, democracy, lack of transparency and corruption.

The data shows two main sub-narratives amongst those countries with a majority of negative views about the BRI, with negligent difference between them: on the one hand, IS16: *BRI as a tool for influence/exporting China's model*, with 19% of total negative references coded to this characterization; and on the other IS26: *BRI related to unfair competition, HHRR, democracy, lack of transparency and corruption* with 18% of total negative references coded to this characterization.

[91] Austria and Italy score below 50% but are nevertheless included among the positive views cases because they show more positive than negative views. This is merely for descriptive purposes, not for the creation of the variation spectrum. Mixed views are calibrated into the spectrum accordingly to avoid skewed membership scores, see section 5.6.

[92] Denmark scores below 50% but it is included among the negative views cases because it shows more negative than positive views. As with the other similar cases in the positive views, this is only for descriptive purposes.

In IS16, "China's model" refers to China's economic model and it inheres a negative point of view which sees Chinese companies exporting overcapacity to other countries which then become dependent on Chinese production at the expense of their own industries. While China projects the image of the BRI as a generous tool via which China helps other countries achieve the level of development China itself accomplished (van Noort, 2021). In IS16, the BRI characterized as a tool allowing China to perpetuate a vicious circle of dependency. In some cases, particularly France, this model is defined by a relationship of vassalage between China and BRI participating countries. Amongst the >50% negative views countries, Denmark, Germany, and France are the cases with most references coded to this sub-narrative. The following quote exemplifies this perception where the BRI is depicted as a "weapon" for "economic imperialism":

Quote 14, France, Le Figaro, 2019: *"Xi Jinping is imperturbably plotting his 'New Silk Roads', a gentle euphemism for a formidable $3,000 billion investment plan designed to establish China's commercial supremacy throughout the world. The European tour of the master of Beijing testifies to his ambitions: from Italy to the countries of the East, via Germany and France, the Chinese are tirelessly weaving their spider's web. Now equipped with the most sophisticated technologies, with digital giants comparable to the American Gafa and with colossal financial resources, they are putting all their weapons at the service of their economic imperialism."*

IS26: *BRI related to unfair competition, human rights, democracy, lack of transparency and corruption* refers to mentions of these six negative dimensions at any point in an article or a reference, provided that reference has not been coded to any other code or the article has not been coded to a contradicting code (i.e., a different sentiment category)[93]. The unfair competition dimension refers to specific mentions of the support Chinese companies bidding in BRI projects outside of China have from the Chinese government, as they are provided with the necessary funds to avoid financial strain. This dimension is often mentioned alongside the issue of lack of transparency, which appears mostly related to the signing of MoUs but also related to Beijing's lack of disclosure of fiscal information of state-owned companies. With regards to references to corruption, almost all relate to the context of BRI projects in Asia,

[93] Should this be the case the article or reference would be coded to a mixed views thematic code which are tailored to instances when articles express both positive and negative characterizations or perceptions.

particularly Central and Southeast Asia. These entail characterizations of the BRI investments as money laundering or as bribes or extortion to appease and scare politicians in participating countries. In these cases, there are sometimes mentions of how harmful the BRI is for democracy, as it helps maintain a network of corrupt and authoritarian leaders. The retelling of the development -mostly depicted as failed- of these projects serves as a stark reminder, an admonition of sorts, of the fallibility of the BRI as a whole. Estonia, Denmark, Lithuania and The Netherlands are the countries with higher code density for this sub-narrative. The following is a quote from Estonian newspaper Eesti Päevaleht where the author counter-argues Beijing's narrative around the BRI as benefiting members:

Quote 15, Estonia, Eesti Päevaleht, 2019: *"Beijing emphasizes that the New Silk Road can be joined by anyone who wants to, and Azerbaijan and Georgia, for example, will benefit directly and enormously from it, and they will be enthusiastic about the project. The Economist emphasizes that the citizens of the participating countries may one day begin to regret the eagerness of their government: when Chinese money is at stake, there are no questions about human rights or corruption. The strict secrecy of the terms of the agreement has raised doubts that local politicians can benefit more than the people."*

The second and third most common sub-narratives are IS17: *BRI as a debt trap* and IS20: *Due to disruptive dynamics among EU Member States*. The theme of the debt trap is quite self-explanatory. Most of articles coded to this topic explain the example of BRI projects which have left signing countries in debt with China and have lost national assets, as for example the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota or China's COSCO Shipping's purchase of a majority of shares of the Piraeus Port Authority in Greece. As regards IS20, this topic is relevant across all >50% negative views cases. The following is a quote from Germany of an article quoted to this sub-narrative:

Quote 16, Germany, Die Welt, 2018: *"Slowly, however, nervousness is now spreading. Above all, China's attempt to bind Eastern Europe more strongly to itself via the '16 + 1' cooperation gives cause for concern that European unity could be weakened even further. '16 + 1' is intended to improve China's economic relations with 16 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and to open up investment opportunities there. "There is a proverb from antiquity: 'I fear the Greeks just when they bring gifts'," warns Green MEP and economic politician Reinhardt Butikofer. "Europe should take a very close look at what is being offered and what*

kind of cheating packages are involved." France's President Emmanuel Macron is also sceptical: "These roads must not pave the way for a new hegemony that turns those countries through which they pass into vassals".

5.4.2.2 Two main positive issue narratives: the BRI as creating benefits for participating countries and the BRI as increasing prospects of investment in infrastructure and transport.

The main positive issue sub-narratives found in the data are IS6: *BRI as creating benefits for participating countries*, with 22% of all positive references coded to this theme, and IS10: *Prospects of investment in infrastructure and transport*, with 21% of negative references coded to this theme.

IS6 includes general references to benefits countries which engage in BRI projects obtain or might obtain. There are no specifics as to which are these benefits, other than the presence of the adjectives "economic" or "social" alongside "mutual benefits" or references to increased growth or potential for investment. This type of general, vague language is characteristic of Chinese outward projection. In discourse analysis this amounts to empty signifiers, containers of information limited enough that when strategically placed in narratives, instantly trigger the audience into "filling" them with whichever meaning better suits their historical or cultural context. In this sense, this thematic code is designed to reflect those instances when country cases replicate Chinese discourse to avoid going into the specifics of the impact of the BRI – which is what most of the negative codes reflect – and convey a general positive feeling towards the BRI. The following excerpt is an example of IS6:

Quote 16, Austria, Der Standard, 2018. "*In the competition between international actors, China has designed a geopolitical initiative model of cooperation and development for mutual benefit, which is intended to develop and reconnect the relevant world regions both across continents and along maritime routes. This is not just about infrastructural measures, but also about linking them with innovation strategies in the key areas of any modern economy, such as energy, ecology, mobility and digitalisation. The economic data speak for themselves."*

Thinking in terms of narrative structure, this excerpt is part of an article where the BRI (the act/issue) is presented (disrupting a status quo) as an instrument which Austria (the agent, from whom the narrative point of view stems) would do well to adhere to (the behavior or agency, which sets the expectation) because it will generate benefits (the resolution of the conflict or purpose of the act). This is a common structure found in Hungary, Italy, and Portugal. See an example from Hungary:

Quote 17, Hungary, Világgazdaság, 2017: *"Orbán stressed that the One Belt, One Road programme in China will bring mutual benefits, and Central and Eastern Europe also have an interest in its success. He said he was proud that Hungary was the first country to sign the agreement in the region, where the most competitive investment environment on the continent has been created. This has led to billions of dollars of investment by Chinese companies in Central and Eastern Europe."*

IS10 is specifically related to the topic of infrastructure and transport. Although the BRI has now evolved to include other sectors such as digital communications, security, green technologies etc., its original focus were the infrastructure and transport sectors, which is reflected in the data collected from 2017 to 2019. During this time "connectivity" became a buzzword intrinsically linked to the BRI's goals, a sort of hard connectivity resulting from the establishment of new transport routes or the improvement of existing ones. In the case of Europe, China's goals included on the one hand, opening up maritime routes and gearing European ports towards Chinese export activity, and on the other, land connections from China through Central Asia till Europe's eastern doors. This ability to connect countries through sea and land is one of the BRI's selling points, a common argument in Chinese BRI discourse. This argument has been observed in articles signed by Chinese ambassadors to Greece, Italy and Portugal, all claiming that these countries have the potential to become Europe's gateway to China. It is no surprise that this theme is particularly relevant for these coastal EU countries as well as for countries on the Eastern border such as Hungary and Poland. Austria's interest in this topic is also quite significant. Most of the articles coded to this code directly link investment in transport infrastructure with increased trade in goods through the BRI. The following is an example from Italy:

Quote 18, Italy, Corriere della Sera, 2019: *"Collaboration with China in the field of connectivity opens up great opportunities for Sistema Italia, the historic terminal of the ancient*

Silk Road. On the one hand, our ports, I'm thinking in particular of those of Genoa and Trieste, can be candidates for the role of terminals in Europe for the new Silk Road. This is an opportunity that potentially benefits the entire Mediterranean, given that a significant part of global trade still transits through Mare Nostrum. I am talking about ports because the railway terminal of the Belt and Road has already been identified in Germany, in Duisburg, which proves that cooperation between Berlin and Beijing is much more advanced than ours. Secondly, our companies active in the construction, shipbuilding, energy networks and all sectors related to the development of infrastructure will have the opportunity to participate in major projects launched to build the Belt and Road".

Considering the issue narrative's increase in mixed views, it is worth briefly mentioning the main themes found in the data. A majority of references in this sentiment category were coded to IS14: *Existence of concerns but willing to cooperate*. This sub-narrative includes references of articles where the author begins by stating one or several issues or concerns related to the BRI in subdued, general, or vague language and finishes by stating support towards cooperation or engagement with it regardless. These articles are not considered positive because negative views are expressed, even if they are somewhat discarded by the end. The following is an example of this:

Quote 19, Denmark, Ritzau, 2019: *"China has repeatedly been accused of disregarding basic human rights such as the rule of law, freedom of expression and freedom of religion. On the other hand, the world's largest country is a sought-after business partner, also for Danish companies. For example, there is great interest in the new Silk Road, unveiled in 2013, which will better connect China with the rest of the world in order to market Chinese goods."*

5.4.2.3 Nuances in countries' perceptions

The thematic analysis of the reception of the BRI strategic narrative shows that the traditional media of different EU Member States have different ways of aligning with or contesting China's projected discourse about its flagship initiative. Starting with those Member States on the negative side, Estonia and Lithuania, both Baltic countries of small size, paint somewhat of a different (in kind) picture. While Estonia is more concerned about issues of transparency

and security related to China accessing sensitive national information (IS24 and IS26), Lithuania remains focused on the debt trap (IS17), not an uncommon fear for smaller states.

Middle and larger EU Member States on the negative side also vary in their qualitative characterizations of the BRI. On the one hand, France and Spain continue showing similar patterns with main sub-narratives revolving around the BRI as a tool for China's influence, concerns about Chinese investments in EU markets through BRI projects and the issue of China using BRI cooperation to foster differences and competition among EU Member States. On this topic, France is very vocal about the need to present a united EU front and protect EU assets. See the following example:

Quote 20, France, Le Figaro, 2019: *"And where does Europe stand in all this? Undermined by its bureaucracy and internal fractures, it has still not found a political line to defend its commercial interests in global competition. With a confounding naivety, it has prevented the creation of large industrial groups and allowed strategic assets to pass into foreign hands. Dazzled by the lure of access to the Chinese market - which is in fact firmly locked - it has opened its own market wide and allowed whole sections of its economy to sink. As much as on their own strengths, Europe's major competitors are growing and prospering on its rigidity and blindness. It is high time for Europe to get its act together."*

Denmark and Germany present a less antagonistic stance towards the BRI rooted in a pragmatic approach. Denmark shifts from a divided stance on the ID narrative to a more balanced position on this IS narrative. The BRI is seen as potentially dangerous because of China's investment in the EU, but with the right oversight, the BRI's benefits are worth considering. We find a similar picture in Germany, with a considerable increase in mixed views and a clear sub-narrative of the importance of investments in transport infrastructure and the possibilities of the BRI in terms of Sino-German trade. Perhaps anecdotal but interesting nonetheless is the fact that a significant number of German articles claim that the name Silk Road, now widely connected with China's initiative, was actually coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in the 19th century highlighting a connection between the popular term and Germany.

When looking at those countries on the positive side of the BRI narrative, a relevant nuance in Greece and Portugal's data is that they often refute notions of debt trapping and predatory

practices by China. Specifically, their traditional media seem to reflect China's own counterarguments to the majoritarian Western view of the BRI as a debt trap. In both cases, the articles which do mention such claims (e.g., the case of the Hambantota port) attribute these debt situations to poor management of the investments by the receiving countries, or poorly designed agreements. In the case of the latter, this is not perceived as China's intention but as an oversight or lack of know-how by other governments. This could be interpreted as a way to justify their decisions to participate in the BRI without buying into the narrative of the desperate country in need of Chinese economic assistance. In many articles there is a clear repetition of the win-win / mutual benefits Chinese leitmotif:

Quote 21, Greece, Kathimerini, 2017: *"China's Ambassador to Greece, Zhou Xiaoli, said that the Cosco project in Piraeus is the engine ('dragon's head' is the Chinese expression) of Sino-Greek cooperation. Indeed, as the dragon has reared its head for good, more and more Chinese companies are coming to Greece for investment, such as China Grid, China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC) and Shenhua Group China, to name a few. The investment activity of Chinese enterprises in Greece is based on the principle of mutual benefit and 'win-win' cooperation. This is obviously good for China and Greece, and for the wider region, as it promotes regional integration and development and assures positive prospects for further strengthening of relations in the future. The Sino-Greek investment cooperation vividly showcases and highlights the rich content of the Belt and Road Initiative."*

Poland and Austria are two cases which have switched from negative to positive views from the ID to the IS narratives. Both share similar thematic narratives related to the importance of transport infrastructure and both also stress a certain fear of missing out on investment opportunities. The BRI is seen by these two cases as more of an opportunity than a risk. Austria in particular justifies its interest in the BRI by often mentioning local and regional popular support:

Quote 22, Austria, Die Presse, 2018: *"And what do the people and the economy in the region think about this major location-deciding project? WK Wien wanted to know exactly and commissioned Makam Research to conduct a survey. The results are clear. 'Both the population and entrepreneurs already support the project with a large majority,' reports Ruck. 74 percent of the Viennese are in favor of extending the broad-gauge railway to Austria, and 72 percent want Austria's eastern region to become the trade hub of Europe. The majority of*

the population is aware of the advantages the project will bring. Thus, 78 percent of the Viennese expect the Silk Road link to have a positive impact on 'economic growth', 71 percent on 'jobs' and 74 percent on 'companies in Austria'."

When it comes to Italy, we still encounter a polarized country. Yet the sub-narratives found in this IS thematic analysis paint a very specific picture. A majority of references on the positive side justify Italy's engagement in the BRI by differentiating itself from other countries and putting distance between those Italy and cases where, arguably, the outcome of BRI engagement could be interpreted as negative (e.g., the loss of the majority shareholding of the Piraeus by Greece). By doing this, Italy says "we are different, we make different agreements." There is an emphasis on the fact that the MoU and other agreements fully comply with of all EU rules and regulations and therefore, no such debt trap or corruption scenario would be repeated, but actually, Italy would be missing out should it not participate in the BRI, particularly vis-à-vis other EU Member States' engagement with China. See the following quotes as an example:

Quote 23, Italy, Corriere della Sera, 2019: *"No risk of colonization. The reasons for prudence are fully shared within the government: the protection of national security, also on the economic level, is a fundamental value that we intend to strengthen. With Beijing we must rebalance the balance of trade, through greater access to the Chinese market for our goods, from agribusiness to luxury, and for our services, and here I refer to the elimination of barriers to the procurement market in China. Among EU partners we are only the fourth exporter to China, at a great distance from Germany in particular. We pay utmost attention to the defense of our national interests, to the protection of strategic infrastructures, including telecommunications, and to the avoidance of predatory investments and transfer of know-how and cutting-edge technologies".*

Quote 24, Italy, Corriere della Sera, 2019: *"There is a lot of confusion about this agreement, which is not an agreement, it is a Memorandum of Understanding. The principles of economic and commercial cooperation present in all European documents are reaffirmed, no commercial and economic rules are changed. On the other hand, "changing trade rules would not be within Italian possibilities since it is a European competence: we are making a bit of a storm in a glass of water". In short, according to Tria, there is no risk of Italy becoming China's 'bridgehead' to penetrate European markets."*

Lastly, looking at Hungary, the specific themes populating this country's traditional media take a more aggressive stance towards the majoritarian EU negative view on the BRI. Hungary presents its choice of taking part in the BRI, but also in regional China-led initiatives such as the 16+1 as a smart choice, particularly in the context of current EU issues such as economic slowdown and the so-called migration invasion. See the following two examples:

Quote 25, Hungary, Világgazdaság, 2017: *"A solution to the crisis of European integration can also come from the East, and Hungary can play a central role in this, György Matolcsy, President of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank, told MTI in an interview. The common Europe is in a trap, he said, and bold and far-reaching reforms are needed, but social and political support is lacking to implement them. In his view, the One Belt, One Road initiative announced by China, a modern version of the Silk Road, offers a particular opportunity to accelerate growth in the countries concerned. It is clear that the Central and Eastern European region, including Hungary, can act as a centre and, in other respects, as a bridge between East and West."*

Quote 26, Hungary Világgazdaság, 2017: *"Orbán also said that Hungary has always supported the freest and most equitable world trade network possible and has always been a supporter of Eurasian cooperation. That is why he was also interested in the success of China's One Belt, One Road initiative, he stressed."*

5.5 Reception of China's system narrative: a community of common destiny

5.5.1 Sentiment analysis

Assessing the reception of China's system strategic narrative poses more challenges. The widened scope of this type of strategic narrative complicates its observation and measurement. Actors employ system narratives to project their understanding of what is normal in the system, promote or legitimize specific dynamics, and express what the desirable way forward is. When looking for discursive elements belonging to system narratives, one should look for universal themes or all-encompassing approaches to the international system or "the world". This is naturally less likely to appear as such in the type of media analyzed in this dissertation, as mainstream news outlets, even those with extensive traditions documenting international news

are limited in space, scope, and the need to engage an audience which might not be so attuned to such wider commentary about the international system. Hence a disclaimer is in order before moving on to the description of the patterns found in this category. The number of references obtained from the data and coded to the system strategic narrative category is significantly lower than those coded to the identity and issue strategic narratives, particularly for the cases of Estonia and Lithuania, where only 6 and 4 references were coded in total in this strategic narrative. Thus, this analysis of results will exclude these two cases since any conclusions based on such a small population of articles would be irrelevant.

When looking at the sentiment analysis of the references coded to these topics surrounding China's perception of how the international system should be, i.e., "the community of common destiny or shared future" the data revealed patterns that mimic those of the reception of the identity and issue strategic narratives.

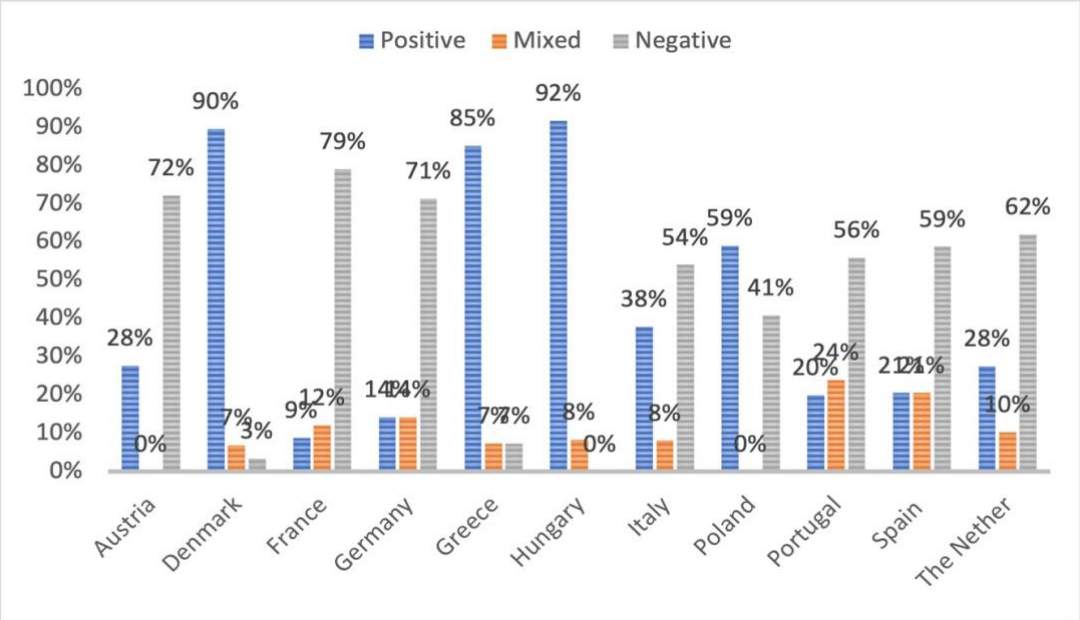


Figure 9: Percentages of references coded to positive, mixed, and negative SY narrative. All years.

Amongst those countries scoring >50% in the negative reception of the system narrative, France (79%), Austria (72%), and Germany (71%) score the highest. The Netherlands follows at 62% and Spain at 59% and, in a twist from the previous patterns, Portugal ranks among the negative at 56%. France continues its pattern as the clear case of non-alignment with Chinese narratives, while Austria switches back to its ID narrative pattern of non-alignment, after having swayed to the alignment side with the IS narrative. Germany scores its highest negative

reception across narratives in this SY narrative, 10 percentage points higher than its ID narrative score and 17 percentage points higher than its IS narrative score. This places Germany as an interesting case, particularly vis-à-vis the more defined French negative reception. Further thematic analysis will illustrate the nuances in the German reception process. Italy also finds itself scoring a majority of negative views if by a small margin. This case continues to point towards a polarized debate around Chinese issues, with references both aligned and non-aligned with China's discourse, depending on the topic. The table below presents a percentage classification of positive and negative views for a quick glance at overall scores.

Reception of China's System Narrative

Positive views		Negative views	
Hungary	92%	France	79%
Denmark	90%	Austria	72%
Greece	85%	Germany	61%
Poland	59%	The Netherlands	62%
		Spain	59%
		Portugal	56%
		Italy	54%

Table 23: Score of percentages for SY narrative. All years

Among those cases scoring >50% in the positive side, we encounter a relatively different picture to that of the two previous narratives. Relatively, but not completely different, as Hungary and Greece appear once again as paradigmatic cases of alignment with Chinese narratives with 92% and 85% positive views respectively. Poland, also with the majority of positive views (59%), continues its IS narrative trend, albeit with less nuance (no mixed views).

The relative difference in the SY narrative versus the prior ones responds to a shift in the narrative reception of Denmark. Denmark's prior trends showed a balanced reception of both the ID and IS narratives, with references distributed evenly among the sentiment categories. In the case of the SY narrative, the distribution is no longer even, and this country's reception falls overwhelmingly in the positive views category, with a 90% score. Mixed and negative views stand negligent at 7% and 3% respectively. Further insights into Denmark's 'strange behavior' with regards to this narrative will be brought to the fore by the thematic analysis.

5.5.2 Thematic analysis

The system narrative is the most difficult to identify, as its themes often tie into identity or issue themes. It is rare that articles will only be coded to system codes, it is therefore not strange that there are far fewer references coded to this category, considering the coding rule of avoiding double coding into multiple narrative categories.

This system strategic narrative inheres a vision of the world based on what China believes to be good governance, a malleable term which includes a series of old and new concepts within the IR orbit. China has increased its influence in current multilateral institutions, while also creating new parallel institutions aimed at supporting a new global governance system that is more "fair and just" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023), i.e., more multipolar. In this sense, China is trying to reframe or give new meaning to established concepts from democracy, sovereignty, to multipolarity and security. In the Chinese IR sphere, good governance is key to address current global challenges which the Western-led system can no longer properly address (Yang, 2017). Discursively, observing this narrative around the international system includes besides obvious positive or negative characterizations of China or its promoted institutions, paying attention to representations of the world as a collaborative community (the community of shared future/common destiny) or a competitive jungle (unfair, unbalanced, based on Western approaches to global governance in China's characterization of the current international system). A common discursive structure in Chinese discourse is an adversative relationship between the type of governance rules/norms and institutions of the Bretton Woods system (i.e., bad governance) and the new norms and institutions China proposes (i.e., good governance).

The system thematic analysis yielded the 13 thematic codes listed below. There are no child-codes in this narrative.

Code	Label	Total
System Positive		36%
China as not a challenge to the US/current world order	SY1	10%
Community of shared destiny, peaceful coexistence, re-globalization	SY2	8%
Positive views of China as leading a new world order/new type of IR	SY3	37%

Positive views of China as a promoter of global trade	SY4	45%
System Mixed		11%
Non-conditionality of Chinese loans	SY5	23%
Promoting alternative global governance structures	SY6	77%
System Negative		53%
Abuse of current multilateral institutions	SY7	8%
Anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-democratic	SY8	9%
China as a disruptive actor	SY9	8%
Monopoly of new industries	SY10	3%
Need for the EU to answer with its own project	SY11	5%
Negative views of new GG structures	SY12	5%
Negative views of US-China bipolar system	SY13	15%

Table 24: Thematic codes, labels and percentages for SY narrative.

The following table illustrates code density for each thematic code with respect to each sentiment category. Before proceeding, it is important to bear in mind that the number of references coded to this narrative is comparatively low, particularly for the cases of Estonia and Lithuania. These two cases will therefore not be included in the analysis.

	AU	DE	ES	FR	GE	GR	HU	IT	LI	PO	PR	SP	TN
Pos	**28%**	**90%**	**17%**	**9%**	**14%**	**85%**	**92%**	**38%**	**75%**	**59%**	**20%**	**21%**	**28%**
SY1	10%	8%	0%	13%	0%	17%	14%	0%	0%	8%	20%	0%	25%
SY2	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	22%	18%	14%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
SY3	40%	42%	0%	50%	33%	26%	41%	36%	0%	46%	60%	29%	25%
SY4	40%	50%	100%	38%	67%	35%	27%	50%	100%	46%	20%	71%	50%
Mix	**0%**	**7%**	**17%**	**12%**	**14%**	**7%**	**8%**	**8%**	**0%**	**0%**	**24%**	**21%**	**10%**
SY5	0%	0%	0%	45%	33%	0%	0%	33%	0%	0%	0%	0%	67%
SY6	0%	100%	100%	55%	67%	100%	100%	67%	0%	0%	100%	100%	33%
Neg	**72%**	**3%**	**67%**	**79%**	**71%**	**7%**	**0%**	**54%**	**25%**	**41%**	**56%**	**59%**	**62%**
SY7	4%	0%	0%	22%	20%	50%	0%	0%	0%	33%	7%	5%	11%
SY8	4%	0%	0%	4%	40%	0%	0%	30%	100%	11%	21%	30%	28%
SY9	8%	100%	50%	22%	10%	0%	0%	15%	0%	11%	7%	5%	17%
SY10	4%	0%	0%	4%	13%	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	15%	0%
SY11	27%	0%	0%	6%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	7%	20%	22%
SY12	19%	0%	25%	8%	7%	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%	14%	5%	11%
SY13	35%	0%	25%	33%	10%	50%	0%	30%	0%	44%	43%	20%	11%
Total	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**	**100 %**

Table 25: Code density for system narrative. All years

Among those cases with a majority of negative views, the main system sub-narrative is SY13: *Negative views of the US-China bipolar system*. This theme includes references to the instability of the current US-China competition, with negative connotations for China as a challenger and a disruptive actor in the system. This topic is particularly salient in France, where notions of instability are directly linked to China's rise. Data in France shows this theme often appearing alongside SY7: *Abuse of current multilateral institutions* and SY9: *China as a disruptive actor*. Germany, Spain and The Netherlands, also on the negative side, show a preference for SY8: *Anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-democratic,* which in a relatively self-explanatory fashion, articulates China's vision for the international system as defined by these three dimensions. Italy scores among the negative view countries, in a switch from the previous two narratives. Its main sub-narratives are also SY8 and SY13, suggesting a non-aligned reception along the lines of the majority of cases. These sub-narratives articulate a non-alignment position of these cases with China's projected system narrative.

On the other side we observe that Greece and Hungary continue their aligned pattern of the previous two narratives. Both score highly in the positive group, with the main sub-narratives being SY4: *Positive views of China as a promoter of global trade* for Greece, and SY3: *Positive views of China as leading a new world order/new type of IR* for Hungary. While SY4 steers away from supporting the envisioned global governance reform according to Chinese proposed values and norms, it does stress the positive impact for other nations of China's role as a promoter of global trade. SY3, on the other hand, fully endorses the Chinese discourse on the need to reform the system to address current challenges, and more specifically, with China in a leadership position. The following quote is an example of SY3:

Quote 27, Hungary, Napi Gazdaság, 2017: *"The low-growth Western countries, with thousands of problems on their shoulders, are not only in moral decline, but also in economic decline. So we need an alternative, a new "way" to rise. The countries of Eastern Europe, including the V4, have already embarked on this path, although they do not yet realise that the potential key to Europe's resurgence lies in the One Belt, One Road or the New Silk Road. The shift in the centre of gravity of the world economy towards the East is clear, and once again Hungary has been the fastest to respond in the framework of its Eastern Opening programme. The big question now is how the V4 as a core, and later China and the cooperation of the sixteen Central and Eastern European countries, will take this initiative forward. The process will accelerate spectacularly when Germany and Italy, like the Austrians, move beyond*

superficial feelings and say, not just verbally but by their votes, what they have already said in their minds. Until that day comes, however, the eastern half of Europe cannot hesitate, cannot wait, it must build its own web of interests and relationships that will enable it to prosper."

Lastly, the case of Denmark is a surprising one as it moves from a soft negative view of the BRI narrative to a fully positive view of China's system narrative. To bear in mind that only 29 references in a total of 81 articles were coded from Denmark, therefore drawing conclusions from a 90% positive score is unwise. However, it is worth mentioning that most of Denmark's articles coded to the system narrative ascribe to SY4, like those of Greece, putting the emphasis on the positive impact of China's role in global trade.

5.6 A spectrum of variation and a typology of narratives

The narrative and discourse analysis performed on 1577 news media articles aimed at answering *RQ1*: How are Chinese strategic narratives received in EU Member States' traditional media? The results confirmed Expectation 1 of varying degrees of acceptance and rejection among EU Member States. Firstly, results show that all three strategic narrative types are present in the 13 EU Member States analyzed. Among the three types, the issue strategic narrative of BRI has a higher degree of salience, which is expected.

Secondly, the data confirms the expectation of a differentiated reception of Chinese strategic narratives among EU Member States in two ways: one in terms of difference in degree, defined in this thesis as varying from aligned to non-aligned and based on coding to sentiment categories; the results of the sentiment analysis are summarized in the spectrum of variation described below. The second way in which the data highlights variation in the reception of narratives is in terms of difference in kind, embodied in the many sub-narratives found in the thematic analysis and summarized in the typology described below.

With regards to the former, the results have shown that in the case of China's identity narrative, eight out of thirteen cases observed showed a majority of negative views. The remaining five cases showed the same discursive elements present in projected China's strategic narrative about itself. In contrast, the analysis of the BRI issue narrative revealed a more nuanced reception. While still seven out of thirteen cases scored a majority of negative views, these

negative percentages present overall lower ranges than in the case of China's identity. Adding to this, the reception of the BRI narrative showed an increase in mixed views, pointing, paradoxically, at a less polarizing narrative. As in the case of China's identity narrative, those cases scoring a majority of positive views showed the same discursive elements that are commonplace in Chinese outward projection of the BRI. The analysis of the reception of China's system narrative showed similar patterns to those of the previous two narratives with seven out of eleven[94] cases scoring a majority of negative views and four scoring a majority of positive views. Once again, cases on the positive side showed Chinese discursive elements in their media discourse.

The main goal of the sentiment analysis is to be able to quantitatively assess how different EU Member States receive Chinese strategic narratives. While the results of the analysis have yielded interesting insights, a more practical way to ascertain patterns of alignment and non-alignment requires converting the previously described percentages into scores on a spectrum. This spectrum allows for the calibration of the descriptive data into a cross-case comparative which will be used in the QCA[95] analysis of Chapter 6.

The end points of the spectrum are 0 and 1, where 0 = non-alignment, with 0% positive views / 100% negative views, and 1 = alignment, with 100% positive views / 0% negative views. The conversion of percentages into scores is done by converting the positive percentage of each case into a numerical score. For example, for the ID narrative, Hungary shows 86% of positive views therefore Hungary has a positive score of 0.86. However, cases' scores must account for the qualitatively relevant mixed views, which signify nuance in the reception. In order to include this nuance in the spectrum, percentages of mixed views are divided in half and the resulting amount is added or subtracted depending on whether the case scores >50% in the negative or positive sentiment category respectively. In the case of Hungary, which shows >50% of positive references and scores 9% of mixed views, 0.5[96] is subtracted from 0.86, arriving at a final 'corrected' score of 0.81. This process is repeated for each of the three narrative types.

[94] Estonia and Lithuania were not included in the system analysis due to insufficient data.

[95] QCA requires calibrated raw data.

[96] Numbers are rounded up. The non-rounded up percentage of Hungary's mixed views of ID is 8.9%. If numbers are rounded upwards in their mixed views percentages, they are rounded downwards in the correction score to compensate the previously added decimals. Thus, a rounded up 9% of mixed views, after halving it to 4.5% is rounded up to 0.5.

The chart below shows the spectrum of variation with scores for each case in all three narrative types from non-aligned (0) to aligned (1).

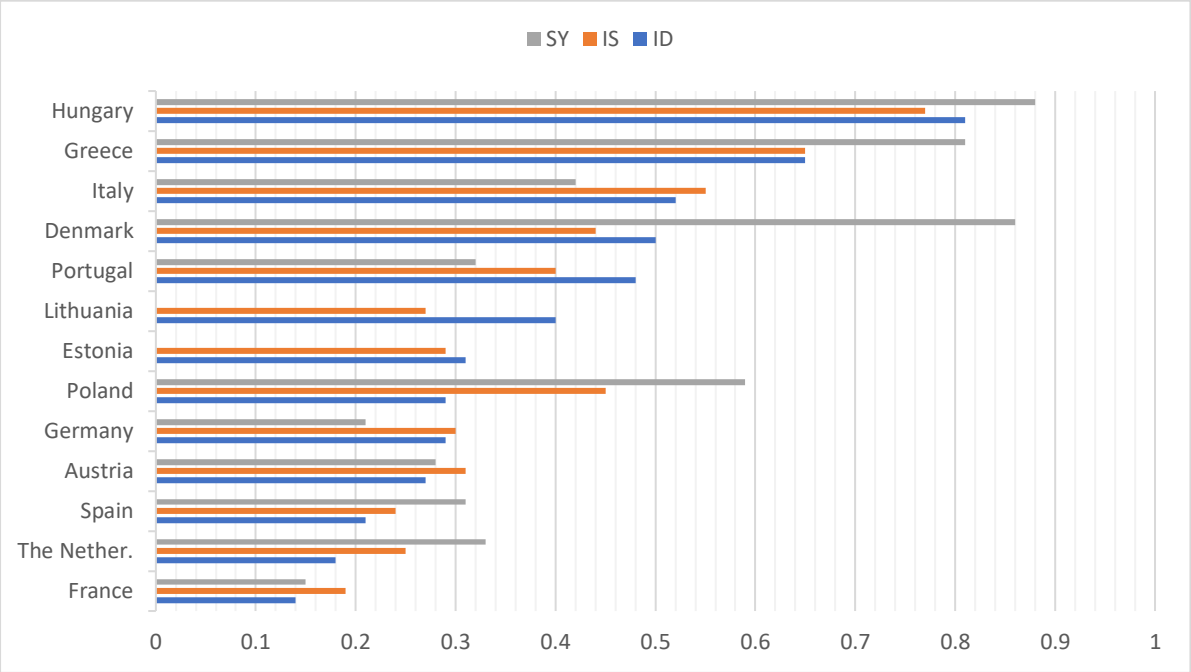


Figure 10: Spectrum of variation in the reception of Chinese narratives in 13 EU Member States. Cases are ranked based on their ID scores (blue)

The figure above summarizes the results of the sentiment analysis. We see that Hungary and France represent opposing ends of the spectrum in all three narrative types, with Hungary aligned with Chinese narratives at 0.77 (IS), 0.81 (ID), and 0.88 (SY); and France non-aligned at 0.14 (ID), 0.15 (SY), and 0.19 (IS). Looking at country results in terms of size, small countries both southern and northern tend to be more aligned with Chinese narratives. Interestingly, southern European countries behave differently amongst them. On the one hand, Greece and Italy are more aligned, with Greece being significantly more aligned in all three narratives. On the other hand, Spain represents the outlier with markedly not aligned scores while Italy shows signs of a polarized reception, particularly in the case of the BRI narrative (see Figure 7), nonetheless presenting a mostly positive reception overall. Portugal shows relatively less alignment than Greece and Italy, but still an overall positive reception (see Figures 6 and 7). The sub-narratives amongst these countries also vary, as explained in the thematic analysis section.

Stronger economies and bigger size countries are less aligned overall, with the BRI narrative showing more signs of alignment. Denmark behaves somewhat unexpectedly as the most

aligned case among the strongest economies in the region. In a similar fashion, Lithuania is the second most aligned of the northern European countries. However, this case should be taken with a grain of salt due to the temporal frame selected for this research. We know Lithuania's position on China and the BRI becomes more negative from 2019 onwards, particularly with regards to the Covid-19 crisis. Poland shows a unique pattern as a case with high intra-narrative variation. This could be related to Poland's position towards China's identity as a communist party considering its historical connotations for the Eastern European country. However, this negative stance does not seem to affect the country's more positive view of the benefits the BRI might bring, owing to China's projection of the BRI as part of the global free trade architecture. We observe a similar pattern, albeit at a smaller scale in Austria and The Netherlands. Further insights into the conditions that underpin these patterns will be addressed in the QCA analysis of necessity and sufficiency of Chapter 6.

Thirdly, the thematic analysis revealed a difference in kind in cases' reception of Chinese strategic narratives. Different sub-narratives within the three main narrative types populate countries' traditional media, indicating a tailored reception of Chinese strategic narratives. Amongst aligned sub-narratives, the data shows concrete discursive elements from Chinese outward discourse about itself, the BRI, and the international system, pointing at a certain level of assimilation of Chinese strategic narratives. Such are the cases of Hungary, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Austria, and Denmark. The latter is particularly relevant as a strong northern European economy, with its thematic analysis showing a strong emphasis on the economic benefits of engaging with China and a positive attitude towards China's projected role as a leader in the fight against climate change.

Amongst non-aligned sub-narratives, the data shows a variety of arguments which contest or counter Chinese strategic narratives. In both cases, country's preferred sub-narratives are linked to their historical, social, and economic contexts highlighting the relevance of normativity in narratives. Further analysis of the importance -or lack of thereof- of these case-sensitive conditions and the normativity dimension of narrative will be explored in the QCA analysis of Chapter 6. The following table summarizes sentiment and thematic findings, highlighting the specific main sub-narratives found in the data.

	Positive	Cases	Negative	Cases[97]
ID	*China as benevolent and a trustworthy partner*	Hungary 86% Greece 74% Portugal 55% Denmark 50% Italy 46%	*China as aggressive/ authoritarian, taking advantage*	France 80% TNH 76% Spain 71% Austria 69% Germany 61% Estonia 58% Lithuania 50% Denmark 50%
IS	*BRI as win-win*	Hungary 83% Greece 76% Poland 53% Portugal 50% Austria 42% Italy 39%	*BRI as a tool for influence / 'debt trap'*	France 71% Lithuania 65% Spain 65% THN 58% Estonia 56% Germany 54% Denmark 45%
SY	*Community of common destiny / shared future*	Hungary 92% Denmark 90% Greece 85% Poland 59%	*Anti-western, anti-liberal, anti-democratic world view*	France 79% Austria 72% Germany 71% THN 62% Spain 59% Portugal (56%) Italy (54%)

Table 26: Typology of narratives in 13 EU Member States

The results of this discourse analysis are complemented by the results of the QCA analysis described in the following chapter. Said analysis will contribute to the establishment of causal linkages between these discursive patterns and the configurations of conditions that are necessary and/or sufficient for the occurrence of the observed phenomena (i.e., alignment and non-alignment with Chinese strategic narratives).

[97] Percentages refer to totals in sensitive categories, not in individual sub-narratives.

CHAPTER 6. EXPLAINING VARIATION IN THE RECEPTION OF CHINESE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

6.1 Introduction

This Chapter focuses on the second research question: *what conditions explain variation in the reception of Chinese SNs in EU Member States' traditional media?* The previous Chapter mapped the different Chinese strategic narratives present in the 13 EU Member States' traditional media observed in this study, and it described how these countries responded to Chinese narratives by measuring reception in terms of positive – mixed – negative views reflected in a spectrum of variation. That was step one in a broader goal to assess Chinese discursive influence in the EU. Step two is reflected in this Chapter, which employs Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Oana et al., 2021; Schneider & Wageman, 2012) to explain why narrative reception varies among EU Member States by identifying necessary and sufficient conditions which lead to alignment and non-alignment of EUMS' traditional media with Chinese strategic narratives. As such, the main objective of the analysis underpinning this Chapter is to find causal links between the observed variation in EUMS' reception of Chinese narratives and several potential explanatory factors stemming from Member States' domestic contexts (see Chapter 4, section 4.2).

The chapter proceeds as follows. In a somewhat unorthodox order, section 6.2 section describes the key findings of this QCA analysis so as to ease the understanding of the more technical parts of the chapter which come later. These more technical parts comprise sections 6.3 to 6.5 which explain the so-called "during the analytic moment" stages of the QCA analysis[98]. A word of caution, the approach taken in these sections is that of standard reporting procedure in applied QCA studies, including IR QCA studies. Description and interpretation of results is done employing QCA nomenclature and describing the results in a concrete manner. Firstly, Section 6.3 explains the logics of less than perfect set relations in social phenomena that have been observed in each analysis (i.e., parameters of fit, deviant cases, etc.). Section 6.4 details

[98] See Figure 4: Steps in QCA in Chapter 4.

the results of the analysis of necessity, first for the presence of the outcome (alignment with Chinese strategic narratives) and then for its absence (non-alignment). Then, section 6.5 details the results of the analysis of sufficiency, in a similar fashion than with necessity, describing the solutions terms for the relations of sufficiency between the selected conditions and the three different outcomes in their presence and their absence. Looking at the relationship of necessity and sufficiency in both the scenario of alignment of EUMS' traditional media with Chinese strategic narratives (presence of the outcome) and in the scenario of non-alignment (absence of the outcome) is important for two reasons. Firstly, the notion of *asymmetry* in causal relations that underpins QCA suggests that the conditions that explain the presence of the outcome are "not just the opposite" (Oana et al., 2021, p. 15) of those explaining the absence of the outcome. This already enhances our understanding of the dynamics that govern any potential causal links between Chinese discursive influence and media debates and public perception in EU Member States in a way that differs from linear additive or regression models approach to causality[99]. Secondly, looking at both scenarios not only better reflects the reality of the reception of Chinese narratives in the EU, but also sheds light on which Member States, by virtue of belonging to condition sets (that is, because they present certain structural domestic characteristics) may be more resilient vis-à-vis Chinese discursive influence (in the case of the absence of the outcome, i.e., non-alignment) and which may be less resilient (in the case of the presence of the outcome, i.e., alignment). These results contribute to gaining further insight into potential gaps and strengths of the EU in the current context of contestation and competition of world politics. Lastly, Sections 6.6 and 6.7 delve into the "after the analytic moment" steps of a QCA, firstly by pointing at the links between deviant cases found in the analysis and potential explanations for such deviance through the dimension of normativity of the observed narratives (i.e., timing and internal-external coherence) to illustrate the added value of normativity in the study of strategic narrative studies, and secondly, highlighting general takeaways from the results of the QCAs with regards to the research objectives and expectations.

[99] However, it is crucial to remember that set-theoretic relations do not *per se* imply causation; robust causal inference should in practice be underpinned by theoretical explanations or supported by in-case process tracing wherever possible.

6.2 Main findings

A brief disclaimer is in order for those unfamiliar with QCA. This is a relatively technical method, yet despite its reliance on seemingly quantitative tools such the use of R language to conduct logical minimization and a relatively arid terminology, it cannot be conducted without profound qualitative knowledge of the phenomenon at hand. The aim of QCA is establishing causality, but the approach takes into account more than just numbers. Designing a QCA requires having contextual knowledge that is often ignored in statistical methods because it is perceived as subjective and unreliable. In this sense, QCA is a middle ground between qualitative and quantitative approaches. This chapter's results highlight the importance of approaching the study of international relations seeking to understand how certain phenomena happen as much as aiming to explain why they happen. Identifying domestic conditions which enable or limit Chinese discursive influence helps us understand on the one hand, the nature and mechanics of Chinese discursive influence - understood as a strategic expression of China's foreign policy; and on the other hand, it sheds light on potential gaps in the EU's strategic stance vis-à-vis a China which has been described as a partner, a competitor, and a rival. The value of identifying these gaps in the current global context of a return to geopolitics is discussed in this dissertation's conclusion (Chapter 7).

This Chapter yields three key insights: the first one is related to the complex nature of causality in social phenomena as it suggests that variation in the reception of Chinese strategic narratives cannot be explained by one factor alone. Rather, multiple domestic factors combined contribute to EU Member States' traditional media's adoption or rejection of Chinese narratives. The second key insight revealed by these results is that while the material dimension (i.e., the GDP of a country and its dependency on Chinese trade and investment) is *sufficient* for EUMS' traditional media's alignment with Chinese narratives, the ideological/institutional dimension (i.e., the nature of government, a country's stance on human rights, the health of democratic processes and the level of freedom of the press) is actually *necessary* when determining the likelihood of alignment with Chinese narratives. This means that countries with specific economic, trade and investment needs may align with China's discourse, yet this is not a given. Not all EUMS which may have a need for Chinese investment or that have below EU-average GDP levels necessarily align with Chinese narratives. Some countries with these material needs have in fact rejected China's discourse (such are the cases of Spain and Lithuania within the observed sample). However, all countries which have aligned with China's discourse present

the same ideological/institutional conditions. Therefore, while the material dimension is sufficient for alignment, the ideational/institutional is necessary for it.

The third key insight stemming from this QCA analysis highlights the relation of necessity existing between certain "illiberal tendencies" between EU Member States and the adoption of Chinese narratives in EU traditional media. For EU countries' media to [discursively] align with Chinese strategic narratives, their domestic context must necessarily present the above-mentioned ideological/institutional characteristics in a manner which departs from ideal liberal democratic societies. Specifically, China is more likely to exert discursive influence in those countries with populist governments, which do not show support for statements condemning China's Human Rights abuses, and which show below EU-average levels of democracy and freedom of the press. In this sense, the more illiberal and undemocratic the domestic context, the more likely that country is to align with Chinese narratives. For example, Hungary's traditional media is completely aligned with China's discourse, whereas Greece is also very much aligned but less so than Hungary. When looking at the domestic conditions of these two cases, Hungary scores worse in terms of democratic processes and freedom of the press. The same goes for Greece and Italy, where Greece's democratic and freedom of the press domestic conditions are worse than those of Italy, so on and so forth. This insight about the connection between "illiberal tendencies" and Chinese discursive influence may, *a priori*, seem counterintuitive in the context of the EU, considering that all EU Member States are established democracies, and they all, at least on paper, respect certain values which lay at the core of the EU. Yet liberal democracies such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Hungary have reproduced almost *verbatim* elements of China's discourse (see Chapter 5) and have, in some cases, undermined EU action with regards to China (see Chapter 2, section 2.3.3). It is not far-fetched to consider these results in the current context of geopoliticization and the populist wave that has swept through the EU during the last decade. Ultimately, these results point at differences among EU Member States along this ideational/institutional dimension and identify common denominators to look out for when assessing EUMS' resilience vis-à-vis China's discursive influence. The following figure illustrates these three key insights in a more dynamic way.

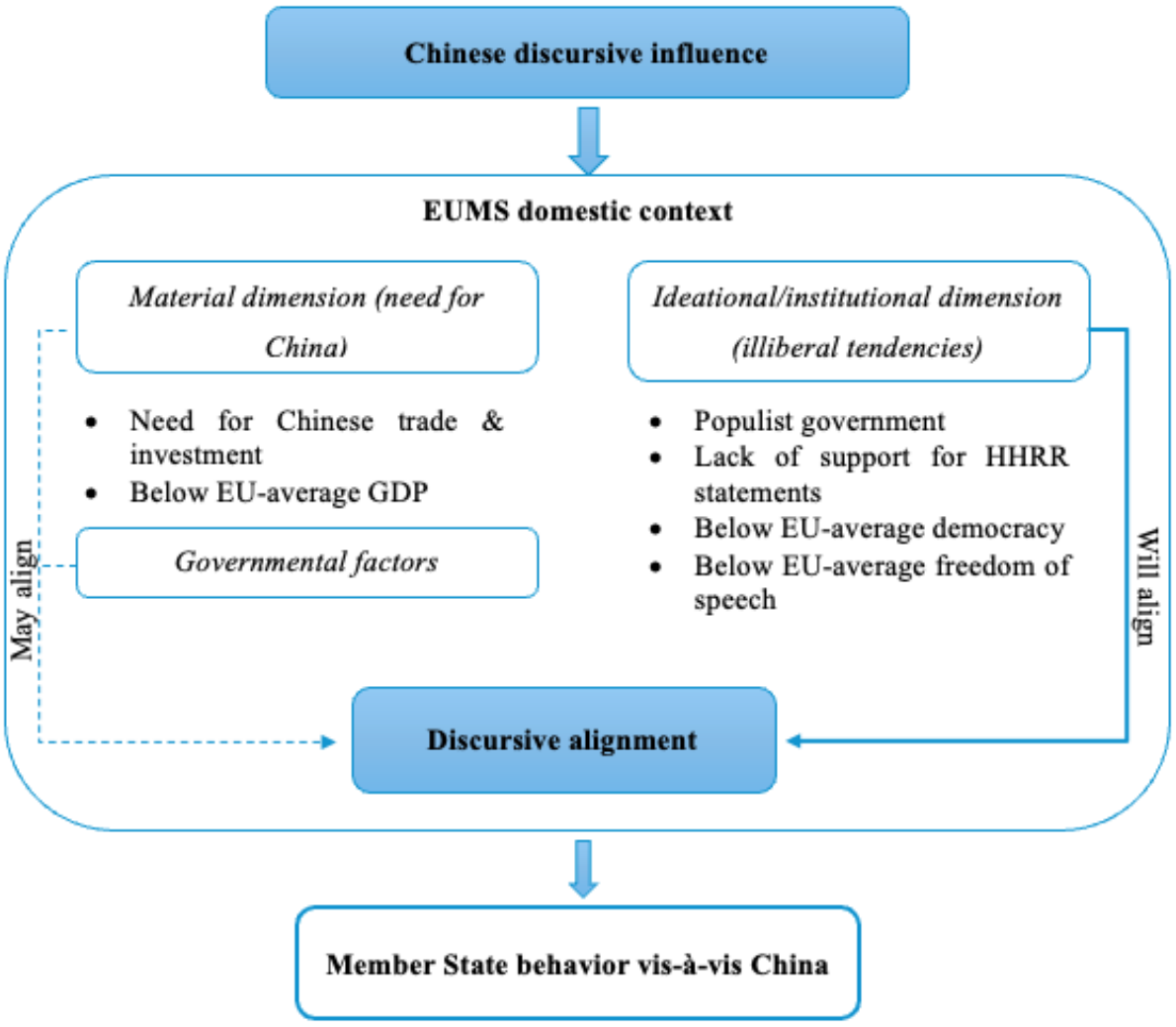


Figure 11: Paths towards discursive alignment. Own elaboration

This figure illustrates the two paths through which the interaction of Chinese discursive influence and EUMS's domestic conditions lead to discursive alignment with Chinese narratives. On the one hand, a sufficient path is brought about the material dimension of EUMS domestic context. This path requires a certain opportunity structure of need for Chinese trade and investment as well as a below EU-average GDP which may lead towards discursive alignment as long as populist parties are in government and the government does not support statement condemning China's human rights abuses. On the other hand, a second path is generated by an ideational/institutional dimension whenever illiberal tendencies (listed above) are present in the domestic context of EUMS. This second path which will necessarily lead towards discursive alignment.

These findings are in line with initial expectations (see Chapter 1, section 1.2.3). Firstly, no single condition was found to be necessary on its own, a common result in applied QCA studies. Both the relations of necessity and sufficiency between the five conditions and the three outcomes[100] occur in conjunctions of several conditions. Secondly, the condition of GOV (aspects related to a country's government which may enable alignment) is a crucial factor as it appears in every combination of conditions which lead to alignment alongside the conditions of democracy levels and freedom of the press levels (see section 6.3 of this Chapter). These findings are particularly important in the context of our understanding of China's engagement with the EU for two reasons. Firstly, IR studies have traditionally ascribed China's potential for influence to its economic might. It is China's economic coercion or economic incentives that which first and foremost explains why countries engage with it. Little attention has been dedicated to China's other sources of influence, such as the non-material ones. Co-optation of domestic media spheres may not be a direct line to swaying state behavior but it nevertheless operates in the realm of influence and it has become a relevant expression of Chinese foreign policy. With this in mind, the fact that the conditions which combined *necessarily* lead to alignment are those which belong to an ideational/institutional dimension within domestic contexts is an indication of the increased relevance of ideational frameworks in the current "battle of narratives" (see Chapter 7). And secondly, there are few studies on Chinese influence in the EU which account for non-material influence through cross-case approaches. These findings constitute a first foray of this kind, with a view to expanding the number of observed cases to the whole of the EU and studying its most significant ideal cases more in-depth in future research.

6.3 Less than perfect set relations in social sciences: parameters of fit

As previously expressed, the main objective of QCA is to find potential causal relations between condition sets and outcome sets. To that end, QCA searches for the presence of necessary and sufficient conditions. Necessary conditions are those which, whenever the outcome is present, they are also present (i.e., there are no cases which are part of the outcome Y set, which are not also members of the condition X set). In other words, the outcome Y is a subset of the condition X. Sufficient conditions are those which, whenever they are present,

[100] IDNA (identity narrative alignment), ISNA (issue narrative alignment), SYNA (system narrative alignment).

the outcome is also present yet there can be cases in the outcome Y that are not members of the condition X (i.e., there are no cases in the condition X set that aren't also members of the outcome Y set). In other words, sufficiency relations establish that the condition X is a subset of the outcome Y. The figure below illustrates these set relations. Both these relations are relevant to understand what conditions are present (and in which terms: necessity or sufficiency) when the outcome occurs; in the case of this thesis, what conditions explain EU Member States' traditional media alignment or non-alignment with Chinese narratives.

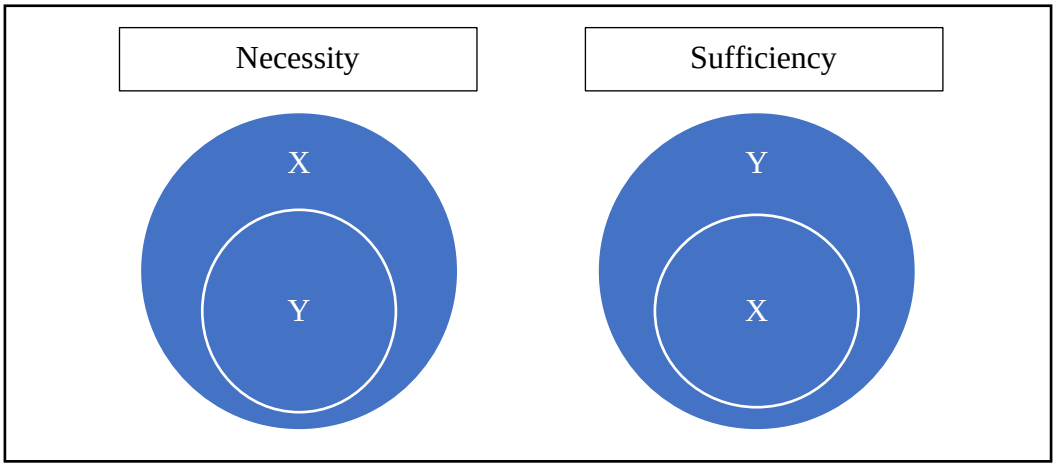


Figure 12: Necessity and sufficiency set relations. From Oana et al., 2021, with slight modifications

After the calibration process described in Chapter 4, section 4.2, one must consider if those decisions made in the "before the analytic moment" accurately depict and contain the phenomenon under scrutiny. In order to assess the extent to which our cases fit into our condition and outcome sets and the extent to which these sets accurately represent reality QCA employs the instrument of parameters of fit. The first check concerns the potential skewness of the sets. Standard QCA procedures dictate that sets should display a standard distribution of cases, no more than 80% and no less than 20% in any set as this would indicate skewed concept formation or set calibration. The table below illustrates set distribution for the final dataset:

Set (conditions /outcomes[101])	*Number of cases[102]*	*%*
ECON	8 / 13	61.54 %
DEM	5 / 13	38.46 %
TRADI	7 / 13	53.85 %
GOV	8 / 13	61.54 %
PRESS	7 / 13	53.85 %
IDNA	6 / 13	46.15 %
ISNA	6 / 13	46.45 %
SYNA	5 / 13	38.46 %
~IDNA	7 / 13	53.85 %
~ISNA	7 / 13	53.85 %
~SYNA	8 / 13	61.54 %

Table 27: Sets distribution

The next step requires checking for necessity and sufficiency relations. Necessity and sufficiency are expressed numerically and visually in QCA and the assumption of a relation of necessity or sufficiency can only be made taking into account certain measures of robustness also called parameters of fit. For necessity, these measures are the parameter of consistency (inlcN), the parameter of coverage (covN), and the relevance of necessity (RoN), which are expressed numerically. The reasoning behind these parameters of fit is that in the social sciences, the phenomena we analyze rarely reflect perfect relations of necessity and sufficiency. Indeed, studies must often account for outliers. QCA is no different, and in order to account for these "less than perfect set relations" this method has devised certain mechanisms which aim at assessing the "goodness and strength of set relations" (Oana et al., 2021, p. 69).

Firstly, consistency (inclN) necessity expresses the degree to which a case is consistent with the statement of necessity, and it is expressed from 0 to 1, with higher values representing more consistent necessity relations. This thesis applies the standard QCA threshold for consistency = 0.9. This means that only those conditions with values ≥0.9 are considered necessary. Only if a condition is ≥0.9 does it make sense to assume a relationship of necessity and check the parameters of coverage and relevance of necessity. Coverage (covN) explains the degree to which cases that deviate from the statement of necessity are actually problematic enough for us to assume necessity in that given relationship. For example, going back to consistency, a

[101] The tilde ~ is used in QCA to indicate the negation of the outcome (i.e., the absence of the outcome, in this case, traditional media's non-alignment with Chinese narratives).

[102] Number of cases covered by each set out of a total of thirteen cases observed.

score of 0.9 is not a perfect necessity relation, as this would show numerically with a score of 1. While 0.9 suggests strong enough evidence to assume a relationship of necessity between conditions and outcome, it still means that there is 1% of cases that are inconsistent with that statement of necessity.

In the likely event that our observed phenomenon is not governed by perfect set relations and we have cases that contradict the statement of condition X being necessary for outcome Y, coverage tells us *how much* these cases contradict it. This is helpful because it allows for case idiosyncrasies to have a place in causal inference through further in-case analysis. Once again, this thesis applies the standard QCA threshold for coverage necessity = 0.6. What this means is that only those conditions with values ≥0.6 are considered to have a high enough coverage to not contradict the statement of necessity. However, observing coverage requires another step besides this numerical check: visual XY plots to look at the nature of deviant cases[103]. Lastly, relevance of necessity (RoN) assesses the trivialness of the necessity relation we have found. In essence, it serves as a marker for how different in size the outcome and the condition sets are. The bigger the difference, the more trivial the necessity relation between them. This thesis applies the standard QCA threshold for RoN = 0.5, according to which, the closer to 0.5, the more trivial a condition is, and no conditions are included in the statement of necessity below the 0.5 mark.

For sufficiency, parameters of fit are similar yet slightly different. The same parameter of consistency exists (labelled "inclS") but the threshold is commonly set at 0.8 (in necessity, higher thresholds are required hence 0.9). Next, we observe the PRI parameter, which stands for "proportional reduction of inconsistency" (Oana et al, 2021, p. 95) and aims at expressing simultaneous subset relations (Schneider and Wageman, 2012, p. 237). To avoid these, which would turn any sufficiency statement made based on them into a nonsensical statement, the threshold for PRI must be 0.5. Following standard QCA practices, only conditions or combinations of conditions with scores higher than 0.8 for inclS and 0.5 for PRI are considered sufficient in this QCA analysis. Lastly, we observe the parameter of coverage, which is the same as in necessity but lowered for sufficiency (like in the case of consistency) to 0.5. As with necessity, coverage tells us how much cases contradict the statement of necessity (i.e., whether there are deviant cases and to what degree they are deviant). It is quite normal to have deviant

[103] This step is explained wherever necessary later in the Chapter.

cases, although the ideal scenario is, of course, no deviance. As previously expressed, this rarely happens in social phenomena, thus some deviance is allowed and accounted for by analyzing which cases are deviant and if this deviance actually "makes sense" considering existing knowledge.

6.4 QCA analysis of necessity

The figure below illustrates the results of the analysis of necessity. On the left-hand side of the image, we observe the path towards narrative alignment of EU Member States' traditional media with China's projected narratives. This path requires a specific configuration of the domestic ideational/institutional dimension which veers towards illiberal tendencies. The specific configuration of conditions in this "illiberal tendencies" scenario is listed from 1 to 4: (1) having populist parties in government, (2) not supporting statements condemning China's HHR records such as those related to Uighurs in Xinjiang and the passing of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, (3) having below EU-average levels of democracy, and (4) having below EU-average freedom of the press. In this scenario, Chinese discursive influence filters down into the domestic contexts of EU Member States through traditional media and Chinese strategic narratives are replicated in the public sphere. Alternatively, on the right-hand side of the image we observe the path towards narrative non-alignment of EU Member States' traditional media with China's projected narratives. This path requires the opposite configuration of the domestic ideational/institutional dimension which could be described as traditionally EU liberal democratic. In an opposed mirror image to the path towards alignment, the specific configuration of conditions in this scenario is listed from 1 to 4: (1) not having populist parties in government, (2) supporting statements condemning China's HHR records such as those related to Uighurs in Xinjiang and the passing of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, (3) having above EU-average levels of democracy, and (4) having above EU-average freedom of the press. In this scenario, Chinese discursive influence is prevented from filtering down into the national public spheres by domestic factors related to this ideational/institutional dimension. Each specific path is explained in detail in the following sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2.

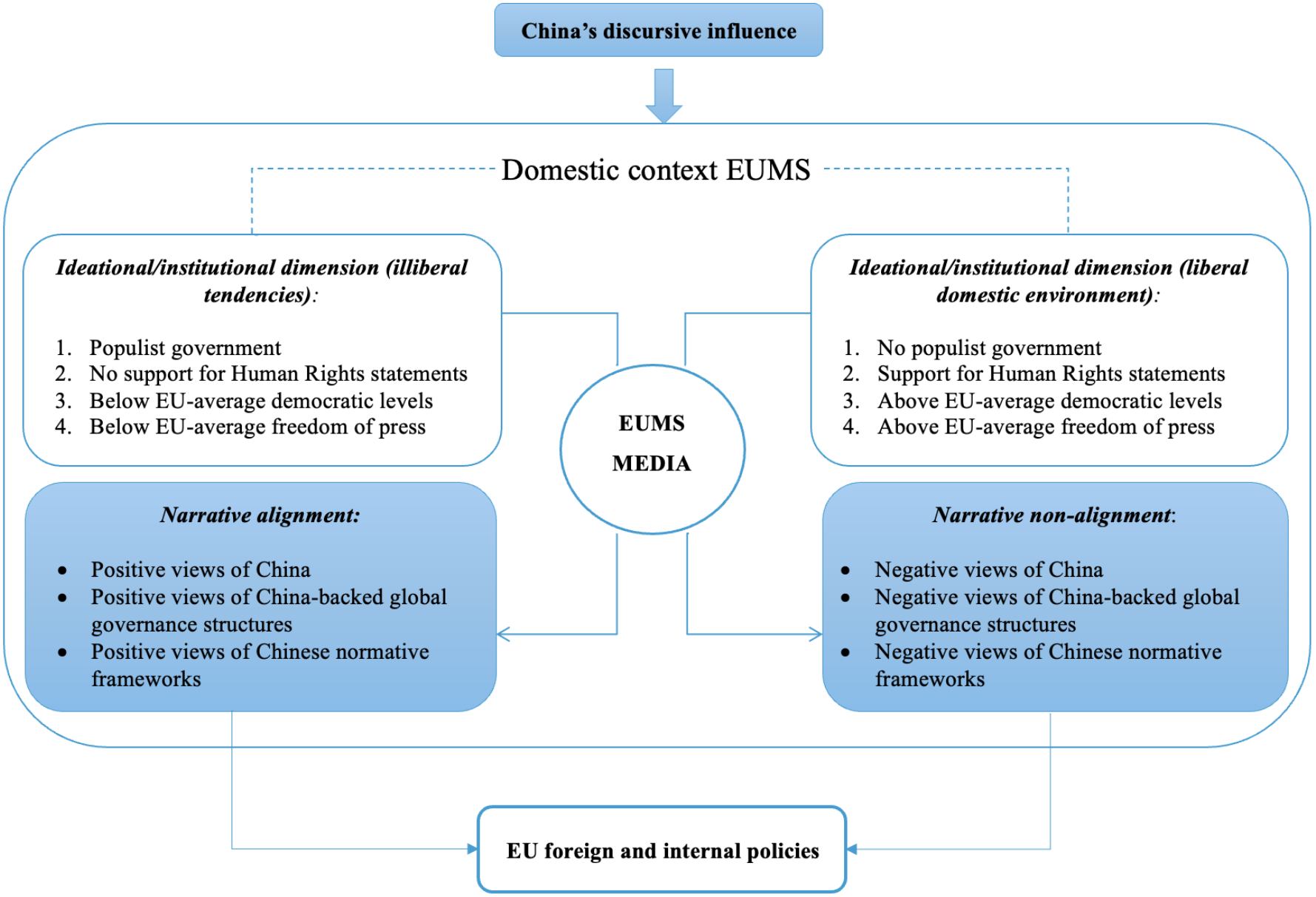


Figure 13: Dynamics of Chinese discursive influence in EUMS' domestic contexts. Own elaboration based on necessity results

6.4.1 Necessary conditions for alignment

This QCA yielded no individual necessary conditions for the presence or absence of any of the three outcomes (IDNA, ISNA, SYNA). The parameters of fit of each condition and outcome are detailed in the corresponding Annex. However, necessity was found in several configuration of SUIN[104] conditions for outcomes IDNA and ISNA.

OUTCOME 1: IDNA

		inclN	RoN	covN
1	DEM + GOV	0.955	0.632	0.638
2	GOV + PRESS	0.968	0.616	0.633

For the presence of alignment of national traditional media with China's identity narrative (IDNA), two configurations appear as necessary. Configuration 1 presents a scenario where alignment with China's ID narrative happens whenever the Member State presents a combination of the conditions of below EU-average democracy level (DEM) and [105] government (GOV). This means that for EU Member States' traditional media to align with China's identity narrative, Member States must either present below EU-average democracy levels or they must have populist parties in government and not support HHRR statements condemning China. Configuration 2 presents a scenario where alignment with China's ID narrative occurs whenever Member States present a combination of the condition of government (GOV) and the conditions of below EU-average freedom of the press (PRESS) is present. In other words, a second path for EUMS' traditional media to align with China's ID narrative requires the Member States to have populist parties in government and not support statements condemning China's human rights violations, and to have below EU-average levels of freedom of the press. Taken together, these two configurations present a scenario where EU Member States' traditional media align with China's narratives about its identity whenever

[104] A SUIN condition is a single condition that is "an unnecessary part of a *logical OR* combination that, in turn, is insufficient but *necessary* for the outcome […] In (A+B) * (C+D) ← Y, the conditions A, B, C, and D are SUIN conditions." (Schneider & Wageman, 2012, p. 333).

[105] In set-theory approaches, the symbol + denotes the notion of a union or a logical alternative. It refers not to the usual meaning of "and" in the English language, but to an inclusive "or". This means that in configurations including the + symbol, at least one of the elements connected through + must be present. In practice, this increases the number of logical explanations and cases covered by the configuration, but may also increase its trivialness.

they have populist parties in government and don't support statements condemning China's human rights violations in combination with either below EU-average levels of democracy or below EU-average freedom of the press levels. These results are fully in line with expectations in so far as the condition of government must be present in a configuration for alignment to happen but it is not enough on its own. Moreover, this speaks to configurational methods' understanding of complex causality.

In both configurations, the numerical values of consistency (inlcN), coverage (covN), and relevance (RoN)[106] are within the established thresholds (0.9, 0.6, 0.5, respectively) thus reinforcing the statement of necessity. This means that both configurations are consistent with the statement of necessity (inclN = 0.955 and 0.968, respectively), the configurations cover most cases (8/13 and 10/13, respectively) and those that are not covered (i.e., deviant cases) are only relatively inconsistent with the statement of necessity (covN = 0.638 and 0.633, respectively), and lastly, that the relation of necessity reflected in the configurations is not too trivial (RoN = 0.632 and 0.616, respectively). Looking at the visual representation of the necessity statements reflected in both configurations, there are four deviant cases: Italy (#8), Denmark (#2) and Germany (#5) for configuration 1; Italy (#8), Denmark (#2) and Estonia (#3) for configuration 2.

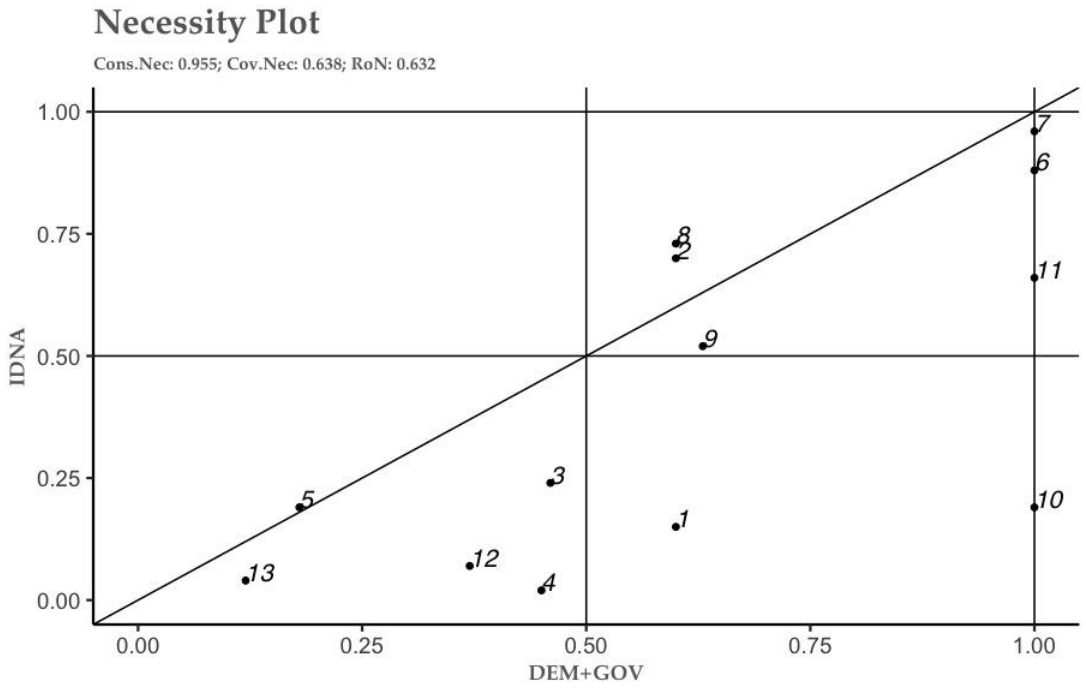


Figure 14: Necessity plot for configuration 1, IDNA[1]

[106] Notice that the order of the parameters is changed. This is due to the way R saves its output.

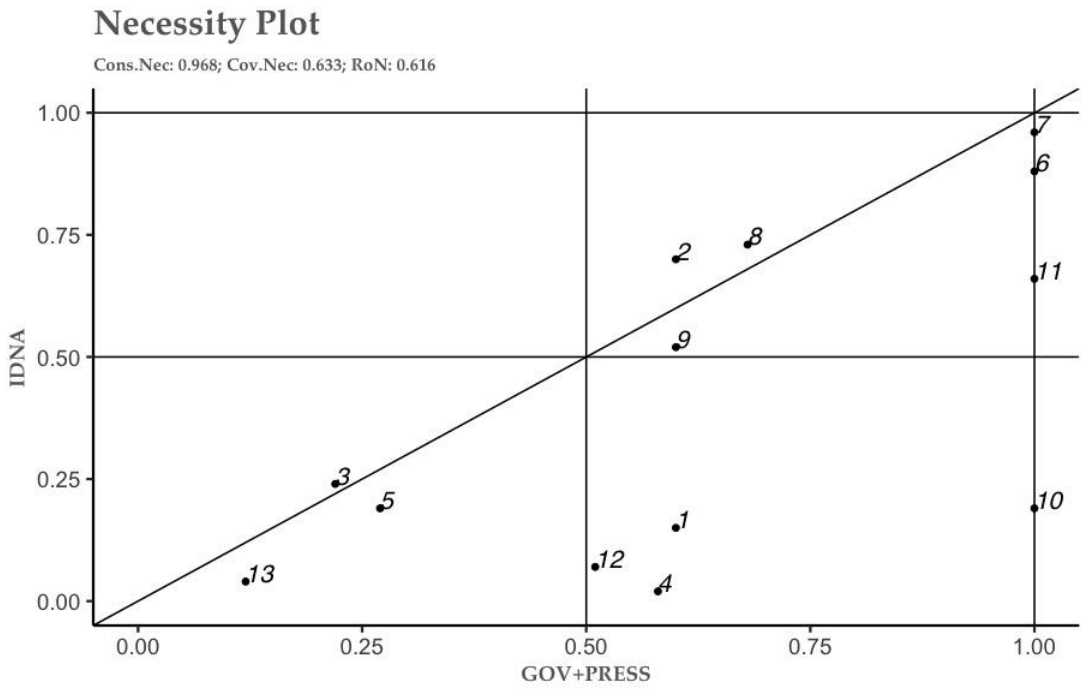


Figure 15: Necessity plot for configuration 2, IDNA

In necessity, cases should cluster below the diagonal line, as this indicates that their membership in the condition (in this case the two configurations: DEM + GOV and GOV + PRESS) should be greater than or equal to their membership in the outcome (in this case, IDNA). Those cases falling below the diagonal are covered by the configuration of conditions and thus that specific necessity statement for that specific outcome. Bearing in mind what has been previously expressed with regards to less than perfect set-relations, two considerations must be made when visually analyzing necessity results. Cases falling above the diagonal line are inconsistent with the statement of necessity to different degrees (Oana et al., 2021, pp. 70 -72). On the one hand, cases that *strongly* contradict the statement of necessity are called *deviant consistency in kind* (DCK) cases. These cases fall on the upper left quadrant of the necessity plot and hold qualitatively different membership in the condition or configuration of conditions (below 0.5, more out than in) than in the outcome (above 0.5, more in than out). In other words, DCK cases are problematic for any researcher considering a statement of necessity. There are no DCK in the necessity statements of either configurations for IDNA, which reinforces the statement of necessity represented by the two configurations of SUIN conditions.

On the other hand, cases that *slightly* contradict the statement of necessity are called *deviant consistency in degree* (DCD) cases and they fall above the diagonal in the bottom left and upper right quadrants of the necessity plot. These cases still fall on the same side of the qualitative anchors 0.5 of the outcome and the conditions (in this case, configuration of conditions), and thus contradict the statement that condition X is necessary for outcome Y (in this case, that DEM + GOV and GOV + PRESS are necessary for IDNA) much less than DCK cases. All four deviant cases for this IDNA necessity statement are DCD cases, located above the diagonal line, yet contradicting the statement of necessity to a low degree. Starting with those cases with less deviance, Germany (#5) and Estonia (#3) are both located very close to the diagonal in configurations 1 and 2, respectively (see Figures 14 and 15), which indicates that they contradict the statements of necessity by very little. Looking at Germany's scores in the outcome IDNA and in each of the individual conditions (see Chapter 4, section 4.2) it becomes apparent that the deviance of this country is comparatively non-relevant, as it scores more out than in the set of aligned countries with IDNA (i.e., it is not narratively aligned with China's ID to a high degree). However, the fact that Germany has a high score in the democratic index and the fact that it did not have a populist party in government and it supported human rights statements condemning China's violations in Xinjiang should lead to a much more negative view of China in Germany's traditional media. And yet Germany's media are somewhat more positive towards China's projected identity narrative than its structural conditions would indicate.

Estonia (#3), like Germany, is located barely above the diagonal, thus contradicting the necessity statement that GOV + PRESS ← IDNA by very little. Looking at Estonia's membership scores in the outcome IDNA and in each of the individual conditions, very much like in the case of Germany, this country did not have a populist party in government during the time observed and it did support human rights statements, while it also scores relatively high in the freedom of the press index. This indicates it should present a lower degree of narrative alignment with China's projected identity narrative. However, it is worth noting that, like Germany, Estonia scores more out than in the set of the outcome, thus the contradiction of the necessity statement is relatively low.

As for Denmark, it is also a DCD case which contradicts the statement of necessity by relatively little. In the case of Denmark, however, it should be noted that the discourse analysis showed quite a polarized reception of China's ID narrative (50% positive and 50% negative). With this

in mind, Denmark's deviance could indicate either in-case idiosyncrasies not accounted for by the selected conditions, or an issue with the coding of news articles[107]. In the case of the outcome IDNA, Denmark shows high narrative alignment (above the 0.5 anchor, more in than out of the outcome), and it also scores relatively high in the solution term (DEM + GOV) (above the 0.5 anchor, more in than out of the configuration of conditions). However, it is [relatively] problematic because it scores higher in the outcome than it does in the solution term[108]. Denmark's high score in the outcome could be derived from news coding issues, although as previously expressed, this is unlikely. The more likely explanation for Denmark's deviance is that there are specific in-case aspects that make its national media more lenient towards Chinese narratives than it should be according to this QCA model. Denmark's position towards trade with China is positive in general and the analysis of Denmark's media debate around China showed that there is considerable praise for China as a responsible actor with regards to issues such as the fight against climate change. At the same time, it displayed almost no mentions of the normative or "moral" aspects that generally lead northern European countries to present more negative views of China's identity (i.e., references related to human rights abuses). In this sense and in the context of this study, Denmark is a case that would warrant further study.

Lastly, Italy (#8) appears as relatively more deviant, although still within the limits stipulated by QCA standards. The literal description of this deviance lies in Italy being more aligned with China's ID narrative than its domestic conditions would warrant according to this model. This deviance has two potential explanations: Firstly, that the analysis of Italy's media was slightly skewed. This is unlikely, since articles were coded without country or newspaper references in the files, but possible, as there is information in the articles which could contextually situate articles in countries (e.g., names of politicians, cities, events, etc.). Secondly, that Italy's own domestic context skews its perceptions of China beyond what this model can account for. Further study in the form of in-case analysis and cross-case comparative analysis would shed light into the potential explanations for both Italy and Denmark.

[107] A reminder that news articles were coded without contextual knowledge regarding their country, year, or newspaper outlet. Hence, it would seem unlikely that Denmark's deviance is a result of coding bias. Nevertheless, issues with the automatic translation of articles into English may occur so this scenario is not discarded.

[108] In necessity, cases' membership scores in the condition or configuration of conditions must be equal or greater than their membership scores in the outcome.

The QCA analysis for outcome 2, the presence of alignment of national traditional media with China's BRI issue narrative (ISNA), yielded the same two SUIN configurations that were necessary for IDNA, with slightly higher parameters of fit:

OUTCOME 2: ISNA

		inclN	RoN	covN
1	DEM + GOV	0.966	0.629	0.633
2	GOV + PRESS	0.985	0.616	0.632

Configuration 1 presents a scenario where alignment with China's issue narrative around the BRI happens whenever the Member State presents a combination of the condition of below EU-average democracy levels (DEM) and the condition of government (GOV). In essence, either DEM or GOV must be present for EUMS' traditional media's alignment with China's BRI narrative to occur. Configuration 2 presents a scenario where alignment with China's issue narrative around the BRI happens whenever the Member State presents a combination of the union of the condition of government (GOV) and the condition of below EU-average freedom of the press (PRESS). Once again, this means that either GOV or PRESS must be present for issue alignment to occur.

The fact that these two scenarios are the same than the ones found for the presence of outcome 1 (IDNA) is not a surprise, as variation within the spectrum (stage 1) is relatively limited in quantitative terms (qualitatively, the narratives themselves are very different [109]). This similarity in necessity results reinforces the validity of the analysis. In this sense, the results of the QCA analysis for ISNA are also fully in line with the expectations, as the condition of GOV (i.e., having populist parties in government and not supporting statements condemning China's HHRR violations) must be present as a SUIN condition but it is not enough on its own. Like in the case of IDNA, in both configurations, the numerical values of consistency (inlcN), coverage (covN), and relevance (RoN)[110] are within the established thresholds (0.9, 0.6, 0.5,

[109] See Chapter 5.

[110] Notice that the order of the parameters is changed. This is due to the way R saves its output.

respectively) thus initially reinforcing the statement of necessity. It should be noted that the RoN parameters of these results are acceptable, but not ideal (the closer to 0.5 the less relevant the statement of necessity). When looking at the visual representation of this statement of necessity between these two configurations of conditions and ISNA, two cases appear once again as deviant: Italy (#8) and Germany (#5), for configuration 1; Italy (#8) for configuration 2.

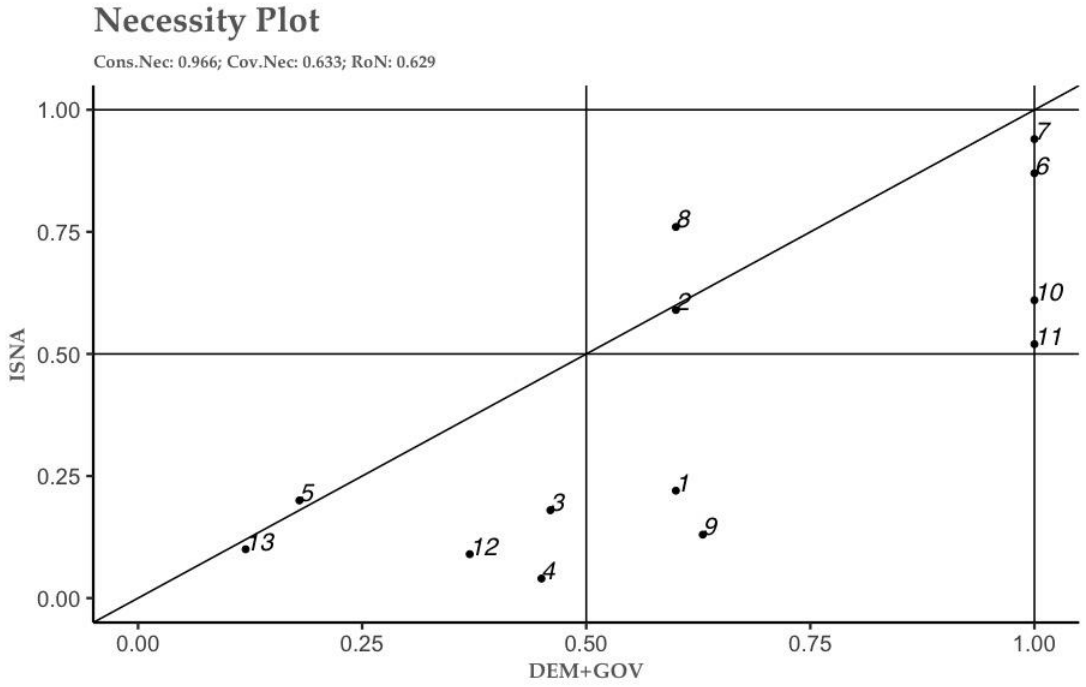


Figure 16: Necessity plot for configuration 1, ISNA[111]

In this first necessary configuration of SUIN conditions, Germany behaves as it did for IDNA, hovering relatively close to the diagonal and still scoring on the same side of the 0.5 qualitative anchor for both the configuration and the outcome; it is a DCD case only slightly contradicting the statement of necessity presented by DEM + GOV. That means that Germany is still more aligned with China's BRI narrative than it should, as per its domestic conditions. The fact that this alignment mimics the one found in IDNA suggest that, indeed, this case is more welcoming that it should towards China, which aligns with Germany's pragmatic approach vis-à-vis the EU's competitors (i.e., China and Russia), and its tradition of pursuing a national interest-based foreign policy, while contrasting with the behavior of the other major player in the EU observed in this study, France. Nevertheless, Germany's position is still one of non-alignment overall,

[111] 1 = Austria, 2 = Denmark, 3 = Estonia, 4 = France, 5 = Germany, 6 = Greece, 7 = Hungary, 8 = Italy, 9 = Lithuania, 10 = Poland, 11 = Portugal, 12 = Spain, 13 = The Netherlands.

what these results tell us is that this non-alignment is not as high as it should be, considering the country's domestic conditions.

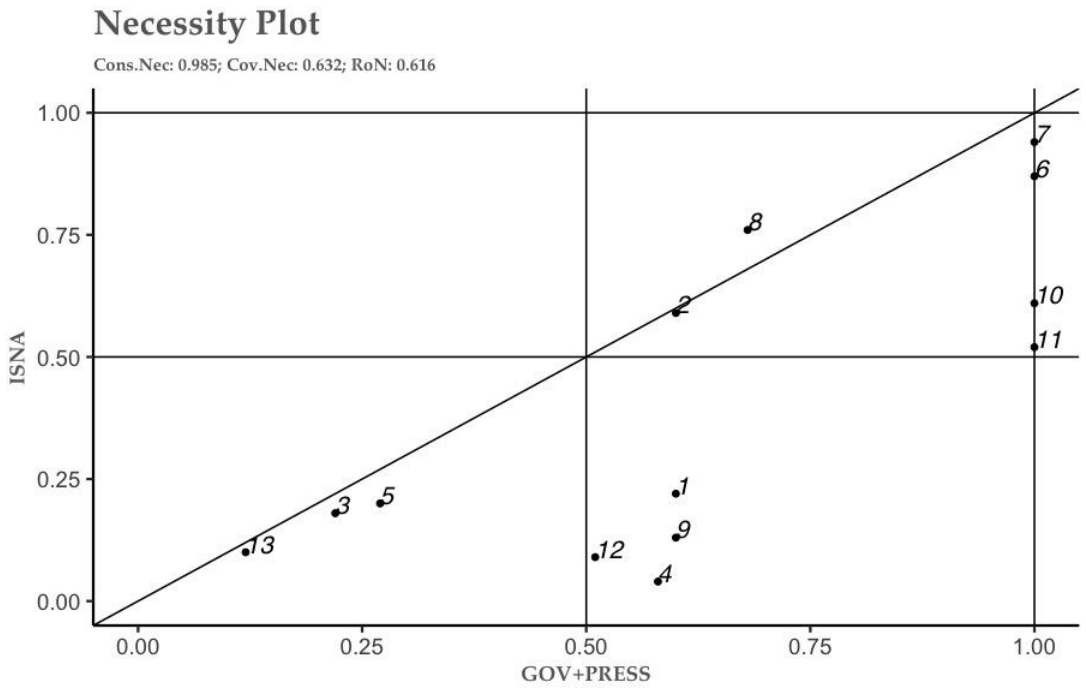


Figure 17: Necessity plot for configuration 2, ISNA

In this second configuration of conditions necessary for EUMS' traditional media alignment with China's BRI narrative, only Italy (#8, upper right quadrant) is a DCD case and by very little. Once again, Italy's behavior is as previously explained seemingly a result of the country's idiosyncrasies and, more importantly, it does not contradict the statement of necessity enough to discard it.

As regards those cases that are fully explained by these results (i.e., all cases below the diagonal), Austria (#1), France (#4), Lithuania (#9) and Spain (#12) are ideal cases as they are located in the lower right quadrant of at least one of the two configurations of SUIN conditions for both IDNA and ISNA. This means that they fully respond to this model in so far as they behave in a way that fully matches expectations.

6.4.2 Necessary conditions for non-alignment

Like in the analysis of the presence of the outcomes IDNA and ISNA, no individual conditions were found to be necessary. The parameters of fit depicting the analysis of necessity for individual conditions can be found in Annex. For the absence of alignment of national traditional media with identity narrative (~IDNA), three SUIN configurations of conditions appear as necessary:

ABSENCE OF OUTCOME 1: ~IDNA

		inclN	RoN	covN
1	~GOV + ~PRESS	0.906	0.692	0.787
2	~ECON + ~DEM + ~GOV	0.901	0.676	0.777
3	~DEM + ~GOV + ~TRADI	0.919	0.640	0.766

Configuration 1 presents a scenario where EUMS' traditional media's non-alignment with China's identity narrative occurs whenever Member States present the combination of the absence of the condition of government (~GOV) and the absence of the condition of below EU-average freedom of the press (~PRESS). This means that EUMS' traditional media are less likely to be aligned with China's ID narrative if the countries do not have populist parties in government and they support HHRR statements condemning China, and if they present above EU-average freedom of speech. This is the direct opposite of configuration 2 for the presence of alignment in IDNA which required a combination of GOV + PRESS in their presence[112], a logical assumption hereby empirically demonstrated.

Configuration 2 presents a scenario where non-alignment with China's ID narrative happens whenever Member States present the combination of the absence of the condition of below EU-average GDP (~ECON) and the absence of the condition of below EU-average democracy levels (~DEM) and the absence of the condition of government (~GOV). In other words, this second path to non-alignment requires EU Member States to have an above EU-average GDP, above EU-average democracy levels, or to not have populist parties in government and to support statements condemning China's HHRR violations. Lastly, configuration 3 presents another scenario for EUMS' traditional media non-alignment to occur whenever Member

[112] Absence is indicated with a tilde, no tilde indicates presence.

States present the combination of the absence of the condition of below EU-average democracy levels (~DEM) and the absence of the condition of government (~GOV) and the absence of the condition of dependent trade and investment relations with China (~TRADI). This last path therefore suggests that non-alignment with China's ID narrative can also require a combination of either having above EU-average democracy levels, or not having populist parties in government and supporting statements condemning China's HHRR violations, or not being dependent on trade and investment with China.

As with the configurations found for the presence of the outcome IDNA, in all configurations for the absence of the outcome (~IDNA), the numerical values of consistency (inlcN), coverage (covN), and relevance (RoN) are within the established thresholds (0.9, 0.6, 0.5, respectively) thus initially reinforcing the statement of necessity. The meaning of this is the same as the explanation provided for the two necessary configurations in IDNA. Looking at the visual representation of the necessity statements reflected in these configurations, there are three deviant cases: Poland (#10), Austria (#1), and Lithuania (#9).

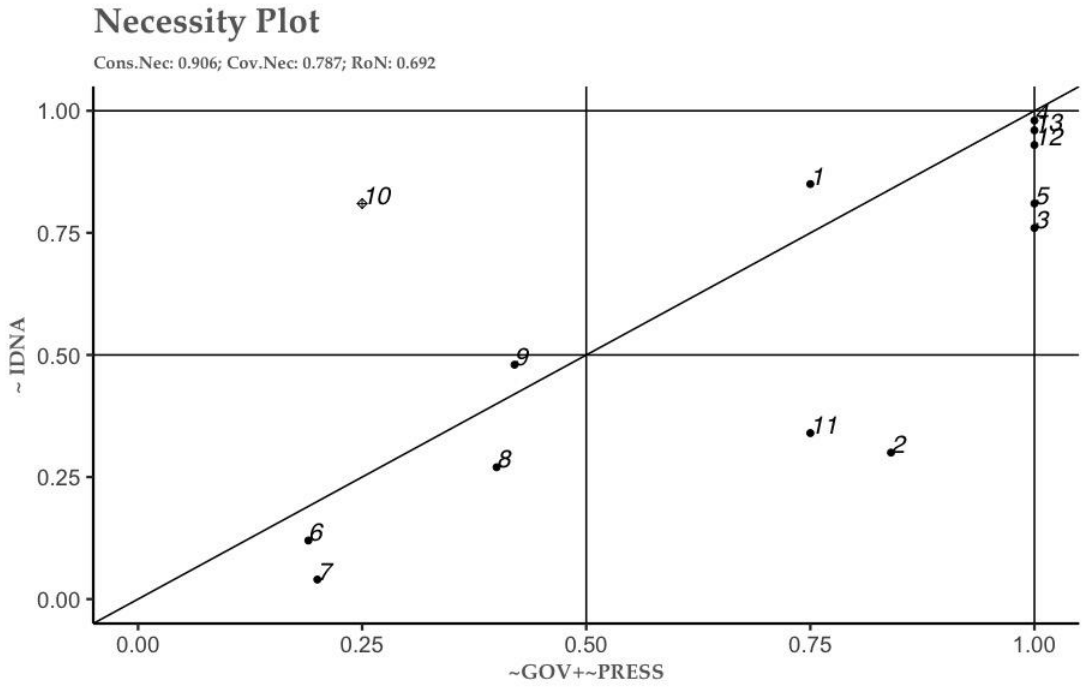


Figure 18: Necessity plot for configuration 1, ~IDNA[113]

[113] 1 = Austria, 2 = Denmark, 3 = Estonia, 4 = France, 5 = Germany, 6 = Greece, 7 = Hungary, 8 = Italy, 9 = Lithuania, 10 = Poland, 11 = Portugal, 12 = Spain, 13 = The Netherlands.

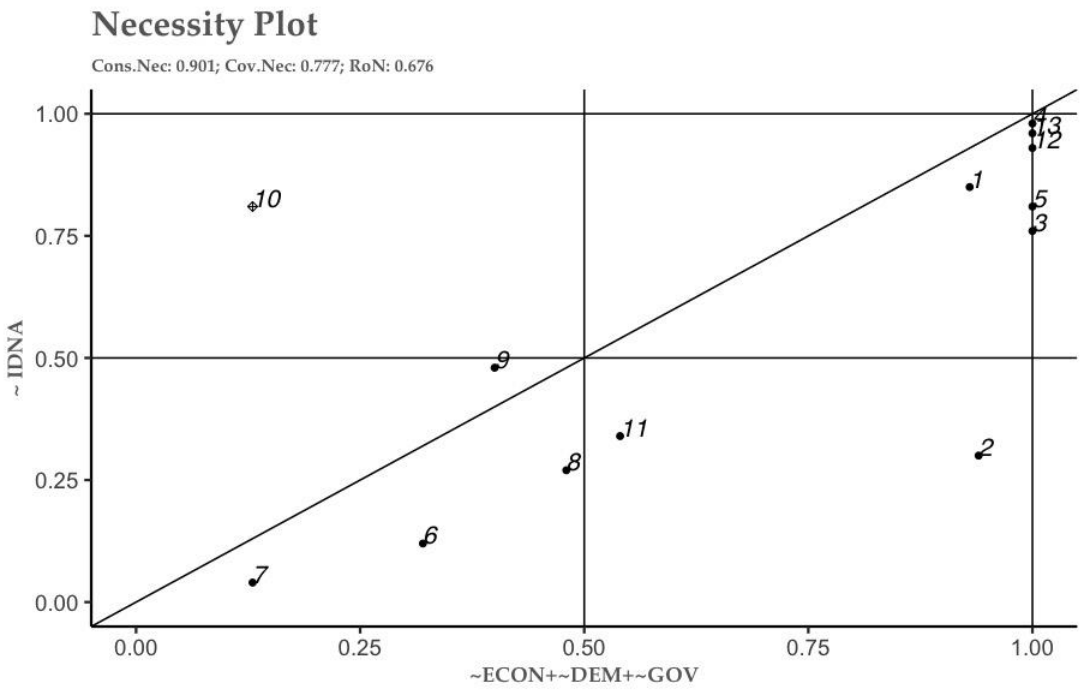


Figure 19: Necessity plot for configuration 2, ~IDNA

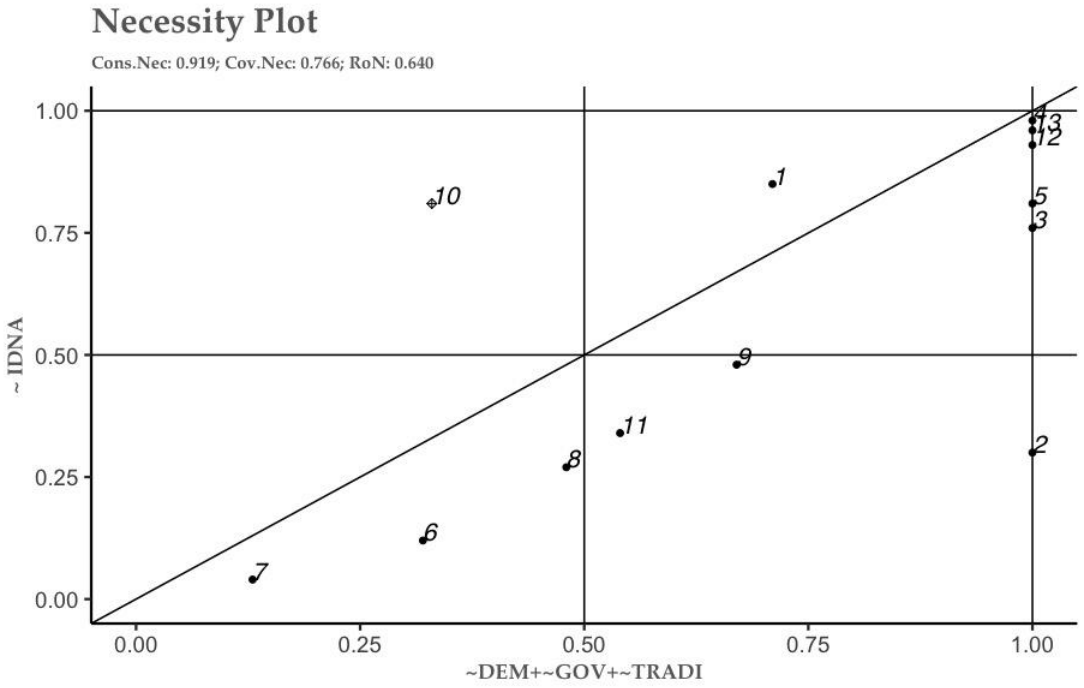


Figure 20: Necessity plot for configuration 3, ~IDNA

Although the parameters of fit indicate a clear necessity relation between these three configurations and the absence of the outcome ~IDNA, looking at the necessity plots we observe a more complex picture. While Austria (#1) and Lithuania (#9) are DCD cases with

relatively low deviance, Poland (#10) is a deviant consistency in kind (DCK) case in all three configurations on SUIN conditions (i.e., it is located in the upper left quadrant of the XY plot). This strongly contradicts the necessity statement of all three configurations. In this case, standard procedure dictates that one must engage with the deviant case to assess its relevance:

> *"Based on this in-depth engagement with the deviant case, we need to decide whether the deviant case 'falsifies' the set relation or whether it is an idiosyncrasy that does not in principle invalidate the statement of necessity" (Oana et al., 2021: 72).*

This translates into one of three options: (1) dropping the problematic case and including other cases to test the validity of the statement of necessity. This would require collecting news articles for the new cases and conducting narrative and discourse analysis on them (stage 1), a task not feasible in the timeline of this thesis; (2) performing an in-depth case analysis combined with recoding the Poland's articles in stage 1 and reassessing the conceptualizations of the conditions and as well as fine-tuning the calibration to then rerun the model and see if this resolves the deviance; or (3) discard the necessity statement for this outcome. The second option could be explored in further research guided by the assumption that this country's deviance is a result of its historical-cultural context as an ex-communist state, which makes its national media particularly skeptical towards China's projected identity as a "peaceful nation" given its characteristic communist context, something that is highly triggering for Polish domestic audiences (thus the low normativity). This assumption would explain why Poland scores high in ~IDNA (that is, shows a quite negative reception of China's identity narrative) despite its domestic conditions indicating that it should have a more positive perception of IDNA (that is, it presents a low level of democracy, high dependency from Chinese trade and investment, and ideal government conditions for narrative alignment). This in-depth case analysis would require further content and discourse analysis of Polish media to reassess its sensitivity towards notions of China as a communist country. Unfortunately, this cannot be addressed in the scope of this thesis. Yet, the model still explains all other cases' behavior, thus it would seem that this potential explanation for Poland's deviance warrants further research. At this point, the necessity statement for the configuration of conditions for the absence of alignment of EUMS' traditional media with China's identity narrative (~IDNA) is maintained pending further research.

The QCA necessity analysis for the absence of alignment of national traditional media with issue narrative (~ISNA), yielded two configurations of SUIN conditions as necessary:

ABSENCE OF OUTCOME 2: ~ISNA

	inclN	RoN	covN
1 ~GOV + ~PRESS	0.920	0.716	0.810
2 ~ECON + ~GOV + ~TRADI	0.905	0.743	0.820

Configuration 1 presents the same scenario as the absence of alignment for IDNA (~IDNA), whereby EUMS' traditional media do not align with Chinese narratives of the BRI if Member States present the combination of absence of the condition of government (~GOV) and absence of the condition of below EU-average freedom of the press (~PRESS). Once again, this configuration is the exact opposite to the one presented for the presence of this outcome (i.e., media alignment with Chinese BRI strategic narrative), which reinforces the validity of the results by empirically illustrating a logical assumption[114]. Configuration 2 illustrates a scenario where EUMS's traditional media do not align with Chinese narratives given the conditions of absence of ECON (~ECON), absence of GOV (~GOV) or absence of TRADI (~TRADI). In other words, non-alignment happens also whenever Member States present above EU-average GDP levels, they don't have populist parties in government and they support statements condemning China's human rights abuses, and they don't have dependent trade and investment relations with China. Interestingly, this last configuration is not the opposite of any one configuration found for the presence of this outcome (ISNA), which confirms the QCA basic notion of asymmetry[115]. As in previous cases, the numerical values of consistency, coverage, and relevance of necessity reinforce the necessity statement. Turning the attention towards the visual representation of these configurations, we observe that there are a total of six deviant cases: Lithuania (#9), Poland (#10), and Austria (#1) in configuration 1; Lithuania (#9), Poland (#10), Portugal (#11), Greece (#6) and Hungary (#7) in configuration 2.

[114] This applies specifically to this study, where alignment and non-alignment are understood as opposite ends of a spectrum of variation and, as QCA outcomes, they have been calibrated as opposites. It does not apply for every QCA study.

[115] The explanatory conditions for the presence of an outcome *are not necessarily* the direct opposite as the ones explaining its absence and vice versa.

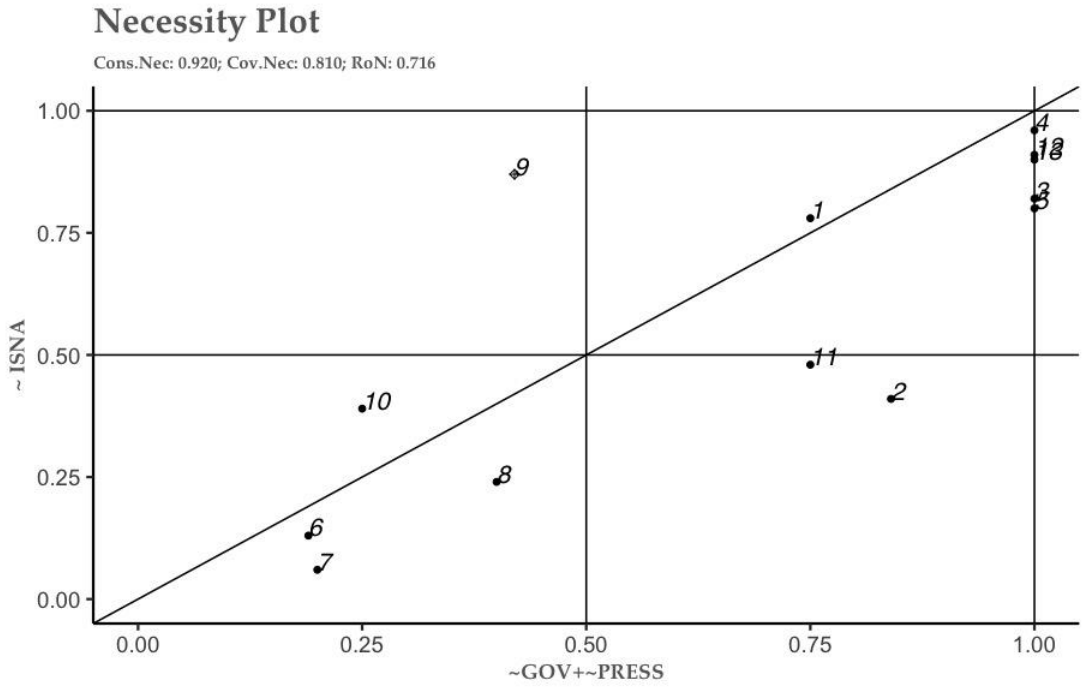


Figure 21: Necessity plot for configuration 1, ~ISNA[116]

Although the parameters of fit indicate a clear necessity relation between these two configurations and the absence of the outcome 2 (~ISNA), looking at the necessity plots we observe a more complex picture. On the one hand, Austria (#1) and Poland (#10) are DCD cases with relatively low deviance in the statement ~GOV + ~PRESS ← ~ISNA. However, this statement of necessity is contradicted by Lithuania (#9), a DCK case located in the upper left quadrant of the XY plot. Lithuania contradicts the statement because it presents high non-alignment with China's BRI narrative in its national media yet its domestic conditions do not explain this, because it scores relatively low in both (slightly below the 0.5 point on the X axis). As such, this configuration cannot explain why Lithuania behaves like this. This does not immediately imply configuration failure, in fact, the configuration still meets the expectations for 10 out of 13 cases and it still reflects the theoretical expectation of representing the direct opposite of one of the main explanations for the presence of this outcome (i.e., GOV + PRESS ← ISNA). In this case, like in the previous case of the analysis of ~IDNA where Poland was a DCK case, QCA standards suggest three options: (1) dropping Lithuania from the cases observed and adding new cases to test the conditions against them and see if it improves

[116] 1 = Austria, 2 = Denmark, 3 = Estonia, 4 = France, 5 = Germany, 6 = Greece, 7 = Hungary, 8 = Italy, 9 = Lithuania, 10 = Poland, 11 = Portugal, 12 = Spain, 13 = The Netherlands.

consistency and coverage, (2) dropping the statement of necessity entirely, (3) looking into potential explanations for Lithuania's deviance rooted in in-case idiosyncrasies. As with Poland, substantiating any such explanations would require conducting more discourse analysis and extensive content analysis to ascertain the nature of the relationship between Lithuania and China. This is unfortunately not feasible in the context of this thesis. However, common knowledge dictates that the assumption that Lithuania's deviance is rooted in in-case idiosyncrasies is plausible, as Lithuania and China have openly held a diplomatic row over the issues of the recognition of Taiwan and Hong Kong national security law in recent years which led to China engaging in a *de facto* trade embargo against Lithuania (European Commission, 2022). Considering this and the fact that the model explains all other cases, the statement of necessity is maintained pending further research.

Looking at the visual representation of the statement of necessity represented in configuration 2 (~ECON + ~GOV + ~TRADI ← ~ISNA), there are no DCK cases, which in theory reinforces this combination of SUIN conditions as potentially explanatory. However, there is only one ideal case (Denmark, #2, the lower right quadrant) and there are two new DCD cases in the lower left quadrant, Greece (#6) and Hungary (#7). While not invalidating the statement of necessity that this configuration represents, it does lower its consistency.

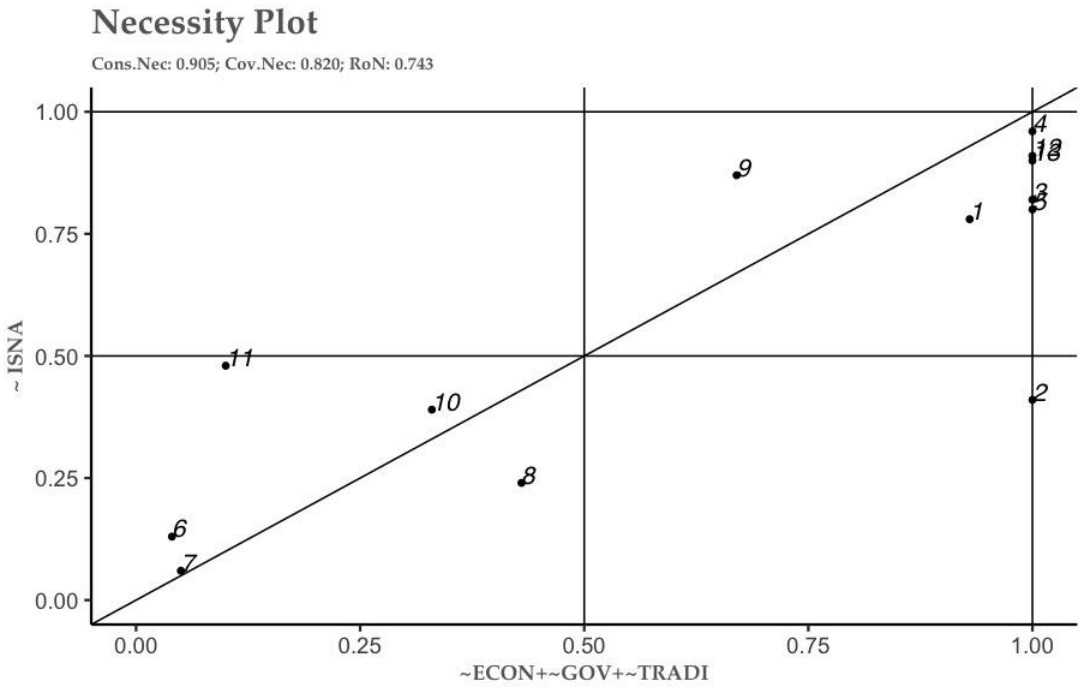


Figure 22: Necessity plot for configuration 2, ~ISNA

Understanding these results requires understanding the role each condition plays in each combination. In these configurations or unions of conditions, each individual condition is a SUIN condition, which, as expressed before, means that they alone are not necessary for the outcome but they are a sufficient part of a combination that is necessary for the outcome (i.e., in GOV + PRESS neither SUIN condition is indispensable for IDNA or ISNA, but their combination is). The problem with ascribing necessity to unions of SUIN conditions is that these are somewhat of a construct, a mechanism devised to further understand the conditions at the heart of necessity relations in a given outcome. SUIN conditions are not per se necessary for the outcome, but they point towards elements that have a particular causal relationship with the outcome. It is crucial to meaningfully interpret what these configurations of SUIN conditions stand for and ascertain if together, it makes sense to argue that they are "functional equivalents of a higher-order concept" which would explain necessity always in the context of existing knowledge, theory, and extant literature (Oana et al., 2021, p. 80; Schneider and Wageman, 2021, p. 74).

The analysis of necessity for the outcomes SYNA and ~SYNA, that is, the alignment and non-alignment of EUMS' traditional media with China's system narrative did not yield any results strong enough to claim necessity either with individual conditions or via configuration of SUIN conditions. This is not entirely surprising as the discourse analysis results were limited.

The main takeaway from the analysis of necessary conditions for the alignment and non-alignment of EUMS's traditional media with China's identity and issue narratives is that GOV is a key condition in its presence and its absence as it is a common denominator appearing in all necessary configurations. The second key takeaway of this analysis is that GOV is not, neither in its presence nor its absence, enough on its own to explain alignment or non-alignment. Rather it must operate in combination with other conditions. Importantly, the other two conditions found to be part of these necessary configurations for the presence of both IDNA and ISNA are DEM and PRESS (i.e., below EU-average democracy levels, and below EU-average freedom of the press levels). Particularly, the lower these democracy and freedom of the press levels the higher the narrative alignment. In the case of the absence of the outcomes, ~PRESS is relevant in combination with ~GOV.

These results are significant for three reasons: firstly, they conform to theoretical expectations of QCA's relationship to causal complexity. Secondly, they indicate that there is a significant relationship between the presence or absence of GOV and the likelihood of states' media alignment with China's identity and issue strategic narratives. And thirdly, the relevance of this lies on the idea of a higher order concept explaining narrative alignment: all three SUIN conditions present in the necessary configurations, GOV, DEM, and PRESS, can be ascribed to institutional/ideational dimension of state structure as opposed to ECON and TRADI representing a more material dimension of state affairs and not being part of these necessary configurations of SUIN conditions. These results suggest that, interestingly, it is the former, not the latter, that marks likelihood of alignment.

6.5 QCA analysis of sufficiency

The figure below illustrates the results of the analysis of sufficiency. These results are less clear-cut than those of necessity as combinations of conditions become more complex. While this is quite usual in QCA, it does call for caution when interpreting results. On the left-hand side of the image we observe the sufficient path towards narrative alignment. As explained before, sufficient in QCA parlance means *enough* for the outcome to occur. Thus, it transpires that for narrative alignment to happen it is enough that EU Member States have an economic need to engage with China in combination with the ever-present condition of GOV. On the right-hand side of the image we observe the path towards narrative non-alignment. This is the most complex of scenarios as it requires a combination of the ideational/institutional dimension in the liberal domestic environment version and the absence of material needs from China. Essentially, what this path tells us is that several combinations of conditions are *sufficient* (i.e., enough) for EUMS' traditional media's rejection of Chinese narratives. Each specific path is explained in detail in the following two sections.

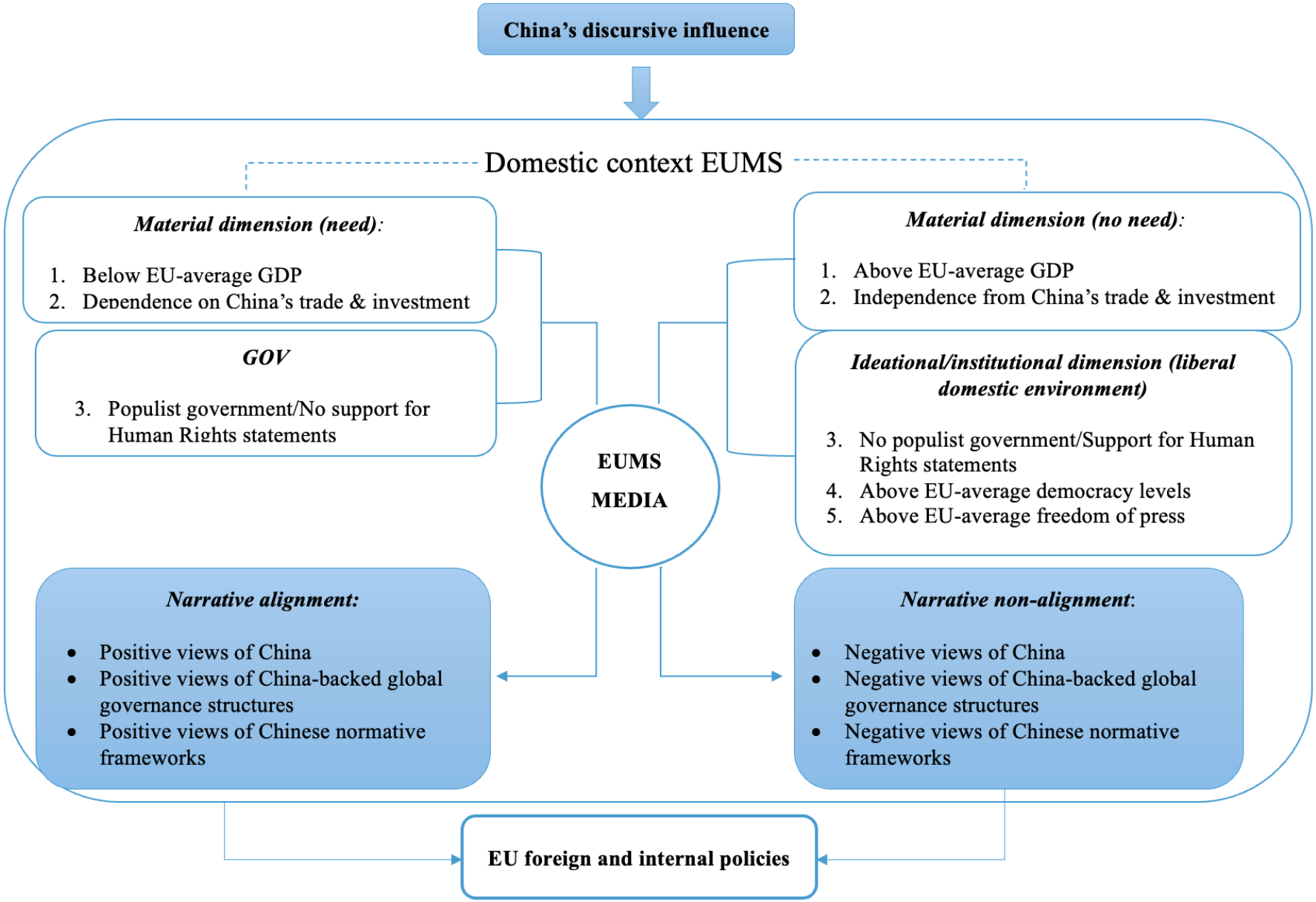


Figure 23: Dynamics of Chinese discursive influence in EUMS' domestic contexts. Own elaboration based on sufficiency results

6.5.1 Sufficient conditions for alignment

In QCA, sufficient conditions are those that, whenever they are present, the outcome is also present yet there can be cases in the outcome Y that are not members of the condition X (i.e., there are no cases in the condition X set that aren't also members of the outcome Y set). In other words, sufficiency relations establish that the condition X is a subset of the outcome Y[117]. Using Enhanced Standard Analysis (ESA) (Oana et al., 2021; Schneider & Wageman, 2012), the data was then explored for sufficient individual or conjunctions of conditions. The analysis of sufficiency consists of the creation of a so-called truth table (Oana et al., 2021, p. 101; Schneider and Wageman, 2012, p. 92), which shows all logically possible combinations of the conditions and their relationship with the outcome, as well as the logical minimization thereof. This section will first detail the results of the logical minimization of truth tables (i.e., the solution terms and paths) for the presence of the outcomes IDNA, ISNA, and SYNA (i.e., sufficient conditions for narrative alignment); to then detail the results for the same analysis on the absence of the outcome (~IDNA, ~ISNA, ~SYNA) (i.e., sufficient conditions for narrative non-alignment). The analysis of sufficiency for the outcome IDNA revealed one sufficient (intermediate[118]) solution, consisting of two paths[119]:

OUTCOME 1: IDNA

ECON*GOV*TRADI +

GOV*~TRADI*~PRESS → IDNA

The solution describes two scenarios that can explain which conditions are sufficient for EUMS's traditional media alignment with China's identity narrative. The first path describes a setting in which the presence of three combined elements is sufficient for alignment: below EU-average GDP (ECON), populist parties in government and lack of support for statements condemning China's human rights violations (GOV), and dependent trade and investment

[117] See Figure 11.

[118] The enhanced intermediate solutions are presented in this dissertation as they are parsimonious enough to provide interpretable results, without including rows in the logical minimization that would contradict formal logic (Schneider & Wageman, 2012).

[119] Not all solutions are shown here –all truth tables and XY plots – can be found in the appendix.

relations with China (TRADI). This path covers the most cases in the solution, specifically, it explains the behavior of Portugal (#11), Greece (#6), Hungary (#7), Italy (#8), and Poland (#10) which all are the cases that present ID narrative alignment (see Chapter 5) except one, Denmark, which is covered by path 2. Path 2 describes a scenario where the presence of three different combined elements is sufficient for alignment: populist parties in government and lack of support for statements condemning China's human rights violations (GOV), absence of dependent trade and investment relations with China (~TRADI), and above EU-average freedom of the press (~PRESS). This second path contains ~TRADI, the direct opposite as the condition TRADI, present in path 1. This is a normal expression of QCA's equifinality whereby multiple paths lead to the same outcome, including a priori counterintuitive expressions (like including the presence of a condition and its absence in two different explanatory paths) that share explanatory potential because they act in combination with other conditions. However, it is worth noting that path 2 explains Denmark's behavior only, which in this case warrants careful consideration. Denmark's discourse analysis unveiled a polarized relationship with China's ID narrative, presenting 50% positive and 50% negative views, which, considering its domestic conditions, altogether affects the strength of the statement of sufficiency attempting to explain it (i.e., PRI is very close to 0.5). In essence, in path 1 (ECON*GOV*TRADI → IDNA) provides a stronger explanation for sufficiency because it is backed by more empirical cases. The final solution term (M1) is displayed below, presenting slightly lower consistency (this is normal, as it is attempting to account for two different paths).

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	ECON*GOV*TRADI	0.820	0.741	0.682	11; 6,7,8,10
2	GOV*~TRADI*~PRESS	0.875	0.593	0.314	2
	M1	0.819	0.725	0.826	

The visual representation of sufficiency in XY plots is the mirror one to that of necessity plots, which means that cases must cluster above the diagonal line. For summarization purposes, only the final solution formulas including all solution paths are represented here. All other plots and solutions (conservative, parsimonious) are included in the Annex. Cases in the lower right quadrant of the plot are DCK cases and are more problematic for the statement of sufficiency requiring further explanation. Exploring the results for IDNA we observe that Poland (#10) is

a DCK case in path 1 (and therefore in the solution formula). This means that this sufficiency claim cannot explain Poland's behavior, in other words, Poland's media is not aligned enough as its conditions would suggest. We have seen the same behavior in the necessity analysis for the absence of outcome 1 (~IDNA). Like in said case, three options are available: (1) dropping the case from the sample and selecting other case(s); (2) recoding Poland's articles and recalibrating its membership scores in the QCA to check for any changes, (3) dropping the statement of sufficiency. Considering that deviance is not only allowed but commonplace in applied QCA and that this case shows deviance for both necessity and sufficiency thus pointing at underlying issues with regards to its fit into the model, in addition to the fact that this solution term accounts for the behaviors all other relevant cases (i.e., cases with positive views of China's ID as well as cases with negative views), discarding this sufficiency statement does not seem warranted. The expression explains a lot of the variation in the outcome in a broad sense, but the calibration may need fine-tuning and Poland's case may need to be analyzed in further research; Therefore, the statement is maintained and Poland's deviance is ascribed to the assumption Poland's media rejection of Chinese narratives as related to historical cultural aspects inherent to this particular case.

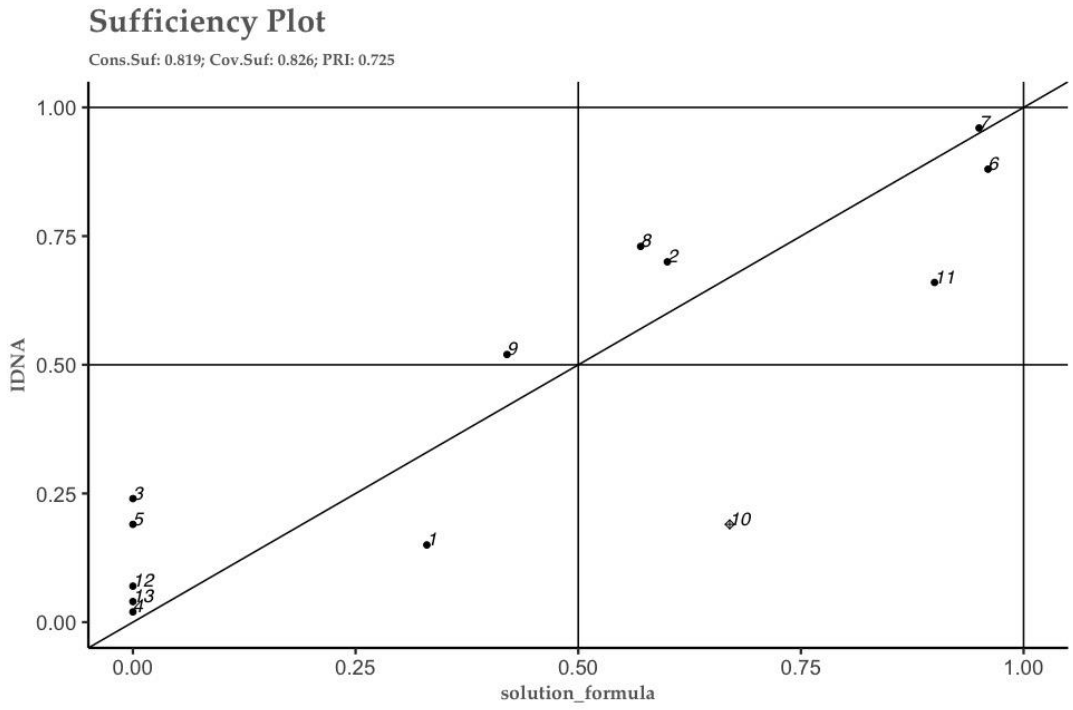


Figure 24: Sufficiency plot solution formula, IDNA

OUTCOME 2: ISNA

ECON*GOV*TRADI +

~DEM*GOV*~TRADI*~PRESS → ISNA

The solution describes two scenarios that can explain which conditions are sufficient for EUMS's traditional media alignment with China's issue narrative. In a similar way that the necessity configurations for IDNA and ISNA were the same, the first path of this sufficient solution is exactly the same as the sufficient path for ISNA. This makes sense considering there is little variation between them in terms of cases' membership scores. This first path describes a setting in which the presence of three combined elements is sufficient for alignment: below EU-average GDP (ECON), populist parties in government and lack of support for statements condemning China's human rights violations (GOV), and dependent trade and investment relations with China (TRADI). This path covers the most cases in the solution, specifically, it explains the behavior of those countries with a mostly positive reception of China's narrative: Portugal (#11), Greece (#6), Hungary (#7), Italy (#8), and Poland (#10) which all are the cases that present IS narrative alignment (see Chapter 5) except one, Denmark, which is covered by path 2. Path 2 here is slightly different from path 2 of the solution for IDNA. This time, ~DEM is included in the group of sufficient conditions. Altogether, path 2 describes a scenario where the presence of four different combined elements is sufficient for alignment: above EU-average democracy levels (~DEM), populist parties in government and lack of support for statements condemning China's human rights violations (GOV), absence of dependent trade and investment relations with China (~TRADI), and above EU-average freedom of the press (~PRESS).

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	ECON*GOV*TRADI	0.834	0.749	0.707	11; 6,7,8,10
2	*~DEM *GOV*~TRADI*~PRESS*	*0.794*	*0.419*	*0.265*	*2*
	M1	0.832	0.726	0.848	

Parameters of fit indicate that path 1 has a stronger sufficiency claim as consistency, PRI, and coverage are all higher than in path 2. Ultimately path 2 seeks to explain Denmark's behavior, which, as mentioned before, is slightly outlandish. Hence the model 'struggles' to provide parameters of fit that meet proper standards. In addition to this, the intermediate solution

includes this path 1 despite consistency levels being lower than 0.8 (the conservative solution does not, see Annex). Thus, this second path is not taken into account for the ISNA sufficiency solution term[120].

Looking at the XY plot for this sufficient solution, no DCK appear, although some DCD appear as relevant. Particularly, Lithuania (#9) and Portugal (#11) are worth mentioning as their membership in the conditions' formula is greater than their membership in the outcome set[121]. This means that these cases have more negative views of China's BRI narrative than what their conditions would suggest according to this model. The same can be said of Greece (#6), Austria (#1), and Poland (#10). Austria and Lithuania both had cooperation agreements with China, Austria had a populist party in government at the time, but its GDP is highly above EU average, while Lithuania's is not, but it did not have a populist party. However, both countries signed statements condemning China's human rights abuses and they therefore place below the 0.5 point of the X axis. Yet their negative reception of ISNA is too high for countries with these structural conditions, placing them among the DCD cases. These are cases that are worth looking into in further research as unveiling in-case idiosyncrasies would further explain the mechanisms that make Chinese narrative successful or not.

[120] Some QCA studies use lower thresholds for consistency but this study chooses to follow Oana et al., 2021.

[121] In sufficiency, cases' membership scores in the conditions should be smaller or equal than their membership scores in the outcome. This is a reverse logic than that of necessity.

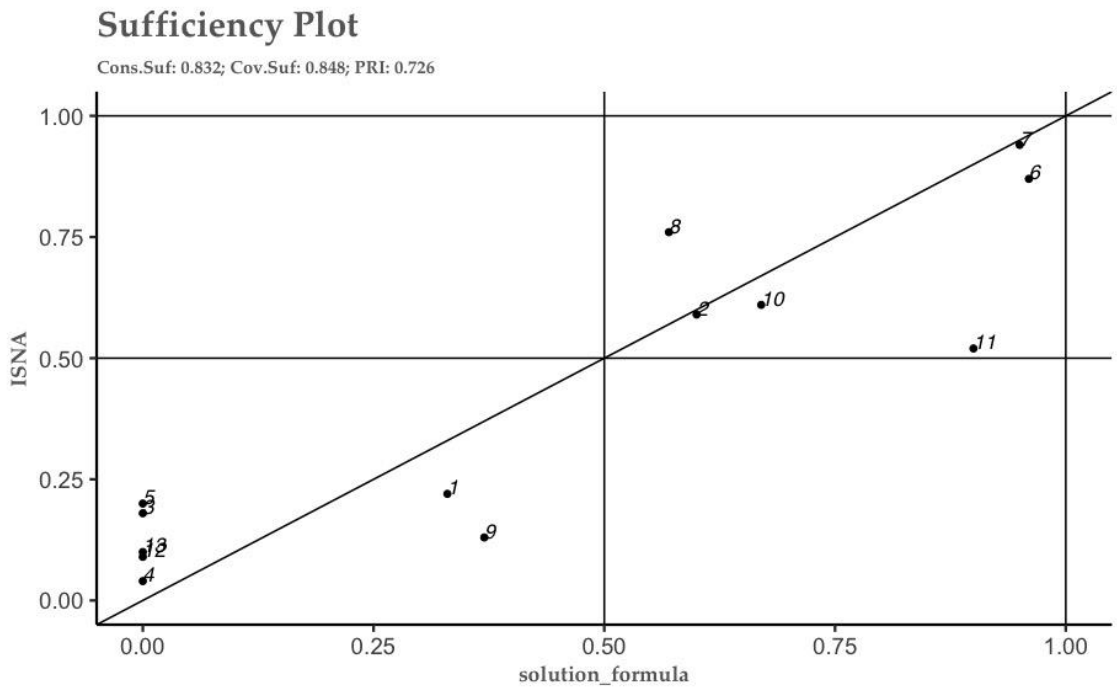


Figure 25: Sufficiency plot solution formula, ISNA

Lastly, the analysis of the sufficient conditions for the alignment of EUMS' traditional media with China's system narrative yielded a solution composed of two paths.

OUTCOME 3: SYNA

GOV*~TRADI +

ECON*DEM*GOV*PRESS → SYNA

Path 1 suggests a scenario whereby EUMS' traditional media align with China's system narrative whenever Member States have populist parties in government and they do not support statements condemning China's human right abuses, and they are not dependent on China's trade and investment. This path covers Denmark and Lithuania, two cases that have previously shown deviance, which, added to the fact that coverage is significantly low, begs caution when interpreting this path as sufficient. Further in-case analysis should accompany the interpretation of this statement. Path 2 suggests a scenario whereby EUMS' traditional media align with China's system narrative whenever Member States have below EU-average GDP, below EU-average democracy levels, populist parties in government and they do not support statements condemning China's human right abuses, and below EU-average freedom of the press levels.

This path covers most cases showing alignment with SYNA and it shows high consistency and high PRI, which strengthens its statement of sufficiency.

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	GOV*~TRADI	0.886	0.797	0.374	2; 9
2	ECON*DEM*GOV*PRESS	0.903	0.853	0.645	9; 6,7,8,10
	M1	0.865	0.812	0.755	

Looking at the visualization of the solution formula, we observe that Poland (#10) is a DCD case although relatively negligent and in line with previous behavior, and Portugal (#11) and Austria (#1) are also deviant. What this means is that neither Portugal nor Austria are narratively aligned enough for what their domestic conditions would suggest according to this mode. As for Italy (#8), it is a more problematic DCK case (i.e., located in the lower-right quadrant). Just like Portugal and Austria, it is not narratively aligned enough according to this model, with the aggravating issue that this case is more in than out in the conditions yet more out than in in the outcome, thus contradicting the statement of sufficiency that this formula is sufficient for the outcome.

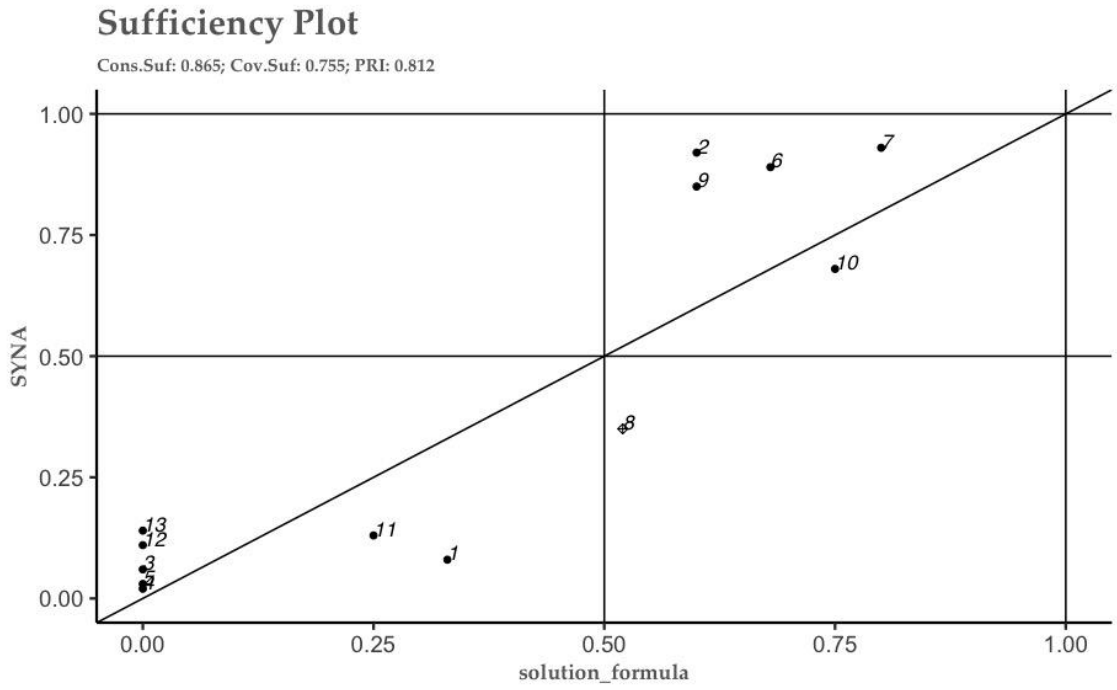


Figure 26: Sufficiency plot solution formula, SYNA

6.5.2 Sufficient conditions for non-alignment

ABSENCE OF OUTCOME 1: ~IDNA

~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI +

~DEM*~GOV*~PRESS +

~ECON*~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS → ~IDNA

The analysis of sufficiency for EUMS's traditional media non-alignment with China's identity narrative yielded a solution term composed of three paths. The first path is the direct opposite of the main path found in the sufficient solution for the presence of this same outcome, which makes sense as these are opposing ends of a spectrum. The scenario suggested by path 1 is one where EUMS's traditional media do not align with Chinese ID narratives whenever they have above EU-average levels of democracy, no populist parties in government and support for statements condemning China's human rights abuses, and whenever there is no dependence on Chinese trade and investment. This path covers a majority of cases, pointedly those which often show comparatively less discursive alignment (i.e., Germany, The Netherlands, France, and Spain). Path 2 presents a similar scenario with the difference that in this case, the third element is not the absence of a dependent relationship on Chinese trade and investment but rather, presenting above EU-average levels of freedom of press. This path covers three cases, also those which show comparatively less discursive alignment, i.e., Germany, The Netherlands, and Estonia. The fact that path 1 and 2 cover some of the same cases shows that there are several paths towards sufficiency (i.e., equifinality). Lastly, path 3 suggests a scenario where EUMS' traditional media do not align whenever there is a combination of above EU-average GDP, above EU-average democracy levels, dependence on China's trade and investment and above EU-average levels of freedom of the press. However, this path covers only Austria, which indicates a weaker sufficiency claim.

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI	0.963	0.939	0.539	5,13;4,12
2	~DEM*~GOV*~PRESS	0.967	0.948	0.575	5,13; 3
3	~ECON*~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS	0.979	0.962	0.359	1
	M1	0.968	0.951	0.676	

All parameters of this solution term and paths fit the standard requirements of consistency, PRI and coverage. Looking at the visual representation of the solution term, there are no DCK cases and only three DCD cases, of which Hungary (#7) is barely over the diagonal. Italy (#8) and Denmark (#8) are the same cases that have been deviant in previous analysis, thus assumption about their deviance being rooted in either an issue of article coding or in-case idiosyncrasies remains.

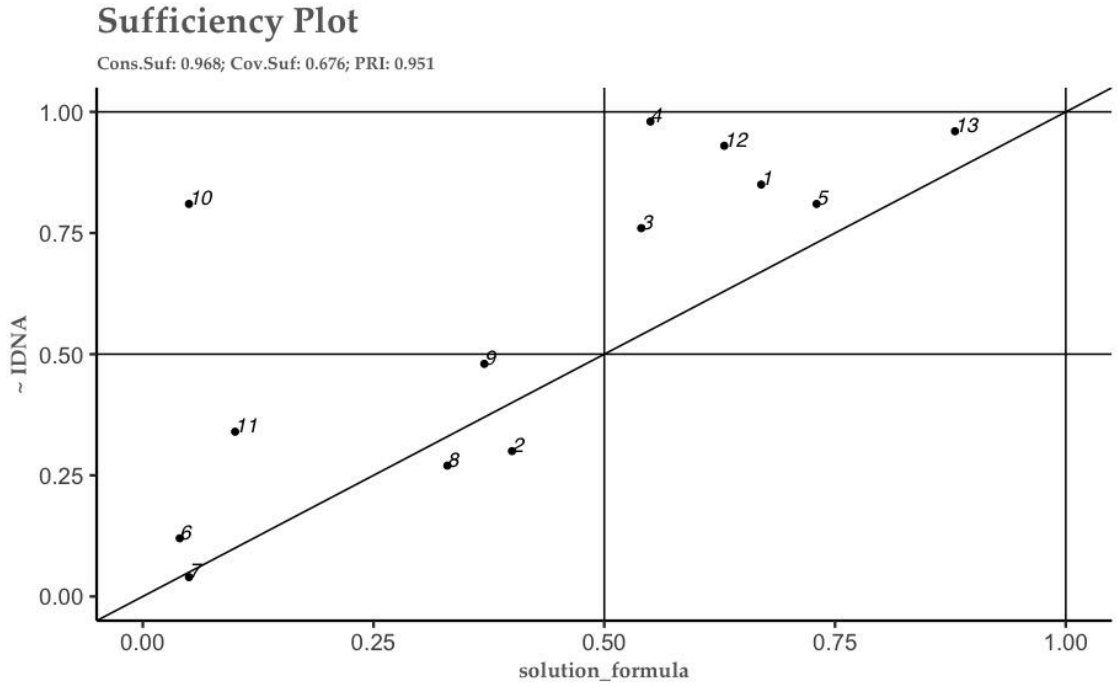


Figure 27: Sufficiency plot solution formula, ~IDNA

ABSENCE OF OUTCOME 2: ~ISNA

~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI +

~DEM*~GOV*~PRESS +

~ECON*~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS → ~ISNA

The analysis of sufficiency for EUMS's traditional media non-alignment with China's issue narrative yielded a solution term composed of three paths. Both solution terms and individual paths are equal to those presented in the results for the analysis of ~IDNA, thus for a specific description see above. In terms of the parameters of fit, the results for ~ISNA are overall sounder, with all parameters presenting higher values which indicates a better model fit for the explanation of the cases' behavior in ~ISNA.

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI	0.979	0.966	0.541	5,13; 4; 12
2	~DEM*~GOV*~PRESS	0.982	0.973	0.577	5,13; 3
3	~ECON*~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS	0.972	0.943	0.352	1
	M1	0.9683	0.974	0.677	

When it comes to the visual representation of these results, the resulting XY presents a very similar image as the previous analysis. With parameters values being higher, more cases fall above the diagonal reinforcing the statement of sufficiency. The only DCD case is Italy (#8) which means this case is less narratively aligned than what its domestic conditions would warrant. This is not surprising considering the results of Italy's traditional media narrative and discourse analysis, which pointed at a polarized reception of China's BRI narrative, hence slightly skewing this QCA's results.

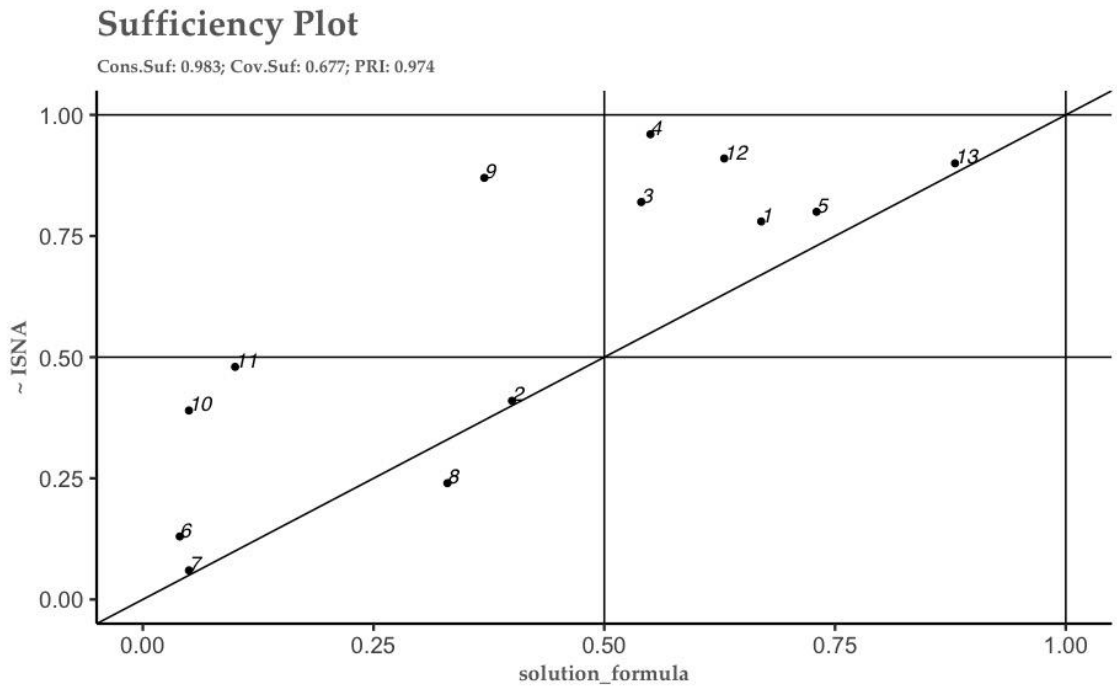


Figure 28: Sufficiency plot solution formula, ~ISNA

For non-alignment with SYNA, the solution presented is the one provided by the Standard Analysis as the Enhanced Standard Analysis produced model ambiguity.

ABSENCE OF OUTCOME 3: ~SYNA

~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI +

~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS → ~SYNA

The solution formula of sufficient conditions for the absence of alignment with China's system narrative includes two paths. Path 1 is the same observed across all three analysis for non-alignment, and it presents a scenario where non-alignment occurs whenever EU Member States above EU-average levels of democracy, no populist parties in government and support for statements condemning China's human rights abuses, and there is no dependence of China's trade and investment. This path is the one covering more cases, specifically, Germany, The Netherlands, France, and Spain. These are the countries which in the discourse analysis presented less alignment with China across all its narratives. Path 2 suggests a scenario whereby non-alignment happens whenever EUMS present a combination of above EU-average democracy levels, dependence on China's trade and investment and above EU-average levels of freedom of the press.

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI	0.874	0.835	0.479	5,13; 4; 12
2	~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS	0.923	0.887	0.493	1; 3; 11
	M1	0.883	0.845	0.658	

Parameters of fit for this sufficiency statement present relatively high consistency and PRI, yet coverage levels are quite low (below 0.5). This indicates that these sufficient solution's empirical relevance is limited. This is probably related to issues of article coding, as the system narrative analysis yielded somewhat skewed results. Looking at the XY plot for this solution formula we observe that there are no DCK cases and four DCD cases which can all be described as presenting the same issue already commented on: their traditional media is too aligned for that which their domestic conditions would warrant. They hence score very low in the Y axis depicting non-alignment, so low that they cross below the diagonal line marking the expected point according to their scores in the X score depicting membership in conditions.

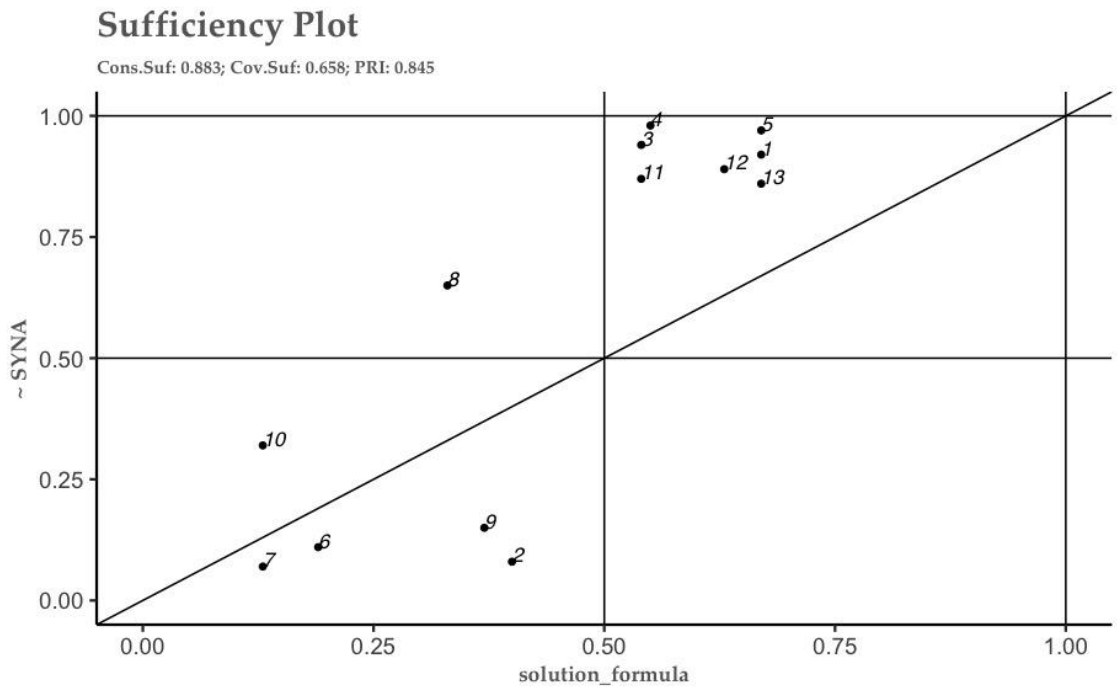


Figure 29: Sufficiency plot solution formula, ~SYNA

Ultimately, what these IDNA, ISNA, and ISNA results point at is, as in the case of necessity, the centrality of the condition of GOV for the alignment of EU Member States with Chinese strategic narratives. GOV is present across all IDNA and ISNA sufficient configurations, highlighting a persistent relationship between the presence of certain ideational and institutional factors and the alignment of national media with Chinese narratives.

6.6 DCK and the notion of normativity in strategic narratives

The presence of deviant consistency in kind[122] cases indicates that the results of the QCA model cannot explain the behavior of all EU Member States with regards to China. This does not imply that the models in this QCA are erroneous (else either no conditions would have surpassed the established thresholds for necessity or sufficiency, or the pertinent robustness and skewness checks would have indicated so), since deviance is, in fact, a normal occurrence in applied QCA. It follows that these DCK cases are an indication of other explanatory forces at play which are not accounted for in the QCA conditions. This dissertation argues that these

[122] DCK cases strongly contradict the statements of sufficiency and necessity whereas DCD are more likely related to calibration issues or they can be easily explained with extant knowledge.

forces are related to strategic narratives themselves and that they play a role in alignment and non-alignment alongside those necessary or sufficient structural domestic conditions of EUMS which this analysis has uncovered. In this sense, these additional explanatory factors stem from the strategic dimension of narratives and they can be explained through the lenses of normativity. In brief recollection of Chapter 3, I put forward the notion of normativity as a way to observe strategy in narrative action. Normativity suggests that strategic narratives aimed at foreign audiences have a higher chance of being accepted if they are timed correctly and they maintain internal-external coherence. By "timed" I refer to the moment *when* certain discursive elements are plotted into the narration of international (or national) events. By internal-external coherence I refer to the ability to trigger certain mental frames in the receiving audience by employing cultural and historical cues the receiving audience is sensitive to. In the face of DCK cases that do not behave in a way which is expected or explained by the necessity and sufficiency solutions, analyzing the dimension of normativity of Chinese narratives vis-à-vis the historical and cultural context of these cases may help explain why these countries which should be more or less aligned according to their domestic conditions do not conform to those expectations.

The QCA analysis was concluded with three DCK cases: Poland, Lithuania, and Italy. Poland was a DCK case for the necessity analysis of China's identity narrative. Italy appears as a DCK case for the sufficiency analysis SYNA (system narrative), and Lithuania was a DCK case in the necessity analysis of China's issue narrative (~ISNA). Starting with Poland, it's media's news articles analysis of stage 1 concluded that the way in which Poland acts with regards to China's ID narrative, i.e., its negative reception of China's projected narrative about itself as a benevolent and responsible partner, is significant because it contrasts with its positive reception of China's BRI narrative as a win-win project with benefits for those involved. This is reflected in the QCA, where Poland appears as a DCK in the analysis of the absence of ID alignment, (i.e., non-alignment or ~IDNA), but not in the analysis of the absence of IS alignment (i.e., non-alignment or ~ISNA with China's BRI narrative). In other words, Poland should be more aligned with China's ID narrative than it is, showing a majority of negative views (65%). As discussed in each respective results section of necessity and sufficiency, this means that Poland has the ideal domestic conditions for alignment with China's ID narrative, but for some reason it does not. Employing the lenses of normativity and particularly in this case, analyzing how the internal-external coherence of China's ID narrative against the backdrop of Poland's historical and cultural triggers, a deeper analysis of Poland's articles and the subsequent QCA

indicate that China fails to convince Poland's traditional media of its benevolent nature due to the communist ideology of the CCP.

Looking at what Poland's media say of China's ID (see Chapter 5, section 5.3.2.1), the majority of references were coded to ID12: *China as aggressive, colonialist, expansionist*, and ID13: *China as authoritarian-undemocratic.* Furthermore, there is a common thread amongst Polish media's depiction of China's identity: its communist ideology. For example, the following quote belongs to a 2019 article published in Gazeta Wyborcza:

> *"In a way, the new global superpower has been forced to put its military boots outside the Great Wall. And once it was convinced of this solution, the communist apparatus began to encourage domestic entrepreneurs to enter the names of exclusively Chinese companies in the relevant budget columns. And as you know, in China, recommendations for business are better not ignored."*

In it, we can observe a specific pejorative connotation of the word communist attached to the character description of a government that is authoritarian by nature and interferes with business affairs. In this sense, we can observe a connection between the idea of Communism and the notion of authoritarianism. In a similar manner, another 2019 article from the same journal reads:

> *"[…]the Chinese, as befits sneaky communists, used the weapon of hostile capitalism: they decided to conquer the world with banknotes."*

The negative identification of China and the Chinese as communists is quite explicit here. Comparisons between China's Communist Party and the USSR are present in this country's media quite inconspicuously. In the following quote from 2018, Gazeta Wyborzca, one of Poland's main newspapers describes China's actions in Xinjiang in no uncertain terms:

> *"According to the accounts of people who have been through the camps, beatings and sometimes torture are routinely used there, but the simplest methods remain the most effective. For example, you do not get to eat until you have sung all the verses of the song 'If it were not for the Communist Party, there would be no China', to the complete satisfaction of the guards. It also depends on them how many months or years you spend in the camp before they*

consider you re-educated. Xinjiang is unlucky: the Chinese empire is, as it turned out, incomparably more powerful than the Russian one."

Another example from a 2017 article from the newspaper Rzeczpospolita describes a view of China as authoritarian and specifically, links Poland's own experience with communist rule with a political maneuver to sustain a pretense of democratic pluralism:

"The first [black swan] is, by the way, just suggested by the NIC. It is the democratisation of China. Realising that the military clash for global domination is either lost in advance or entails unimaginable losses, Chinese decision-makers could perform a manoeuvre with which we are familiar. It would mean introducing party pluralism while giving people from the Communist nomenklatura broad influence. As a result, China would find it easier to cooperate with Western Europe and would lull the US into silence for a while."

As suggested by Poland's traditional media's stance on China's benevolent nature, the "trauma response" from its own past as an ex-communist republic from 1947 to 1989 is still prevalent, and it prevents China's projected narrative of a benevolent, well-intended, and responsible ally from taking hold among Polish audiences. In this sense, there is a high level of dissonance between the internal coherence of China's ID narrative and the receiving audience's mental frames (i.e., external coherence).

The second DCK case is Lithuania which presents ideal domestic conditions yet it rejects the BRI narrative. Lithuania is a small ex-soviet country with domestic conditions that would indicate it should be relatively interested in the potential economic benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative and increased investment from China. But it scores considerably low in the alignment of the issue narrative and its discourse analysis shows a concern about the BRI's potential to send weaker economies into bankruptcy. The code with the most references in the issue narrative analysis of Lithuania is IS17: *BRI as a debt trap/predatory practices.* The following excerpt from a 2019 article from Lietuvos Rytas provides an example of this common description of the BRI in Lithuanian press:

> *"BRI revealed that Chinese officials are used to working in a corrupt environment at home, so they carry out projects abroad through opaque means without remorse. The Chinese apply the slippery cultural concept of 'guanxi' to the BRI and many other projects in China itself, which refers to a win-win relationship that facilitates business transactions. If it were not for guanxi, it would be a virtually impossible task to carry out any large-scale project in China from start to finish. Such relationships are a breeding ground for corruption, writes Mr. Doig in Foreign Policy. Corruption will not bankrupt the Chinese government, but Chinese corruption can bring smaller, poorer countries to the brink of bankruptcy."*

While this depiction of the BRI is commonplace in Lithuania's discourse analysis, particularly in relation to corruption, the data collection on Lithuania yielded relatively few articles by comparison with other EUMS. Therefore, this dissertation puts forward the conclusion that the lack of normativity, specifically the lack of internal-external coherence, operates in the Lithuania-China relationship to a point where it prevents China from "convincing" Lithuanian audiences of the economic benefits of the BRI yet it does so tentatively, pending more data collection for this case and a more in-depth analysis.

The last DCK case is Italy, which appears as deviant in the analysis of the absence of alignment with China's system narrative. This means that it is not aligned enough with China's system narrative according to what its domestic conditions tell us. However, drawing plausible explanations of deviance from SYNA is undesired without increasing data collection (i.e., news articles) for this narrative as it was the least coded to. Further research would shed some light into similar dynamics of DCK cases across the three narratives observed. Additionally, further analysis of how normativity plays into those countries that are not DKC cases but rather ideal typical cases would further strengthen this concept's added value. For example, it would be interesting to apply the normativity lenses to a case such as Greece, a country with ideal structural conditions *and* attuned to the narrative of China as a responsible ally due to its experience during the European debt crisis. In this case, China's narratives would prove to have high normativity levels as they triggered cultural cues and temporal necessities (salvation from the Troika) .

6.7 Concluding discussion

This chapter aimed to answer RQ2: *what conditions explain variation in the reception of Chinese SNs in EU Member States' traditional media?* After defining the outcome sets "Identity Narrative Alignment" (IDNA), "Issue Narrative Alignment" (ISNA), and "System Narrative Alignment" (SYNA), three QCA analyses were performed on the presence and absence of each outcome to study the influence of a series of conditions selected based on theoretical and literature-based expectations for their relationship with the occurrence of EUMS' traditional media's alignment or non-alignment with China's strategic narratives.

In line with the main idea of causal complexity in QCA, the results of these analyses confirmed three main general theoretical assumptions. Firstly, the assumption of conjunctural causation was confirmed: no single condition could be identified as necessary or sufficient for the occurrence or non-occurrence of the outcome. This means that EUMS' traditional media alignment or non-alignment with China's SNs cannot be explained by one factor alone. Just having below EU-average democracy levels or simply being dependent on China's trade and investment does not lead to alignment. Rather, a single condition may be explanatory only in combination with other specific conditions; it is always conjunctions of various conditions that prove necessary or sufficient for the outcome and its negation. Secondly, the assumption of equifinality was also confirmed in so far as multiple non-exclusive paths explain the outcome (e.g., necessity configurations 1 and 2 for IDNA; sufficiency paths 1 and 2 for ISNA); This means that there are several explanatory paths for EUMS's traditional media alignment with China's strategic narratives, rather than one simple -reductive- explanation. Thirdly, with regards to QCA's approach to asymmetry in explanatory conditions, these results depart from QCA's traditional approach in a way that fits the design of the outcomes depicting the phenomenon under observation. While in QCA the outcome and its absence are not normally qualitative opposites, in this QCA they are, and this has implications for the notion of asymmetry. To clarify, the design of this QCA assumes that the occurrence of the outcome and its non-occurrence are opposite ends of the same spectrum of variation. This is conceptually aligned with the notions of being qualitatively aligned and qualitatively non-aligned, in that one group of traditional media cannot be aligned and non-aligned at the same time. The qualitative middle ground between alignment and non-alignment does exist, as countries' media debates may express some views that are aligned with China's narratives and at the same time express other views that are not aligned. This middle ground is accounted for in the

variation spectrum through the inclusion of the percentages of mixed views, which are conceptualized precisely to reflect this qualitative state. Therefore, in this applied QCA, it is logically expected to observe the outcome (alignment) and its absence (non-alignment) explained by mirror opposites.

Beyond this reflection on this chapter's relationship with causal complexity, each analysis of the QCA revealed an individual set of conclusions which deserve further discussion. Let us briefly remember what necessary and sufficient conditions are to understand the implications of these results. Necessary conditions are those which, whenever the outcome is present, they are also present (i.e., there are no cases which are part of the outcome Y set, which are not also members of the condition X set). Sufficient conditions are those which, whenever they are present, the outcome is also present yet there can be cases in the outcome Y that are not members of the condition X (i.e., there are no cases in the condition X set that aren't also members of the outcome Y set). Intuitively, the explanatory value of necessary conditions is superior to that of sufficient conditions, but both contribute to the understanding of the reason why a specific phenomenon happens. The translation of this QCA's results through these lenses is as follows. Starting with sufficient conditions, this QCA reveals that the material dimension of EUMS relation to China is enough to generate alignment or non-alignment. This is substantiated with the fact that ECON and TRADI are commonplace in their presence and absence (depending on whether the outcome is alignment or non-alignment) in all sufficient conjunctions of conditions. What this means is that all the cases that are members of these conditions (concretely, that are above the 0.5 qualitative anchor in these conditions) are also members of the outcomes indicating alignment (IDNA, ISNA, SYNA). In essence, economic need is *sufficient* for EUMS's traditional media to replicate Chinese narratives. However, ECON and TRADI are only sufficient as long as GOV is present too in the cases showing alignment with China's narratives. This is a crucial insight stemming from the analysis of necessity. While the analysis of necessity did not yield single necessary conditions it did suggest that the combination of GOV, DEM and PRESS is a key factor for necessity. What this means is that all the cases that display alignment also display these conditions in various configurations of which GOV is the common denominator. Hence, since all cases that display alignment with IDNA, ISNA and SYNA also display GOV, this condition plays a key role in sufficiency as well.

The main takeaway from this chapter's analyses is therefore that ideational/institutional factors have a clear explanatory power when assessing Chinese discursive influence among EU Member States. By ideational/institutional factors these results refer to the conditions of below EU-average democracy levels (DEM), below EU-average freedom of the press (PRESS), and more clearly, presence of populist parties in government and lack of support for statements condemning China's human rights abuses (GOV). The condition of GOV is present across all conjunctions of conditions both in necessity and sufficiency in the presence and the absence of each outcome in at least one if not two of the individual configurations. This strongly suggests that the nature of the government of an EU Member State *and* its stance on human rights are crucial factors when trying to determine EUMS likelihood or a positive or negative reception of Chinese narratives. In this sense, these results support the expectation that while the material dimension of the relationship between EUMS and China is important to understand variance in the reception of Chinese narratives, the ideational/institutional dimension plays a greater role than when it comes to explaining alignment and non-alignment in necessary terms.

This is a surprising result since, on the one hand, economic coercion and inducement are two well-documented expressions of Chinese foreign policy, and on the other, not enough attention has been dedicated to the non-material dimension of Chinese influence. A likely explanation for these results points at China's inability to employ a "carrot and stick" approach towards EU Member States. In this scenario, China resorts to attempts at ideological appeal which are only effective in cases where domestic conditions of GOV and (DEM or PRESS) are present. For example, Greece and Spain share relatively similar material characteristics -or they did during the time frame observed- and as this analysis has demonstrated, they represent ideal cases differentiated by the condition of GOV. Greece is an ideal case for alignment, and Spain should be so as well, but the discourse analysis of Chapter 5 showed that it is not only not ideal in terms of alignment, but it actually scores quite low in the variation spectrum thus indicating high non-alignment. The key difference between these two cases is that at no point during the observed time frame did it have a populist party in government plus it supported statements condemning China's human rights abuses. It is true that Spain did not sign any cooperation agreements with China and Greece did, but this indicator is part of the condition TRADI, which had a lower presence in necessary configurations than that of GOV.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS

Anchored in the constructivist paradigm, this dissertation stemmed from two observations. Firstly, that China wants to influence the discourse around itself and around the functioning of the international system as the ability to establish what is *normal* and *abnormal* is becoming an increasingly important tool in world politics. As illustrated in Chapter 1, actors' motivations to increase their discursive influence over other actors is fueled by an opportunity structure derived from a more decentralized communicative ecosystem. And secondly, that current work on Chinese discursive influence should be expanded: on the one hand, it is mostly focused on the formation and projection of Chinese discourse rather than in its reception by foreign audiences; on the other, little attention is currently paid to the dynamics of Chinese discursive influence in the EU.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation set out to study China's discursive influence in the EU by analyzing 13 EU Member States' traditional media's reception of Chinese strategic narratives during a time of intense Chinese narrative projection around itself, the Belt and Road Initiative, and its view of global governance (2017-2019). This analysis was performed in two steps centered around the two guiding research questions: firstly, step one mapped out the reception of these Chinese narratives in terms of the themes found in the articles analyzed and the sentiment towards these projected Chinese narratives to ascertain *how are Chinese strategic narratives perceived in 13 EU Member States' traditional media?* This analysis yielded two concrete outputs: (1) a typology of the Chinese strategic narratives as they were perceived by EUMS' traditional media, and (2) a spectrum of variation in the reception of these narratives. Secondly, step two built on the results of step one to explain why reception of Chinese narratives varies across EU Member States and identify *what conditions explain variation in the reception of Chinese SNs in EU Member States' traditional media?* This step aimed at understanding how Chinese discursive influence interacts with EUMS's domestic contexts to either enable or limit the replication of China's projected messages among EU audiences. This second analysis identified a series of necessary and sufficient conditions that lead to discursive alignment and non-alignment of EUMS' traditional media with Chinese narratives and arrived at the conclusion that, in the 13 cases observed, the non-material dimension (i.e.,

ideational/institutional domestic conditions) is crucial in facilitating the replication of Chinese narratives for EU audiences.

The following section summarizes the insights gathered from the analysis undertaken for the two research questions. Then, this chapter proceeds with Section 7.2 to embed these insights into the wider context of current debates on China's influence and the EU's strategic positioning in a time of increased normative contestation and geopoliticization. Section 7.3 details the specific contributions of this dissertation to the current academic research on China and the EU. Section 7.4 then delineates the limitations encountered in this project and offers some thoughts with regards to further research. Lastly, section 7.5 offers some concluding remarks and points at future research avenues.

7.1 Summary of findings

How are Chinese strategic narratives received in 13 EU Member States' traditional media?

To answer the first question, 1577 articles were analyzed following a specific approach aimed at (1) gathering a consistent sample that would allow for a systematic analysis of the 13 chosen cases, (2) diminishing bias by coding the data blindly, (3) approaching the data comprehensively by reading articles in full and selecting those articles which included normative evaluation of the topics of interest, (4) reflecting general themes in the data according to the three types of strategic narratives identified by Miskimmon et al., (2013, 2017), (5) reflecting specific themes following Lams (2018) and van Noort (2021) works on Chinese strategic narratives, and (6) reflecting the structure and sentiment of the narratives found in the data.

The analysis revealed that the majority of EU Member States' traditional media observed in this study hold negative views of China's projected narratives. However, a bit more than a third of EUMS observed receive these narratives positively and reproduce, with varying levels of similarity, the messages that China projects about itself as a benevolent and responsible actor, about the BRI as win-win initiative for participating countries and about the China-led international system as positive. This analysis allowed me to map *how* these narratives are perceived in the traditional media of the countries observed. Firstly, when it comes to China's

projection of itself, while a majority of EUMS analyzed perceive China as an aggressive and authoritarian actor that takes advantage of other countries and actors (i.e., multilateral institutions) in the international system (this is the case of France, The Netherlands, Spain, Austria, Germany, Lithuania and Denmark[123]), five countries perceive China in a positive way, concretely, as a benevolent actor and a responsible partner to rely on in times of crisis (such is the case of Hungary, Greece, Portugal, Denmark and Italy). China has problems convincing EU audiences of his benevolent nature because EU audiences, in general, do not identify China's political and social system as democratic and free. And so, positive identity narratives (accepted identity narratives) revolve around China's trade and economic abilities. Traditional media which replicate the notion of China as benevolent tend to avoid mentioning topics which can be traced to any reprehensible acts or behavior by China, and rather highlight its 'good Samaritan' facets.

Secondly, with regards to the reception of China's narratives about the Belt and Road Initiative, the results are more even, with seven cases perceiving the BRI negatively, concretely, as a tool for influence and a debt trap for participating countries (France, Lithuania, Spain, The Netherlands, Estonia, Germany, Denmark); and six cases perceiving it positively and replicating Chinese projected messages of participation in the Initiative as a win-win scenario (Hungary, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Austria, and Italy). Those cases which receive the BRI narrative positively differ from the ones perceiving negatively in that there is no sense of risk in participating in it, rather the assumption of benefits to be reaped. Traditional media which perceives engagement with the BRI as a threat to their identity (as democratic countries, as not corrupt, as respecting of human and labor rights, etc.) openly contest China's BRI narrative such are the cases of France, Spain and The Netherlands). Those who do not, replicate Chinese messages and they often justify their engagement by presenting it as a different kind of cooperation, one that would simply not lead to debt trap (such are the cases of Italy and Portugal).

Lastly, the results of the reception of China's system narrative are less clear-cut, with not enough data found in the cases of Estonia and Lithuania to substantiate any claims and Denmark's data showing seemingly drastic results. However, overall, a similar distribution of cases can be observed in the system narrative analysis than in the analyses of the previous two

[123] Denmark is an outlier with a very polarized reception of Chinese narratives.

narratives, with a majority of cases perceiving the China-led international system as anti-western, anti-liberal and anti-democratic (France, Austria, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and Italy); and four countries replicating -to varying degrees- China's narrative of the community of common destiny/shared future (Hungary, Denmark, Greece, Poland).

These results confirmed *Expectation 1*, in that it showed that Chinese strategic narratives are received to varying degrees of acceptance and rejection among EU Member States. This variance can be traced to specific rhetorical elements in the strategic narratives (i.e., normativity, (although normativity in these observed narratives is addressed hand in hand with the results of the second analysis)). These rhetorical elements change from narrative to narrative, because China tailors narratives based on the target audience (i.e., each member state). Therefore, Chinese strategic narratives' pervasive nature is not given, but rather case dependent.

In sum, this first research stage offered a detailed account of, on the one hand, the various Chinese narratives that populate EU Member States' traditional media, and on the other, the responses that those narratives generate in those countries in which they are rejected. This process laid the empirical basis for the second stage of this dissertation. The observation that more than a third of the countries' media sampled align to varying degrees with Chinese projected narratives (i.e., they positively perceive China, the BRI, and a China-led international order) is markedly relevant in a global context of a "battle of narratives" (Borrell, 2020) as it substantiates the argument that China's discourse does indeed reverberate positively in some EU Member States. This begs the question of why. Why do some EU Member States perceive these narratives positively and some do not?

What conditions explain variation in the reception of Chinese SNs in EU Member States' traditional media?

To answer the second research question, a QCA model was constructed based on a series of domestic structural factors that were expected to impact the likelihood of traditional media's alignment with Chinese narratives. The rationale behind the selection of these domestic factors aimed at encompassing on the one hand, a material dimension which could influence alignment; and on the other hand, a non-material or ideational/institutional dimension which could also influence alignment. The material dimension is represented by economic, trade and investment

indicators and is articulated in the QCA analysis as the ECON and TRADI conditions. The ideational/institutional dimension is represented by governmental, democracy and freedom of the press indicators and is embodied by the conditions of GOV, DEM, and PRESS in the QCA analysis (see Chapter 4, section 4.2). The main assumption was that a combination of factors across these two dimensions would explain variation in the reception of Chinese strategic narratives (i.e., alignment or non-alignment) but that the ideational/institutional dimension would play a greater role as the political trade-off of aligning with China would be more difficult to legitimize for countries whose behavior points in the opposite ideational or normative direction.

QCA uses logical minimization to identify necessary and sufficient conditions that occur across cases in the presence of the outcome (i.e., alignment) and in the absence of the outcome (i.e., non-alignment). A different QCA was run for each of the three types of narratives found in the data (identity, issue, system). The results of these analyses revealed three key insights. Firstly, they conform to QCA's general expectation that in the study of social phenomena, including the study of international relations, we can rarely ascribe causality to one single factor (i.e., causal complexity). In this sense, the results from Chapter 6 highlight that it is the combination of several conditions what leads to alignment or non-alignment.

Secondly, the results of the QCA analyses show that while the material dimension is *sufficient* (i.e., enough) for EU Member States' traditional media to discursively align with Chinese narratives, the ideational/institutional dimension is *necessary* for alignment. This means that while for some cases it is enough to have a material need for China's economic engagement to discursively align with its narratives, this does not hold for all the countries which have shown discursive alignment. The common denominator among all countries which have shown alignment is the condition of GOV, which represents the presence of populist parties in government and the lack of support from these governments towards statements condemning China's human rights abuses. It is GOV, in combination with the DEM and PRESS, what determines whether a country's traditional media aligns or not with Chinese narratives. In sum, considering the ideational/institutional dimension of domestic contexts is crucial when studying Chinese discursive influence among EU Member States.

Thirdly, these results also highlight the relationship of necessity existing between certain "illiberal tendencies" between EU Member States and the adoption of Chinese narratives in

EU traditional media. For EU countries' media to [discursively] align with Chinese strategic narratives, their domestic contexts must necessarily present the above-mentioned ideological/institutional characteristics in a manner which runs counter to liberal democratic societies. Specifically, China is more likely to exert discursive influence in those countries with populist governments, which do not show support for statements condemning China's Human Rights abuses, and which show below EU-average levels of democracy and freedom of the press. In this sense, the more illiberal and undemocratic the domestic context, the more likely that country is to align with Chinese narratives.

These results confirmed *Expectation 2* which argued that case dependent variation would be linked to the condition of democracy or the condition of government in terms of necessity. However, given the relevance of China's economic engagement with some EU Member States, other conditions related to the material dimension of EUMS' domestic context play a role in terms of sufficiency. This expectation was based on the following underlying assumptions: on the one hand, the literature on countries' response to the rise of China and the BRI tells us that China's influence is primarily exerted through material means, but also that non-democratic governments are more inclined to engage with China. All EU Member States are consolidated democracies but the material need for trade and investment from China is relatively low. On the other hand, China's position on human rights is that of the non-universality of a concept which originated in Western norms and values. Countries sharing this position are also more likely to engage with China without political costs.

In sum, the QCA analysis detailed in Chapter 6 supports the expectation that, in the context of EU Member States, China's discursive influence is enabled by a favorable ideational/institutional dimension rather than by economic inducement.

7.2 The battle for narratives and what it means for the EU

The above-mentioned results combined speak of a certainty and a suspicion. The certainty is that China has indeed realized the power of naming as a reality-shaping tool, and it seeks to garner the authority to claim veracity in naming through the legitimation of its messages by not only domestic audiences, but foreign ones. China is conducting a sort of PR campaign aimed at convincing audiences that governance "with Chinese characteristics" is a more effective and

overall better approach than that of the traditional liberal democratic nations of the West. Undoubtedly, convincing foreign audiences of this is a more complicated endeavor as discursive influence is limited by the domestic contexts in which it operates and the historical and cultural frames of the audience for which it is deployed, as this thesis has demonstrated. Nevertheless, the narrative onslaught is happening, as an expression of a wider trend of geopoliticization of foreign policies focusing "on the discursive construction of issues as geopolitical" (Herranz-Surralles, 2024). In the concrete case of the EU's Member States, overall, China struggles to "tell its story well", as suggested by the results which show that most EU traditional media reject the narratives China *tells* about itself.

However, in some cases, these messages do seem to find a willing audience in those traditional media which replicate certain discursive elements. In these cases, there is an observable switch in the depiction of the self-other relationship whereby the particular identities of those audiences positively replicating Chinese discursive elements are no longer in opposition to that of China or weary of it, but they are presented as a partnership. In these partnerships, China occupies a vacuum left by the EU itself. Such are the cases of Greece and Hungary. The traditional media of these Member States buy into the China's discursive framework as the depictions that China projects about these countries (as forward-looking, strong, historically important civilizations) resonate with them (i.e., have high normativity), potentially in opposition to their understanding of how they are perceived by the EU. This subjective process is similar in other aligned countries, albeit that self-other relationship has not been co-opted to the same degree, and above all, there is no sign of such distance between the Italian and Portuguese self and the EU.

With this in mind, this dissertation upholds a suspicion. The fact that the conditions which combined *necessarily* lead to alignment are those which belong to an ideational/institutional dimension within domestic contexts speaks to the increased relevance of the battle of narratives in the current context of geopoliticization. The adoption of China's narratives by some Member States' traditional media is not alienated from a political will to do so, as illustrated by the presence of GOV in all paths towards alignment. Furthermore, it inheres a certain challenge of established European ideational frameworks, and sometimes even their dissolution in domestic contexts (e.g., the current state of rule of law in Hungary). When this happens, the order engendered by that shared European identity, and those shared European values, transforms into disorder. We saw this happening in the case of Brexit, the dynamics of which were

unrelated to Chinese discursive influence, but they operated similarly by reconstructing the narrative around British identity.

In essence, effective strategic narratives are a tool to disrupt the status quo. Granted, they are context-dependent – as this dissertation has shown – and it may be easier for China to discursively influence non-EU countries where the opportunity structure of economic need is the primary motive for ideational alignment. However, strategic narratives are also a low-cost tool which is easy to deploy. Should disgruntled EU Member States see a way to articulate (and thus legitimize) the discursive buy-in, there is a cost to not taking narratives seriously both in research and in policy. For an actor such as the EU, this task is arguably more complicated for two main reasons: one, the nature of EU foreign policy, which often sees Member States pursue their own interests with regards to China. Two, the perhaps naive assumption that all EU Member States ascribe to certain ideological frameworks which include liberal democratic values. As this dissertation has demonstrated, there are inherent risks to the EU's resilience vis-à-vis Chinese discursive influence which lay in the political will of governments and more generally in the domestic contexts of EU Member States.

When HR/VP Josep Borrell first spoke about the battle of narratives, he did so in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, when the EU became officially aware of China's discursive tactics to shape the narrative around the origin of the outbreak and around the best approach to deal with it – which, incidentally, involved juxtaposing China's approach with that of the EU and effectively de-legitimizing EU action in a time of crisis by casting it as ineffective by comparison. Borrell would continue to use this battle of narratives metaphor not only with regards to China but also in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. 2020 was the wakeup-call moment for the EU to recognize that other actors had taken a very active stance on the discursive arena. So much so that the EEAS-based division originally dedicated to countering Russian-led misinformation expanded to include studying and analyzing discursive threats coming from China as part of a wider effort to counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) (EEAS, 2020). At the 2022 Munich Security Conference, Borrell once again approached the matter of Russia and China's strategy to "re-define terms" and highlighted a compound effort to re-write the meaning of democracy and universal values. He concluded: "In short, yes we must speak the language of power as you have heard me say before, but also be mindful of the power of language." (Borell, 2022). An admonition not so different from the one Nebrija offered to Queen Isabella at that pivotal moment in time for the

Spanish Empire. Language speaks *to* power and *of* power, in everyday life as well as in International Relations, nowadays more than ever.

7.3 Contributions of the study

Theoretical and conceptual contributions

This study offers a theoretical contribution to the study of strategic narratives by putting forward the notion of normativity. Strategic Narrative Theory approaches the issue of strategy in narratives relatively loosely, pointing at intentionality as a crucial factor indicating strategy in narrative. Yet this approach lacks clear conceptual concretion as to how to identify mechanisms through which narratives are imbued with strategy. This dissertation's notion of normativity offers an initial understanding of those mechanisms based on the assumption that narratives are strategic insofar as they are designed to account and interact with their target context. In other words, actors tailor strategic narratives depending on the specific cultural and historical contexts of the receiving audience. The more fine-tuned this tailoring, the higher the chances a strategic narrative has of being successful. This dissertation suggests that researchers can analyze the degree of normativity of a strategic narrative by looking at the elements of timing and internal-external coherence of said [projected] strategic narratives in the context of the receiving audiences (see Chapter 3, section 3.3). The more accurate the timing and the stronger the internal-external coherence of a narrative, the higher the degree of normativity. A high degree of normativity indicates a deliberate and elaborated effort on behalf of the narrator to imbue narrative action with the potential to trigger or evoke certain mental frames in the audience.

The notion of normativity was tested in this study in the case of Poland, as a deviant case whose behavior could not be explained by the QCA model. In this scenario, attention was redirected at the dissonance between Poland's historical context and the reality of China's identity as a communist country, which weakened the internal-external coherence of China's narrative about itself and ultimately reduced its potential for normativity. The author notes – and comments on in the section on limitations – that this specific contribution is limited by the single case on which it was able to be tested.

The second related contribution relates to the operationalization of strategic narratives described in Chapter 3, section 3.7. Bridging theory and methodology, I have strived to operationalize strategic narratives more rigorously and clarify how researchers should study them. The conceptual model developed based on the approach of Miskimmon et al. to strategic narratives is novel in the sense that it integrates theoretical elements from SNT and concrete discursive tools to apply it in the study of narratives. It puts forward, on the one hand, a novel conceptualization of the structure of narratives building on the work of Miskimmon et al., and adding specific linguistic markers which researchers can use to filter through discursive data when trying to identify strategic narratives. On the other hand, it offers a three-level operationalization specifically developed for the study of the reception of narratives, which, as previously mentioned, is largely underdeveloped.

Lastly, this study contributes to wider IR debates about discursive power by providing a bridge between the study of political communication and Foreign Policy Analysis. This dissertations' approach is novel as it brings these two areas closer in the study of non-material power. Concretely, by addressing China's discursive power as an expression of its foreign policy and identifying the locus of Chinese influence within EU domestic spheres, this study highlights a certain missing link in current debates about China's rise and its risks for the European Union.

Methodological contribution

This study employs a mixed methods approach which represents a novel approach to the study of strategic narratives in general, and more concretely, to the study of Chinese discursive influence in the EU. Anchored in the constructivist paradigm, the primary focus of this research lies on "constructed meanings" of what actors say and what actors perceive, namely through narrative and discourse analysis of news articles. Inherent to this approach is the assumption that any insights gathered represent individual or collective perspectives of the subjects under scrutiny. In the case of this thesis these subjects are embodied by the traditional media of the 13 Member States. There is therefore an implied understanding that these insights do not represent the "correct and single truth" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 140) of how Chinese strategic narratives are received in EU Member States' traditional media. Furthermore, this author acknowledges that the insights gathered during the first research stage and during the QCA calibration process are not completely free of issues regarding reflexivity (i.e., one's own biases), and thus should not be considered independent from the researcher as "a constructor

of knowledge, of understanding and interpretation of the meaning of lived experiences" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 196, cited in Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 124). The irony of the above factoring in a study aiming to understand perceptions and narratives does not go unnoticed.

Despite the above, this study also reflects the added value of the chosen mixed methods approach embodied in the various data collection techniques and analysis strategies. This approach has allowed me to "bring together qualitative and quantitative approaches into a single study and rely upon the complementary strengths of each approach to address a study question or several questions" (Kahwati & Kane, 2020, p. 2). In this vein, the complementarity of the in-depth analysis of the main narratives found in the 13 EU Member States' traditional media observed and the cross-case comparison through QCA highlights the usefulness of bridging the qualitative-quantitative divide. The choice of dividing the project in two stages helped clarify the goals of each research question and organize the task ahead. The final database constructed by gathering 1577 articles shows the added value of conducting research on a large sample of qualitative original data. This database serves as an initial step which can now be expanded by including other media from other EU Member States, and perhaps expanding into the non-traditional realm of media and public spheres. In this sense, this dissertation illustrates the usefulness of systematic discourse analysis with the use of NVivo, as it provides a medium size analysis of the reception of Chinese narratives which is something that, to this author's knowledge, has not been attempted yet.

Similarly, the application of QCA for an IR study looking at perceptions and influence is, in itself, a novel contribution. As mentioned before, QCA is relatively new to IR, although it is quickly gaining track. QCA is a method for researchers who "wish to combine the best features of both qualitative and quantitative methods" (Oana et al., 2021, p. 6), and thus it further contributes to enhance a field of study dominated by qualitative studies. Therefore, this dissertation also contributes to the growing range of applications of qualitative comparative analysis by emphasizing the importance of multi-factorial conceptual models, mainly through the results of the QCA. Additionally, these results also add to a wider debate around the nature of causality in social phenomena, whereby the study of causal links shifts from putting the emphasis on one single explanatory factor to acknowledging the relevance of studying interaction effects of several conditions or variables and the nuance and richness it brings to our understanding of the reality of international relations.

Empirical contribution

This dissertation builds on the literature on strategic narratives, power, and communication in International Relations. This body of literature tends to focus on the processes of formation and projection of narratives, particularly in the area of Chinese discursive influence which has received much scholarly attention of late (see Chapters 2 and 3). Thus firstly, this dissertation contributes to the existing literature by filling a gap in the study of the reception of strategic narratives. By providing an in-depth cross-case study of the reception of Chinese narratives in 13 EU Member States' traditional media, this dissertation has also concretely furthered our understanding how Chinese discursive influence operates in the context of the European Union, a topic that is also underdeveloped as studies who do employ multiple-case analysis (limited to 1 or 2 as far as I am aware) choose to focus on China's soft power on other regions such as Africa and South East Asia. This is particularly relevant for researchers based and studying the EU, but also, it is significant because of the complexities of studying the EU as a foreign policy actor and particularly in its relations with China.

Secondly, this dissertation contributes to the existing debate around Chinese discursive power and the meanings associated with its foreign policy communications by providing a typology of Chinese strategic narratives in the EU. Understanding how China projects itself, how it shapes the narrative around its various initiatives (the BRI of course, but also the Digital Silk Road, the Arctic Silk Road, the Global Security Initiative, etc.) and how it sees the international system is crucial to assess its ambitions and expectations.

This is complemented by the added value of the results of the QCA which highlight the interaction dynamics between Chinese messages and the domestic contexts of EU Member States. In this sense, these results incorporate a non-discursive lens through which to analyze Chinese discursive influence. By identifying cross-case necessary and sufficient conditions which facilitate or hinder the positive reception of Chinese messages by EU audiences, this dissertation helps illustrate the internal vulnerabilities embedded in the EU. Specifically, the relevance of the ideational/institutional dimension in the results, and the fact that discursive alignment of traditional media goes hand in hand with specific domestic characteristics which veer towards illiberalism is poignant considering that, in the context of the EU, China has been primarily described as an economic actor, one that engages through trade and investment, rather than by exerting discursive influence. In this sense, these results may be a first step into

acknowledging the trojan horse of China's discourse with regards to, on the one hand, the appeal that China's model can have for some EU Member States, and on the other, wider trends of contestation of Western liberal democratic values from which Beijing has much to gain. This is in turn very relevant to calculations around the place that EU has in the current shifting world order, not only in terms of its position with regards to China, but also when it comes to assessing what kind of actor it wants to be (i.e., a geopolitical Europe) in the world to come.

7.4 Limitations of the study

Like any academic study, the research presented in this dissertation is subject to some limitations. This section outlines the limitations this study encountered as a result of several research design and research methods choices.

With regards to research design aspects, after initial testing and data gathering, the selection of cases was resolved to include only 13 EU Member States due to limited access to news articles and limited time to perform the analysis. This means not selecting the "whole of universe of cases" available, which has a direct impact on the generalization value of the results. However, two arguments can be made regarding this study's potential for generalization: on the one hand, 13 cases amount to roughly half of EU Member States at the time of observation (considering that the United Kingdom had already voted to leave the EU), which offers a consistent enough sample on the assumption that EUMS have similar relatively domestic contexts. On the other hand, the selection of cases was made purposely to reflect differences in size (population), geographical placement, and entry into the EU, so as to account for diversity among this relatively similar group of cases. These two arguments would suggest that the insights gathered could be generalized to the larger group of EU Member States and that some level of generalization has been attained. However, this dissertation only claims to ascribe the validity of the results obtained to those cases observed and remarks on the need to extend the sample of cases to a whole-of-the-EU research design.

The limited choice of cases has another repercussion with regards to normativity. Normativity is best observed in outlier cases, that is, in cases which behave in a way that cannot be explained by the expectations derived from their domestic contexts. As such, this study could only apply the normativity lenses to the case of Poland, which is not enough data to properly test the

assumptions underpinning the mechanisms of normativity. Therefore, this study makes only limited affirmations regarding this aspect of strategic narratives in the hopes to further study it in the future.

As regards the limitations derived from methodological aspects, both the choices of narrative/discourse analysis and QCA as methods present certain challenges and limitations. Narrative analysis in its current application in IR is limited in concretion with regards to its methods. Current literature on strategic narratives employs an array of techniques ranging from content analysis to discourse analysis, thus it is up to the researcher to decide how to best operate when studying narratives. The operationalization designed for this dissertation includes conceptual elements of Strategic Narrative Theory and employs discourse analysis techniques to undertake the actual analysis of the news articles. In this sense, this study represents a hybrid approach which, to this author's knowledge, has not been applied yet and thus may be subject to feedback and improvement.

However, the author does acknowledge the limitations presented by discourse analysis which are commonplace in studies applying this method. Such as, for example, inserting the researcher's biases into the analysis which can happen during the coding of the articles. To avoid this, the coding was done blindly, eliminating metadata from the documents (news articles) downloaded from the databases before initiating the coding process (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2). While it is relatively safe to assume that coding issues were thus minimized, intersubjective elements may have found their way into the research as is always the case with any human cognitive activity.

Approaching now the limitations stemming from the use of QCA, first and foremost, I shall speak of the risks during the calibration process. The calibration of the outcomes and the conditions (i.e., the "before the analytic moment") is a process that is entirely up to the researcher, which carries certain risks. In applied QCA studies, the conceptualization of the conditions may, on the one hand, not reflect the reality of the concept they describe well enough, and, on the other, limit the results. For example, in the case of this study, there are factors in government formation which differ from one Member State to another beyond the presence of populist parties which can also impact state behavior towards China or its perception of the EU, such as the levels of Euroscepticism. With regards to this, indicators pointing at Euroscepticism on behalf of parties overlapped with those indicating populism and this author could not find a

clear definition of the former that excluded the latter. Thus, populist parties were maintained as a more relevant indicator among governmental aspects, with the assumption that it may include Eurosceptic groups in a way that non-populist parties do not. Similarly, the general categorization of "material dimension" and "ideational/institutional dimension" could include other aspects that are also important to the outcome. These considerations were observed during the research design process and during the analysis by running different models and performing standard robustness checks. Ultimately, conditions were selected on the basis of (1) the need to maintain five or less conditions to match the number of cases analyzed so as to avoid complications with the logical minimization; and (2) that they did not conceptually overlap with any of the other relevant conditions. Overall, the selection of conditions is consistent with the aim of accounting for the two dimensions which are particularly relevant for the study of China's engagement with other actors, but it should be noted that with an increase in the number of cases observed (e.g., the whole of the EU), more conditions could be added without incurring in issues derived from limited diversity (QCA's response to too many scenarios that are not empirically represented by cases).

7.5 Concluding remarks and future research avenues

This dissertation has, on the one hand, uncovered how Chinese strategic narratives are received in EU traditional media, and on the other, it has explored why the reception of these strategic narratives varies across 13 EU Member States. In doing so it has highlighted the structure and messages in these narratives around China itself, the BRI, and China's vision of the international system. It has also pointed at the ideological/institutional dimension of domestic Member States' contexts as a crucial element in the replication or rejection of these strategic narratives. These results are concrete, but they are based only on the cases studied. Therefore, three paths lay ahead for further research: the first one involves applying the framework developed in this dissertation to other EU cases to strengthen the validity of the claims made in this study; the second one would require running the QCA model with other conditions that still reflect the ideational/institutional dimension vs material dimension divide to further test the robustness of these findings; lastly the third one would consider gathering data from a more recent temporal framework, specially a post-COVID-19 one in conjunction with either one of the previous two paths or both to ascertain how Chinese narratives are perceived now.

This would provide a "second act" to the present dissertation, one that would encompass the EU's response to China's first wave of discursive influence. By this I mean accounting for the EU's reinforced strategic communications strategy since the COVID-19 crisis. This includes a turn towards [open] strategic autonomy, the unveiling of the Global Gateway as a response to the BRI, and certain shifts in the domestic contexts of EU Member States (e.g., the election of Georgia Meloni as Italy's PM and this country's exit of the BRI). In a sense this would amount to studying the EU's strategic narratives in domestic contexts which would indeed be an interesting exercise to ascertain to what degree has the EU embraced strategic narratives in its communication strategy in the current context of contestation and geopoliticization of foreign policy.

Lastly, this research could be complemented by further studies on the link between China's discursive influence and Member States' behavior in EU foreign policymaking as well as further research on EU/Member States' policy changes regards to those industry areas where EU-China cooperation is more active (e.g., automotive industries, transport, and semiconductor industries, etc.). While this would require different research designs departing from the one presented in this dissertation, it would nonetheless enrich the findings of this study, and vice versa.

To conclude on a general note, this dissertation has helped clarify some questions about Chinese discursive power in the EU and it (hopefully) lays the ground for raising others. Can China's discourse influence EU domestic audiences' perceptions of certain international issues? Yes, it can. Can it steer domestic audiences towards a more positive stance regarding itself and its actions? It depends on the narrative itself and the context of the receiving domestic audience. Can the EU equally do so? Can it do so in an active manner rather than a reactive one? Time and research will tell.

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APPENDIX: QCA MEASUREMENTS AND RESULTS

1. *Summary of calibration of outcomes' raw and calibrated membership scores*

Case	Raw Scores			Calibrated Scores		
	ID	*IS*	*SY*	*IDNA*	*ISNA*	*SYNA*
Austria	0.27	0.31	0.28	0.15	0.28	0.08
Denmark	0.50	0.44	0.86	0.72	0.64	0.92
Estonia	0.31	0.29	0.25	0.25	0.22	0.06
France	0.14	0.19	0.15	0.02	0.06	0.02
Germany	0.29	0.30	0.21	0.2	0.25	0.03
Greece	0.65	0.65	0.81	0.89	0.9	0.89
Hungary	0.81	0.77	0.88	0.97	0.96	0.93
Italy	0.52	0.55	0.42	0.52	0.09	0.35
Lithuania	0.40	0.27	0.75	0.54	0.18	0.85
Poland	0.29	0.45	0.59	0.2	0.65	0.68
Portugal	0.48	0.40	0.32	0.68	0.56	0.13
Spain	0.21	0.24	0.31	0.07	0.12	0.11
Netherlands	0.18	0.25	0.33	0.04	0.13	0.14
ANCHORS	*5.05*	*5.11*	*6.16*	*SUM*		
Exclusion Anchor	***0.19***	***0.20***	***0.24***	**= Fully out of the set (0.05)**		
Cutoff Point	***0.39***	***0.39***	***0.47***	**= Neither in nor out (0.5)**		
Inclusion Anchor	***0.78***	***0.79***	***0.95***	**= Fully in the set (0.95)**		

2. *Operationalization of conditions*

Conditions	***Economy (ECON)***	***Democracy (DEM)***	***Trade and investment (TRADI)***	***Government (GOV)***	***Freedom of press (PRESS)***
Set description	Below EU average GDP level	Below EU average democracy level	Dependent trade and investment relations with China.	Governmental nature of behavior facilitating alignment	Below EU average freedom of the press
Indicators (crisp set / fuzzy set)	3. EUMS GDP scores (fuzzy)	2. EUMS democracy scores (fuzzy)	3. Signed cooperation agreements (crisp)	3. Populist parties in gov (crisp)	2. Below EU average freedom of press score (fuzzy)

			4. Chinese investment by GDP (fuzzy)	4. Blocked statements on Xinjiang (crisp)	
Aggregation method	Direct method of calibration	Direct method of calibration	Theoretical method of calibration	Theoretical method of calibration	Direct method of calibration

3. Calibration of conditions (distribution of cases in %)

Set (conditions /outcomes[124])	***Number of cases[125]***	***%***
ECON	8 / 13	61.54 %
DEM	5 / 13	38.46 %
TRADI	7 / 13	53.85 %
GOV	8 / 13	61.54 %
PRESS	7 / 13	53.85 %
IDNA	6 / 13	46.15 %
ISNA	6 / 13	46.45 %
SYNA	5 / 13	38.46 %
~IDNA	7 / 13	53.85 %
~ISNA	7 / 13	53.85 %
~SYNA	8 / 13	61.54 %

[124] The tilde ~ is used in QCA to indicate the negation of the outcome (i.e., the absence of the outcome, in this case, traditional media's non-alignment with Chinese narratives).

[125] Number of cases covered by each set out of a total of thirteen cases observed.

4. Analysis of necessity

Analysis of necessity for all individual conditions for outcome 1 IDENTITY NARRATIVE

	Positive outcome (IDNA)			Negative outcome (~IDNA)		
Conditions	Consistency	Coverage	RoN	Consistency	Coverage	RoN
ECON	0.815	0.588	0.647	0.546	0.564	0.634
DEM	0.751	0.672	0.782	0.524	0.671	0.781
TRADI	0.822	0.600	0.659	0.579	0.604	0.662
GOV	0.852	0.712	0.782	0.387	0.462	0.657
PRESS	0.766	0.686	0.789	0.525	0.672	0.782
~ECON	0.396	0.379	0.681	0.601	0.823	0.882
~DEM	0.632	0.481	0.622	0.744	0.811	0.818
~TRADI	0.458	0.432	0.695	0.617	0.880	0.885
~GOV	0.357	0.289	0.577	0.759	0.832	0.890
~PRESS	0.634	0.483	0.622	0.754	0.822	0.827

Necessary conditions should meet the thresholds for consistency (0.9), coverage (0.6) and relevance of necessity (0.5). As such, no individual conditions were found to be necessary.

Analysis of necessity for all individual conditions for outcome 2 ISSUE NARRATIVE

	Positive outcome (ISNA)			Negative outcome (~ISNA)		
Conditions	Consistency	Coverage	RoN	Consistency	Coverage	RoN
ECON	0.806	0.591	0.648	0.560	0.580	0.645
DEM	0.792	0.679	0.785	0.498	0.645	0.768
TRADI	0.870	0.589	0.653	0.554	0.585	0.651
GOV	0.853	0.711	0.781	0.375	0.455	0.654
PRESS	0.813	0.666	0.778	0.485	0.629	0.760
~ECON	0.415	0.385	0.683	0.590	0.818	0.879
~DEM	0.596	0.487	0.624	0.765	0.850	0.846
~TRADI	0.421	0.444	0.699	0.644	0.880	0.925
~GOV	0.335	0.292	0.578	0.752	0.883	0.893
~PRESS	0.577	0.493	0.627	0.779	0.860	0.859

Necessary conditions should meet the thresholds for consistency (0.9), coverage (0.6) and relevance of necessity (0.5). As such, no individual conditions were found to be necessary.

Analysis of necessity for all individual conditions for outcome 3 SYSTEM NARRATIVE

	Positive outcome (SYNA)			Negative outcome (~SYNA)		
Conditions	Consistency	Coverage	RoN	Consistency	Coverage	RoN
ECON	0.817	0.572	0.638	0.552	0.582	0.643
DEM	0.740	0.642	0.766	0.458	0.599	0.745
TRADI	0.721	0.510	0.612	0.618	0.659	0.694
GOV	0.821	0.666	0.755	0.359	0.437	0.647
PRESS	0.757	0.657	0.774	0.458	0.599	0.745
~ECON	0.403	0.374	0.679	0.594	0.830	0.886
~DEM	0.538	0.397	0.586	0.726	0.808	0.816
~TRADI	0.518	0.474	0.711	0.540	0.744	0.835
~GOV	0.306	0.241	0.561	0.726	0.859	0.873
~PRESS	0.538	0.397	0.586	0.738	0.821	0.826

Necessary conditions should meet the thresholds for consistency (0.9), coverage (0.6) and relevance of necessity (0.5). As such, no individual conditions were found to be necessary.

Resulting configurations of SUIN conditions

Outcome 1: IDNA

```
IDNA                inclN  RoN   covN
   ----------------------------------------
1  DEM + GOV        0.955  0.632 0.638
2  GOV + PRESS      0.968  0.616 0.633
   ----------------------------------------
```

Negation of outcome 1: ~IDNA

```
~IDNA                          inclN  RoN   covN
   ------------------------------------------------------
1  ~GOV + ~PRESS               0.906  0.692 0.787
2  ~ECON + ~DEM + ~GOV         0.901  0.676 0.777
3  ~DEM + ~GOV + ~TRADI        0.919  0.640 0.766
   ------------------------------------------------------
```

Outcome 2: ISNA

```
ISNA                inclN  RoN   covN
----------------------------------------
1  DEM + GOV        0.966  0.629 0.633
2  GOV + PRESS      0.985  0.616 0.632
----------------------------------------
```

Negation of outcome 2: ~ISNA

~ISNA	inclN	RoN	covN
1 ~GOV + ~PRESS	0.920	0.716	0.810
2 ~ECON + ~GOV + ~TRADI	0.905	0.743	0.820

Outcome 3: SYNA

No SUIN configurations

5. Analysis of sufficiency (Enhanced Standard Analysis)

Truth table outcome 1 (IDNA)

TTIDG5ESA

	ECON	DEM	GOV	TRADI	PRESS	OUT	n	incl	PRI	cases
23	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	11
5	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0.875	0.660	2
32	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	0.855	0.766	6,7,8,10
30	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0.854	0.333	9
7	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0.654	0.118	1
18	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.605	0.067	12
19	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.570	0.053	3
2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.546	0.055	4
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.432	0.072	5,13
3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0			
4	0	0	0	1	1	0	0			
6	0	0	1	0	1	0	0			
9	0	1	0	0	0	0	0			
11	0	1	0	1	0	0	0			
14	0	1	1	0	1	0	0			
17	1	0	0	0	0	0	0			
20	1	0	0	1	1	0	0			
25	1	1	0	0	0	0	0			
27	1	1	0	1	0	0	0			
8	0	0	1	1	1	?	0			
10	0	1	0	0	1	?	0			
12	0	1	0	1	1	?	0			
13	0	1	1	0	0	?	0			
15	0	1	1	1	0	?	0			
16	0	1	1	1	1	?	0			
21	1	0	1	0	0	?	0			
22	1	0	1	0	1	?	0			
24	1	0	1	1	1	?	0			
26	1	1	0	0	1	?	0			
28	1	1	0	1	1	?	0			
29	1	1	1	0	0	?	0			
31	1	1	1	1	0	?	0			

Enhanced sufficient solutions for IDNA

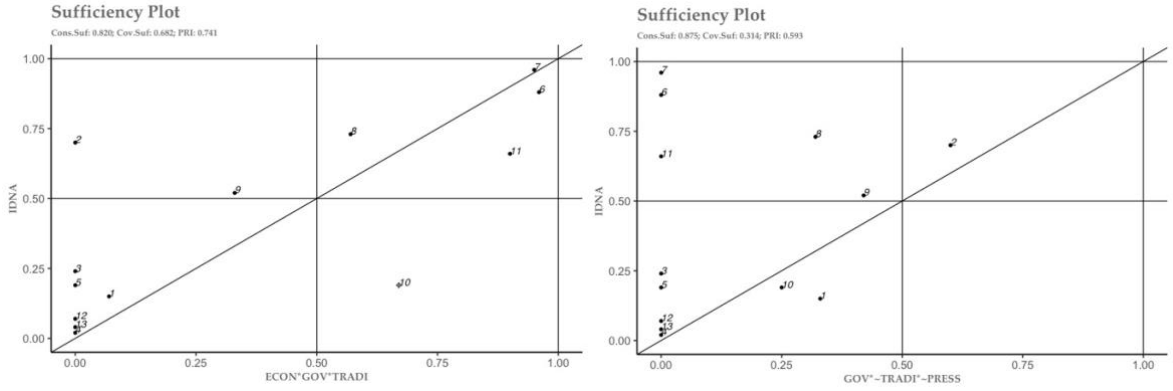
Solution	*Consistency*	*Coverage*	*PRI*
Conservative sol.	0.852	0.712	0.758
Parsimonious sol.	0.819	0.826	0.725
Intermediate sol.	**0.819**	**0.826**	**0.725**

Bold for selected reported solution.

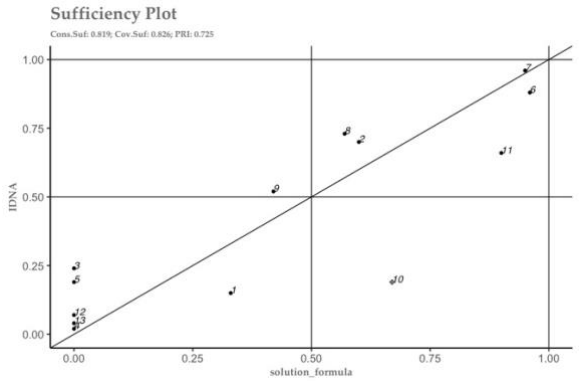
Reported Intermediate Enhanced Configurations IDNA (all conditions in presence)

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	ECON*GOV*TRADI	0.820	0.741	0.682	11; 6,7,8,10
2	GOV*~TRADI*~PRESS	0.875	0.593	0.314	2
	M1	0.819	0.725	0.826	

IDNA (ESA, intermediate) plots



(paths 1 and 2)



(intermediate solution, total)

Truth table negation of outcome 1 (~IDNA)

```
TTIDG5NEGESA
=====================================================
   ECON DEM GOV TRADI PRESS OUT n incl   PRI   cases
-----------------------------------------------------
19  1    0   0    1     0    1  1 0.976 0.947    3
2   0    0   0    0     1    1  1 0.974 0.945    4
18  1    0   0    0     1    1  1 0.971 0.933    12
1   0    0   0    0     0    1  2 0.956 0.928   5,13
7   0    0   1    1     0    1  1 0.954 0.882    1
30  1    1   1    0     1    0  1 0.883 0.467    9
23  1    0   1    1     0    0  1 0.760   0      11
5   0    0   1    0     0    0  1 0.757 0.340    2
32  1    1   1    1     1    0  4 0.527 0.234 6,7,8,10
6   0    0   1    0     1    0  0
8   0    0   1    1     1    0  0
14  0    1   1    0     1    0  0
15  0    1   1    1     0    0  0
16  0    1   1    1     1    0  0
22  1    0   1    0     1    0  0
24  1    0   1    1     1    0  0
29  1    1   1    0     0    0  0
31  1    1   1    1     0    0  0
3   0    0   0    1     0    ?  0
4   0    0   0    1     1    ?  0
9   0    1   0    0     0    ?  0
10  0    1   0    0     1    ?  0
11  0    1   0    1     0    ?  0
12  0    1   0    1     1    ?  0
13  0    1   1    0     0    ?  0
17  1    0   0    0     0    ?  0
20  1    0   0    1     1    ?  0
21  1    0   1    0     0    ?  0
25  1    1   0    0     0    ?  0
26  1    1   0    0     1    ?  0
27  1    1   0    1     0    ?  0
28  1    1   0    1     1    ?  0
-----------------------------------------------------
```

Enhanced sufficient solutions for ~IDNA

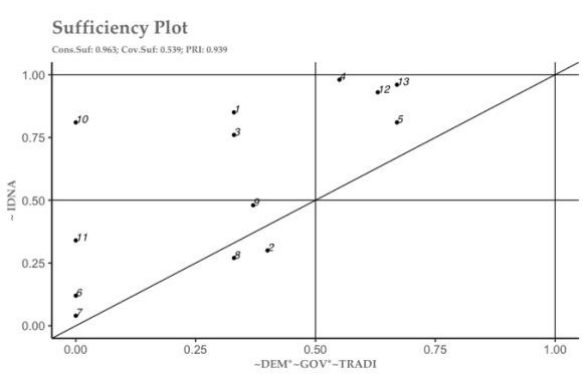
Solution	*Consistency*	*Coverage*	*PRI*
Conservative sol.	0.965	0.616	0.943
Parsimonious sol.	0.887	0.825	0.846
Intermediate sol.	**0.968**	**0.676**	**0.951**

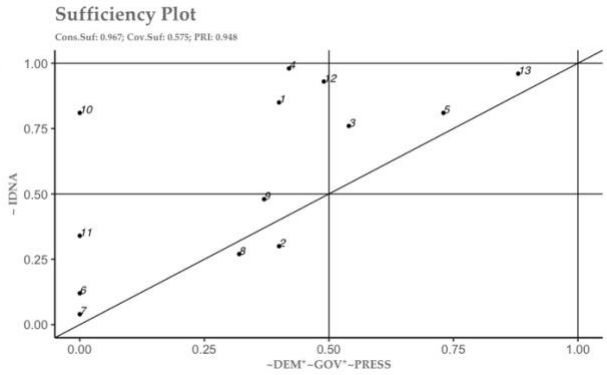
Bold for selected reported solution.

Reported Intermediate Enhanced Configurations ~IDNA (all conditions in absence)

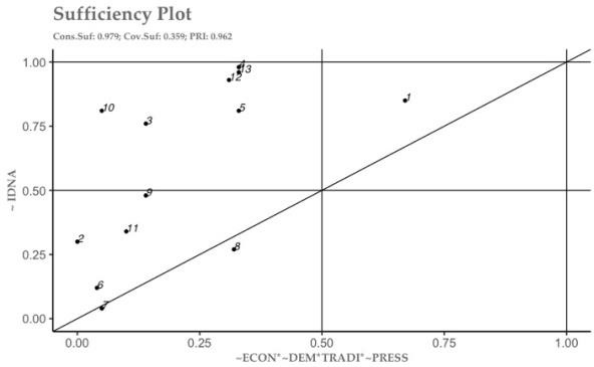
Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI	0.963	0.939	0.539	5,13;4,12
2	~DEM*~GOV*~PRESS	0.967	0.948	0.575	5,13; 3
3	~ECON*~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS	0.979	0.962	0.359	1
	M1	0.968	0.951	0.676	

~IDNA (ESA, intermediate) plots

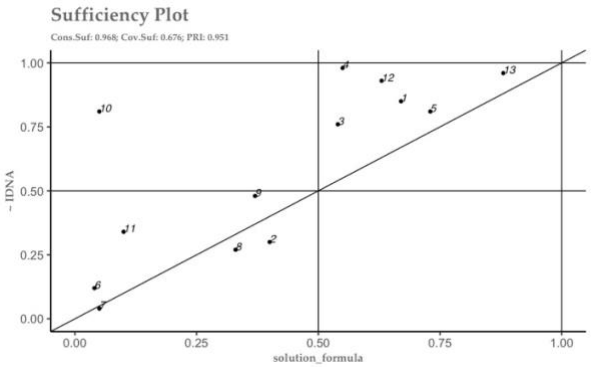




(paths 1 and 2)



(path 3)



(intermediate solution, total)

Truth table outcome 2 (ISNA)

```
TTISG5ESA
=================================================
   ECON DEM GOV TRADI PRESS OUT n incl   PRI   cases
-------------------------------------------------
32  1    1   1    1     1    1  4 0.922 0.873 6,7,8,10
5   0    0   1    0     0    1  1 0.910 0.667    2
23  1    0   1    1     0    1  1 0.871 0.532    11
7   0    0   1    1     0    0  1 0.700 0.170    1
30  1    1   1    0     1    0  1 0.672 0.167    9
2   0    0   0    0     1    0  1 0.621 0.095    4
18  1    0   0    0     1    0  1 0.500 0.079    12
1   0    0   0    0     0    0  2 0.482 0.043   5,13
19  1    0   0    1     0    0  1 0.473 0.068    3
3   0    0   0    1     0    0  0
4   0    0   0    1     1    0  0
6   0    0   1    0     1    0  0
9   0    1   0    0     0    0  0
11  0    1   0    1     0    0  0
13  0    1   1    0     0    0  0
14  0    1   1    0     1    0  0
17  1    0   0    0     0    0  0
20  1    0   0    1     1    0  0
25  1    1   0    0     0    0  0
27  1    1   0    1     0    0  0
8   0    0   1    1     1    ?  0
10  0    1   0    0     1    ?  0
12  0    1   0    1     1    ?  0
15  0    1   1    1     0    ?  0
16  0    1   1    1     1    ?  0
21  1    0   1    0     0    ?  0
22  1    0   1    0     1    ?  0
24  1    0   1    1     1    ?  0
26  1    1   0    0     1    ?  0
28  1    1   0    1     1    ?  0
29  1    1   1    0     0    ?  0
31  1    1   1    1     0    ?  0
-------------------------------------------------
```

Enhanced sufficient solutions for ISNA

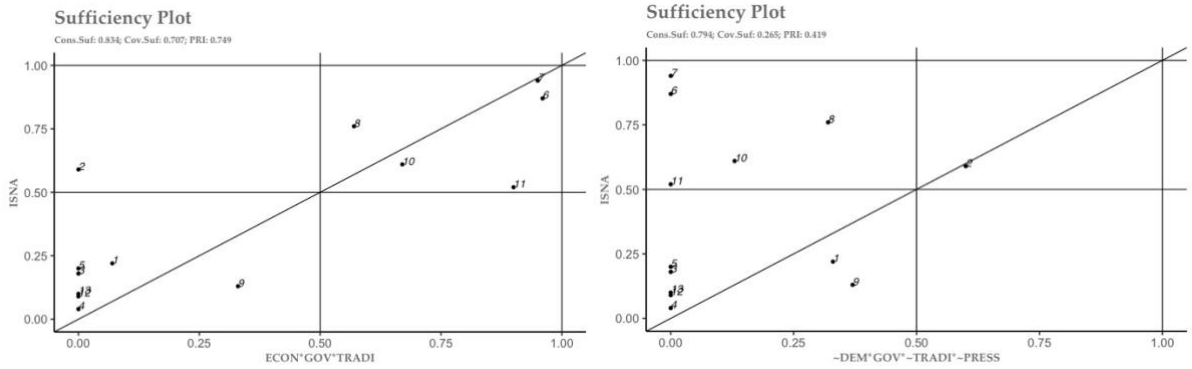
Solution	*Consistency*	*Coverage*	*PRI*
Conservative sol.	0.911	0.775	0.834
Parsimonious sol.	0.832	0.848	0.726
Intermediate sol.	**0.832**	**0.848**	**0.726**

Bold for selected reported solution.

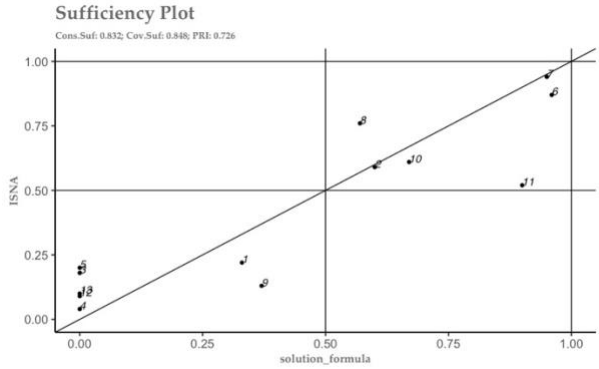
Reported Intermediate Enhanced Configurations ISNA (all conditions in presence)

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	ECON*GOV*TRADI	0.834	0.749	0.707	11; 6,7,8,10
2	*~DEM *GOV*~TRADI*~PRESS*	*0.794*	*0.419*	*0.265*	*2*
	M1	0.832	0.726	0.848	

ISNA (ESA, intermediate) plots



(individual paths 1 and 2)



(intermediate solution, total)

Truth table negation of outcome 2 (~ISNA)

```
TTISG5NEGESA
=================================================
   ECON DEM GOV TRADI PRESS OUT n incl   PRI   cases
-------------------------------------------------
1   0    0   0    0     0    1  2 0.976 0.957   5,13
19  1    0   0    1     0    1  1 0.961 0.932    3
2   0    0   0    0     1    1  1 0.960 0.905    4
18  1    0   0    0     1    1  1 0.957 0.921    12
7   0    0   1    1     0    1  1 0.938 0.830    1
30  1    1   1    0     1    0  1 0.934 0.833    9
23  1    0   1    1     0    0  1 0.842 0.426    11
5   0    0   1    0     0    0  1 0.812 0.308    2
32  1    1   1    1     1    0  4 0.443 0.098 6,7,8,10
6   0    0   1    0     1    0  0
8   0    0   1    1     1    0  0
13  0    1   1    0     0    0  0
14  0    1   1    0     1    0  0
16  0    1   1    1     1    0  0
22  1    0   1    0     1    0  0
24  1    0   1    1     1    0  0
31  1    1   1    1     0    0  0
3   0    0   0    1     0    ?  0
4   0    0   0    1     1    ?  0
9   0    1   0    0     0    ?  0
10  0    1   0    0     1    ?  0
11  0    1   0    1     0    ?  0
12  0    1   0    1     1    ?  0
15  0    1   1    1     0    ?  0
17  1    0   0    0     0    ?  0
20  1    0   0    1     1    ?  0
21  1    0   1    0     0    ?  0
25  1    1   0    0     0    ?  0
26  1    1   0    0     1    ?  0
27  1    1   0    1     0    ?  0
28  1    1   0    1     1    ?  0
29  1    1   1    0     0    ?  0
-------------------------------------------------
```

Enhanced sufficient solutions for ~ISNA

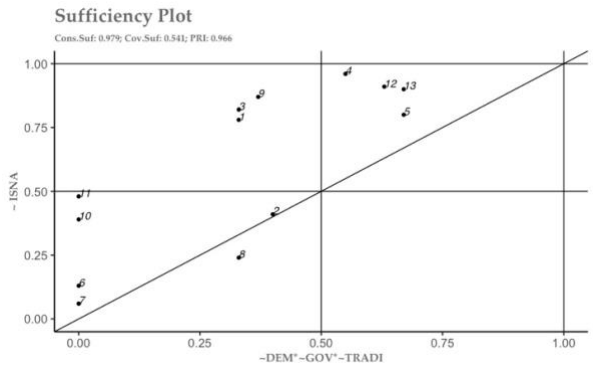
Solution	*Consistency*	*Coverage*	*PRI*
Conservative sol.	0.982	0.618	0.970
Parsimonious sol.	0.892	0.818	0.854
Intermediate sol.	**0.983**	**0.677**	**0.974**

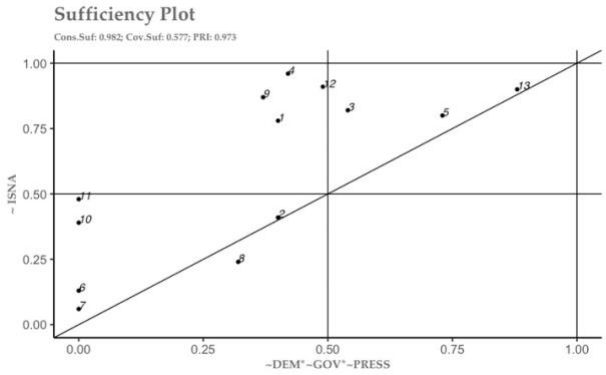
Bold for selected reported solution.

Reported Intermediate Enhanced Configurations ~ISNA (all conditions in absence)

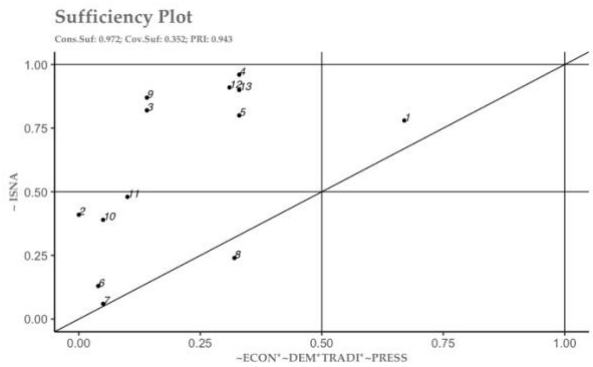
Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI	0.979	0.966	0.541	5,13; 4; 12
2	~DEM*~GOV*~PRESS	0.982	0.973	0.577	5,13; 3
3	~ECON*~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS	0.972	0.943	0.352	1
	M1	0.9683	0.974	0.677	

~ISNA (ESA, intermediate) plots

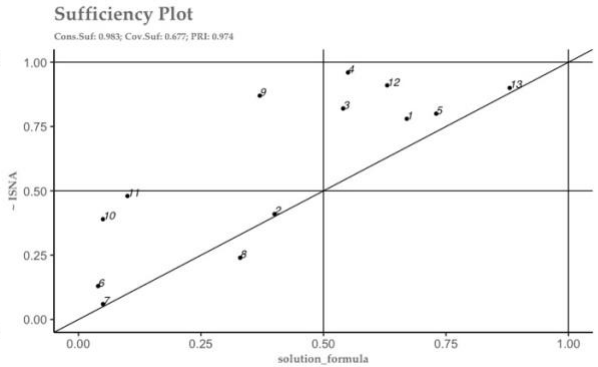




(individual paths 1 and 2)



(individual path 3)



(intermediate solution, total)

Truth table outcome 3 (SYNA)

TT_SYESA

	ECON	DEM	GOV	TRADI	PRESS	OUT	n	incl	PRI	cases
30	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	9
32	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	0.913	0.863	6,7,8,10
5	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0.826	0.675	2
23	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0.760	0.438	11
7	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0.600	0	1
18	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.529	0.182	12
19	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.483	0.144	3
2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0.463	0.062	4
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.382	0.132	5,13
9	0	1	0	0	0	0	0			
10	0	1	0	0	1	0	0			
11	0	1	0	1	0	0	0			
12	0	1	0	1	1	0	0			
25	1	1	0	0	0	0	0			
26	1	1	0	0	1	0	0			
27	1	1	0	1	0	0	0			
28	1	1	0	1	1	0	0			
3	0	0	0	1	0	?	0			
4	0	0	0	1	1	?	0			
6	0	0	1	0	1	?	0			
8	0	0	1	1	1	?	0			
13	0	1	1	0	0	?	0			
14	0	1	1	0	1	?	0			
15	0	1	1	1	0	?	0			
16	0	1	1	1	1	?	0			
17	1	0	0	0	0	?	0			
20	1	0	0	1	1	?	0			
21	1	0	1	0	0	?	0			
22	1	0	1	0	1	?	0			
24	1	0	1	1	1	?	0			
29	1	1	1	0	0	?	0			
31	1	1	1	1	0	?	0			

Enhanced sufficient solutions for SYNA

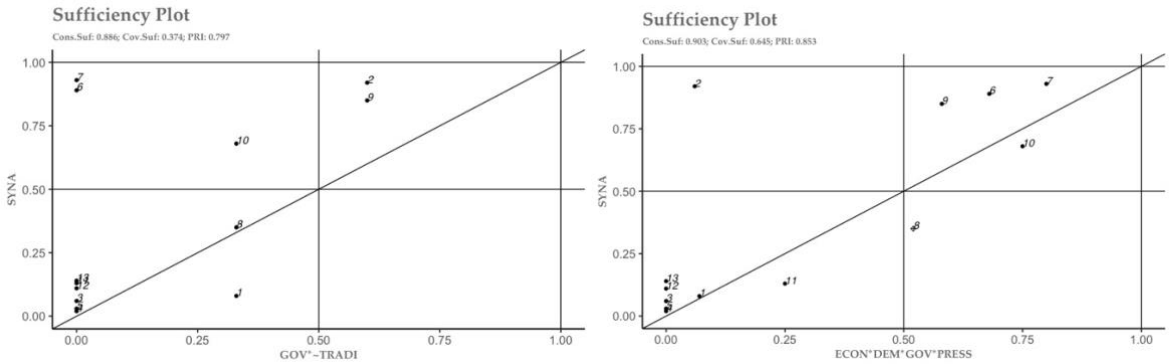
Solution	*Consistency*	*Coverage*	*PRI*
Conservative sol.	0.865	0.751	0.811
Parsimonious sol.	Model ambiguity	Model ambiguity	Model ambiguity
Intermediate sol.	**0.865**	**0.755**	**0.812**

Bold for selected reported solution.

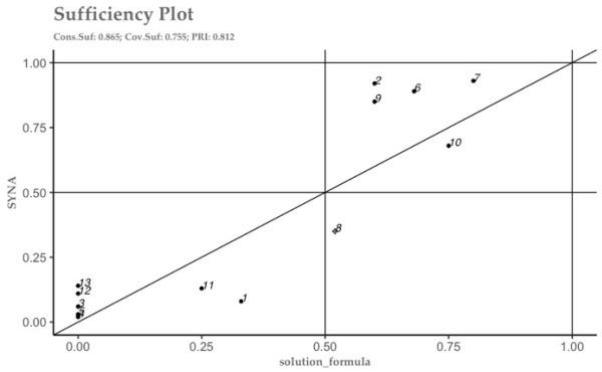
Reported Intermediate Enhanced Configurations SYNA (all conditions in presence)

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	GOV*~TRADI	0.886	0.797	0.374	2; 9
2	ECON*DEM*GOV*PRESS	0.903	0.853	0.645	9; 6,7,8,10
	M1	0.865	0.812	0.755	

SYNA (ESA, intermediate) plots



(individual paths 1 and 2)



(intermediate solution, total)

Truth table negation of outcome 3 (~SYNA)

	ECON	DEM	GOV	TRADI	PRESS	OUT	n	incl	PRI	cases
7	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
2	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0.965	0.938	4
19	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0.913	0.856	3
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0.906	0.868	5,13
18	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0.895	0.818	12
23	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0.813	0.562	11
30	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0.679	0	9
5	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.639	0.325	2
32	1	1	1	1	1	0	4	0.449	0.137	6,7,8,10
3	0	0	0	1	0	?	0			
4	0	0	0	1	1	?	0			
6	0	0	1	0	1	?	0			
8	0	0	1	1	1	?	0			
9	0	1	0	0	0	?	0			
10	0	1	0	0	1	?	0			
11	0	1	0	1	0	?	0			
12	0	1	0	1	1	?	0			
13	0	1	1	0	0	?	0			
14	0	1	1	0	1	?	0			
15	0	1	1	1	0	?	0			
16	0	1	1	1	1	?	0			
17	1	0	0	0	0	?	0			
20	1	0	0	1	1	?	0			
21	1	0	1	0	0	?	0			
22	1	0	1	0	1	?	0			
24	1	0	1	1	1	?	0			
25	1	1	0	0	0	?	0			
26	1	1	0	0	1	?	0			
27	1	1	0	1	0	?	0			
28	1	1	0	1	1	?	0			
29	1	1	1	0	0	?	0			
31	1	1	1	1	0	?	0			

Enhanced sufficient solutions for ~SYNA

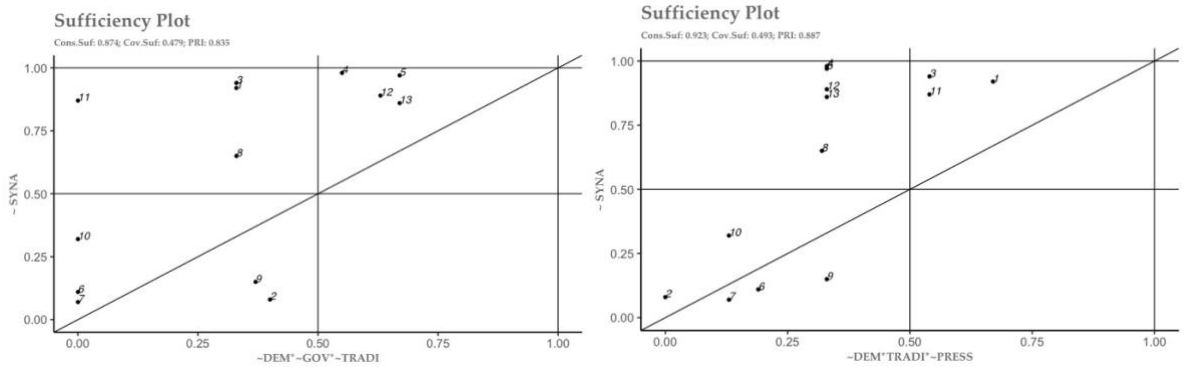
Solution	*Consistency*	*Coverage*	*PRI*
Conservative sol.	0.879	0.634	0.838
Parsimonious sol.	0.872	0.721	0.834
Intermediate sol.	**0.883**	**0.658**	**0.845**

Bold for selected reported solution.

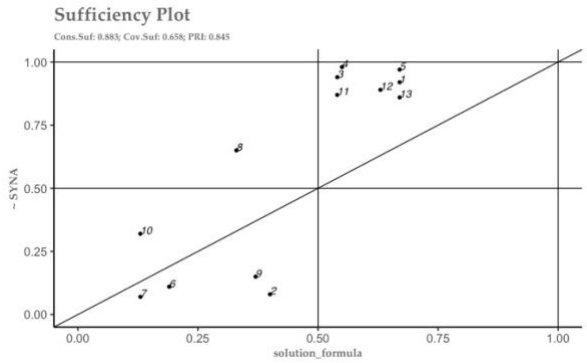
Reported Intermediate Enhanced Configurations ~SYNA (all conditions in absence)

Path	*Suf. Conditions*	*inclS*	*PRI*	*covS*	*cases*
1	~DEM*~GOV*~TRADI	0.874	0.835	0.479	5,13; 4; 12
2	~DEM*TRADI*~PRESS	0.923	0.887	0.493	1; 3; 11
	M1	0.883	0.845	0.658	

~SYNA (ESA, intermediate) plots



(individual paths 1 and 2)



(intermediate solution, total)