Understanding EU crisis diplomacy in the European Neighbourhood:
Strategic Narratives and Perceptions of the EU in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine

Abstract
This Special Issue seeks to better understand the role of communication and perception in EU crisis diplomacy. In a recent Special Issue in this journal, Catarina Kinnvall, Ian Manners and Jennifer Mitzen argue that, ‘...the greatest security challenge facing people across Europe is not physical, despite the threats of Putin and ISIS, but is a sense of fear and anxiety over their daily lives’ (2018: 249). We take an interdisciplinary approach to widen the scope of studies on European security and offer new avenues for further research into how citizens in the EU’s neighbourhood understand the security challenges they face and the role the EU plays in addressing these. Through so doing, we aim to bring theoretical and methodological innovation to understanding the role of the EU as an external actor.

The European Union (EU) Global Strategy outlines the EU’s foreign policy priorities to engage more effectively with the EU’s neighbourhood. Ukraine, Israel and Palestine are currently embroiled in conflicts set in differing contexts which threaten the EU’s eastern and southern edges. It is critical that the EU understands the narratives and perceptions of the EU that circulate in these volatile strategic neighbours – neighbours who challenge Europe’s foreign policy and its security approaches in the region. This Special Issue will examine external perceptions of the EU, as well as broader narratives of the EU as a diplomatic and security actor, in conflicted societies. In focus are external, “outside looking in” perspectives on the EU as a conflict diplomacy actor. The intensity of the two conflicts makes EU diplomacy much more critical. The Special Issue presents empirical findings which have the potential to help guide and revise EU diplomacy towards its neighbours.

The articles contained within this Special Issue aim to make an innovative contribution to the study of EU external relations with its immediate neighbours. This originality stems from the manner in which the articles are informed by strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 2017) as a means to contribute to the field of EU external perceptions studies (for reviews of EU perceptions studies see Lucarelli 2014; Chaban and Holland 2014, 2015, 2018; and Elgström and Chaban 2015). We define strategic narratives as ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon et al. 2013, p.2). Drawing on Kenneth Burke’s work we examine the interaction between agency and
narrative—how people use language to act (1966)—in this case, how the EU draws on narratives to exert influence in the neighbourhood in the context of violent ongoing conflicts. Narratives are central to how political actors seek to influence others. Use of narrative by powerful actors is seen by some scholars as connected to the ability to coerce others to do their will in international affairs, as the work of Janice Bially Mattern (2004) has demonstrated. Narrative analysis also helps explain how political actors forge agreement and cope with the complexity of international negotiations (Epstein 2008; Hajer 1995). Public diplomacy scholars have highlighted the importance of narrative in the strategies of states to influence others (Brown 2005; Melissen 2005; Pamment 2014). We also see a focus on the role of narrative in military conflict (Betz 2015; Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2015) and how narratives projected by states shape responses to crises (Lang 2006; Miskimmon 2012). This body of strategic narrative studies connects with scholars working on EU external perceptions research which has made an important contribution to how we understand the reception of narratives in third countries (see, for example, Holland and Chaban 2011, also Chaban and Holland 2008; 2014; Chaban, Knodt, and Verdun 2017). It is this link to understanding how narratives are perceived by others which this Special Issue wishes to explore in detail and to demonstrate its contribution to policy debate.

In order to provoke such policy debate, the Special Issue explores how coherent is the EU’s projection of the international system and its role in the neighbourhood, its identity as an actor, and its response to policy issues on the ground in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine. The three locations are currently embroiled in conflicts set in differing contexts which threaten the EU’s eastern and southern edges. It is critical that Europe diagnoses and understands perceptions of the EU in these volatile strategic neighbours and tracks expectations. The Special Issue also assesses views and narrations of the EU from the two conflicted regions by tracing audience reception. It is one of the first attempts in the field of EU external perceptions to employ a strategic narrative approach to conceptualise and empirically trace how the formation, projection and reception of EU narratives are part of broader circuits of communication through which EU might be recognised, legitimised, and exert influence.

Articles in this Special Issue are based on original research undertaken by a multinational three-year study within the Jean Monnet Network “Crisis, Conflict and Critical Diplomacy: EU Perceptions in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine” (2015-18). Articles feature systematic
empirical analysis of EU perceptions in the two regions in leading news media, among national elites and among university educated youth. Informed by an original methodology in EU perceptions studies, the Special Issue demonstrates a set of innovative methods that allow us to track and measure images and perceptions of the EU as a conflict diplomacy and security actor. The Special Issue benefits from a genuinely multidisciplinary set of scholars whose work emerges from radically distinct research traditions but intersects on questions of communication and influence.

This Special Issue is the first major collaborative empirical study of two significant approaches to the research of influence today guiding scholars in Diplomatic Studies, EU Studies and International Relations. It brings together EU external perceptions studies with its focus on images, frames and cognition, with strategic narrative, with its focus on narrative sequence and creating shared experience of the past, the present and the future. The Special Issue also offers the first large-scale empirical application of strategic narrative. There have to date been only few monographs on the use of strategic narratives in international affairs (Krebs 2015; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle 2013), collaborative volumes on narratives and conflict (de Graaf, Dimitriu and Ringmose 2015; Chaban et al. 2017), and multi-author studies across a range of IR issues (Miskimmon et al. 2017). This Special Issue, emerging from original empirical research, provides the first systematic testing of the two approaches in IR and EU Studies focusing on the contexts of EU interactions with its Eastern and Southern neighbours involved in violent conflicts. The overall aim of the research is to both develop our conceptual understanding of EU diplomacy in its neighbourhood and to track empirically the level of the EU’s perceived influence in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine, each embroiled in conflicts that challenge EU foreign policy and security approaches.

In this brief introduction to the Special Issue we detail how the contributing articles move the field of EU perception studies forward. This area within EU foreign policy studies is under-theorised, not least due to its multidisciplinary background. To address this challenge, our Special Issue uses strategic narrative as an encompassing theoretical approach that allows us to link various theories that have been employed in the field of EU external perceptions and EU foreign policy analysis. Strategic narratives are understood as both a cyclical progression of three interwoven processes of formation of narratives, projection of narratives and reception of narratives, and in terms of narrative type – identity narratives, policy narratives and narratives of the international system (Miskimmon et al. 2013). In
addition, the research presented here responds to Ian Manners and Philomena Murray’s call in which they advocated that, ‘Research pathways could usefully develop an examination of how, and by whom, many of the EU narratives are formulated; why and when they are projected; and how they are perceived by their recipients, both within the EU and in an international context’ (Manners and Murray 2016: 199).

The articles presented here are based on original data sets. Firstly, elite interviews of policy makers in Brussels were conducted focusing on their perception of the EU's crisis management role in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. Secondly, and in addition to this, we conducted interviews of media, political, economic and civil society elites in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine to uncover their perceptions of the EU’s role in their countries which face ongoing violent conflicts. Thirdly, we conducted an extensive analysis of the media reporting of the EU in each of the three locations. Finally, we extracted dominant narrative statements from each of these data sets as a basis to survey citizens in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. This final step was designed to understand how citizens in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine received and interpreted narratives of the EU projected by elites and in the media.

The articles in this Special Issue engage with these overarching themes in a series of complementary ways. Connecting strategic narrative to perceptions research, the Special Issue elaborates and synergises these two approaches. Our systematic study of perceptions offered by the contributions to this issue seeks to add to our understanding of narrative reception. Whilst the EU projects and communicates its narratives on systemic, identity and issue-specific levels, a number of contributions to this issue dissect the reception of such narratives (**** on the reception of the Normative Power Europe narrative in Israel and Palestine; **** et al. on the reception of the civil society narrative in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine).

Our Special Issue also brings coherence to the multidisciplinary set of scholars of strategic narrative and perceptions via close attention to the concepts of frames and perspectives. These two concepts-cum-phenomena are explored through several of the papers (**** and **** on narrating events in Ukraine traced through elite and youth opinion and media narratives of the EU; **** on multimodal metaphorical categorisations and their role in shaping narratives of EU-Ukraine relations; **** on Ukraine’s perceptions of Self, the EU
and Russia through intertextual construction of the narratives in media; ****, **** and **** on views from journalists and media frames and narratives created by them in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine). As such, the Special Issue moves forward our understanding of influence in European Studies and IR, and in the studies of security of Europe. It provides novel insights into more mainstream approaches like Normative Power Europe (article by ****), institutionalism, learning and persuasion (article by **** et al.) before offering a more multidisciplinary and communication-focused set of theoretical approaches that get at and evidence actual meaning-making practices in those three locations, that illuminate the mechanisms by which perception and potential narrative influence actually work. Importantly, this Introduction explicitly stresses that systematic empirically-informed attention to perceptions and their role in the reception of narrative allows us to critically re-assess the dominance of Euro-and EU-centric views both in the practice of EU foreign policy as well as in its scholarship, including critical analyses of the EU as a security and conflict diplomacy actor.

Finally, we highlight how this Special Issue contributes to the development of the concept of strategic narrative. Multimodality addressed in the papers by **** and **** offer analysis that brings visuality more explicitly into the study of narrative. Despite the widespread intuition that ‘a picture paints a thousand words’ and rare works on visuality and narrative in IR by, for example Crilley (2015; Bliker, 2018), this has not as yet been systematically studied. Strategic narrative studies also rarely conceptualise and study the role, motives and intentionality of the narrators – those who create and disseminate narratives. Our Special Issue tackles this deficit and offers a paper by ****, **** and **** that examines perceptions of Ukrainian, Israeli and Palestinian newsmakers and information gatekeepers – of the EU and of EU news making. This article explores the link between the views and perspectives of those who communicate the EU to local audiences and narratives created and circulated in given societies through influential news media – traditional and new. Further to this, the paper by **** and **** explores the contribution of social media to the creation and dissemination of narratives about the EU and its relation with neighbours experiencing conflict.

In short, our synthesis of strategic narrative and perception frameworks moves both fields forward, and we would draw attention to particular advances in our understanding of audience reception, of frames and perspectives, and of the role of visuality and other modes
of communication. The reader, we hope, may go further still and find additional concepts and practices of interest across the range of articles.

**Structure of the Special Issue**

This Special Issue features nine articles. It starts with an introductory article that outlines the logic and rationale behind this collection and details its theoretical background. This is followed by seven articles that present readers with case-studies which conceptualise and test a link between perceptions and strategic narratives using datasets generated by mixed methods: media content analysis, elite face-to-face interviews, and focus group opinion survey with the tools of the Q-Sort method. The final article is a concluding reflection on the added value of the studies of perceptions and narratives for the practice of EU foreign policy and policy debate on security in the EU’s neighourhood.

In the article *Narratives of the EU in Israel/Palestine – and in the EU: Narrative “stickiness” and the formation of expectations*, **** and **** argue that analysis of narrative can help identify the expectations actors hold about each other in international relations. This article triangulates a mix of elite interviews, media content analysis and an original Q-sort public opinion methodology to map the presence of narratives about EU relations in different sections of Israeli and Palestinian society and how narratives about the EU’s neighbourhood crises (here, Ukraine and Israel/Palestine) are understood inside the EU, taking Germany and Lithuania as cases. The authors aim to identify the narrative “terrain” or conditions that the EU communicates to and with. They find a broad recognition that the EU’s capacity to act in international relations is necessary but limited in the face of greater challenges in the international system, and indeed, within the EU itself. This suggests a shift from Hill’s (1993) conception of the ‘capabilities-expectations gap’ which dogged the emergence of the EU as a foreign policy actor in the 1990s and 2000s. Participants’ narratives reflect the growing pragmatism in the EU’s foreign policy outlined in the European Global Strategy. Their second finding is that there is little evidence that young people radically reshape the narratives they encounter in their public spheres. Nevertheless, some important divisions emerge – particularly in Germany -- that pose problems for how EU policymakers can communicate consistently without dismaying some citizens. The article argues that for EU communication to have credibility, it must work with the grain of national publics’ longstanding and “sticky” narratives of the international system and the character of states within it.
in his article *Normative Power Europe and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The EU’s Peacebuilding Narrative meets Local Narratives* engages with the concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE). Building on insights from strategic narrative theory this article conceives the EU’s normative power in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a discourse that articulates its views of the international system, its identity as a peacebuilder, and its positions on specific conflict issues. The EU’s normative power narrative interacts with - and is perceived through - local narratives of the parties to the conflict, which show diverging degrees of narrative alignment with the EU. Highlighting the importance of local narratives as ‘cultural filters’, it argues that the EU’s normative power narrative on peacebuilding is interpreted differently by the conflict-parties, with diverging local narratives favoring negative images of EU normative power and high narrative alignment with the EU privileging more positive views. Yet, the case of Palestine also shows that high narrative alignment with the EU may encourage (unreasonably) high expectations, which contrast starkly with the perceived realities of EU foreign policymaking.

****, ****, **** and ****co-authored the article *Learning’ narratives of the EU’s external perceptions in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine: a critical approach towards the implementation of the EU’s external governance among local civil society elites*. In it, they argue that the EU’s external governance is gaining broad popularity as an approach that provides an enhanced mechanism for the communication of EU norms to the outside world. Different to understanding successful Europeanisation through integration by means of conditionality and socialisation, a focus on external governance introduces communicative rationality into the framework of Europeanisation (Börzel & Risse, 2009). Due to the fact that the EU’s impact on substantial democratisation in third countries is often limited by domestic constraints (Youngs, 2009), deeper socialisation through persuasion and ‘learning’ (Lavenex, 2008) is understood as a means of advancing the promotion of EU norms in the neighbourhood. By tracing the ‘learning’ or persuasive component of the EU’s external perceptions in its Eastern (Ukraine) and Southern (Israel and Palestine) neighbourhoods, this paper identifies degrees and forms of “receptiveness to the Union’s ideals” (Haukkala, 2008) through the prism of good governance. The article thereby sheds light on how EU initiatives are perceived in the context of normative learning in selected locations. Since “civil society empowerment” is a top priority in the good governance approach (Lavenex, 2008) and given
the specific attention that the European Neighbourhood Policy draws towards the support of civil society in the EU’s neighbourhood, this paper focuses on ‘learning’ narratives among civil society elites in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine as the key targets of EU assistance and primary recipients of EU norms.

****, **** and **** in their article Narrators’ Perspectives: Communicating the EU in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine in times of conflict add innovatively to the conceptualisation and further theorisation of its reception stage in the strategic narrative model. Newsmakers occupy a special place in it, possessing skills, networks and tools to exert power and control of information flows. This systematic analysis of newsmakers’ opinions also contributes to the studies of external perceptions which typically overlook creators of the mediated texts as a driving force in framing and disseminating EU images outside the EU’s borders. The article thus aims to answer the leading question -- How do newsmakers perceive the EU and what shapes their perceptions? In order to explain perceptions, the authors assume political, ideational, business/financial and professional pressures and constraints to be among main factors to influence EU perceptions, and in different intensities. They also assume additional intervening factors to influence EU perceptions: seeing the EU as 1) an actor on the global stage (global filter); 2) a player in the respective region (regional filter); and 3) a partner/interlocutor for the locations in question (local filter). Finally, temporal filter prescribes to assess EU images as influenced by short-, medium- and long-term historical impacts such as conflicts.

**** presents her article Cognitive metaphors of Ukraine's course of development and creation of a strategic macronarrative. Informed by strategic narrative theorisation, cognitive metaphor theory and multimodal metaphor theory, this article analyses textual and pictorial instantiations of cognitive metaphors used to describe and explain the trajectory of Ukraine’s civilizational future and form a particular narrative of this movement. Both narrative and cognitive metaphor are considered as tools for navigating experience and serving to construe its subjective images. The study focuses on the ways these tools were used by Ukrainian print media (eight influential outlets) in 2016. The outcomes demonstrate how a relatively coherent strategic macronarrative of Ukraine's course of development emerges from metaphoric images that survive semiotic mode changes, alternating between the textual and pictorial.
The discussion on the multimodality is continued by **** in her article *Ukrainian Perspectives on the Self, the EU and Russia: An Intersemiotic Analysis of Ukrainian Newspapers.* This article contributes to our understanding of EU-Ukraine relations by examining intersemiotic communication – how words and images, or verbal and photographic semiotic layers and their interaction, combine in the representation of international affairs. The analysis focuses on Ukraine’s perceptions of Self, the EU and Russia as presented in Ukrainian media discourse, namely, in leading Ukrainian social and political newspapers (January-June, 2016). The article presents the results of applying the cognitive theory of perspectives to research the intersemiotic and mental image of Self and the Other in four aspects: a vantage point, direction of scanning, perspectival distance, and perspectival mode. Based on that, the main strategic narrative of the Ukrainian press about the EU is presented, and ways to sustain it and secure the image of the EU are pronounced.

The article *New Media and Strategic Narratives: The Dutch Referendum on Ukraine–EU Association Agreement in Ukrainian and Russian Internet Blogs* by **** and **** analysed two confronting narratives authored by Ukrainian and Russian bloggers who reported the Dutch referendum held on 6 March, 2016 and discussed its outcome. The considered narratives – addressed to the Ukrainian and Russian audiences respectively – are viewed as strategic because they specifically portray the political actors of the referendum “drama”– the Netherlands, the European Union (EU), Ukraine and Russia. These actors are participants of European international relations, and their perceptions of one another are significant for European security at the present time of critical diplomacy. In this paper, information about the Dutch Referendum obtained from the new media texts is regarded as a *narrative-based political concept (NBPC).* It is argued that this concept is non-lineal, i.e. it may have different versions, or images that reflect the narrators’ biased perceptions imposed upon the public. Identification and comparison of such images require a particular methodology. The article exposes the two confronting versions of a strategically relevant political image and develops an original interdisciplinary methodology for its analysis. This article is informed by the ontology theory, employed in cognitive science and cognitive linguistics.
In the concluding article, *A new strategic narrative for Europe?*, **** advocates for European leaders to take greater account of external perceptions in crafting the European Union’s strategic narrative and guiding its actions. The author argues that overlooking perceptions has impaired external policies like the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership. The article concludes that a greater awareness of such perceptions is needed among EU policy- and decision-makers. Account for perceptions and narratives will assist European officials and diplomats in the conduct of informed and nuanced external action.

**Summary**

Strategic narratives and perceptions are important in a time of continuing global disruption and persistent territorial conflicts. Our Special Issue presents to your attention a systematic, empirically informed research into EU images and perceptions that engages innovatively with the theory of strategic narrative. It contributes to the policy debate on the geo-politics of Europe -- in the neighbouring region vis-à-vis the wider world. EU Global Strategy of 2016 formulated and projected a coherent message about new priorities of EU foreign policy. Among those are the EU’s relations with its immediate neighbours and raised security concerns about conflicted neighbours. Through the study of perceptions and narratives, contributions to the Special Issue explore the reception of the EU’s message and its action in the ENP locations challenged by violent conflicts. This perspective offers multifaceted and multidisciplinary insights useful for scholars and practitioners of European security, EU diplomacy and EU relations with Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods.

**References**


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