

# **The Cooperative Narratives of the EU, NATO, and the Netherlands**

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## **Introduction**

Narratives are central to human relations: they compose our society by setting norms that inform or constrain our behavior, and influence how we perceive the world around us.<sup>1</sup> But narratives can also be used to influence how the world perceives a nation. Strategic narratives are used by political entities and actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations.<sup>2</sup> In terms of public diplomacy, actors use media communications in conjunction with interpersonal tools to cultivate favorability among foreign publics.<sup>3</sup>

In the media ecology of the twenty-first century, journalists and political actors are never speaking to a singular, domestic audience. The evolution of the broadcast communication model to the cascading communication model illustrates that change.<sup>4</sup> In a pre-internet era — even in liberal democracies, where the press is free from state control — a dominant news broadcast had the power to shape a national conversation. Ultimately, a government or political elites had more power over the framing of an event or issue.<sup>5</sup> The rise of the internet and social media has transformed audience members into actors, who now have the ability remix-narratives and hack

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<sup>1</sup> Miskimmon, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*.

<sup>2</sup> Miskimmon, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 176.

<sup>3</sup> Entman, “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11.”

<sup>4</sup> Entman, “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11,” 98.

<sup>5</sup> Entman, “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11,” 90.

algorithms to promote a singular framing. The cascading model illustrates how self-reinforcing feedback between governments, political elites, media and the public can enable single-framing to emerge.<sup>6</sup>

The internet has also blurred international borders and challenged language barriers, making narratives open to broad interpretation. Narratives intended for a domestic audience can be re-framed, re-contextualized, or misinterpreted altogether by a foreign audience. Strategic narratives aim to mitigate this effect. In an international context, they are “bounded by prevailing domestic and international understandings and expectations of that state.”<sup>7</sup> These “understandings” are key components of strategic narratives.

Strategic narratives use identity narratives, system narratives, and issue narratives to give meaning to past, present, and future political objectives. Identity narratives illustrate the historic identities of actors in international affairs; system narratives describe structural truths on an international scale; and issue narratives include events and people that make up the landscape of contemporary policy determinations.<sup>8</sup> In order to better understand the Netherlands’ response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022, I will first briefly discuss the relevant narratives of the Netherlands, the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

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<sup>6</sup> Entman, “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11,” 91.

<sup>7</sup> Miskimmon, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Miskimmon, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 7.

## Dutch Identity and System Narratives

The Netherlands has historically served as a humanitarian home for political and religious refugees. Following the Second World War, the country recognized the need for a strategic alliance with its neighboring countries in order to preserve this identity, and became a founding NATO member in 1949 as well as a founding member of multi-lateral European institutions that later became the European Union.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the Maastricht Treaty — which established the modern EU — was signed in the Netherlands' city of Maastricht.<sup>10</sup> The Netherlands is also home to the International Criminal Court, located in the Hague. Despite its size, the Netherlands took on an unusually large role in preserving peace and international order for the new alliance of nations. Below is a chart of the nation's core, relevant narratives:

<b>The Netherlands: Identity</b>	<b>System</b>	<b>Issue</b>
Humanitarian haven	Refugees need a safe haven	Mass migration of Ukrainian refugees
Liberation of the Netherlands post-WWII by the United States and Canada	Tolerance as a universal value	Cooperation with NATO in regards to Ukraine

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<sup>9</sup>“NATO Enlargement & Open Door.”

<sup>10</sup>“Treaty on European Union (TEU) / Maastricht Treaty .”

Pillar and founding member of NATO	Alliance as guarantors of peace	Supporting and enforcing EU sanctions
Cooperative member of the EU	Alliance of democratic nations	Providing military goods to Ukraine
Home of the Hague International Criminal Court	International law should be enforced	Supporting Poland in regards to refugees
Home of the Maastricht Treaty to establish the European Union	Egalitarianism	Withholding troops/additional manpower

### European Union and NATO's Shared Identity and System Narratives

It is important to note that the European Union and NATO are separate entities, although they share similar objectives and several member nations belong to both organizations. The following chart identifies shared narratives of the EU and NATO:

#### Brief History of the European Union (EU)

The end of the Second World War prompted efforts to strengthen political, social, and economic ties as well as military security between Western European nations.<sup>11</sup> In 1951, the

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<sup>11</sup>“History of the European Union 1945-59.”

Treaty of Paris established the European Coal and Steel Community, a regulatory economic body that operated across Europe. Signed by Belgium, France, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, this treaty was a significant step for securing economic relations and peace.<sup>12</sup> Six years later, the six founding nations expanded their economic cooperation into additional sectors: the Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community.<sup>13</sup> These “communities” later served as the bedrock for the European Union.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the push for deeper European integration intensified, and the European Union launched an enlargement process. Europe’s governing bodies — including the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe and Western European Union — were expanded and re-architected to better suit a new political order in Eastern Europe.<sup>14</sup>

The EU was formally established in 1992 by the Maastricht Treaty, signed in Maastricht, NL.<sup>15</sup> The treaty granted EU citizenship to all citizens of member nations; enabled citizens to vote and run for office in European Parliament elections; introduced a central banking system with a common currency, the euro; and implemented cooperative foreign and security policies.<sup>16</sup>

### Brief History of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

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<sup>12</sup>“Treaty of Paris .”

<sup>13</sup>“History of the European Union 1945-59.”

<sup>14</sup>“The End of the Cold War and Geopolitical Change in Europe.”

<sup>15</sup>“After the Berlin Wall: Europe's Struggle to Overcome Its Divisions.”

<sup>16</sup>“After the Berlin Wall: Europe's Struggle to Overcome Its Divisions.”

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was established at the end of the Second World War in response to the threat of the growing Soviet Union and the revival of nationalist militarism experienced in WWI, and to encourage European political integration.<sup>17</sup> When the Berlin wall fell in 1989, marking the end of the Cold War, NATO's mission and alliance persisted. Its additional two goals were still salient: to deter the rise of nationalist militarism, promote collective security for Europe, and encourage democratization of Eastern European nations.<sup>18</sup>

<b>EU and NATO: Identity</b>	<b>System</b>	<b>Issue<sup>19</sup></b>
Alliance of democratic European nations	<p>Strict adherence to the rule of law/international law</p> <p>Peace and security should be promoted</p> <p>Freedom of travel within internal borders</p> <p>Egalitarianism and social justice</p>	<p>Sanctions and restricted measures targeting Russia</p> <p>Humanitarian and non-lethal aid for Ukraine</p> <p>Refugee support</p> <p>Collection of evidence of war crimes</p>

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<sup>17</sup> "A Short History of NATO."

<sup>18</sup> "A Short History of NATO."

<sup>19</sup> "EU Solidarity with Ukraine."

	Promotion of democracy	
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NATO and the EU operate as global peace keepers, and proponents of democracy, the rule of law, and liberal society. Following the Cold War, the EU's primary strategy to stabilize Europe was to expand its membership and encourage neighboring nations to adopt EU values. Although Ukraine is not an EU member, it has repeatedly advocated for its admittance and worked to demonstrate its qualifications. The EU has not been unsupportive of Ukraine's intentions, but has expressed that certain reforms must be put into place before Ukraine has the strength and values of an EU member nation.<sup>20</sup>

Like the EU, NATO promotes democratic values and is committed to peaceful resolutions for international disputes, and does not claim Ukraine as a member nation. Past Ukrainian administrations have not expressed the same enthusiasm to join NATO as President Zelenskyy's has. NATO's resistance to adopt Ukraine into the organization, however, pre-dates Russia's invasion. France and Germany's prior opposition has made it impossible for Ukraine to join — NATO's "open door policy" is contingent on the unanimous agreement of all member nations.<sup>2122</sup> Although the door is still open on the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO,

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<sup>20</sup> Chaban, "The EU's Crisis Diplomacy in Ukraine: The Matrix of Possibilities."

<sup>21</sup> Erlanger, "NATO Allies Oppose Bush on Georgia and Ukraine."

<sup>22</sup>"NATO Enlargement & Open Door."

American officials concede that Ukraine's exclusion strengthens Russia's narrative that Ukraine is not European, it is truly a part of Russia.<sup>23</sup>

There are also diplomatic reasons NATO has not admitted Ukraine under the current dire circumstances. If Ukraine were a NATO member, the alliance would be obligated to defend Ukraine and member nations would have to involve themselves more directly. In addition to providing further funds and supplies, manpower would be required. Moreover, NATO member nations are hesitant to further aggravate Russian President Putin given Russia's proximity to Europe, and Europe's dependence on Russian oil; and American officials are eager to avoid pushing Putin towards a nuclear war.

### **Shared Narratives of the EU, NATO, and the Netherlands**

The Netherlands' narrative is strategically aligned with the narratives of NATO and the EU, and in stark contestation to Russia's narrative. In their official statements, the Dutch government frames the conflict as an illegal act of aggression and an attack on western Europe's democratic values. It is an open contestation of Russia's narrative, which argues that their invasion is a strategic military operation to free the Ukrainian people of a fascist, Nazi regime, and that Russia has an obligation to re-absorb the nation into Russia.

In February, 2022 Dutch Prime Minister of the Kingdom of the Netherlands Mark Rutte met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv to celebrate the upcoming 30th

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<sup>23</sup>Wong, "Nato Won't Let Ukraine Join Soon. Here's Why."



anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relationships between the two countries. Together, they expressed ongoing support for mutual interests. In a joint statement, Prime Minister (PM) Rutte expressed his unwavering support for Ukraine in its efforts to combat Russian aggression at its borders, and both leaders emphasized the importance of a peaceful solution.<sup>24</sup> PM Rutte vocalized his appreciation for Ukraine's allied efforts, and supported Ukraine's EU aspirations.

The Dutch statement on PM Rutte's visit with President Zelenskyy underscored the nations' concurrent values and identity narratives. In their meeting, the two leaders underscored that their alliance is based upon "shared values and principles of freedom, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights".<sup>25</sup> These values are part of the Netherlands' core identity as a liberal democracy, and the statement evidences Zelenskyy's government's commitment to instilling these values into the identity of their own young nation. It further demonstrates Ukraine's attempt to raise their status in the new global order. Dutch support for Ukrainian resistance to an invading nation also taps into their own historical identity: the Dutch, although swiftly defeated by German forces, were committed to resisting foreign occupation during the Second World War by reinforcing its official status of neutrality. The nation has since apologized for this stance and taken considerable steps, such as monetary reparations, to address its conduct during the War.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, "Joint Statement of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of the Netherlands Mark Rutte."

<sup>25</sup>Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, "Joint Statement of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of the Netherlands Mark Rutte."

<sup>26</sup>Aderet, "In First, Dutch Pm Apologizes Holland Did 'Too Little' to Help Jews during Holocaust."

When Russian forces invaded Ukraine, the Netherlands joined their defensive allies, the United Kingdom and Canada, in releasing a joint statement. Their sentiments echoed NATO's official statements, which framed the invasion as an attack on democracy and internationally recognized borders.<sup>27</sup> In her first statement following the invasion, EU President von der Leyen framed it as an attack on Europe, European stability, and international peace.<sup>28</sup> The trilateral statement condemned Russia's violations of international law and reiterated their unwavering support for Ukrainian resistance.<sup>29</sup> The Netherlands underscored in the trilateral statement the importance of humanitarian action to protect Ukraine's most vulnerable populations: women, children, and the elderly. Dutch identity as an EU and NATO member nation is also demonstrated in their trilateral statement with its strategic defense partners, the United Kingdom and Canada. The three NATO nations' shared identities as free, democratic nations and history as cooperative allies during WWII undoubtedly influenced their commitment "to sustain and coordinate the political, humanitarian, economic and defence support that is so vital for a free and independent Ukraine."<sup>30</sup>

## **Discussion**

As a member nation of the EU and NATO, the Netherlands' official statements closely resemble the rhetoric, narratives, and frames used by the EU and NATO to combat Russian

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<sup>27</sup> "Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Russia's Attack on Ukraine." NATO.

<sup>28</sup> "Press Statement by President Von Der Leyen on Russia's Aggression against Ukraine." European Commission.

<sup>29</sup> Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, "Trilateral Statement."

<sup>30</sup> Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, "Trilateral Statement."

aggression and to support Ukraine. Dutch membership of NATO and the EU demonstrates cohesiveness between national identity narratives and global system narratives. The Netherlands' joint statements with President Zelenskyy, and the U.K. and Canada, tap into the core qualities of NATO and EU: the importance of democracy, independent sovereignty, and peaceful resolution; as well as NATO and the EU's desire to preserve Ukrainian sovereignty contests. Given the Netherlands' historic ties to NATO and the EU, it is highly unlikely they will stray from the approved messaging frame, and will continue to be a cooperative player in the war against Russia.

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