understanding europe

Security Workshop II: Competing Narratives in International Politics



GEMEINNÜTZIGE Hertie Stiftung

Schwarzkopf Foundation YOUNG EUROPE

WORKSHOP

Competing Narratives in International Politics

AIMS

› Understand how narratives shape the interpretation of political events, identities, and possible responses

› Recognise how different actors, and context influence whether a narrative becomes accepted by the audience

› Analyse how issues are framed as security threats and used to justify extraordinary measures by political actors.

› Strengthen analytical and critical-thinking, listening, cooperation, and civic-mindedness competences.

› Reflect critically on personal news sources and develop practical strategies for navigating political information.

MATERIAL NEEDED

› A room in which participants can first sit together and then work in groups of three or four,

› Workshop PowerPoint and projector,

› Internet connection for the Mentimeter, or a non-digital backup,

› Post-it notes and pens,

› Flipchart or whiteboard,

› Printed actor cards for the short narrative exercise,

› Printed scenario sets for the securitization exercise.

DURATION:

40 – 60 minutes

INSTRUCTIONS

Political events do not speak for themselves. The way they are described influences what people understand as a problem, whom they trust, who appears responsible, and which political responses seem necessary. This workshop introduces participants to the role of narratives in politics and security. Through discussions, short exercises, and scenario-based group work, participants explore how different actors can frame the same event in contrasting ways and why some narratives become more influential than others. They are introduced to the concept of securitization and will examine how an issue can be presented as an urgent or existential threat that requires extraordinary action. Finally, participants apply these insights to their own information environment by reflecting on the news sources they use and identifying practical ways to engage with political information more critically.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP

MODULE			MAIN PURPOSE
SHORT	LONG		
5 min	7 min	1. My information environment.	Participants identify their regular information sources and briefly discuss trust.
8 min	8 min	2. What is a narrative?	Participants develop a definition and experience how actors frame the same event differently.
10 min	10 min	3. From an issue to a security threat.	The trainer introduces securitization, audience acceptance, and extraordinary measures.
12 min	20 min	4. Narrative Securitization Exercise.	Groups compare two competing narratives about the same event and analyse their political consequences.
5 min	5 min	5. Reconnect and act.	Participants apply the analytical questions to their own information environment and formulate one practical action.

WORKSHOP FLOW:

The workshop follows a progression from participants' everyday information habits to a broader understanding of how political narratives shape perceptions of security. Participants first reflect on where they receive information, then explore how narratives are constructed and why some narratives become more influential than others. They are introduced to securitization and apply the concept to fictional but realistic scenarios. The workshop ends by returning to participants' own news sources and identifying practical ways to engage with political information more critically.

MODULE 1:
WHERE DOES OUR INFORMATION COME FROM?

Duration: 5 minutes for the short version and 7 minutes for the long version.

Goal: Introduce the topic through participants' everyday experiences and encourage initial reflection on trust and information sources.

[Slides 2-3]

Hand each participant some post-it notes and ask them to write down one or two sources they regularly use to learn about political events or current affairs. Explain that the source does not have to be a traditional format. It could be a television channel, podcast, Instagram or TikTok account, online newspaper, YouTube channel, influencer, family member or another source.

Invite participants to place their post-its on a wall, flipchart, or board. Ask a few participants to briefly share what they wrote and why they use or trust this source.

Possible follow-up questions include:

- What makes a source feel trustworthy to you?
- Do you actively search for news, or do you mostly encounter it through your feed?
- Do you receive information from several types of sources or mainly from one?
- Does popularity make a source more trustworthy?

The purpose of this discussion is not to assess whether individual sources are "good" or "bad". Instead, it should make participants aware that their understanding of politics begins within a particular information environment. Conclude by explaining that the group will return to these sources at the end of the workshop.

For the short version: Invite only two or three participants to share and keep the discussion focused on the variety of sources in the room.

For the long version: Briefly compare the different types of sources represented. Ask whether some actors or platforms appear more frequently than others and what this might mean for the information participants encounter.

NOTE FOR THE TRAINER:

Avoid turning this opening into a fact-checking exercise. The objective is to create curiosity about how information reaches us, not to shame participants for using social media or informal sources.



MODULE 2:
WHAT IS A NARRATIVE?

Duration: 8 minutes for the short version and 12 minutes for the long version

Goal: Help participants understand that narratives are constructed stories that connect events, actors, causes, values, and possible solutions.

[Slides 4 – 7]

Ask participants:

What is a narrative?

Participants can answer aloud or anonymously through an open Mentimeter question. Read out or display several responses and identify recurring ideas, such as “story”, “perspective”, “message”, or “interpretation”.

Introduce the workshop’s working definition:

A narrative is a constructed story that gives meaning to events by linking actors, problems, causes, values and possible solutions.

Explain that there is not only one interpretation or description of an event, but rather each description contains its own interpretation and its own narrative. The same event may be described differently depending on who is speaking, which audience they want to reach, and what they want the audience to believe. For example, a protest could be presented as democratic participation, public disorder, extremism, or necessary resistance.



NOTE FOR THE TRAINER:

This exercise is optional, if your class is very engaged in module one and two, consider skipping this exercise for the sake of time keeping.

Optional Short exercise: One Event, Different Headlines

Present participants with a short event description:

Several thousand people gather in the capital after the government announces a controversial new policy. The gathering remains largely peaceful, although traffic is disrupted and there are minor confrontations with police.

Divide participants into pairs or small groups and assign each group a different actor, for example:

- a government spokesperson,
- a protest movement,
- a police union,
- a public broadcaster,
- a business association.

Ask each group to write one headline on post-it notes (or use larger paper if available) that its actor might use to describe the event. Invite groups to read their headlines aloud. Compare how the same event has been transformed into different stories.

Use the following questions for the discussion:

- Who is speaking?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the main problem in this scenario for this actor?
- Who is portrayed positively or negatively?
- Which actor has the greatest power to make its narrative widely visible?
- What is each actor trying to achieve through their narrative?

Conclude by emphasising that everyone can attempt to shape a prevailing narrative, but not everyone has the same access to institutions, media platforms, authority, or public attention. Narratives can also create group cohesion by defining shared values, identities, and threats.

MODULE 3:
HOW DOES SOMETHING BECOME A SECURITY ISSUE?

Duration: 10 minutes for the short version and 14 minutes for the long version

Goal: Introduce participants to the idea that security is not only determined by objective danger, but also by how issues are interpreted, prioritised, and politically presented.

[Slide 8-10]

Ask participants:

What is a security issue?

Collect a few responses or use Mentimeter. Participants may mention military invasion, terrorism, cyberattacks, climate change, migration, energy dependence, pandemics, or economic crises.

Explain that some issues involve clear physical danger. However, not all of them do. Climate change, for example, can be framed as an environmental issue, an economic issue, a justice issue, or a security issue.

Introduce the concept of securitization:

Securitization occurs when an actor successfully presents an issue as an urgent or existential threat that requires exceptional action.

Display the simplified process:

Issue → threat narrative → audience acceptance → extraordinary measures

Clarify the meaning of each element:

- **Issue:** An event or development that can be interpreted in different ways.
- **Threat narrative:** A story presenting the issue as dangerous, urgent, or existential.
- **Audience acceptance:** The relevant audience accepts or supports this interpretation.
- **Extraordinary measures:** Actions that might otherwise appear excessive become politically acceptable.

NOTE FOR THE TRAINER:

Avoid suggesting that all security threats are invented. Securitization analysis examines how threats are interpreted and politically communicated, including in situations where a genuine danger exists.

MODULE 4:
NARRATIVE SECURITIZATION EXERCISE

Duration: 12 minutes for the short version and 20 minutes for the long version

Goal: Enable participants to question securitized narratives.

NOTE FOR THE TRAINER:

There is also a suggested debrief focus for the trainer that can help you give the participants some guidance in interpreting the scenarios.

[Slide 11]

Divide participants into groups of three or four. Give each group one prepared scenario set. Each set should include:

- Two contrasting headlines,
- the actor responsible for each headline,
- two short fictional article summaries presenting mutually exclusive interpretations of the event.

However, the participants should not see that debrief focus and do not necessarily have to follow it. The goal is to have them make their own interpretation. Explain that the scenarios are fictional but designed to resemble narratives participants may encounter in real political communication. Their task is not to decide immediately which article is correct. Instead, they should analyse how each narrative constructs the event. You do not need to use all of the questions below, prioritise according to how the discussion progresses and time keeping.

Ask groups to discuss:

- Who is speaking, and who is the intended audience?
- Who is presented as responsible, dangerous, vulnerable or trustworthy?
- What emotions does each narrative try to evoke?
- What response or policy appears necessary after reading each version?
- What alternative explanations or responses are missing?

After the group discussion, invite each group to briefly present its scenario and one or two main observations. During the presentations, draw attention to similarities across the cases. In particular, highlight how narratives can organise fear, blame, urgency and identity, and how they can make certain policies seem natural while making alternatives appear weak or irresponsible.

For the short version: Give each group approximately five minutes to discuss question 1 and 4. Each group then shares one key observation in a maximum of one minute.

For the long version: Allow groups more time to answer the full set of questions. Each group presents both narratives and explains how the political consequences differ depending on which narrative is accepted.

MODULE 5:
RETURNING TO YOUR OWN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Duration: 5 minutes for the short version and 7 minutes for the long version

Goal: Connect the workshop's concepts to participants' everyday media use and identify one practical action they can take after the workshop.

[Slide 12-13]

Ask participants to return to the news source they wrote down at the beginning. Explain that they should not decide whether the source is simply trustworthy or untrustworthy. Instead, they should apply what they have learned about narratives so far.

Ask participants to reflect individually or in pairs:

- **Who is speaking?** Ask participants to identify the person, organisation or institution behind the source and whose perspective they represent.
- **How much power does this news source have?** Encourage participants to consider the source's reach, credibility, resources, and ability to influence public debate.
- **Who is the intended audience?** Ask participants to reflect on which group(s) the source is trying to reach.

Ask some participants to share their reflections with the group.

Give each participant a second post-it and ask them to complete:

One thing I can do to engage more critically with my information environment is...

Possible actions include:

- Comparing the same story across two different types of sources.
- Adding a source from another country, community or perspective.
- Looking for the original speech, report or statement.
- Pausing before sharing information that produces an immediate emotional reaction.
- Consulting a specialist or local source.
- Regularly asking narrative-analysis questions such as:

  –Who is speaking?
  –Who is the intended audience?
  –What problem or threat is being emphasised?
  –Who is presented as responsible, dangerous or trustworthy?
  –What action am I being encouraged to accept?
  –What perspective is missing

Collect the actions on a flipchart or whiteboard so that everyone can see them. The goal is not necessarily to stop using the sources you already use. It is to become more aware of how they frame events, which narratives they make visible, and what you can do to question or broaden the information you receive.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS:

SET 1: VIOLENT INCIDENT AT A CENTRAL TRAIN STATION

SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

One narrative presents the incident as evidence of a wider national-security threat, while the other presents it as a failure of social and health systems. Discuss how the absence of confirmed information creates space for competing interpretations.

Event description

During the evening rush hour, a person attacks several passengers at the central train station of a large European city. Three people are injured before the attacker is arrested. The authorities have not yet confirmed the attacker's motive. Police state that the person acted alone, but the investigation is continuing.

Narrative A

Actor: A conservative national newspaper.

Headline:

Attack at Central Station Exposes Growing Threat to National Security.

Article summary:

The violent attack at the central station demonstrates that the country remains vulnerable to individuals who may have become radicalised. Although the authorities have not yet confirmed the attacker's motive, the location and timing suggest that the attacker intended to create fear and disrupt everyday life. The incident raises serious questions about whether security services have sufficient powers to identify dangerous individuals before they act. The government must strengthen surveillance, expand police presence at transport hubs, and investigate whether the attacker had links to extremist networks.

Narrative B

Actor: Social welfare and mental-health organisation.

Headline:

Station Attack Reveals Gaps in Mental-Health Care and Crisis Prevention.

Article summary:

The attack should not be used to create fear before the facts are known. Early information indicates that the attacker had previously come into contact with emergency services and may have experienced a serious personal crisis. The incident raises questions about whether adequate mental-health and social support was available. Increasing surveillance or presenting the attack as part of a wider security threat may distract from failures in prevention. The government should invest in accessible mental-health care, crisis teams, and cooperation between social services and local authorities.



SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

Discuss which issue is presented as a threat: disruption to infrastructure or climate change. Ask how the use of labels such as "radical", "peaceful", "dangerous", and "necessary" shapes audience reactions.

SET 2: CLIMATE PROTEST AT AN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Event description

A group of climate activists enters a restricted area at an international airport and attached themselves to a taxiway. Several flights are delayed and two flights are redirected to another airport. No one is injured. The activists state that the protest was intended to draw attention to government inaction on climate change.

Narrative A

Actor: Police union.

Headline:

Radical Activists Endanger Critical Infrastructure and Public Safety.

Article summary:

The airport disruption represents an unacceptable escalation by radical climate groups. Entering a restricted aviation area places passengers, airport workers, and emergency services at risk. The protest was not simply an expression of political opinion; it was an attack on critical national infrastructure. Police officers need stronger legal powers and increased resources to prevent similar incidents and protect critical infrastructure. Democratic protest cannot include actions that endanger public safety and interfere with essential transport systems.

Narrative B

Actor: Climate justice organisation.

Headline:

Peaceful Airport Protest Highlights Government Failure to Address Climate Emergency.

Article summary:

The temporary disruption at the airport must be understood in the context of the far greater disruption caused by climate change. The activists used non-violent civil disobedience after years of warnings, petitions, and demonstrations failed to produce adequate political action. Describing them as security threats shifts attention away from the climate emergency and may be used to restrict legitimate protest. Instead of increasing punishments, the government should respond by accelerating emissions reductions and creating meaningful opportunities for public participation in climate policy.

SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

One narrative constructs the people arriving as part of a threat to the state; the other constructs them as people facing a threat. Discuss how each version defines who needs protection.

SET 3: ARRIVAL OF RESCUE BOATS

Event description

Over the course of one week, several rescue boats arrive at the port of a coastal European town carrying approximately 1,200 people who were rescued at sea. Local authorities say that temporary accommodation is almost full. The national government is discussing whether additional emergency funding and border-control measures are needed.

Narrative A

Actor: Opposition politician campaigning on border security giving an interview to an online magazine.

Headline:

Uncontrolled Arrivals Overwhelm Coastal Town and Threaten State Sovereignty.

Article summary:

The arrival of more than a thousand people within a single week shows that the country has lost control of its borders. Local services are already struggling, and residents are being asked to accept the consequences of policies they did not choose. If the government continues to allow rescue boats to enter without restrictions, more arrivals will follow. The state must restore control by increasing maritime patrols, limiting access to ports, accelerating deportations and introducing emergency border procedures.

Narrative B

Actor: Humanitarian rescue organisation.

Headline:

People Rescued at Sea Face Humanitarian Emergency as Reception System Reaches Capacity.

Article summary:

The central issue is not a threat to national sovereignty but the safety and dignity of people who have survived dangerous sea crossings. The pressure on the coastal town results from insufficient preparation and a lack of cooperation between national and regional authorities. Closing ports or restricting rescue operations would place more lives at risk. The government should provide emergency accommodation, distribute responsibility across different regions and cooperate with other European countries to ensure safe and lawful reception procedures.

SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

Discuss whether the threat is constructed as external and intentional or internal and structural. Ask which narrative could justify expanded state surveillance and which could justify stronger limits on data collection.

SET 4: DATA LEAK FROM A PUBLIC HEALTH APPLICATION

Event description

A public health application used by several million people experiences a major data leak. Names, contact details, and some health-related information may have been accessed. The application was developed by a private technology company under a government contract. It is not yet known whether the data was stolen deliberately or exposed because of a technical error.

Narrative A

Actor: Government cybersecurity agency.

Headline:

Health-App Breach May Be Part of Coordinated Attack on National Data Infrastructure.

Article summary:

The scale and sensitivity of the leaked information suggest that the incident could be more than an ordinary technical failure. Health data can be used for blackmail, disinformation, and intelligence gathering. The breach must therefore be treated as a possible attack on national security. The government should give cybersecurity authorities greater investigative powers, require rapid access to company systems and introduce stricter controls on foreign involvement in public digital infrastructure.

Narrative B

Actor: Digital rights organisation.

Headline:

Government Outsourcing and Weak Oversight Put Millions of Citizens' Data at Risk.

Article summary:

Before presenting the breach as a foreign or national security threat, authorities should examine their own responsibility. The government awarded a major public contract to a private company without sufficient transparency, independent security testing, or clear accountability. Framing the incident as an external attack may distract from poor administration and weak data-protection safeguards. The response should focus on compensation, public transparency, stronger privacy regulation, and limits on the amount of sensitive data collected in the first place.

SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

Both narratives recognise the cyberattack but disagree about its central cause and the appropriate response. Discuss how attribution uncertainty is used in each version.

SET 5: CYBERATTACK ON A EUROPEAN POWER GRID

Event description

A cyberattack disrupts electricity supplies in several regions of a European country. Most power is restored within six hours, but hospitals and public transport rely temporarily on emergency systems. A group of hackers claims responsibility online, although investigators have not confirmed who was behind the attack.

Narrative A

Actor: Government defence minister.

Headline:

Power-Grid Attack Is an Act of Hybrid Aggression Against Our Country.

Article summary:

The coordinated attack on the electricity grid demonstrates that hostile actors are testing the country's ability to defend itself. Even without missiles or soldiers, an attack on energy systems can disrupt hospitals, transport and public confidence. The claim of responsibility may be intended to hide the involvement of a foreign government. The country must treat cyberattacks as a defence issue, strengthen military cyber capabilities, and make clear that serious attacks may receive a national-security response.

Narrative B

Actor: Independent energy regulator.

Headline:

Outdated Infrastructure and Weak Private-Sector Security Allowed Preventable Blackout.

Article summary:

The attack succeeded because electricity providers failed to modernise their systems and follow existing cybersecurity recommendations. The immediate priority should be an independent investigation into infrastructure failures, stronger safety requirements and public accountability. Military language may create urgency, but it does not repair vulnerable systems or ensure that private providers meet their obligations.

SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

Discuss how the same infrastructure can be presented as an economic asset or a strategic security resource. Ask what becomes acceptable once economic interdependence is framed as vulnerability.

SET 6: FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN A MAJOR PORT

Event description

A company partly owned by a non-European government offers to purchase a large share in a major European port. The company promises to modernise the port, create jobs, and increase trade. Security officials warn that the port is also important for military transport and essential supply chains.

Narrative A

Actor: Parliamentary national-security committee.

Headline:

Foreign Port Deal Risks Handing Strategic Infrastructure to a Rival Power.

Article summary:

The proposed investment is not an ordinary business transaction. Control over a major port could allow a foreign government to influence trade routes, collect sensitive information, and disrupt military or emergency transport during a crisis. Short-term economic benefits cannot compensate for the loss of strategic independence. The government should block the sale, introduce stronger investment screening, and restrict foreign ownership of critical infrastructure.

Narrative B

Actor: Regional business association.

Headline:

Security Fears Threaten Investment, Jobs, and the Future of the Port.

Article summary:

The port urgently requires investment if it is to remain competitive. The proposed deal would create employment, improve transport links, and connect local businesses to international markets. Claims that investment automatically creates a national-security threat risk turning economic competition into political hostility. Clear rules and oversight can address legitimate concerns without rejecting the agreement. Blocking the investment could harm the region and send the message that foreign companies are unwelcome.

SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

Discuss how national identity and sovereignty are used to create urgency. Ask who the relevant audience is – the opposing country, domestic voters, the military, or international allies.

SET 7: NAVAL ENCOUNTER IN DISPUTED WATERS

Event description

Two naval vessels from neighbouring countries come within several hundred metres of each other in waters claimed by both states. Each side states that the other vessel entered the area without permission. No shots are fired, but both governments release videos of the encounter and call for an official response.

Narrative A

Actor: State broadcaster in Country A.

Headline:

Foreign Warship Violates Our Waters in Deliberate Test of National Resolve.

Article summary:

The foreign vessel entered national waters despite repeated warnings and attempted to challenge the country's sovereignty. This was not a navigation error, but a deliberate provocation designed to test whether the government would defend its territory. A weak response could encourage further incursions. The government should increase naval patrols, strengthen defence cooperation with allies, and demonstrate that future violations will have serious consequences.

Narrative B

Actor: Regional peace and conflict research institute.

Headline:

Competing Territorial Claims and Military Signalling Bring Neighbours Closer to Conflict.

Article summary:

The incident reflects an unresolved maritime dispute in which both governments use patrols to strengthen their claims. Presenting the encounter as one-sided aggression may increase public pressure for military retaliation and reduce space for diplomacy. Neither vessel opened fire, and communication channels remain available. Both countries should establish emergency naval contacts, reduce patrols in the disputed area, and return to negotiations before a future misunderstanding leads to violence.

SUGGESTED DEBRIEF FOCUS FOR THE TRAINER:

Discuss the tension between election security and freedom of expression. Ask which measures are presented as necessary and which democratic rights might be affected.

SET 8: FOREIGN SOCIAL-MEDIA PLATFORM DURING AN ELECTION

Event description

During a national election campaign, researchers identify a large increase in political videos on a foreign-owned social media platform. Some videos contain false or misleading claims, while others are ordinary political commentary. The platform's recommendation system and data practices are not fully transparent.

Narrative A

Actor: National election-security authority.

Headline:

Foreign-Owned Platform Creates Serious Threat to Democratic Elections.

Article summary:

The rapid spread of misleading political content through a foreign-owned platform with questions about its transparency could undermine confidence in the election. The platform collects extensive user data and may allow outside actors to target voters with divisive messages. Waiting until direct interference is proven could be too late. The government should require access to platform data, remove harmful content rapidly, and consider temporarily restricting the application during the election period.

Narrative B

Actor: Civil liberties and youth media coalition.

Headline:

Government Uses Election Fears to Justify Censorship of Young People's Political Spaces.

Article summary:

Misinformation is a real concern, but it exists across television, newspapers and domestic social-media platforms as well. Singling out one platform because it is foreign owned may disguise political discomfort with a space used heavily by young people and opposition voices. Broad removal powers or temporary bans could restrict legitimate expression. The government should support independent fact checking, media literacy, and transparent platform regulation rather than deciding which political content citizens may access.

GLOSSARY

NARRATIVE

A constructed story or interpretation that connects events, actors, causes, values, and possible solutions. Narratives help people understand what is happening and why it matters.

FRAMING

The way an issue is presented by highlighting certain aspects and leaving others in the background. Different frames can make the same event appear very different.

EXISTENTIAL THREAT

A danger presented as threatening the survival, identity, or essential values of a state, community or group.

SECURITIZATION

The process through which an actor presents an issue as an urgent or existential threat that requires exceptional action. Securitization is successful when the relevant audience accepts this interpretation.

AUDIENCE ACCEPTANCE

The moment when the people whose support matters accept an issue as a serious security threat. This acceptance can make unusual or restrictive measures appear necessary.

EXTRAORDINARY MEASURES

Actions that go beyond normal political procedures or everyday policies because a situation is presented as an emergency. These may include emergency laws, increased surveillance, military action, or restrictions on rights.

COUNTER-NARRATIVE

An alternative story that challenges a dominant narrative by offering a different explanation of the problem, the actors involved, or the possible solutions.

INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

The combination of sources, platforms, people, and institutions through which someone receives information. This can include news outlets, social media, influencers, public institutions, friends, and family.

MISINFORMATION

False or inaccurate information that is shared, whether or not the person sharing it intends to mislead others. A narrative can be influential even when it does not contain completely false information.

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