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SPECIAL ISSUE

30 YEARS AFTER THE BREAKUP OF THE USSR: RUSSIA AND POST-SOVIET EUROPE, NARRATIVES AND PERCEPTIONS

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Natalia Chaban, Henrietta Mondry, Evgeny Pavlov

**30 YEARS AFTER THE BREAKUP OF THE USSR: RUSSIA AND
POST-SOVIET EUROPE, NARRATIVES AND PERCEPTIONS**

Special Issue Introduction

The year 2021 marks a major milestone in the global geopolitical history – 30 years since the collapse of the USSR. Our Special Issue is a scholarly reflection on the evolving and evolved narratives and perceptions formed in the post-Soviet time and space. In our focus is one piece of the post-Soviet puzzle – five independent states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia that once built the ‘western flank’ of the USSR. The five countries have remarkably different paths following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet, we argue that the three Baltic states, Ukraine and to certain degree Russia share a common plank in their identity of post-communist states, sometimes described as “liminal Europeanness” (Morozov 2011, Filippov, 2020). A “historical legacy of the Western European Enlightenment, which invented and juxtaposed Western (superior) and Eastern (inferior) Europe” (Matheson et al. 2021) has triggered a particular vision of this region in Europe of “ever becoming European” and being “betwixt and between” (Mälksoo 2009) East and West. These spatial identities, related to the visions of core and periphery, intersect with the temporal dimension. The 30-year time line is a critical historical period when slowly evolving perceptions, images and narratives start crystallising into modified and/or new mental schemas shared collectively. Moreover, there is a new generation born after the watershed event – a generation without direct historical experiences of the USSR and its shared legacy. This generation is already the backbone of the work force and voting cohorts in the respective countries. New identities emerge – identities without reference to the Soviet past.

The 30-year historical period is characterised by an uneasy intersection between different generations. The “rosy past syndrome” – a phenomenon well-known in political psychology (see Duffy 2018 for review) – means that older generations tend to see the past better than it used to be. While cognitive details fade as time goes by, the emotive and normative image elements remain and may dominate. This Special Issue reflects on the three image elements – cognitive, emotive and normative (see also Boulding 1959; Hopmann 1996) – and uses these concepts to reflect on political communication flows shaped by narratives and perceptions communicated

by influential opinion-maker and multipliers, as well as shared by the members of the respective societies. Of special interest to us are young people in the post-Soviet societies and their political imaginaries of the world, region, their country and themselves.

The temporal dimension is important not only for its longer historical span. This region has become a new ‘hotspot’ in the geopolitics of Europe in the most recent history of the continent. It features the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict following Ukraine’s Euro-Maidan in 2013-2014, Ukraine’s strategic vision of its “European choice” and its direction to the Euro-Atlantic integration sealed by the Ukrainian Constitution. The region is marked by growing security concerns among the three Baltic states that are currently members of the European Union (EU) and NATO, and ardent supporters of Ukraine’s pro-Western orientation. Russia’s ambitious and aggressive geopolitical stance in the region and in the world is perceived by these four states to be the main threat. Such perceptions are reinforced by the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine by Russia (the first landgrab in the post-WWII Europe), the war by proxy in the east of Ukraine, and numerous incidents and provocations challenging the Baltic states and Ukraine (e.g. Russian cyberattacks against Estonia, the capture of Ukrainian navy ships in November 2018, or deployment of substantial number of Russian troops – 85,000 to 110,000 soldiers (The Washington Post 2021) – and military drills near the border with Ukraine in May 2021). Challenging relations between the Baltic States and Ukraine on the one side and Russia on the other are unfolding against the background of an increasing instability in the post-Soviet space. The war between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the bloody suppression of domestic opposition in Belarus in 2021 demonstrate that the post-Soviet space remains volatile 30 years into independence. This period has also demonstrated that the current leadership of the largest and most powerful post-Soviet state, Russia, is very clear in its visions that the collapse of the Soviet empire “was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (NBC 2005). According to President Putin, if he had a chance to alter modern Russian history, he would reverse the collapse of the Soviet Union (Reuters 2018). Perhaps more concerning is the Russian leadership’s consistent anti-Ukrainian frame – from the 2008 statement by President Putin to President Bush that “Ukraine is not a country” (The Washington Post, 2018) to his most recent statement that Ukraine is becoming “anti-Russia,” “requiring our special attention from a security point of view” (Reuters 2021). The Baltic states remain highly aware and outspoken on the current uneasy situation and threat perception. Voting against the 2021 Franco-German proposal to hold an EU summit with Russia, Lithuanian President

Gitanas Nausėda said the idea was like “trying to engage the bear to keep a pot of honey safe,” while Latvian Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš said Russia might see a summit as a reward when diplomacy had failed to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine (Reuters, 2021). Reflecting on the complex region with sensitive geopolitics, tangled dialogue between generations and approaching historical celebration, our Special Issue features interdisciplinary reflections, collaboration between generations of scholars and diverse geography.

Contextual background: History, politics and geopolitics

One third of a century after the break-up of the USSR has featured a roller-coaster ride for the citizens of the former republics. They faced a challenge of revisiting their identities, cultures and political outlooks. Evolution and transformation – or resistance to change – have affected several generations in the post-Soviet states. In our Special Issue, we focus on the intersections between identity, culture and geopolitics in five post-Soviet states which ended with very different paths post-USSR. We put analytical focus on perceptions and narratives of post-Soviet Europe. We argue they build the foundation of the political communication flows inside the now independent societies and across their borders – when they interact with each other or when they relate to the world.

The three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – proclaimed their firm pro-Western and pro-EU orientation following the historic fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. After the end of the Soviet Empire in 1991, the three states have entered the waiting list of the EU’s candidates and dedicated a decade to major political, economic and social reforms of their societies. In 2004, the three Baltic countries became member states of the EU, an exclusive and highly coveted club of developed European nations. Approaching the end of the second decade in the EU, the three societies explicate ebbs and flows in their visions of Europe, Russia, immediate geopolitical region and a wider world. However, their overall attitudes remain staunchly pro-Euro-Atlantic integration. Contributions to our Special Issue will reflect on the complex web of visions of Self and Others in Estonia (articles by Vlad Vernygora and Elizaveta Belonosova), Latvia (articles by Pauline Heinrichs, as well as Vineta Klienberga and Elizabete Vizgunova), and Lithuania (article by Gintaras Šumskas).

In contrast, the then newly independent Ukraine was not chosen by the EU as a potential candidate country. This decision reverberates within

Ukraine until today (see Chaban and Elgström 2018, 2020; 2021a, b). In the early 1990s, Pew Survey poll of the post-Communist countries (199X) demonstrated that Ukrainian citizens were more pro-democracy than their counterparts in Poland or the Baltic states. At that time, Ukraine saw itself as a country with a sizeable and diverse economy, highly-educated work force, large strategically-located territory and big population. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine had ended with the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Following the Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine relinquished its nuclear arsenal in exchange for promises by the signatories of the Memorandum – Russia, the US and the UK – to protect its sovereignty. Newly independent Ukraine has had a turbulent ride in the 30 years of its statehood. Endemic corruption, problematic rule of law and economic underperformance have riddled Ukraine. Yet, the Ukrainian political landscape has preserved the institute of democratic elections. Since 1991, Ukraine has been led by six democratically elected presidents. Irrespective of their political leanings and surroundings, all Ukrainian leaders have proclaimed Ukraine's European 'vector', even if on a superficial level only. When the fourth Ukrainian president reneged on his previous promise to strike an Association Agreement with the EU choosing Russia instead, the events of the Maidan Revolution in 2013-14 demonstrated that decades of independence have solidified perceptions and narratives of Ukraine belonging to Europe and produced new generation ready to stand for this vision. Post-Maidan Ukraine has struck several main accords with the EU and NATO. In 2020, Ukraine has become as Associate Member of NATO. In 2017, Ukraine signed an Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (AA/DCFTA) and the agreement on visa-free travel into the Schengen zone up to 90 days by Ukrainian citizens. However, to this day, the EU has not opened a pathway to membership candidacy for Ukraine. Contributions to our Special Issue deal with Ukraine's problematics: article by Sabatovych dissects narratives and perceptions of the EU evolving over time and article by Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska and Anatolij Chaban consider the external reception of the EU's granting of the visa-free status to Ukrainian citizens (case-study Russia).

Russia's initial reaction to the transforming post-Soviet world saw Russia trying on some democratic practices and reforms under Yeltsin's rule. Yet, following the change in leadership, Russian political outlook towards the West (including the EU) has reverted back to the guarded and even hostile attitudes. The change was partially triggered by the EU's policies and initiatives towards its eastern neighbours. These were interpreted by Russia

as meddling into what traditionally has been the Russian sphere of influence, if not a threat by the West. In addition, the end of the first decade of the 21st century showed to the world the EU challenged by multiple crises of political, economic and social nature. Finally, the changing global landscape demonstrated an eroding multilateral rules-based global order, with a new set of existential non-traditional threats (climate catastrophe and global pandemics among them). A combination of internal and external factors have revived Russia's "grand" geopolitical narrative as a key actor in Europe and globally. Contributions to our Special Issue engage with post-Soviet Russia's self-narratives and self-images vis-à-vis Europe and the rest of the world, while factoring temporal dimension (article by Henrietta Mondry and Evgeny Pavlov), Russia's narrative formulate and disseminated by influential think tanks (and specifically on "grey zones") (article by Šarūnas Liekis and Viktorija Rusinaitė), and Russia's media narratives on Ukraine and its pro-European dynamics revealed in framing Ukraine receiving a no-visa regime from the EU (article by Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska and Anatoliy Chaban).

This brief historical overview highlights that the five countries have intricate connections to each other in the course of their short-, mid- and long-term history, and their current and historical understanding of and attitudes to the West and the EU are a part of the story of their relations. Importantly, all contributions to the Special Issue also reflect on narratives and perceptions of Russia vis-à-vis Europe – as either a main or secondary theme. The three Baltic States and Ukraine remain 'in between' the two bigger players in the region – feeding into the concept of "liminal Europeanness" discussed at the start of this Introduction. We argue that a geopolitical competition between the two regional 'hegemons' will continue to affect Ukraine in the years to come, but also the three Baltic EU member states. The latter have a significant share of population who are Russian by ethnicity or Russian-speaking due to the legacies and migration patterns of the Soviet Union (33.8% of Russian speakers in Latvia, 29.8% in Estonia and 8% in Lithuania (Jakniunaite 2020)).

Self-Other Imaginations: Continuum of Otherness

One of the leading premises that informs our Special Issue is that narratives and perceptions, if dissected in cognitive, emotive and normative planes (see political psychologist Hopmann 1994), will not reveal clear-cut patterns. On the contrary, narratives and perceptions will demonstrate a complex intersection of self-identities and visions of the Other, the latter

located along the continuum of Otherness. Different positions on the continuum will elicit different attitudes. For the Baltic states, it is a dominant self-vision of historically belonging to the West and returning to the Western ‘family’ after the collapse of the USSR. The Baltic societies conceive that their dominant norms and values resonate fully with the normative priorities of the Western societies. This vision, however, is complicated by the argument of “liminality” of the Baltic identities – the constant need to overcome their contested “Europeanness” as post-Soviet and post-socialist states caught between East and West (Mälksoo, 2009). Russia, on the other hand, is perceived to belong to a different normative camp (see e.g. Kleinberga and Vizgunova or Vernygora and Belonosova in this Issue). One of the main findings of the Special Issue is a particular vision of the Self in the region and the world emerging among younger citizens of the Baltic EU states. For them, the historical break-through to Europe has been already achieved by the Baltic nations and it underlines a proud self-narrative of the present and future and informs narratives on Ukraine (see e.g. articles by Šumskas and Heinrichs in this Issue).

Literature in the field points to the post-Soviet Ukraine having a deeply polarised self-vision. On the one hand, it is about Ukraine’s centuries-long strife to be a part of the Western paradigm and value system. This narrative justifies the need to reform the Ukrainian society post-USSR. On the other hand, there is a narrative of the historical connections with Russia and certain normative resonances with the neighbour to the East. This narrative contests Western values and Ukraine’s rapprochement with the West. The most recent events in the relations between Ukraine and Russia – the annexation of Crimea, the ongoing violent conflict in the east of Ukraine and propaganda affronts undertaken by the Russian Federation against Ukraine – have been solidifying the images of Russia as Ukraine’s hostile Other (see also Sabatovych in this Issue). In contrast, the Western actors (including the EU and the Baltic states in it) are increasingly seen as allies and friends.

Russia’s self-vision registers becoming a key pole of the global politics of the 21st century. This includes Russia’s self-definition as an heir presumptive to the USSR legacy – a vision that provides justification to control former Soviet republics. Following this self-image, Russia sees itself as a viable power with a proud history of domination and influence and current geopolitical ambitions. Official Kremlin narratives asserting this right to hegemony in the post-Soviet space explicitly draw on neo-Eurasianist proleptic constructs and neo-medievalist models propagated by Russia’s ultra-right intellectuals (see Mondry and Pavlov in this Issue).

Russia also defines itself as an international actor with a unique (Eurasian) set of norms and values informed by its rich culture and history. Importantly, Russia conceives these values as different – better and often opposing – to the norms and values of the West (including Europe) (see Liekis and Rusinaitė in this Issue). In this context, Russia solidifies the image of Ukraine which is perceived to be moving in its norms and values closer to the West/Europe – as the Other (see Chaban et al. in this Issue), arguably corroborating the official Russian narrative of Ukraine becoming an “anti-Russia” (see above).

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict reminds us again that intersections of identity and geopolitics are never simple. The Russian treatment of the former Soviet republics as its “natural” area of geopolitical control clashed with the EU’s vision of its enlargement and neighbourhood policy. Initially, Russia, hit by the collapse of the USSR on socio-economic and political planes, did not react aggressively to the introduction of the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy in 1995. Yet, the creation of the EU’s Eastern Partnership with six post-Soviet states of Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine in 2009 was perceived in Russia as a threat. This perception was further supported by the official applications by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to become members of NATO (declined by the Alliance). Russia saw the West encroaching into Russia’s traditional sphere of geopolitical influence and has retaliated with aggression against Georgia and later Ukraine, the two most pro-Western post-Soviet states. The Baltic states, aware of Russia’s hard power and methods of influence through their own experiences in the past, share growing concerns about their own security. These states have become the most vociferous supporters of Ukraine (and earlier Georgia), advocating for a pan-EU support of Ukraine in the ongoing violent conflict, insisting on sanctions against Russia and backing up Ukraine’s case as a future EU candidate country.

A complicated map of relations between the six actors brings in the first key theme in our Special Issue – Self-Other relations in an uneasy process of identity transformations typical for this region. This theme invites systematic considerations of the process of Othering and its result – the imaginary continuum of Otherness from friends and allies to distinct Others who may become enemies and even nemeses (see e.g. the model of “difference” – “otherness” – “enmity” examined by Chaban et al. in this Issue). All contributions to our Special Issue engage with the continuum of Otherness and contemplate its role in shaping and re-shaping identities in this

geopolitical region. The contributions also factor complex interactions between time, space and change.

Temporal Considerations

The second theme that unites contributions to this Special Issue deals with fluidity and uncertainty, changing world and transition. In our brief overview above, we highlighted profound historical changes in the last 30 years in this region. However, the societies in the focus of this SI have been affected by transformation and change event before the collapse of the USSR in the summer of 1991. Perestroika, a complex reform programme of the last Soviet government, inflicted major shocks on the existing narratives and self-visions. And while debates on the effectiveness of perestroika on the worldviews of Soviet citizens and elites are ongoing, we argue that it has left a distinct imprint on the perceptions of the ever-changing world, relativity of the historical truth and fluidity in this particular region. Relevant and vast literature on the post-Soviet space traces changes at the levels of identity; in views of how the world is organized and evolves; and how every-day matters, policies and issues are conceived and executed. Contributions to the Special Issue focus on both the process of change and major ruptures (“critical junctions”). Recognizing temporality as a key feature of any narrative unfolding from the past through present to the future, some of the scholars in this Issue prioritize a trajectory of the change “from past to present” (e.g. Sabatovych, Kleinberga and Vizgunova). Others provide an insight into the move “from the present to the future” (Heinrichs), or, proleptically, constructing political narratives in a way that disturbs normal temporal progression (Mondry and Pavlov). Change and continuity are always dependent on perspective. Contributions to the Special Issue map those perspectives when examining their cases studies.

Narratives, images and perceptions: conceptual models

The third theme of this issue is a conceptual engagement with the notions of images, perceptions and narratives in political communication around international relations to understand the unfolding of change in reality and construction of change in the minds of publics in the region. The already axiomatic statement “whose story is better, wins” (Nye 2019) gets additional traction at times of uncertainty and fluidity. In the contested post-Soviet space, recognition and reputation matter, and ideology and propaganda techniques influence everyday frames of political communication inside the states and exchanges across borders. As such,

contributions to this issue have engaged with several models considering a concept of “narrative” linking different disciplines together – international relations (IR), cognitive science, cultural studies, political science, communication studies.

Several contributions engage with the IR’s strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al. 2013). This model proposes a three-level paradigm in the life-cycle of a strategic narrative: system, policy and identity levels. In this theory, system narratives define actors’ views on international order; identity narratives describe how actors view themselves and the others within the system; and issue narratives reveal actors’ attitude towards specific policy issues (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p.7). The theory also talks about three distinct yet intertwined phases in the information flow: formulation, projection and receptions. Contributions to the Special Issue explore cases on all levels. Papers by Klenberga and Vizgunova, Mondry and Pavlov, Chaban et al., Vernygora and Belonosova, Liekis and Rusinaitė deal with formulation and projection of the narratives. Reception of narratives is in main focus of the articles by Heinrichs, Sabatovych and Šumskas. Contributions to this Special Issue also bring analytical attention to different narrators (e.g. official discourses, think tank influencers, media, or youth).

Contributions to the Special Issues that engage with the strategic narrative theory introduce several conceptual innovations to it. For example, Kleinberga and Vizgunova add to the conceptualization of the alignment between the narrative levels. In their focus are two different types of alignment – between levels of narratives produced by the same narrator and between narratives projected by different narrators in one society (in this case, official political and media actors). Both cohorts are in the business of opinion-making, and narrative alignment in terms of consonance between them is telling and revealing of opportunities to persuade, especially in the democratic societies. The divergences are also important.

Adding to the strategic narrative theory conceptualization, our contributors develop the notion of temporality (long, short and medium) (Heinrichs); argue the central role of the identity-level narrative in the SNT model (Heinrichs); examine scope conditions for the stickiness of the narratives (Šumskas); explore the role of visuality and intertextuality in the projection of narratives (Chaban et al.); study the nature of public information important in understanding the reception stage within the strategic narrative cycle (Šumskas) as well as propose the notion of a hybrid toolbox where there is a need to promote strategic narrative in potentially

hostile environments (Liekis and Rusinaitė) and explore public diplomacy analytical instrumentarium used to communicate strategic narrative in such environments (Vernygora and Belonosova).

The Special Issue also features case studies that engaged with other theoretical models to explain perceptions, and more specifically their evolution. Sabatovych engages with a theoretical approach from the school of historical institutionalism, namely path dependency theoretical approach. While the school focuses on radical institutional change, Sabatovych demonstrate how this model may be used to advance perceptions studies by explaining the mechanism of change in public attitudes. This approach is useful when dramatic changes in outlook are taking place. In the case by Sabatovych, it is ideology that is accepted as a marker of an institutional change. Mondry and Pavlov explore the application of proleptic futurity in narratives of newspaper articles. They focus on the specific genre of editorials as it emerged in the late Soviet Union and demonstrate features of continuity between Soviet editorials and the current writing of important public and political personalities, such as Aleksandr Prokhanov, Aleksandr Dugin, and Vladislav Surkov. Mondry and Pavlov argue that employment of temporo-spatial aspects of the popular Neo-Eurasianist ideology as well as use of folk narratives based on the ability to dream allows the promotion of the notion of culture-specific temporality linked to the stability of country's geopolitical borders. They conclude that today's official Kremlin narratives increasingly rely on the proleptic temporality typical of the particularistic ideology of the Russian far right.

Methods

This Special Issue showcases a range of methods to study narratives and perceptions. These methods applied to analyse multiple sources of data such as media texts (editorials and daily news articles), media visuals (photographs and cartoons), opinion of elites and educated youth, official documents.

Heinrichs applies the method of narrative analysis to analyse youth opinion collected in the course of the Q-Sort focus groups in Latvia. Šumskas applies a mixed qualitative and quantitative content analysis techniques to identify indicators of media texts in Lithuanian e-press that correlate with higher audience demand for news that report Russia. Kleinberga and Vizgunova employ narrative analysis to analyse narratives on Ukraine, the EU and Russian that emerge in media and official discourses in Latvia.

Sabatovych undertakes an interpretative analysis of elite interviews comparing opinions across time. Chaban, Zhabotynska and Chaban apply the cognitive science protocol of the Narrative-Based Political Concept to analyse visual images accompanying Russian e-media news texts on Ukraine's no-visa agreement with the EU. Vernygora and Belonosova employ discourse analysis and process tracing when examining eight annual reviews of the Estonian Internal Security Service (2012-2019/20). Liekis and Rusinaitė focus on content analysis of the productions by the Russian think tanks that lean towards advocacy model and publish in English language, seeking to internationalise their advocacy model. Mondry and Pavlov use a thematic interpretative approach in their analysis of narratives which strategically blur the boundaries between objectivized style of newspaper articles and subjective style of editorials.

Structure of the Special Issue

The Special Issues starts with four article that dissect perceptions and narratives in the Baltic states: Vineta Klienberg and Elizabete Vizgunova on Latvia; Pauline Heinrichs on Latvia, Vlad Vernygora and Elizaveta Belonosova on Estonia, and Gintaras Šumskas on Lithuania. Article by Iana Sabatovych focuses on Ukraine, while article by Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska and Anatoliy Chaban deals with Russia's framing of Ukraine. Special Issue concludes with articles by Šarūnas Liekis and Viktorija Rusinaitė, and Henrietta Mondry and Evgeny Pavlov – both teams of authors elaborate opinion making discourses in Russia.

Concluding remarks

Some case studies demonstrate that post-Soviet cultural narratives are often concerned with aspects of transgenerational stability and the passing of cultural and ethnocultural knowledge to future generations. This concern is manifested in the notion of ontological future in the case of Latvia with its diminishing population and inter-EU migration of young people. Issues of demographics drive this preoccupation with the ontological future where, paradoxically, being part of EU brought challenges of assimilation and acculturation which threaten the national identity to no less a degree than in Soviet times. In Russia with its multiethnic population the complexities of transgenerational continuity are resolved in the narratives of cohesion achieved by the notions of scientific know-how and the alleged ability to dream about the future, all of which is underpinned by the construct of a shared past. Yet, internal and external strategic narratives differ.

Contributions to the Special Issue unpack complex visions, perceptions and narratives along the Self-Other continuum that emerge in each country discussed here and contemplate their impact on mapping the understanding of the geo-political future in this region and charting future actions.

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Vineta Kleinberga and Elizabete Vizgunova

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT: LATVIAN MEDIA NARRATIVES ON RUSSIA IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-MAIDAN UKRAINE

Abstract

Ukraine and its integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures has been an undisputed priority of Latvia's foreign policy for years. We argue that Russia has been an important part of Latvia's strategic narrative to ensure both domestic and international support to Ukraine's integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, especially after the 2013 Euromaidan events. Inspired by theoretical frameworks of strategic narrative and cascading activation framing models, we explore Latvia's official narrative on Russia vis-à-vis post-Maidan Ukraine as projected by the most popular Latvian-speaking digital news platforms in the country. Engaging with a concept of narrative alignment, we analyse how Latvian digital media outlets communicate and shape political narratives in their representation of Russia and Ukraine. We discover that narratives projected by media feature a highly negative emotive evaluation of Russia in Ukraine-related news stories aligning in this aspect with Latvia's official narrative. However, we also observe a fragmented alignment of political and media narratives, as media often depict Ukraine as a negative actor too in contrast to the official narrative. By exploring alignment among political and media narratives we contribute to the emerging body of scholarly literature that evaluates the supporting role of narratives and perceptions in agenda-setting in international relations and foreign policy-making.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, strategic narratives, projection, alignment, digital news platforms

1. Introduction

Latvia's international reputation cements it as one of the 'hawks' when it comes to Russia's illegitimate annexation of Crimea, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war in the Eastern territories of Ukraine and imposition of sanctions on Russia for its military aggression (ECFR, 2016; ECFR, 2015). On multiple occasions, Latvia has used international formats to remind the world of the price Ukraine had to pay for its 'European choice' (Zaremba and Vizgunova, 2018). In the official narrative, Latvian policy-makers frame Ukraine as a victim of Russia's geopolitical ambitions and blame Russia for its efforts to rearrange the liberal world order established after collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Given the power of information—and disinformation—at the age of global digital transformation, strategic communication has grown as an increasingly important field in the scholarship and practice of international

relations. It is not only country's military, economic or normative performance that determines its might and attractiveness in international affairs, but, increasingly, it is the strategic narratives that influence power relations (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014). Actors use the strategic narratives to 'extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate' (Miskimmon et al., 2003, p.2), thus defending their interests and pursuing goals in international environment.

The scholarship on Latvia's strategic narratives with regard to Russia has been limited. Relevant literature focuses mostly on Russia's footprint in Latvia's information space, and specifically on channels and instruments Russia uses to exert its influence (Valtenbergs et al., 2018). Some authors explore framing of Russia in Latvia's media, analysing Russia's image vis-à-vis various international events. Content analysis of the most popular Latvian- and Russian-speaking media channels in Latvia covering the annexation of Crimea reveals that media often use different news sources (either Western or Russian) thus sending contradictory messages (Šulmane, 2017). Latvian press' reluctance to produce original content on Russia, and reliance on reprinting instead, is uncovered by Denisa-Liepniece (2017) in her analysis of Russia's war in Syria. Berzina's (2016) research indicates that media targeting Latvian and Russian-speaking audiences in Latvia tend to construct opposing narratives on the role of Russia in Ukraine, depending on their ownership and funding organisation (Latvian or Russian). Two news broadcasts are scrutinised there — *Panorama* from the Latvian state television and *Vremya* from Channel One Russia, rebroadcasted in Latvia via the First Baltic Channel. Berzina concludes that the Latvian-speaking media reproduce Latvia's official discourse, whereas the Russian-speaking media largely follow Putin's line. Similarly, she finds out that the Latvian-speaking part of the population mainly aligns with the Latvian media stories, while the Russian-speaking one — with the Russian media narratives (ibid, p.171). Some studies deal with the emotions in the reception side of the communication cycle. Rozukalne (2015) explores the level of aggressiveness after the 2014 events in Ukraine, analysing user comments of the most popular Latvian digital media. Our study has a different focus: we explore the interaction between political and media narratives on Russia through the prism of Russia's relations with post-Maidan Ukraine. We add innovatively to the studies of perceptions and narratives about Russia in Latvia — we assess how different Latvian narrators convey the importance of Russia when telling a 'story' about Ukraine.

Our special interest goes to the role of digital media — Latvian-speaking e-news media portals with the highest readership in Latvia. With the official Latvia's narrative being consistent and clear on Latvia's position towards Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine, what role do the leading popular and prestigious media in Latvia play in supporting or counter-arguing it? Whereas Latvia's foundational foreign policy documents take into account the complexity of global international relations, arguably the majority of Latvia's foreign policy decisions since 1991 has been motivated by the willingness to cement Latvia's place among powerful Western countries in order to permanently protect itself from Russia. As we detail in the article, media narratives largely align with this position and it has important implications for the power of the official narrative. Digital media are important mediators in conveying political messages about domestic and foreign policy realms. They play a crucial role in shaping attitudes among audiences. Alignment between political and media narratives, and in democratic societies in particular, ensures a more coherent message to the audiences while facilitating the persuasive powers of official narratives.

Informed by an international relations theoretical framework of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013) and the cascading activation framing model (Entman, 2003) we explore *alignment* between official political and media narratives on Russia vis-à-vis post-Maidan Ukraine. Our main research question is how media project the official narrative at *system*, *identity* and *issue* levels, and whether media projections align with those of official narrative. Empirical evidence for the analysis comes from the dataset¹ of 173 Ukraine-related articles published in the Latvian-language editions of three digital media outlets — Delfi, Tvnet and *Latvijas Sabiedriskais Medijs* (Latvian Public Broadcasting, LSM) — from February to March 2019. In our particular focus are 73 articles from the dataset that report the *relationship* between Russia and Ukraine. The focus on relations between the two actors led in the sample finalisation. In our analysis, we explore the elements of the narrative—actors, action, time and setting. We also ask: How visible is Russia in these articles? What emotive evaluation journalists assign to Russia? How is Russia framed vis-à-vis post-Maidan Ukraine? How is Ukraine framed in this context?

We structure the article as follows. We first describe the analytical framework informing our analysis. Specifically, we detail the strategic

¹ The data has been collected within the framework of the Jean Monnet Project 'Youth Opinion and Opportunities for EU Public Diplomacy: Youth Narratives and Perceptions of the EU and EU-Ukraine Relations in Ukraine and the three Baltic States' (*E-Youth*, 2018-21).

narrative theory and cascading activation framing theoretical model, and derive our operationalisations focusing on the concept of *alignment*. Further on, we detail our methodological approach in extraction of narratives. We move forward by tracking official political narratives of Latvia on Russia through the prism of Russia's relations with post-Maidan Ukraine. Here we focus on conceptualization of Russia in Latvia's key foreign policy and security documents. Finally, we present our main findings from media content analysis on the depiction of Russia in Ukraine-related media narratives. We test the concept of *alignment* and evaluate convergences and divergences between media and official political narratives at *system*, *identity* and *issue* levels. The article concludes by revealing convergence of media and official narratives at *system* and *identity* levels, while disclosing divergences at the *issue* level. Given this, we discuss the implications of our empirical findings for the viability of Latvia's strategic narrative on Russia in the context of post-Maidan Ukraine.

2. Analytical framework: strategic narrative theory and cascading activation model

Global information space is filled with messages formulated and projected by state-level actors as well as messages created by non-state actors. Both types of messages do not exist in the vacuum — they interact with each other, sometimes resonating and sometime clashing. Relevant literature argues that the ability of official political narratives projected by state-level actors to reach domestic and international audiences is determined not only by the material capabilities of states, but also by the power and attraction of their value systems, ideologies and beliefs (Cepurītis and Kaprāns, 2017).

The theory of strategic narratives addresses this *problematique*. Developed around Nye's concept of 'soft power' (Nye, 1990) theory of strategic narratives helps to explain how states construct the image about their power and attraction in order to persuade others to observe and follow their interests. The founders of strategic narrative theory define strategic narratives as 'means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon et al. 2003, p. 2). Actors shape strategic narratives 'to change the discursive environment in which they operate', and thus aim 'to influence the behaviour of others' on behalf of actors' strategic goals (Ibid.).

However, strategic narratives are not only created by actors. They also structure their behaviour simultaneously. As the reaction of other actors is almost never the same as expected, the viability of strategic narratives depends not only on their persuasiveness in itself but also on their perception. This is why it is important to consider the complete communication cycle of a strategic narrative — formation, projection and reception (Miskimmon et al., 2003, pp. 8-12). Whereas formation refers to the efforts of political actors to shape particular strategic narratives, projection reflects the diffusion of the narratives in the media environment and reception concerns the perception of these narratives by the public, be it domestic or international one. In their strategic communication, political actors strive to address all phases of communication, aiming to achieve the highest possible alignment within their strategic narrative communication cycle. Chaban et al. (2017) claim that the chances for strategic narratives to become more persuasive and influential increase when there is an alignment between *system*, *policy* and *identity* narratives. *System* narratives define actors' views on international order; *identity* narratives describe how actors view themselves and the others within the system; and *issue* narratives reveal actors' attitude towards specific policy issues (Miskimmon et al., 2003, p.7). Greenland conceptualizes the alignment between three levels as internal coherence, while defining the alignment between narratives of different actors as external convergence (Greenland, 2019).

This article chooses to dissect the formation and projection phases of the narrative life-cycle — and examine external convergence of official political and media narratives. It is true that successful formation does not ensure successful projection, and successful projection does not guarantee successful reception, as actors do not have control over other actors' initial perceptions. Besides, strategic narratives can be challenged by actors seeking to put their own narrative forward or to highlight the issues with the opposing narrative (Chaban, et al., 2017). However, the higher the level of alignment between the narratives of different actors the more persuasive power they have with regard to other actors. Consequently, we focus on the alignment between the first two phases of narrative life-cycle, while leaving the reception phase for further research.

We link the formation and projection phases of Latvia's strategic narrative on Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine by using Entman's (2003) cascading activation framing model. Entman claims that there is a need for 'spreading activation' for particular foreign policy frames, shaped by political elites. Framing means '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' (Entman, 2003, p.417). Framing differs from strategic narratives with the latter's emphasis on temporality. While strategic narratives 'include a sequence of events and aim to construct impressions of the past, present and future', frames are 'snapshots used in narratives about particular events or issues' (Greenland, 2019, p.121). Cascading activation framing model conceptualizes the ways the state administration disseminates particular foreign policy framing at the domestic level. According to it, media are a part of the cascading activation model, within which both top-down and bottom-up circulation of frames occurs, though in differing speeds. Not all information from policy-makers attract the attention of media and not everything is reported, yet the model allows to see which aspects of the official discourse 'attract dissent' or 'earn acceptance' in the media representation (Entman, 2003, p.421). Media in democratic societies thus have a potential to contest the dominant frames and to propose counter-frames. However, the diffusion of counterframing themes would require 'not merely the push of journalists themselves but also political elites interested in contesting the dominant problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment, and remedy' (Entman, 2003, p.425). This suggests that the top-down and bottom-up interaction between the policy-makers and media are of utmost importance for spread and activation of strategic narratives in foreign policy realm. Their level of convergence or divergence is crucial for exerting the influence on the next level of the 'cascade' — the general public.

3. Operationalisation: framework of analysis for narratives

Informed by the theory of strategic narratives and the cascading activation framing model, this study uses a method of mixed (qualitative and quantitative) content analysis. The study begins with the analysis of the official political narrative on Russia in the context of post-Maidan Ukraine. We focus on how the key subjects 'Russia' and 'Ukraine' are represented in main national security and foreign policy documents—Latvia's National Security Concepts and Foreign Policy Reports. These documents are the Latvian key documents that inform both domestic and international audiences about Latvia's strategic goals and priorities, and formulate Latvia's official attitude on perceived threats.

We continue by analysing the projection of the official political narrative in three most popular and reputable Latvian-speaking digital news

media in Latvia — Delfi, LSM and Tvnet.² The news media were selected following two characteristics. Firstly, there is an increased popularity of electronic news media for obtaining daily news. According to Valtenbergs et al. (2018, p.10), 81% of Latvian population gets information about actual political events from Latvian-speaking internet portals. Secondly, the chosen news platforms pride high level of readership. Delfi and Tvnet are the most popular online news media in Latvia, reaching the audiences of 867,600 and 725,200 people accordingly,³ whereas the LSM is the biggest public electronic media consortium in Latvia, involving Latvia's Radio and Latvia's Television. It is in the 6th place in Latvia in terms of media consumption, and reaches an audience of 443,300 people (Gemius, 24.04.2018.).

Importantly, we analyse not the narratives of Russia *per se*, but narratives of Russia in the context of Russia-Ukraine *relationship* in the post-Maidan period. The sample includes 73 articles, and all report on the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. In terms of limitations, the dataset deals with digital media targeting Latvian-speaking audiences only. No Russian-speaking news-media were included in this study.

Tracing *system, identity* and *issue* levels is at the core of our analysis for both political and media narratives. To uncover the narratives and to compare them, we employ a set of narrative structure elements. According to Miskimmon et al. (2003, p. 5) 'a narrative entails an initial order, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that re-establishes order' which may differ from the initial one. The structure involves 'actors; events, plot, and time; and setting and space' and it is through 'a particular structure' how 'sense is achieved' (Ibid.).

Actors are central to the narrative and are constructed around certain 'characteristics, interests, and behaviours', while setting reveals the context within which action takes place (Roselle et al., 2014, p.75). *Action* refers to events, most often involving the conflict: what actors do to each other, and what interaction follows from that. It leads to *resolution or proposed resolution*, which 'in many ways bounds the possible — both in thought and action', limiting future options for actors' behaviour (ibid, p.76). Importantly, action highlights the temporal dimension of the narrative, disclosing how past, present and future are addressed.

² Data come from international Jean Monnet Project 'Youth Opinion and Opportunities for EU Public Diplomacy: Youth Narratives and Perceptions of the EU and EU-Ukraine Relations in Ukraine and the three Baltic States' from 2018 till 2020 (*E-Youth*, 2018-20).

³ At the beginning of 2020 Latvia had 1 907 675 inhabitants.

Our protocol focuses on the following elements of structure and categories of analysis (Table 1):

Table 1. Framework of analysis for narratives (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014; E-Youth, 2018-20)

Elements of structure	Categories of analysis
Actors	Visibility and centrality (major, secondary or minor actor) Relationship between actors Emotive evaluation (positive, neutral, negative or mixed; use of conceptual metaphors)
Action, plot	Events, conflict, resolution
Time	Past, present and future
Scene, setting	Scale (local, international); Thematic context (security and military; diplomacy and international relations; economy; Ukraine’s domestic politics; normative domain; culture; religion; social affairs; sport; research, science and technology (RST))

In the final element of our analysis, we evaluate external convergence of political and media narratives comparing them across the three levels of the narrative—*system*, *identity* and *issue*. We assume that alignment of narratives — between the levels and across the narrators—increases the opportunities for persuasion and influence.

4. Latvia’s official political narrative on Russia vis-à-vis post-Maidan Ukraine

From the perspective of the *system*-level narratives, Latvia’s political discourse reflects on Latvia’s fifty-year long experience in the Soviet Union and Russia’s denial to admit the fact of forceful occupation, made possible by the Secret Protocol of the 1939 Molotov-Ribentrop Pact. After collapse of the Soviet Union Latvia established and sustained a pragmatic and values-based relationship with Russia. Yet, Latvia has remained wary of Russia. After the occupation of Crimea in March 2014, the feeling of existential threat to Latvia returned, leading to defining Russia as the main threat for Latvia’s national security on the official level (Saeima, 26.09.2019). The centrality of Russia in Latvia’s security perception is well illustrated by an

increased number of references to Russia in Latvia's National Security Concepts. In the 2011 document, the word 'Russia' was mentioned 5 times, in 2015 43 times, and in 2019 65 times (Saeima, 10.03.2011; Saeima, 26.09.2019; Saeima, 26.11.2015). Russia's 'aggressiveness' towards Ukraine — 'an unprecedented action against fundamental principles of international law' not experienced 'since the World War II' — is mentioned as the main challenge to the European security and global order with 'a long-term impact also on Latvia's national security' in Latvia's National Security Concept of 2015, immediately following Russia's annexation of Crimea (Saeima, 26.11.2015). In Latvia's strategic narrative, Russia's activities in its neighbourhood (Ukraine, but also Georgia and Moldova) carry strong references to the Cold War. The narrative of regional security rests on two actors — Russia and the United States (US) protecting Latvia (and other post-Soviet countries) from Russia — reminding of the discourse of the 'Russian/Soviet confrontation with the West' that characterized the bipolar world order. The Foreign Policy Report, evaluating year 2018 in Latvia's foreign policy, states: 'Russia constantly maintains a confrontation course with the West and continues to act contrary to the principles of international law' (MFA, 2018). National Security Concept of 2015 underlines that 'Russia's growing confrontation with the West, aggressive demonstrations of military force and mounting military potential in the West's strategic direction are creating tension and uncertainty' (Saeima, 26.11.2015). Latvia is positioned as 'belonging to the West', embodying and defending democratic values and liberal international order (MFA, 2019), including in the dialogue with Russia on observation of human rights (MFA, 2018). Common historical experience with the Eastern Partnership countries is a factor, determining Latvia's support to them, and establishing 'the role of Latvia as a responsible regional and international player in the implementation of standards of democracy and the rule of law' (MFA, 2018). Therefore, Latvia's efforts are seen as complementary to those of international organisations 'seeking solutions to the conflict in Ukraine and promoting its stability, territorial integrity, the strengthening of democracy and European values' (Saeima, 26.11.2015).

Identity narratives for Latvia are highly important. Given the traumatic consequences of the Soviet occupation Latvia's identity formulation is highly exclusive. It is based on a set of rules to politically and culturally preserve a country, which is small in terms of its size⁴ and population⁵, and geopolitically is located at the border with an asymmetrically bigger country

⁴ 64 589 km².

⁵ At the beginning of 2020 Latvia had 1.9 million inhabitants.

which historically has proven its political and territorial ambitions. The exclusiveness of Latvia's identity is best defined in the preamble of the Constitution of Latvia, added in 2014:

Since ancient times, the identity of Latvia in the European cultural space has been shaped by Latvian and Liv traditions, Latvian folk wisdom, the Latvian language, universal human and Christian values. Loyalty to Latvia, the Latvian language as the only official language, freedom, equality, solidarity, justice, honesty, work ethic and family are the foundations of a cohesive society (Constitutional Assembly, 1922).

The introduction of this paragraph to the Constitution was, however, seen as highly controversial both by politicians and general public as Latvia is a multi-ethnic society with 25% of ethnic Russians in Latvia, some of whom still have the status of non-citizens or do not use Latvian as the language of inter-ethnic communication, which only adds to the insecurity of Latvia.⁶ Latvia sees Russia's diaspora policy and Russia's information activities targeted to change public's perception on history and influence public opinion against Latvia's Euro-Atlantic orientation as a particular threat (Saeima, 26.09.2019; Saeima, 26.11.2015). In this sense, the dichotomy of Latvia's belonging to the Euro-Atlantic region (thus, the Western alliance) and Russia's opposition to it underlines a sense of radical difference that Latvia sees in its identity. Latvia's belonging to the West, based on the principles of international law and order, is underlined further in this section. Russia's breach of the order which ensures the existence of small states such as Latvia is therefore seen as offensive to Latvia at the *identity* level.

On the *issue* narrative level, Ukraine is considered by Latvia as a 'brother in pain', who still fights to get out of Russia's sphere of influence that Latvia managed to do by joining the EU and the Transatlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004. It is for this reason why the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia Edgars Rinkēvičs asserted that 'we won't forget Crimea' in a joint statement with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and Sweden two years after Russia's 'illegal annexation' of Crimea (Wallström *et al.*, 18.03.2016). Latvia's support to Ukraine has been underlined continuously in annual foreign policy debates which are also informative of Latvia's political discourse towards

⁶ As of 1 January 2020, there are 1 768 480 citizens and 216 682 non-citizens in Latvia (PMLPa, 01.01.2020). More than half of non-citizens — 141 939 people — are Russian by nationality (PMLPb, 01.01.2020). Not all citizens and non-citizens are permanent residents of Latvia.

Russia.⁷ ‘We will never accept Russia’s action, violating the principles of international law and using force against its neighbours’, states Rinkēvičs at the beginning of 2019. Therefore, in his words, ‘we have provided all possible support to our Ukrainian counterparts both bilaterally and multilaterally’, ‘Latvia supports Ukraine’s desire to move closer to the European Union and NATO’, and ‘Latvia will consistently support Ukraine’s efforts to restore the country’s territorial integrity’. For this, ‘there is a need for consistent action by all European allies and the US’ (MFA, 24.01.2019).

Concerning the structure of the narrative, we observe that Latvia’s strategic narrative on Russia in the context of post-Maidan Ukraine evolves around certain events: the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of Russia’s offensive in Eastern Ukraine. In the official political narrative, Russia is cast as a major threat to Latvia’s security, and Russia’s activities are evaluated highly negatively. As a solution, Latvia invites the rule-based international order to counteract the illegitimate activities of Russia. The conflict drives the narrative, as Russia’s actions are seen as a threat not only to Ukraine, but to Latvia itself both at the *system* and *identity* levels, especially due to the common history Ukraine and Latvia share as a part of the Soviet Union. Ukraine’s role in Latvia’s strategic narrative in this case is sub-delegated — it is seen as one of many Russia’s steps to the detriment of Latvia’s international status as an independent country. Latvia’s (and Ukraine’s) future therefore lies in the West—the Western community of values and international law is depicted as crucial for Latvia’s (and Ukraine’s) existence. In this way, a dichotomy is established between Russia as the aggressor and the opponent to the West vs. Latvia, which identifies itself as belonging to the West.

5. Media projection: strategic alignment?

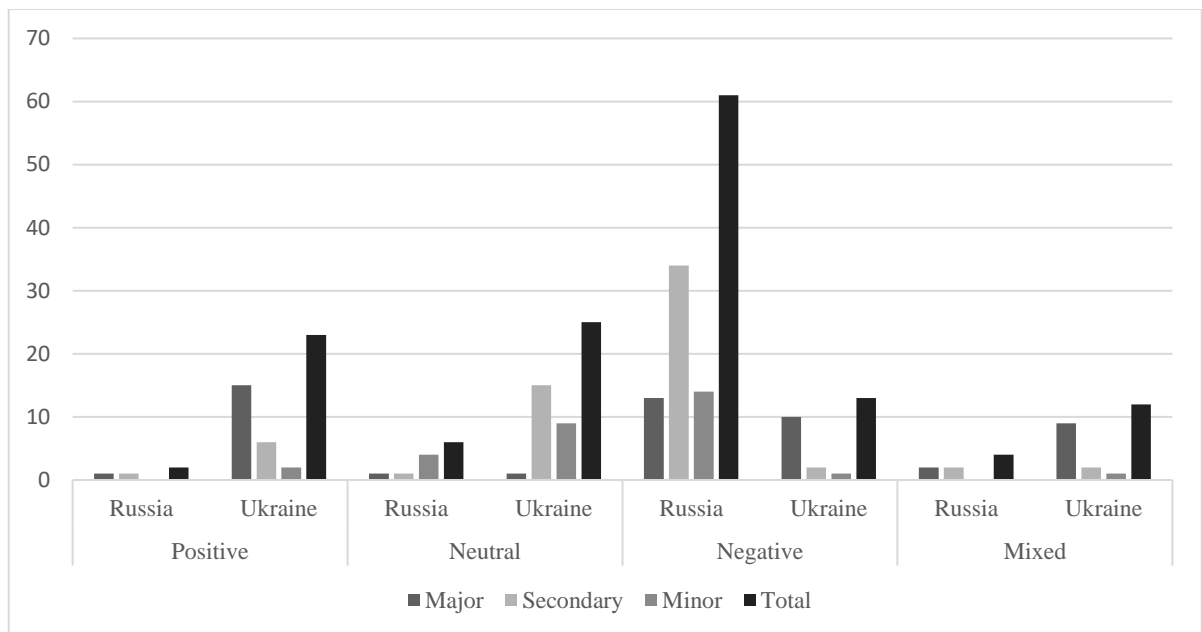
This section outlines our findings on the ‘strategic alignment’ of the Latvian-speaking digital news media — Delfi, LSM and Tvnet — with the official political narrative on Russia vis-à-vis post-Maidan Ukraine. While the media narrative largely aligns with the official narrative on the three levels, we find several divergences discussed below.

⁷ Since 2011, Latvia’s foreign policy goals are debated in parliamentary debates at the beginning of each year, and a Foreign Policy Report, prepared for the debates, serve as a guide to Latvia’s foreign policy objectives and priorities.

Actors: visibility and emotive framing

In over half of the articles, Russia is mentioned as a *secondary* actor, while Ukraine plays a *major* role. The image of Russia is negative in majority of the selected articles — in 61 articles out of 73. This evaluation aligns with the emotive tone of the official discourse. Russia plays a negative role in 13 cases out of 17 where it is a *major* actor; in 34 cases out of 38 where it acts as a *secondary* actor, and 14 out of 18 where it is a *minor* actor (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Visibility and emotive evaluation of Russia and Ukraine (number of articles).



Source: Authors' own, E-YOUTH

Importantly, the emotive image of Ukraine is more nuanced, and, overall, more positive. Media depict Ukraine negatively in 13 cases, neutrally in 25 cases, positively in 23 cases and mixed in 12 cases. Specifically, media see Ukraine as a positive or a neutral actor in all 17 cases, where Russia acts as a *major* actor and in most cases (27 out of 38) where Russia acts as a *secondary* actor. However, in the articles with Russia acting as a *minor* actor, Ukraine has a much higher share of negative images than in the two previous sets. Ukraine is depicted negatively in 9 and in mixed terms in 5 out of 18 articles, while positively and neutrally only twice in each case. We observe

that these articles are about Ukraine’s internal divisions, sluggish reform process and insufficient anti-corruption measures.

These emotive patterns show that media narratives on Ukraine and Russia in the post-Maidan context are not projected using ‘victim’ and ‘villain’ dichotomy exclusively. Out of 61 articles, where media identify Russia as a negative actor, Ukraine has a positive image in 21 articles, and a neutral image — in 21 articles. At the same time media depict Ukraine negatively in 7 cases and with a mixed image in 12 cases (see Table 2). So, in 19 articles out of 61 there is a negative dimension of Ukraine’s image as well.

Table 2: Dynamics between emotive evaluation of Russia and Ukraine

	[if] Russia Positive	[if] Russia Neutral	[if] Russia Negative	[if] Russia Mixed	Evaluation of Ukraine - total
[then] Ukraine Positive	1	1	21	0	23
[then] Ukraine Neutral	0	1	21	3	25
[then] Ukraine Negative	1	4	7	1	13
[then] Ukraine Mixed	0	0	12	0	12
<i>Evaluation of Russia - total</i>	2	6	61	4	73

Source: Authors’ Own, E-YOUTH

A more straightforward dichotomy emerges, when we look at the dynamics between Russia, on the one hand, and the EU and the United States (US), on the other hand (see Table 3). Out of 73 articles the US is an actor in 16 articles, while the EU is an actor in 26 articles. Media depict the US positively in 11 cases, neutrally in 2 cases, negatively in 2 cases, and with a mixed image in 1 case. They show the EU positively in 24 cases, neutrally in 1 case and with a mixed image in 1 case. Contrary to this, media describe Russia negatively in all Ukraine-related articles, where the US and the EU act as actors.

Table 3: Emotive evaluation of Ukraine in the context of the EU and Russia (as a negative actor) and the US and Russia (as a negative actor) relationship (number of articles)

	[if] EU Positive	[if] EU Neutral	[if] EU Negative	[if] EU Mixed
	24	1	0	1
[and] Russia Negative	24	1	0	1
[then] Ukraine Positive	11	0	0	1
[then] Ukraine Neutral	7	1	0	0
[then] Ukraine Negative	2	0	0	0
[then] Ukraine Mixed	4	0	0	0

	[if] US Positive	[if] US Neutral	[if] US Negative	[if] US Mixed
	11	2	2	1
[and] Russia Negative	11	2	2	1
[then] Ukraine Positive	4	0	1	0
[then] Ukraine Neutral	4	2	1	1
[then] Ukraine Negative	0	0	0	0
[then] Ukraine Mixed	3	0	0	0

Source: Authors' Own, E-YOUTH

Arguably, this distribution of evaluations suggests that media apply 'good' vs. 'evil' dichotomy to the representation of the Western world (represented by the EU and the US⁸) vs. Russia. The journalists use the *system* narrative of a regional security system, dependent on the 'shield' of the US to protect against Russia, and *identity* narrative of conflicting values to describe the situation in post-Maidan Ukraine. In this narrative, Russia is a 'villain' that harms Ukraine and meddles in its internal affairs, stalling reforms. In this way, Russia is confronting the Western world. The EU and the US are the 'heroes', safeguarding the democratic and liberal value system of the West

⁸ The image of the US as guardian of the Western values is, however, questioned in few articles, targeting activities of the US President Donald Trump.

and embodying a moral responsibility to take Ukraine ‘under their wings’, thus supporting Ukraine’s efforts to get out of Russia’s sphere of influence. In this regard, Ukraine is not that much of an actor. It is Russia’s confrontation with the West that matters.

At the *issue* narrative level projected by the media, it is not important how the victim ‘behaves’, as Ukraine is only one among a number of Russia’s post-Soviet neighbours, not being capable of fighting off Russian forces when it decides to illegally annex their territories. Media depict Ukraine positively in 4 cases out of 11, where the US acts a positive actor, and Russia — as a negative one. In 4 cases Ukraine has a neutral image and in 3 — a mixed one. With the EU, the dynamics is similar. Media depict Ukraine positively in 11 cases out of 24, where the EU has a positive image and Russia — a negative one, neutrally in 7 cases, negatively in 2 cases and with a mixed image in 4 cases. A high number of cases with Ukraine having a neutral image suggests that Ukraine figures as a ‘background player’ in describing the US and the EU ideological battle with Russia, and, hypothetically the role of a ‘victim’ could be played by anyone. For example, in the articles about imposing sanctions on Russia, Ukraine does not feature as a leading actor.

A rather high number of articles depict Ukraine having a mixed evaluative image in relation to the EU and the US. This adds another dimension to the narrative at the *issue* level. Latvian media do not present Ukraine as an unconditional ‘victim’ there. In this perspective, the West may be supporting Ukraine in its endeavours to get out of Russia’s influence, yet Ukraine is still a country in transition doing its ‘homework’. Several articles point to the economic and judicial reforms to fight corruption as a precondition to become a ‘real’ part of the Western world. As such, Ukraine enters the narrative about Russia and the West as a country fighting between two systems of values. It is aspiring to join the EU and NATO — ‘the West’—yet it is unable to carry out reforms, fight corruption and organized crime, and ‘bring to justice’ individuals responsible for murders during Maidan. Russia embodies the ‘old’ value system, the opposite of the ‘Western world’ in which Ukraine has found itself trapped in. It is up to Ukraine to invest effort to reform itself. The West will help in maintaining a discourse against Russia’s aggression, yet the articles with Ukraine having a negative or mixed image suggest that Ukraine itself must carry out reforms to cut the ties with Russia and join the Euro-Atlantic space.

Setting the scene: thematic context

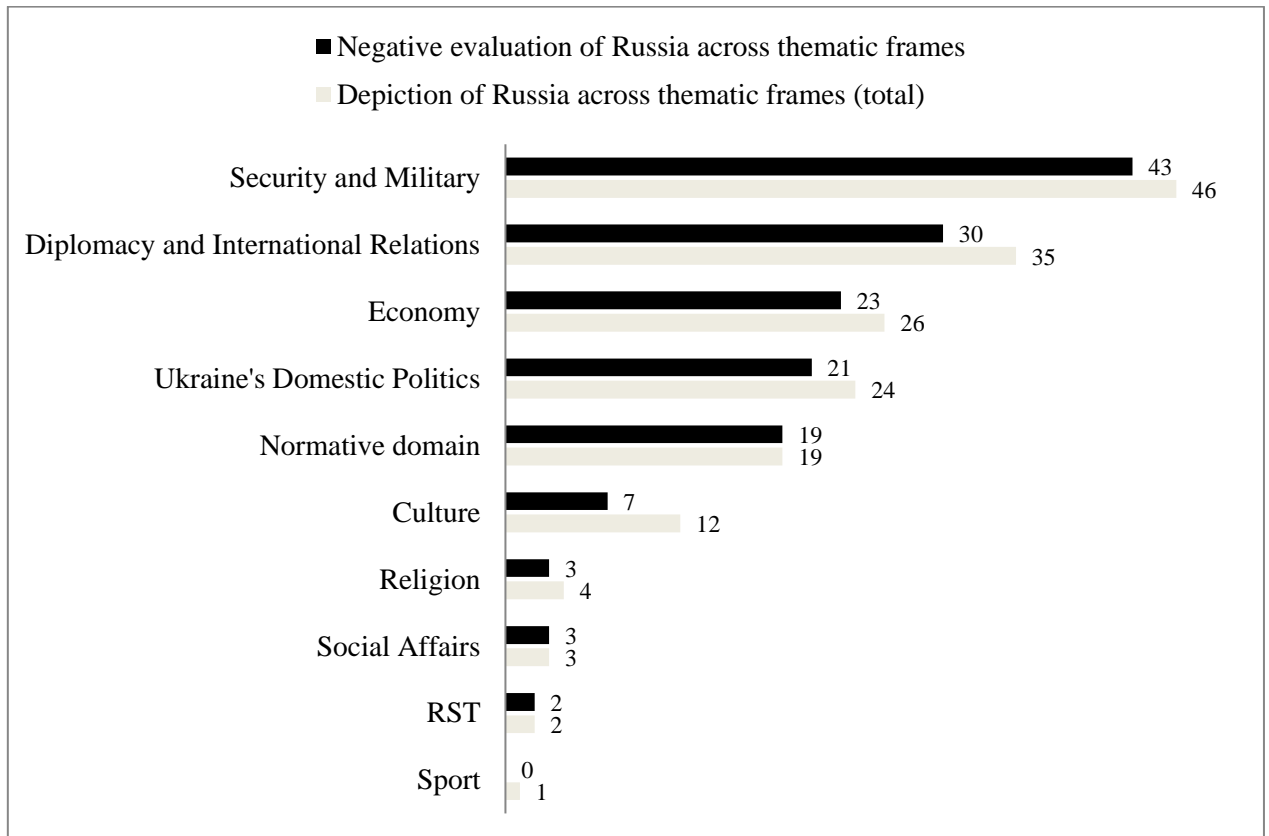
As discussed above, media narratives evolve around *system* narrative of global order and *identity* narrative in representing opposing value systems at actors' level. As such, the scene set for the media narrative is international. Thematic frames of security and military, and diplomacy and international relations dominate, followed by economy, normative issues and Ukraine's domestic politics (see Figures 2 and 3). Russia is evaluated mostly negatively across all thematic frames, except for sports. In Ukraine's case, the evaluation is more nuanced.

Latvia's media in this study construct Russia's negative image around such events as the Kerch Strait incident⁹, following it EU and US sanctions, upcoming Presidential elections in Ukraine, and the 5th anniversary of the Maidan events. Russia's negative image also emerges in the reports on economic issues, including news stories on Russia's meddling in internal affairs of third countries with its corrupt economy leaving a negative imprint on these countries. Here, such topics as Russia's connection to money laundering operations and corruption of Ukraine's high-ranking officials are in focus. Hereby, Ukraine's domestic policy comes into the frame. Russia's negative image appears in the reports on Euromaidan events and Ukraine's pro-European path, corruption in Ukraine, and Russia's potential meddling into Ukraine's Presidential elections. When normative themes entered the reportages, Russia received negative evaluations when publications discussed observation of such values as human rights, democracy, freedom and liberty, peace, rule of law, good governance.

In Ukraine's case, the evaluation is more varied. Latvian journalists usually evaluate Ukraine positively in the field of diplomacy and international relations. They emphasize the use of legitimate tools of the international legal system against Russia to underline Russia's non-compliance. Specifically, reports deal with international sanctions against Russia or stripping Russia of its seat in major international organisations. On the other side, Ukraine gets most of negative evaluations in the reports about Ukrainian politicians engaged in illegitimate money flows. In this case, money is transferred through the Baltic banks. Another popular topic is Ukraine's inability to comply with the standards set by the EU in the aftermath of the Maidan events.

⁹ Russia's capture of three Ukrainian Navy vessels on 25 November 2018 passing from the Black Sea into the Sea of Azov through the Kerch Strait to reach the port of Mariupol. Russia claimed that Ukraine had to ask for permission to enter the territorial waters around the Crimea. Ukraine considered the claim illegitimate as it did not recognize the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

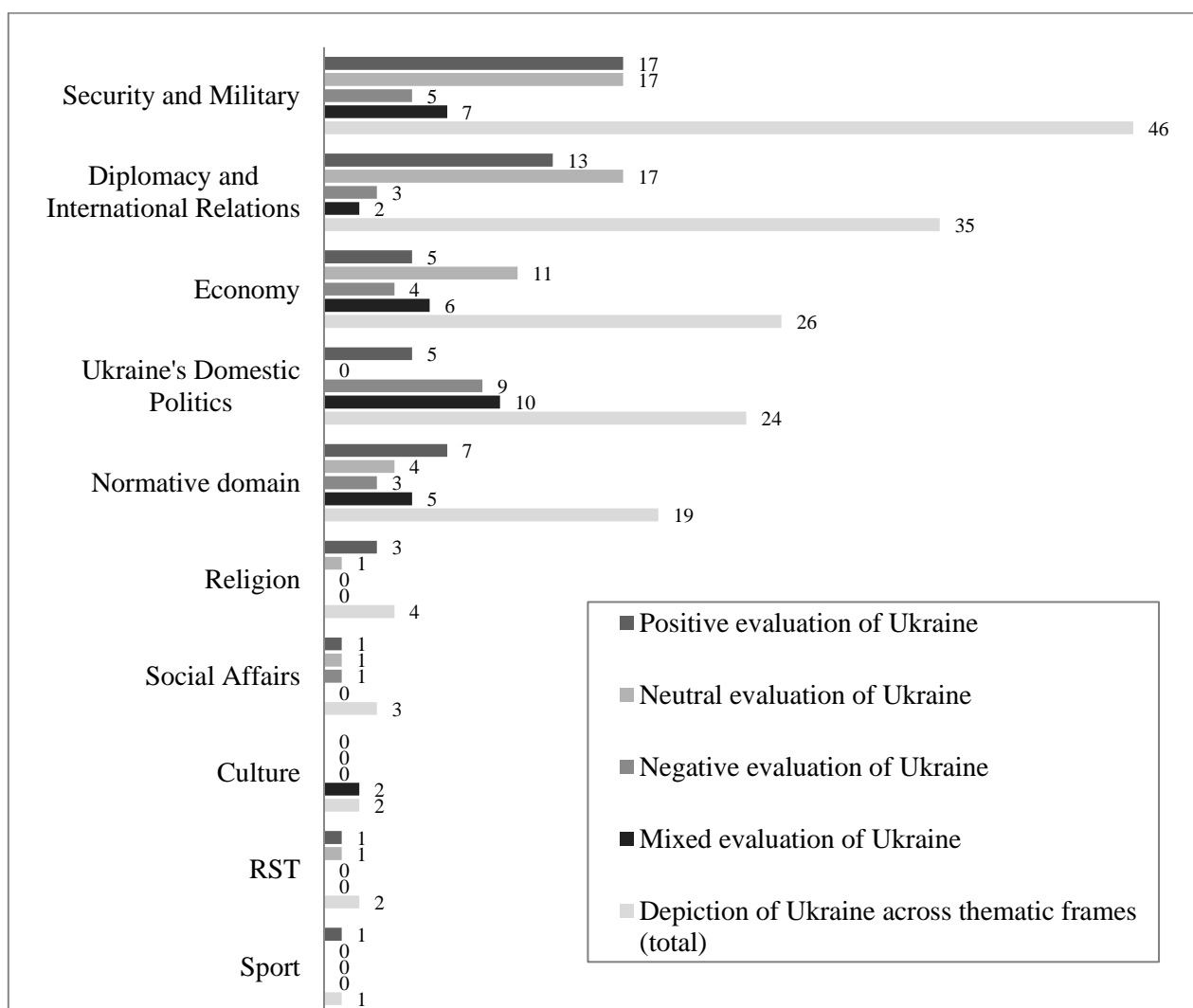
Figure 2: Representation of Russia across thematic frames (number of articles)



Source: Authors' Own, E-YOUTH

The latter thematic framework often links to domestic Ukrainian politics, where images of Ukraine acquire a number of mixed evaluations. Reporting Ukraine's challenged progress of reforms and stumbling indicators of economic growth, Latvian journalists depict Ukraine as a highly polarised country that is fighting to belong to the European 'club', however, slipping back into corruption and mismanagement. Similar framing persists in the normative domain. Ukraine is depicted positively when journalists comment on its ability to resist Russia's meddling in its internal affairs. Ukraine's negative evaluation in the field of security and military affairs is usually linked to the mismanagement of Ukrainian army, Ukraine's inability to protect and provide help for the civilians on the frontline in Eastern Ukraine, and Ukraine's economic insecurity which stems from large-scale corruption and appropriation of state funds.

Figure 3: Representation of Ukraine across thematic frames (number of articles).



Source: Authors' Own, E-YOUTH

Plots of action: framing conflict and resolution

Thematic frame analysis shows that many of the elements constituting the official political narrative resonate with the media narrative of the situation in post-Maidan Ukraine and Russia's involvement in it. Thus, the Latvian-speaking digital media outlets largely align with the strategic narrative of the state at the *system* and *identity* levels. However, in contrast to official political narrative, on the *issue* level, media narrative is critical not only towards Russia but also Ukraine. This section elaborates the roles Latvian journalists assign to the actors in the media narrative. It traces a 'plot' of conflict and (potential) resolution, within which action takes place.

Russia as an aggressor and Ukraine as a victim of the Russian aggression

In this plot, Ukraine is cast as a victim of ‘Russia’s armed aggression’ (DELFI, 21.02.2019.), especially in the context of the Kerch Strait incident and international sanctions. This topic is particularly important for Latvia, considering that journalists have also discussed the possibility of the Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine being a prelude to an attack on Latvia (Ratfelders, 14.03.2019). Such words as ‘annexation’, ‘occupation’, ‘seizure’ of Crimea are used frequently to describe the conflict. The EU and the US are cast into the roles of defenders of Ukraine, imposing ‘new harsh sanctions’ on Russia (Tvnet, 14.02.2019). These articles also cite a lot of numbers to provide evidence (not always referenced) for the price Ukraine has to pay for its European choice: numbers of people killed, injured, kidnapped and displaced. For Ukraine’s ‘price’ the President Piotr Poroshenko is cited: ‘For no one and never the European and the Euro-Atlantic choice has cost as much as for Ukraine’ (Tvnet, 19.02.2019.). The solution in this plot is up to Russia: the sanctions will be maintained ‘until the Russian government returns control over Crimea to Ukraine’ (Tvnet, 28.02.2019).

Russia as an opponent to the Western world

In this plot, Russia is a country violating international norms and acting unacceptably by Western normative standards. In contrast, Ukraine that follows the European ‘path’ is taken under the EU and the US protection. Journalists frequently cite high-level EU official supporting Ukraine: ‘this type of activity on the part of the European Union will not be tolerated’ (Konohovs, 18.02.2019), ‘(w)e are with you. And we want to help you in the future’ because ‘a fair Europe without a free and independent Ukraine is not possible’ (Markusa, 20.02.2019), or ‘the EU is side by side and helps’ (Kārkluvāls, 04.03.2019). The solution suggested in this plot is united effort of the Western world (which Latvia belongs to and Ukraine aspires to be part of) against Russia’s international law breaching activities.

Russia as a perpetrator for the aftermath of Maidan

In this plot, Ukrainian people are disillusioned about ‘harsh’ reality five years after the Maidan events. ‘Thousands of people took to the streets to protest against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich’s efforts to look towards Russia not Europe’s way’ (Markusa, 20.02.2019.), but nowadays

Ukraine has not moved much further. Russia (via its warfare in the East Ukraine, support to corrupt officials and impact on judiciary) is blamed for not letting the 'high' hopes come true. A suggested solution here is bringing to justice those guilty of the murders on Maidan.

Russia as a meddler in Ukraine's internal affairs

In this plot, the conflict is about Russia's interference into Ukraine's internal affairs. Latvian journalists report that Ukraine 'is already counting that Russia will try to influence the [Presidential] elections' (Cunka, 20.02.2019), trying to station its supporters at Ukrainian top positions. Another topic concerns religion. The independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Russian Orthodox Church has 'angered the Moscow church, which has shrunken ties with the patriarch of Constantinople' (DELFI, 20.02.2019). Russia's detention of the Crimean Archbishop Climent of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is seen as an act of revenge. A suggested solution for Ukraine is continuation of its efforts to join the Euro-Atlantic space.

Ukraine as a country in transition between the East and the West

In this plot, Ukraine comes across as a country which has cemented its commitment to the EU and NATO not only at the level of rhetoric, but also constitutionally (TVNET, 19.02.2019). However, journalists describe Ukraine's reforms as 'one step forward, two steps back', as pre-existing structures of power in Ukraine stall full implementation of reforms (Cunka, 20.02.2019). Ukraine's economic progress towards European standards is also questioned as life has become more expensive, money has devalued and people have become less happy overall. So, even if Ukraine is clearly framed as a victim of Russia's aggression that stalls the process of European integration (TVNET, 07.03.2019), Ukraine's own domestic mismanagement is often the reason behind the inability to live up to European standards (Vingris, 11.02.2019). Therefore, a part of the solution lies with Ukraine's successful implementation of reforms.

Ukraine as a deeply mismanaged country in a critical situation

In this plot, journalists have pointed on numerous occasions to the corruption scandals plaguing Ukrainian politics (Tvnet, 26.02.2019), the illegitimate money flows from Ukraine that also affect the Baltic banking sector (Tvnet, 21.02.2019), as well as stalling of anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine (Cunka, 20.02.2019). The trafficking of military equipment from Russia and

selling it for a high price to Ukrainian arms businesses puts a shadow on Ukraine's highest political echelons (Tvnet, 26.02.2019). Media also depict the Ukrainian medical and rehabilitation sector in a state of chaos, describing those receiving treatment as a result of injuries in the frontline as having 'descended into hell' (Vingris, 19.02.2019). The solution here lies within Ukraine and its political willingness to fight corruption.

6. Concluding remarks

Informed by theoretical models of strategic narratives and cascading activation of frames, the article focused on the narrative of the popular Latvian-speaking digital news media about Russia in the context of post-Maidan Ukraine, and specifically - on alignment of media narratives with the official strategic narrative. We presumed that media would depict Russia negatively and Ukraine positively in order to highlight the difficult situation Ukraine finds itself in as a victim of Russia's aggression. The official political narrative has been consistent to underline that at the *system* level, Russia's behaviour is unacceptable from the perspective of international law, which protects smaller and less influential countries such as Latvia and Ukraine. Furthermore, the official political narrative describes Russia as a threat not only because of the consistent meddling in internal affairs of Ukraine, but also Latvia, often contesting the *identity* narratives of these states. Eventually, at the *issue* level Latvia resonates with Ukraine's plight to belong to the EU and NATO, as it evaluates these organisations as 'key' to keep Russia away.

By exploring the contents of 73 media articles, we conclude that Latvian reports of Russia in the context of post-Maidan Ukraine in the three leading digital news media resonate with the official political narrative. One of the main findings relates to the regional security narrative that appears in the official political and the media narratives. Despite Latvia's more than 15-year-long membership in the EU and NATO and the emergence of new global 'poles', such as China, the confrontation of Eastern (Russian) and Western foreign policy *a la guerre froide*, as well as the return of the great power struggle in the region surrounding Latvia is an 'umbrella' theme in the observed narratives. Media narrative depicts Russia as an aggressor and opponent to the West, thus aligning with political official narrative on a *systemic* and *identity* levels. However, our analysis revealed that it was only the relationship between Russia and the West (represented by the EU and the US) that followed straightforwardly the 'good' vs. 'evil' dichotomy. In the media narrative, Ukraine was not depicted as an unequivocally positive

actor. The journalists' depiction of the Ukrainian-Russian dynamics at the *issue* level features negativity towards Ukraine. Though acknowledged as a country that aspires to join the EU and the NATO, Ukraine is seen as a badly managed country too, still hesitating between the values systems of East and the West.

From the theoretical point of view, such a divergence points to a less persuasive power of the official narrative when it comes to reception of it both at the domestic and international levels. As discussed in the second section, the key point of strategic narratives is 'to influence the behaviour of others' (Miskimmon et al. 2013, p. 2). The impact and viability of the strategic narrative depends on its perception (Chaban et al, 2017). The persuasive power of the strategic narrative is higher when there is alignment between three phases of the narrative life-cycle — *formation*, *projection* and *reception* — and three levels of narratives — *system*, *identity* and *issue* narratives. Our study demonstrates that Latvia's official political narratives and media narratives align on a *system* and *identity* levels, both boiling down to the dichotomy of the 'battle' between the West on the one hand, which comprises Latvia, the EU and the Euro-Atlantic community of which Ukraine aspires to be a part of, and Russia and its geopolitical ambitions on the other hand. We conclude that it is potentially the most persuasive part of Latvia's strategic narrative, as *formation* and *projection* phases coincide in their representation of the strategic narrative towards Russia vis- à-vis post-Maidan Ukraine, and both official and media narratives align at *system* and *identity* levels. We thus observe a coherent 'story' told to domestic and international audiences by official and media 'narrators': Russia is an aggressor, violating the principles of international law and endangering the liberal value system of the West, which Latvia is and Ukraine aspires to be part of.

Arguably, Latvia's strategic narrative is less persuasive at the *issue* level because at the *issue* level the 'narrators' differ in how they see the post-Maidan Ukraine. We observe that the journalists take a more critical stance towards post-Maidan Ukraine than the official narrative. Coming back to Entman (2003), we disclose that certain frames 'earn acceptance' by the journalists in the media narratives, such as Ukraine being a victim of Russia's aggressiveness and constantly fighting with Russia's meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs. At the same time, media tell a 'story' about Ukraine overwhelmed by corruption and unable to carry out economic and judicial reforms, which would be the pre-conditions for Ukraine to join the Euro-Atlantic community. Media narratives thus question the official narratives,

which underline Latvia's unequivocal support to Ukraine's integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures and see it as a solution for getting Ukraine out of Russia's sphere of influence.

We consider our findings important for several reasons. Media are important agents for conveying the information to the general public, and as such they play a crucial role in the legitimatisation process of state's policy. Convergence of Latvia's official political narratives and media narratives on Russia and Ukraine in the post-Maidan context at the *system* and *identity* levels provides a coherent message to the public, having a chance to win higher public support for Latvia's policy towards Russia, for example, regarding sanctions. On the other hand, divergences at the *issue* level hamper the persuasive power of the official narrative, providing a room for counter-narratives to emerge, for example, questioning financial support to Ukraine and Ukraine's integration in the EU. Following the cascading activation framing model such a narrative has a chance to circulate not only top-down but also bottom-up, especially if there are political actors that pick-up the contesting narrative. For Latvia's official policy and public diplomacy a narrative contesting Ukraine's reforms and its place in the Euro-Atlantic community may become a challenge.

Given the limitations of this study future studies could focus on a more comprehensive analysis of narratives on Russia within a longer time period. Given an importance of the Russian-speaking news media in Latvia, future research can also factor narratives produced by the Russian-speaking news media in Latvia. Furthermore, a research on perceptions of strategic narratives, formulated and projected on political and media levels would help uncover a full life-cycle of narratives of Russian-Ukrainian dynamics in Latvia.

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Pauline Sophie Heinrichs

**AGENCY AND THE STRATEGIC NEGOTIATION OF FUTURES:
EVIDENCE FROM LATVIA**

Abstract

This paper will argue that the strategic narration of temporality in the process of envisioning future state identity narratives can enable a sense of agency. To capture this sense of agency conceptually, this paper proposes the concept of movement narratives, i.e. strategic narratives that specifically seek to create movement around discursive structures to propose alterations to these structures. This paper explores the concept of movement narratives in the context of how younger Latvian generations engage in ‘writing’ the future of identity narratives for their country. It will argue that narratives are negotiated, disassembled and assembled toward very specific readings and productions of future visions of the Self. In this negotiation, Latvian youth appears to see progress ahead for Latvia, one which they are interested in shaping and encouraged by what they narrate as agency to do so.

Keywords: agency; identity; ontological security; strategic narratives; temporality

This paper will argue that the strategic narration of temporality in the process of envisioning future state identity narratives can enable a sense of agency. Actors can narrate changes to discursive structures that may be perceived as limiting while encouraging redescriptions of the future Self. While identity narratives may be considered discursive structures, they can also be used strategically to negotiate these discursive structures, especially at moments of conceptual uncertainty.

The theoretical approach in this paper seeks to add to discussions on the narration of temporality (Jarvis, 2008) and to the scholarship in strategic narratives more broadly (Miskimmon et al., 2013). For Jarvis (2008, p. 246), “understanding the persuasiveness of ... pervasive political discourse fully necessitates an engagement with its temporal structuration(s)”. I argue that Jarvis’ argument also applies to identity narrative negotiation. To examine how claims of temporality link to identity narrative negotiations, I propose the concept of movement narratives, which I define as strategic narratives that specifically seek to create movement around discursive structures to propose alterations to these structures. I examine the concept of movement narratives in the context of how young Latvian elites and Latvian online media negotiate the future of its country’s identity narratives.

Latvia is an excellent case study to gauge the influence of temporal claims to identity narratives in moments of conceptual and narrated uncertainty. Formerly a Soviet Union country, Latvia joined the European Union and NATO in 2004. Much research has focused on Latvia as a Baltic state, and its transition from Soviet rule, to the country's independence to the European Union. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 encapsulated the “year of miracles” (Sztompka in Jacobsson 2010, p. 1), ushering the Baltic States and Latvia into a new era of their and its national history:

All of a sudden, it was possible to retreat from Soviet rule, proclaim independence, and establish or re-establish themselves as modern, Western states. The wheels of history started rolling in a new direction. (Ibid.)

Notwithstanding, the perception of the Baltic States as role models of the Europeanisation process (see Johanssen, 2006), questions on identity did not fall with the Berlin Wall or did not settle with EU membership. Of significance in Latvia's post-Soviet identity-building process was not only the intrinsic tie to territorial integrity and physical borders (see Aalto et al., 2003; Jurkynas, 2004; Möller, 2007) but also evidenced in its problem-ridden relationship with Latvia's Russian-speaking minority (see Cheskin, 2016). Latvia's entanglement in “two narratives of the recent past,” in “[perennial] conflict with one another” (Kattago, 2010, p. 383), appeared to resurface with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Was it possible that Latvia found itself, once again, in the “waiting room” of history? Further to this, the safety provided by membership in the European Union appeared to erode in light of the EU's manifold crises which led some to question whether it was only a matter of time that the EU would break apart (Hirsh, 2018). International politics has taken many unexpected turns since, and it appears that crises define this day and age, creating lasting uncertainty around what can be expected state behaviour in the future. In applying the framework developed in this paper, I seek to explore how younger generations engage in writing the future of identity narratives for their country.

Identity and Movement Narratives: Toward a Narrative Reading of Continuity and Change

In this paper, I reject an essentialist reading of continuity and change in reference to identity. While scholarship in IR has long grappled with understanding and conceptualising change and continuity in, say, state

identity, I argue instead that change and continuity are subject to where they are narrated. To be sure, conditions can effectively change that will also impact the identity commitments of a given state. Yet, reality and historical time are always made of change and continuity co-occurring. Instead, explaining change, and indeed what is (inter-)subjectively understood as change depends in large parts on how and where actors express change. The analytical attention should thus shift to where actors place movement in identity narrative commitments through time and space. In the process of negotiating change and continuity to a state's identity, a multiplicity of actors (can) seek to partake in the writing process of identity commitment. While strategic narrative research has often exclusively focused on the narrative cycle as produced by political elites, the concept can be applied to any individual or group who seeks to narrate change and continuity to a collective's identity commitments.

While identity is a contentious issue in IR, especially propelled by the advent of constructivist research, I reject an essentialist reading of identity and argue that identity narratives are the closest to understanding "identity commitments" (Steele 2010, p. 77) by an individual or collective. I, therefore, conceptualise identity narratives as collective narratives akin to what Clunan understands as "a set of ideas that are generally accepted by any group of actors as defining what their collectivity is and the general rules under which it operates" (Clunan, 2009). Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 34) clarify that collective narratives "can be identified, even if it is created through a process involving individuals in the midst of domestic contestation". Steele (2010, p. 77) mirrors this point by arguing that collective narratives "most closely [approximate] the identity commitments a state will pursue in international relations". Identity narratives outline the identity commitments of a state, including its external representation as well as internal ontologically guiding narratives.

It follows that identity requires expression by actors who seek to assume or speak for an identity (Steele, 2008). Critically, the assumptions inherent to this conceptualisation of identity are that (1) identity is a socio-linguistically constructed and co-produced concept (2) that identity commitments can be subject to changes in narrations in their expressions. The subjectivity of identity narratives to narrations of change further make claims about agency in relation to structure.

IR has long grappled with questions on how to break the deadlock on the agency and structure debate (Wendt, 1987). More generally, this paper

argues that the binary reading of agency and structure hinders the fruitful analysis of processes that constitute both (see Hay, 2002; Sewell, 2005). The “ontological dualism” (Holland and Bentley, 2014, p. 197) has led to an “excessively intentionalist and structuralist” (Ibid.) debate in the social sciences (see Archer, 1995) and has achieved little in terms of resolving problems inherent to this dualism (Hay, 2002). More aptly, I concur with Hay (2002, p.120) in that the distinction between structure and agency is “purely analytical and should not be reified into a rigid ontological dualism.” Where structure and agency are understood as mutually constitutive as well as limiting and enabling (Hay, 2002; Bially-Mattern, 2005; Sandstrom et al., 2010), we can conceive of both structural constraints placed on actors as well as actors’ ability to work through these structural constraints and exert agency to influence these structural constraints. I argue further that part of the difficulty in conceptualising structure and agency rests on their understanding without acknowledging the concept of strategic narratives.

Strategic narratives are “tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for the international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. i). Strategic narratives are, therefore, a “conscious product, operationalised to secure a specified political purpose or benefit” (Bentley, 2018, p. 334).

The purpose of strategic narratives relates closely to identity, system and issue narratives through which Miskimmon et al. categorize possible strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). While I broadly acknowledge the analytical usefulness of these three categories, I argue that identity narratives are conceptually different from system and issue narratives because they are more akin to overarching narrative structures. Strategic narratives focus on moments of agency in political actors’ ability and power to shape and diffuse certain story worlds about the actors themselves and the world in which they engage. Critically, it is vital to acknowledge the tenuous nature of strategic narratives: “It is difficult to evaluate what disciplining power can be attributed to the narrative itself, as compared to the power structures that underlie it” (Price 2012, p. 25). This paper suggests, however, that such limitations do not mitigate the need to examine the agency inherent to strategic narratives.

Strategic narratives speak to structures as long-term narratives that place constraints on the ability of actors to shape a discursive environment. However, they can also explain the ways in which actors can actively forge

and shape this discursive environment. The “interaction of strategy and context, therefore, serves to shape both the development of that context and the very conduct and identity of strategic actors after the event” (Hay, 2002, p. 134). In the context of identity narratives, this means that identity narratives are long-term narrative structures as well as actors can use strategic narratives as tools. In this way, long-term narratives and short-term narrations of episodes and events interact and co-produce a complex and continuously contested environment in the realm of a collective’s identity (Szostek, 2017; Miskimmon et al., 2013; Clunan, 2009). Long-term narratives and short-term narrations are not necessarily defined by their temporal scope but instead by how they are recognised and what they seek to do. When narratives have reached a “tipping point threshold when a critical mass of social actors accepts and buys into it as a social fact” (Subotić 2016, p. 615), then narratives can become settled discursive structures. When narratives become accepted as social facts they designate acceptable behaviour. At the same time, strategic narratives are tools that can unsettle existing or create new narrative structures to a strategic end.

I argue further that the interaction of long-term narratives and short-term narrations of episodes and events is best analytically approached through the examination of movement narratives. I define movement narratives as strategic narratives specifically crafted to negotiate existing narrative structures through time. Movement narratives thrive on the encounter of the friction between the known and the unknown. They negotiate friction by designing a way out of this friction. Friction here is understood as competing narrative structures through which sense is achieved. However, as they compete, the sense-making of a given situation rests unresolvedly in the space between this friction. Movement narratives seek a way out of this friction; they negotiate it.

Methodology

For the examination of the case study, I use two data produced in the course of the EU-funded policy- and solution-oriented Jean Monnet Project E-YOUTH (<https://jeanmonnet.nz/eyouth/>, 2018-2020). It examines how younger generations in Ukraine and the Baltic States narrate relationships between each other, the European Union and the world. Where the Baltic States are seen as role models of Europeanisation (see Johanssen, 2006), the project asked how the inter-subjective narration among younger generations speaks to how young people make sense of themselves and the world they live in.

The dataset used in this research is based on media data collection in Latvia between 11.02.2019 to 10.03.2019 of three most popular online news sources (Delfi.lv; Tvnet; LSM) among younger audiences (see table 1). In total, 173 media articles that referenced Ukraine was collected. To be sure, the selection criteria for Ukraine excludes a variety of articles that could have spoken to Latvian sense-making of identity. At the same time, the prism of identity through Ukraine made possible an angle on Latvian Self-understanding through (international) relations and the ongoing conflict with Russia, both of which speak importantly to Latvian conceptualisations of the Self (see also Kleinberga and Vizgunova, this issue).

To substantiate the findings from the media analysis, I further included data from 10 elite interviews conducted in February and March 2020 with younger (20-30 years) civil society elites. Here I focus specifically on the examination of three questions: (1) How would you describe Latvia, yourself in relation to your country and what would you like Latvia to be like in the future? (2) What role does Latvia have and should take in international relations? (3) How would you describe the situation in the world, and what do you think the future will look like?

From both the media data set and the elite interviews, I conducted a narrative analysis, with a particular focus on movement narratives. Movement narratives can take many shapes and forms. Therefore, a pre-set coding sheet for their examination is counter-intuitive to analysing movement narratives. I instead examined the data through semi-inductive narrative analysis. I code each interview and media data point by grouping statements according to the following categories through a text analysis: (1) *Actors*; (2) *Identity commitments*; (3) *Temporal claims*; (4) *Uncertainty*; (5) *Agency*.

By grouping textual elements into these categories, I identify how different narrations of temporality link to the Self and formulation of agency. Movement narratives, that is the specific strategic narratives that actors deploy to negotiate identity narrative structures, are identified in the coding sheets. Critically, media data and interview data are textually different, especially where media data has been pre-coded into categories by Latvian researchers. However, where identity narrative negotiation is complex, the deployment of multiple methods reflects this complex interaction more appropriately. Moreover, it has to be acknowledged that the research sample

is limited and the evidence suggested in this paper, should be seen only as indicators for future research in this area.

Where Do We Go from Here? Latvian State Identity and a Fragile World in Latvian Online Media

Latvian media analysis revealed a number of frictions that hindered the sense-making of the Self. Strikingly, the media analysis indicated a lack of movement narratives to resolve this friction. This concerned in particular, narratives of the Self and Latvia's position in the future. On the one hand, the narrative analysis suggested that media outlets considered Latvia to be in a good place; a place Latvians had worked hard to achieve. On the other hand, Latvia was also portrayed as poor, fragile and still in need of a helping hand by international partners and through multilateral cooperation and institutions. This friction produces tension because it relates to different readings of a state's purview of agency (Steele, 2008). Crucially, the narrations of the Self linked to very different formulations as to the possibility of agency, especially in the international arena. Where Latvia was portrayed as being in a good place, a more active placement of interests in the international arena suggested more scope for Latvian agency in this domain, especially through multilateral frameworks such as the European Union or NATO. While Latvia's good position heavily tied to European identity narrative commitments and presented Latvia as a European country at heart, some uncertainty as to what constitutes the Self still resonated in the media data. However, where Latvia was narrated as a European country, the media data reflects a more active pursuit of interests and agency to take part in influencing European policy. On the flipside, where Latvia was understood as being weak and fragile still, the state's purview of agency was less pro-active. In the latter accounts Latvia was presented as a small player in the international arena. The narration of the weak Self further linked to narrations of caution and warned that Latvia had to be cautious not to be pushed aside or off its path of slow but steady development. These accounts tied to a generally positive view of the Self while other actors – most dominantly Russia – were portrayed as endangering the stability of the Self (see also Kleinberga and Vizgunova, this issue). Uncertainty as to the fragility of the international order linked crucially to weakening a sense of agency. While there is a recurring theme of Latvia as a European country, the EU as a powerful player loses out in the wider acknowledgement of US and Russian power (Ibid.). The EU here is perceived as a middle man between two superpowers, which reflects a recurrence of historical Cold War narratives more broadly.

Both readings of agency are processual, that is they place Latvia as subjects in these processes. However, where in the former Latvia can be an active agent in the forging and shaping of these processes, in the latter it is merely subject to it with little agency in the process. The uncertainty here, constituted an important theme, despite the acknowledgement of progress.

More generally, this uncertainty was not necessarily referenced in relation to Latvia itself, but through Latvia as subject to global uncertainty. Both, the international order as well as the European Union were mostly portrayed as fragile or as falling apart, which implied that it had become more difficult to envisage the future amidst this uncertainty. Fragility in this view led to difficulties in assessing expectations and what can be known. As I have argued elsewhere (Heinrichs, 2019, p.7), uncertainty constitutes an “important theme for narrative sense-making” and how uncertainty is negotiated depends on the understanding of the identity of the Self.

One of the dominant metaphors in the media data was that of politics versus culture, which also speaks to questions on the possibility of agency. Politics was presented as creating the conditions in which countries either strive or fall apart. Culture was juxtaposed to the power of the political system. Where Latvians were thus perceived as being culturally European, media data reflected more uncertainty about whether the political system was sufficiently reflecting this culture. Especially where media data suggested Latvia’s weak position in the international arena, a sense of victimhood permeated the narrative sensemaking of Latvia’s position in the world.

Our Generation Will Take Matters into Their Own Hands. Latvian State Identity and the Negotiation of Latvia’s Future in Latvian Young Elite Interviews

Whereas the media projected conflicting narratives as to Latvian agency in the process of writing its future, young elites were more confident about being able to take charge of the process of writing Latvia’s future. The confidence to assert agency was crucially linked to how temporal claims were made, in particular by narrating process through generational narratives. Mostly rejecting the reading of the current global condition as a critical juncture, interviewees focussed on processes. This finding is particularly instructive, as the processual nature of temporality crucially linked to the role of agency in shaping (the outcome) of these processes.

Writing a generation of change and the process of becoming

As argued, generational narratives played a crucial role in the sense-making of Latvia's current subject-positioning in those processes that young elite interviewees thought they could and had the intention to shape. "I am waiting for one or two generations [...], so we can start talking about really radical things [...]," one respondent stated. "We are trying to be what we are not, and I want Latvia to be [...] more open to ideas" (3). The respondent (3) elaborated that:

"Latvians are very shy, very fearful [...]. I greatly respect the older generations and older people, but if you lived in the Soviet Union for fifty years, and then you have twenty years to try to adapt to a modern, open, progressive Europe, well, there won't be that adaptation [...]." (Ibid.)

Another respondent mirrored the idea that a generational change also meant the introduction of new ideas and new ways of thinking. They wished for the "young[er] generation [...] to become more empowered vis-à-vis the older generation [...] to have a clearer understanding of where we really want to move as a country" (5). On the one hand, generations are a seismograph for societal change (Schiek and Ullrich, 2011, p. 167) because they have a novel access to society and events (Mannheim, 1928). On the other hand, generations are bound through their narrated unity, which principally connects to research in collective memory (Halbwachs, 1980; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) and connective memory (Hoskins, 2011). The constitution of a generation, I argue here, is thus both subject to processes of collective and connective memorialisation, but also subject to the production of this generation through narrative, in particular in the attempt to envision a societal change in the future.

The vision for the future rested decisively on temporal narratives that focussed on process, not on ruptures. Ruptures are too subject to narration, and oftentimes constitute the elements that require the incorporation into existing narrative patterns. Ruptures, especially when they are narrated as that, carry the potential to serve as compounded spaces for the negotiation of identity narratives. Yet, in the absence of narration of rupture, respondents focused instead on a process of becoming, from where Latvia had come from and where Latvia would go. "Latvia is like a fourteen-year-old child, we have to grow very far to go, but we have already gone far" (4). "Of course, it

doesn't happen overnight, it has been quite a short time, but I think we are progressing well" (3).

The narration of generational change is a particularly instructive movement narrative because it roots identity narrative structures in generations. The movement narrative of generational change thus argues that there is not an inherent identity narrative to Latvia that stands apart from the generation that produces it. In arguing that identity narrative commitments of the future can be changed through generations, the younger generations not only narrate changes but they narratively empower generational change. The power of placing change in narrative structures rests thus not so much on whether this factually creates change but on how it expands the possible scope of agency and action for the narrators. In this way, the movement narrative of generational change enables narrators to envision the Self as different in the future and to seek to enact this future Self.

Latvia's future is "progressive" and has "great potential."

In the process of becoming, Latvia's future was mostly envisaged as having great potential with a desire for it to be more progressive. "I hope [Latvia's future to be] positive and based on more progressive values than on conservative ones" (5; see also, interviews 1 and 3). Latvia was perceived as having great potential (1), if it realised and expanded in those areas that constituted the main narrative focus points domestically and internationally. "And of course, we have very great potential here, well as for Latvia, I think, for a relatively educated nation and with many other resources, which I think we could use more effectively and compete fairly well." (8).

Domestically, interviewees understood change in particular through narratives on social and ideological change, which dominantly featured themes such as social cohesion and inclusiveness (2; 3; 10). This concerned the inner-societal divisions "A big step would be for us to reduce the classic 'us vs. them' policy, which is a matter between Latvians and Russians" (1). Further, the future society was informed by policies that dominantly saw reforms in the education sector:

There is a huge lack of systematic solutions [...] until we have an orderly education system and until we have a health care and social support system, the society will be less happy, and that is where we should strive, for people wishing to live here. (9).

Through social cohesion and a generational progression toward unity and an educated society, young elites considered meaningful ways through which these processes could be shaped. Internationally, respondents unequivocally saw Latvia as part of a multilateral world order, deeply embedded in supranational institutions. “We must be a part of supranational organisations as a small country” (6; see also 1;3;7;8;10). The integration into Europe was perceived as one way to increase Latvia’s standing and voice in the world. “Because Latvia is cool, but we are small, fragile, weak if we identify with a larger community [...] – NATO or the EU – we can be bigger and stronger” (3). Especially the notion of a small country linked to sense-making of how Latvia’s position could be advanced strategically: “We have to approach it like a crafty fox, we are not a big bear that can hold everything. We have to be like a fox; we have to be smart; we have to be able to offer something to others” (10).

In the process of envisioning future, Latvia is understood as acting within the structural confines of being a small country, yet with agency in the process to work through these structural constraints. Most dominantly, young elites considered social cohesion and education as central tools for realising the great potential they envisioned for Latvia. In this context, multilateral institutions were a core feature of this sense-making, despite the system narratives that made most commonly sense of the global order as uncertain and unpredictable.

Conclusion: Uncertainty, Will and Hopeful Agency

I have started this paper with the assumption that change and continuity are always dependent on perspective. Conversely, history is always the continuous interaction of both. Researchers principally interested in the notions of change and continuity should, therefore, focus on where and how change and continuity are narrated. On the basis of this assumption, narratives construct, order, produce and reproduce reality. Sense is achieved through narratives. This can be strategically explored. Narrative structures are malleable to strategic use, which also expands on processes of envisioning and writing futures.

As younger generations, in particular, attest to visions of the future for the state they live in, I have applied this framework to a short and cursory exploration of sense-making by Latvia’s youth. Latvia, like the other Baltic states, has been considered a role model of Europeanisation with a clear

trajectory and pathway as part of this process. Yet, how young elites make sense of firstly, the media narratives they consume, and secondly, the world of which they are part is more complex and multi-layered. Narratives are negotiated, disassembled and assembled toward very specific readings and productions of future visions of the Self. In this negotiation, Latvian youth appears to see a process ahead for Latvia, one which they are interested in shaping and believe they have the agency to.

To be sure, the size of the dataset cannot fully establish a causal relationship and can only point to the importance of understanding the strategic narrations of temporality for an analytical grasp of narrating agency. However, where temporality is a core feature of narrative analysis, it can shine a light on how actors react to uncertainty, how they narrative it and whether they link agency to temporality and uncertainty. I proposed in this paper that the narration of determined and proactive shaping power in the future vision for a country enables actors to grasp a sense of agency through movement narratives. While uncertainty may initially seem as limiting this sense of empowerment, the research suggests instead that uncertainty can also provide a groundwork from which actors narrate a more creative agency in seeking to overcome this uncertainty.

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**A MODERN EMPIRE AND ITS PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: ON
RUSSIA'S COMMUNICATION WITH ESTONIA¹**

Abstract

Defining the Russian Federation as one of the four contemporary empires (Zielonka 2012), this article links the imperial paradigm (Parker 2010; Zielonka 2012, 2013, 2015; Colomer 2017), social constructs building (Wendt 1992), strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al. 2013), and soft power-associated public diplomacy instrumentarium (Melissen 2005; Nye 2008; Cull 2008, 2009; Cowan and Arsenault 2008) into a single conceptual framework to examine public diplomacy by the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Estonia. This analysis assumes that Russia understands Estonia as its own periphery in imperial terms. However, since Estonia already is an integral part of yet another modern empire (the European Union), our article notifies that Russia is left with a limited range of effective mechanisms of strategic communication with its Baltic neighbours, and Estonia in particular. Respectively, we test the following claim: in order to effectively project its strategic identity, system and policy narratives to Estonia, Russia prefers using a range of public diplomacy mechanisms rather than other types of communicational strategies. Empirically, we engage with eight annual reviews of the Estonian Internal Security Service (2012-2019/20).

Keywords: Soft power, contemporary empires, public diplomacy, strategic narrative theory, security, centre and periphery, strategic communication, Russia, Estonia.

1. Introduction

[Russia's border] does not end anywhere.
Vladimir Putin (2016)

Russia has chosen to be an adversary and poses a long-term existential threat to the United States and to our European allies and partners.
Philip Breedlove (2016)

In an infinite universe, every point can be regarded as the centre, because every point has an infinite number of stars on each side of it.
Stephen Hawking (2016)

This article's analytical focus is on the conceptual intersection of the strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Roselle et al. 2014; Chaban et al. 2017, 2019) and public diplomacy studies (Melissen 2005; Nye 2008; Cull 2008, 2009; Cowan and Arsenault 2008; Chaban and Vernygora

¹ In memory of Johannes Kert (03.12.1959-04.03.2021).

2013). We use this theoretical ‘knot’ to explore and explain how the Russian Federation (hereafter Russia) communicates with the society of the Republic of Estonia (hereafter Estonia). As discussed in the Introduction to this Special Issue (see Chaban, Mondry, and Pavlov 2019-20), the trio of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) continue attracting Russia’s interest, and, specifically, in the contexts of post-Soviet geo-strategic evolutions on the European continent.

For Russia, the Baltic region in general, and Estonia in particular, stands out due to many factors. Among those are historical understandings (after all, the outcome of the Great Northern War became a prerequisite for the Tsardom of Muscovy to ‘convert’ into the Russian Empire in 1721) informed by stereotypes and perceptions, visions on strategy, geographical proximity, religion, social bonds, cultural values, et cetera. From the other side, Estonia has been impacted by conflictual communication from Russia since the two sides recognised each other in 1920, via the Treaty of Tartu (Ciziunas 2008; Stoicescu 2020). In most recent history, Estonia fought the world’s first cyber war, when this Baltic Nordic state became a “subject of a new form of ‘cyber violence’” experiencing a Russia-orchestrated largescale denial of service in 2007 (Haataja 2017, 160). Yet, we argue that the Kremlin had to ‘soften’ (as well as make it more sophisticated) its communicational strategy towards Estonia since then. This article questions the motivations behind the change in the strategy and the course of actions by Russia triggered by the revised strategy. To give a credible answer to these questions, we engage with, and test the imperial theoretical paradigm as one of our leading explanations.

Central to our study are the concepts of empire and periphery. Both are experiencing analytical revival in the post-Cold War period that has not proved to be a critical juncture for establishing a new international system (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 1). As for the current international system, it was ‘cemented’ at the Yalta Conference in 1945 by the concept of the world’s five ‘policemen’ (Plokhy 2010) or the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). However, the UN-bound communicational practices were neither genuinely accepted by the international community of nations nor fully implemented even during the Cold War (Bisley 2012), let alone after the Soviet Union disappeared from the political map in 1991. Perhaps unsurprisingly, major powers of the 21st century (a somewhat different group of geo-strategic ‘heavyweights’ if compared to the world’s ‘policemen’ as defined by the UN) have started searching for new communication mechanisms. In this process, they are

consciously or unconsciously reviving the imperial paradigm in the field of international relations. Relevant literature cited below argues how present-day major powers attempt to justify the imperial lead objectively, by endowing it with analytical relevance.

1.1. Background and structure

In this article, we build on the basic points and notions of Zielonka's (2012) seminal work on the modern international system and define Russia as one of the four contemporary empires, with the remaining three being the People's Republic of China (China), the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA). Intriguingly, Cooper (2004) also named the same international actors, but in the context of another debate, which is beyond the scope of this paper, arguing that Russia and China are more inclined to continue with Westphalia-bound interrelations, while the US and the EU are searching for a post-Westphalian approach. According to a growing body of literature on imperial entities of the present time (for example, Motyl 1997, 1999, 2001; Terrill 2003; Zielonka 2006, 2011, 2012, 2013; Parker 2008, 2010; Gravier 2009; Behr and Stivachtis 2015; Vernygora 2016; Vernygora et al. 2016; Parchami 2019; Kasper and Vernygora 2020), imperial paradigm is instrumental to single out a few specific characteristics of a geo-strategically significant interaction between the imperial core and periphery. For some, a modern empire's periphery is represented naturally by its immediate neighbourhood (either formally designated by the empire or not). It can also be a far-away locality (and not necessarily a former colony of the empire). Nevertheless, as argued by Parker (2010, 111), "empires' extension of domination has not been grounded solely in the internal nature of the given empire, but in empires' relationship to the wider environment: the ecological, social or political environment; the international system or the global setting." This factor brings an empire-periphery interlinkage right into the epicentre of social constructs-building process. In a way, this is where the premises of political realism, constructivism-bound debates on identities, and 'soft power'-originated postulates have a chance to make a unique analytical intersection for the benefit of students of international relations.

Since, according to Zielonka (2012, 509), an empire can be defined as "a vast territorial unit with global military, economic and diplomatic influence", it "must have a record of acting in a way that imposes significant domestic constraints on a [...] periphery." Strategic communication wise, due to "the unstoppable inertial empire-forming process" (Vernygora et al.,

2016, 10) and in accordance with a particular situation that may require an empire's geo-strategic 'change of heart,' an imperial entity can exhibit its "inborn inclination" to make use of different typologies in the process of delivering its strategic narratives to a peripheral area (Vernygora 2017). A given empire's record of imposing those "significant domestic constraints" can be exemplified by a range of communicational practices that the empire employs in the process of 'crafting' its strategic communication with its peripheries – a public diplomacy-driven social constructivism can be listed here together with a more-for-more pragmatic functional approach, a spillover-framed set of integrative applications and a hybrid warfare (Vernygora 2017). Out of the four types of communicational approaches, we argue that Russia primarily uses its 'public diplomacy-prescribed' instrumentarium – these are, according to Cull (2008, 31-32), listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting – for projecting its strategic identity, system, and policy narratives, while grounding these narratives in Estonia-focused contexts. This claim is to be tested in the article.

Given the context, the main premise here is that Estonia's membership in yet another modern empire (the EU) creates completely different analytical 'setup defaults'. Since 2004, the country is no longer situated in what Samokhvalov (2018) described as a "shared neighbourhood" of the EU and Russia in Eastern Europe. With Estonia now being a Member State of the EU, Russia is arguably left with a limited range of strategic communication mechanisms, which can be effectively employed by the world's largest country when it attempts to link with its Baltic neighbour(s). Indirectly supporting this statement, Nielsen and Paabo (2015) argued how vital for Russia is to employ a 'soft' means in regards of Estonia. There is also a factor of Western (including EU) sanctions against Russia as well as Russia's retaliatory restrictive measures, which make a substantial difference to Russian foreign policy (Korhonen et al. 2018; Mürsepp 2021). With that, however, Estonia and its two Baltic neighbours also share common borders with Russia and host a considerable number of Russian citizens and Russian-language speakers, residing in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on the permanent basis. It is, therefore, predictable that significant efforts of Russia-originated strategic communication (regardless of its type) are directed to those two groups within the Baltics. At the same time, if we specify the context further, such a situation leads to a range of discrepancies in understanding how a particular type of communicational framework (i.e., public diplomacy) can be defined in/by Russia and, for example, Estonia.

On 1 January 2020, Statistics Estonia confirmed that people who declare themselves ethnic Estonians represent the country's most sizeable ethnic group (909,552), while ethnic Russians (327,802), Ukrainians (24,897), Belarusians (11,536), Finns (8,297) and Latvians (3,329) represent the next five largest ethnic groups. However, there are two other statistical indicators, which make the situation rather confusing from the statistics side. Estonia is the country of birth for 1,129,934 residents and the country of citizenship for 1,128,559 people. The latter two figures are very similar, but they can be pushing towards a set of wrong generalisations on the 'portrait' of the Estonian society. This is because 115,890 residents of the country were born in the Russian Federation (not necessarily being ethnic Russians though), while Russia is the country of citizenship for 83,989 residents of Estonia (not all of them are ethnic Russians either). Moreover, the citizenship is not specified in 71,361 cases, and these people are recognised non-citizens (so-called 'grey passport-holders'), a sizeable group of Estonian residents (of different ethnicities, including even Estonians) who opted to not apply for any country's citizenship for a number of objective reasons (lack of knowledge of the Estonian language, no desire to serve in the Estonian Defence Forces, possibility to visit Russia without a visa, other reasons).

This article starts with elaborating a leading conceptual framework in the broadest possible sense. What Russia and Estonia represent now is directly coupled with the field's major debate – on the current international system. The next section details Russia's attempts to interact with the society of Estonia, classifying these interactions vis-a-vis the aforementioned public diplomacy-associated communicational modes specified by Cull (2008), but keeping in mind a range of differences in defining the same modes by established Russian scholars and early-stage researchers. Imperial paradigm predetermines a variety of security concerns. These are perpetually projected by the Kremlin towards the locations that it perceives as its periphery. Reflecting on those concerns, the Estonian Internal Security Service (Kaitsepolitseiamet, or KaPo) surveys projections by Russia towards Estonia and openly reports on the situation to the Estonian public in order to raise awareness, while proposing a course of actions for the Estonian government. A number of KaPo's annual reviews (2012-2019/20), which focused predominantly on Russia-originated activities towards Estonia, are in the empirical focus of this study. Method-wise, the article engages with discourse analysis and process tracing (Klotz and Prakash 2008). A pluralistic essence of these methods reflects on the article's observational nature when plenty of descriptive material is required and precise causalities are sought for. The idea is to give an observation-based interpretation, whilst

being in agreement with Neumann (2008, 62) that discourse is about maintaining “a degree of regularity in social relations” because it “produces preconditions for action.”

Arguably, the data from a national internal security agency may have a bias. A public diplomacy action by Russia towards Estonia can be treated as ‘effective’ for the Russian side, but considered ‘harmful’ by Estonia. This in-built bias of the dataset – which we openly acknowledge – does not undermine the rationale behind studying this discourse. Aware of a potential bias of the Western academia towards Russian public diplomacy efforts in general, we widen the insights into the field of public diplomacy and engage with a substantial academic contribution by Russia-based scholars. In its discussion section, the article revisits its main claim that different elements of Russia’s public diplomacy towards Estonia get operationally interlinked with Russia’s formulation and projection of strategic narratives.

1.2. Setting definitions

The understanding of terminology used by the KaPo annual reviews and other similar official reports issued in Estonia is grounded in the vision formulated by Mikk Marran (2020, 2), Director General of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service: “[t]he main external threats to Estonia’s security remain the same,” and that the country is “particularly threatened by neighbouring Russia, whose leadership is aggressively and actively opposed to the democratic world order.” In this light, the study draws analytical boundaries and detects overlaps in the notion of public diplomacy with the concept of propaganda. Some of the definitions considered in this study are provided by NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence-issued report ‘Improving NATO Strategic Communication Terminology’ (Bolt and Haiden 2020). Given the already specified security factor of the empire-periphery communication, this approach will make the process of employing the key notions to be terminologically compatible with the KaPo annual reviews.

Respectively, this study understands ‘discourse’ as “accepted positions [created and maintained through communication] that constrain debates and shape worldviews,” while ‘narratives’ are understood as “morals drawn from stories” (Bolt and Haiden 2020, 30). What is essential for this discussion is that a narrative can become ‘strategic’ when states attempt to use it to “sway target audiences” (Roselle et al. 2014, 74). It makes it distinct from ‘narrative strategies’ and perfectly fit for framing up a discussion on public diplomacy,

which can be described as “an international actor’s attempt to advance the ends of policy by engaging with foreign publics” (Cowan and Cull 2008, 6), while focusing on engagement “with those outside government” (Dasgupta 2011, 54). Linking public diplomacy definition to strategic narrative concept gives an opportunity to identify the role “the strategic narratives play in shaping behaviour in an observable way” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 142). This may lead to a more prominent role for a government – including a foreign government – in information guidance when it comes to international relations and foreign policy.

2. Theoretical Framework

It could be argued that for any big power that undergoes the process of solidifying its geo-strategic relevance, it is challenging to follow President Theodore Roosevelt’s advice to communicate (speak) softly – a ‘big stick’ of power is with you all the time, and your ambition is to extend your influence. Offensive realist Mearsheimer (1990), in his ‘Why we will soon miss the Cold War,’ advocated for keeping the international system to be run by a group of “more equal than others” (Orwell 1944). In contrast, social constructivism (for example, Wendt 1992, 1995) argued for a possibility for power politics to be institutionally transformed with almost no harm for international security. What makes this debate even more complicated is that a big power has many names, and this fact can easily spawn a reason to antagonise one political theory against another one. To illustrate the point, in his seminal *After Hegemony*, Keohane differentiated between a hegemony and an empire, noting that “unlike an imperial power, [a hegemony] cannot make and enforce rules without a certain degree of consent from other sovereign states” (1984, 46). Almost instantly, Keohane (1984, 49) gave away a prediction that “neither the Europeans nor the Japanese are likely to have the capacity to become hegemonic powers themselves in the foreseeable future.”

2.1. The absence of what was designed in 1945

Those academic claims and predictions were being made at a time when (apart from random and predominantly American ‘prophecies’ on chances for the political West to ever see the USSR to collapse, e.g., Kennan (1947) or Brzezinski (1969)), there was no solid theoretical concept that would be seriously forecasting the Soviet Union’s disappearance from the political map. On the European side, even Jean Monnet (1978) treated the Soviet Union as a geo-strategic as well as monolithic given that was to stay. A life

after or without the Yalta Conference-produced international system sounded like an improbable science fiction between the 1940s and the 1980s.

Simultaneously, numerous examples revealed that the UN-bound communicational patterns and permissions were becoming incongruous and even meaningless. In 1945, during the United Nations Conference on International Organisation, Andrey Gromyko (as cited in Bisley 2012, 72) was pushing for the universal acceptance of a nearly metaphysical belief: “If the problem of peace is to be solved, there must be mutual trust and harmony among the greatest world powers, and they must act in harmony.” Objectively, this vision has never been delivered by the UN-bound international system. Moreover, some of the “more equal than others” – specifically, post-Suez Britain and France (McCourt 2009; Sorlin 2019) – who were assigned in 1945 a special role of being two of the world’s ‘five policemen,’ stagnated in understanding their veritable geo-strategic relevancy. The Yalta international system was further undermined by the 1971 Beijing-Taipei swap at the UN. On top of that, as argued by Bisley (2012, 79), “the most important relationship in post-[WWII] international security was not part of the UN Security Council’s business.” Evidently, Bisley meant the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. By the 1970s, the two super-empires (‘major powers,’ ‘hegemonies,’ or whatever the name theoreticians used) were comfortable in communicating with the rest of the world through monologues, while inventing a Cold War variation of the latent G2. According to social constructivists, “shared understanding (or intersubjectivity) form[ed] the basis of [...] interactions” (Theys 2017, 36). Both the USA and the former USSR understood well the other side, not expecting any positive surprises from the counterpart. Nevertheless, that real or perceived stability was anything but a virtue of Yalta and its communicational practices. We argue these practices had never been translated into actual international relations, gradually cobbling the path for the revival of empires in search for a new international setup.

For Europe, “the foreseeable future” (in the parlance of Keohane 1984) arrived to the continent in the politico-economic form of the EU in the beginning of the 1990s. However, it was not the main tiding for the failing UN-based international framework. By then, the Soviet Union was already history, with many countries, including Estonia, having successfully made their international comebacks via regaining independence. An additional issue relevant to the context was directly linked to the Russian Federation, one of the sixteen titular ‘pieces’ that had ever constituted the Soviet imperial

'puzzle'. Even though, as argued by Pain (2009, 61), Russia exemplified a struggle to either become a "political civic nation project" or "a neo-imperial project", it had to wait until President Vladimir Putin's 'arrival' to clarify that the country's imperial intentions had not substantially changed since 1721. President Putin (2016) once noted that "[Russia's border] does not end anywhere." An imperial way of acting (and an empire-based international system) is taking place against particular features specified by Zielonka (2013, 10): "[b]orders within the system are fuzzy and there is disassociation between authoritative allocations, functional competencies and territorial constituencies."

In terms of global strategic communication, the Soviet Union's dramatic derailment and then disappearance puzzled the field of political science. Unlike "[t]he end of global wars in 1918 and 1945 proved to be critical junctures [...] to construct new international orders" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 1), the Cold War's finale did not provide for any meaningful leads on how to interact in the post-Yalta international environment. Katzenstein and Sil (2004, 21) pointed it out that "[t]he totally unanticipated end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union [...] generated not re-examination of whether and why theories drawn from the major research traditions had proven inadequate." These scholars argued that "[i]nstead, these events yielded another round of ad hoc explanations and bold predictions that essentially served to protect the natural worldviews embedded in each of the traditions."

2.2. The arrival of a new approach: Soft power, public diplomacy, discourses and narratives

Using Lotman's expression, the field kept driving "deep into a Procrustean bed of concepts" (2013, 41), without finding a new set of explanatory approaches and an analytical tool set on a) how to analyse interactions between different major actors and their perceived as well as actual peripheries in the new reality and, b) the nature of their communicational linkages established in the absence of the Cold War-originated theoretical 'stability'. One of the intellectual challenges to the discipline's stagnation came from Nye (2004, 2008) and his notion of 'soft power'. The concept proved to be productive to theorise the phenomenon of 'public diplomacy' (Nye 2008, 96), since culture ("in places where it is attractive to others"), political values ("when it lives up to them at home and abroad") and foreign policies ("when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority") can be effectively projected. Theorising further on public

diplomacy, Cull (2008, 2009) offered a hierarchical structure to understand it, distinguishing its five elements: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. Significantly adding to the conceptual understanding of the process, Klyeva and Tsetsura (2015) argued the dualistic nature of soft power, which can generate (or even represent) both enabling and disabling environments.

At the same time, there are two crucial theoretical additions to the debate on the soft power-public diplomacy interlinkage, and they are associated with contemporary empires and strategic narratives. On the one hand, Zielonka (2006, 2012, 2013) pointed to the terminological confusion existing between the notions of ‘hegemony,’ ‘empire’ or ‘power’ and made an analytical breakthrough in regards of ‘rehabilitation’ of imperial paradigm. In the context of Russia, for example, Zielonka (2012, 511) argued that the country’s “prime interests” are focused on “recovering from the Soviet collapse”, its “key sources of power” are represented by “energy and the military”, and the essence of its imperial “civilising mission” is framed around “ensuring stability and security.”

On the other hand, as argued by Miskimmon et al. (2013, 143), “[s]trategic narratives are central to the identity of its actors and the meaning of the system”, and this argument analytically interlinks a country’s strategic identity, system and policy narratives in the context of building sustainable long-lasting relationships. In a way, it was a very timely scholarly ‘assistance’ for Wendt (1992, 398), so his colossal argument – “[i]dentities are the basis of interests” – can have a new life. The analytical cornerstone here is “the narrative of your state [that] comes to constitute an important part of the identity of another state [...] [and] this will shape its behavior” (Miskimmon 2013, 143).

In continuation, Roselle et al. (2014, 71 and 74) proposed the next step in theorising ‘soft’ power, arguing that “[s]trategic narrative is soft power in the 21st century” and recognising a big challenge in identifying “soft power resources” and “the processes through which soft power operates” as well as understanding “under what conditions soft power resources can be used to support foreign policy.” The point was that a “chaotic world” is to appreciate some assistance from a soft power-originated communicational side. More notably, according to Roselle et al. (2014, 74),

[s]oft power resources – culture, values, or policies, for example – may be attractive because they fit within a preexisting or developing

personal narrative. Strategic narrative, then, directly addresses the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system.

The scholarship of strategic narrative states that “the post-Cold War international system opens space for significant contestation over narratives” (Roselle et al. 2014, 77). Arguably, there is a distinct link between a) a striking and deliberately crafted similarity of “Comrades! Citizens! Brothers and sisters! Men of our army and navy! I am addressing you, friends of mine!” (Stalin 1941) and “Dear citizens of Russia, dear friends! Today, I am addressing you, all of you, because you have entrusted me with the highest office in the country” (Putin 2000) and b) a Russian strategic narrative that “Russians and Ukrainians constitute one nation and that the countries should find a way to integrate” (Putin 2019). Mearsheimer (2014) with his ‘Getting Ukraine wrong’ had already pushed for that case anyway, but on the strategic narrative theme, Putin “has been able to achieve narrative continuity” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 259). For Mürsepp (2021), Russian foreign policy, on the general level, is associated with the following strategic narratives-forming themes: a) Russia’s direct ‘communication’ with the United States; b) Russia’s prime-level place in the UN-based international system that needs to be maintained, and c) Russia’s particular attitude and approach to the so-called “ближнее зарубежье” (‘near abroad’) that does not need to be defined too precisely.

Arguably, the narrative considerations are of direct relevance for Estonia. The key narrative projections can be traced from both Vladimir Putin’s speech delivered at the 2007 Munich Security Conference and his article ‘Russia in the Changing World’ published in 2012. Had they been accounted for by the EU’s political elites, they would have been less surprised by the fact that Russia, especially in 2012-2013, understood the EU’s Eastern Partnership Programme as a competing empire’s attempt to, using Putin’s terminology, oust “the bear” out of “the taiga” (Putin 2014; Vernygora et al. 2016). More so, let alone the allegedly ‘disputed’ neighbourhood that includes countries like Georgia, Moldova or Ukraine, the Russian Federation still has plenty to say in imperial terms towards Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania, which are already integral parts of the EU. Such situations are not unique – as argued (Zielonka 2012, 518), “[b]oth China and the US consider the Asia-Pacific region to be their own backyard.”

2.3. Russia and its ‘spiritual shackles’ of influence

Public diplomacy is not a know-how of modernity. It has been practiced in other historical periods, yet in today’s international relations it is remarkably heightened in importance (Belonosova 2020). And while it is still a challenge to provide a single-cut understanding of the phenomenon, a relative consensus emerged among many scholars who point to the initial interplay between a government and a foreign public as a basis for analysing its effectiveness in the field. In general, not much has changed principally, and public diplomacy of the 21st century, as noted before, still focuses on engagement with a foreign civil society to mobilise support. However, there is a booming theme on new features of public diplomacy. For example, Frangonikolopoulos and Proedrou (2014) already talk about a new version of the old phenomenon that appears in the form of “strategic discursive public diplomacy”, which ‘look after’ grand-debates on development and growth, climate change and even nuclear proliferation-associated issues. Complementary to the discussion, Graz and Hauert (2019) note the importance of civil society organisations in the process of developing international standards. In short, for the current environment of international relations, the process can be driven by countries or, with an increasing visibility, different organisations, including even non-governmental arrangements. Evidently, the Russian Federation can be considered a prime example of the former rather than the latter when it comes to its interactions with the Estonian society.

Lebedeva (2021) argues that the 9/11 events became a catalyst for the Russian Federation to start developing its own distinct public diplomacy, since the USA turned its attention to it as well. However, while searching for a productive adaptation of its post-Cold War imperial civilising mission for the modern time, Russia has managed to create a range of atavistically archaic “скрепы” (can be loosely translated as social ‘clams’/ ‘stapes’ or ‘spiritual shackles’), which are evidently as well as extensively applied by the Kremlin in the process of projecting strategic narratives, utilising the country’s old public diplomacy-related toolkit. The efforts are jointly carried out by many state or state-associated agencies ranging from Россотрудничество (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation or Rossotrudnichestvo), Фонд ‘Русский Мир’ (The Russkiy Mir Foundation), Россия Сегодня (Rossiya Segodnya), RT (formerly Russia Today) to name a few.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia tries spreading its soft power to the ‘near abroad,’ but the process does not seamlessly lead towards enhancing the country’s attractiveness among its closest neighbours (Cwiek-Karpowicz 2012). Characteristically, Russia’s communication with the Estonian society is ‘sharpened up’ towards the so-called соотечественники (compatriots), whom Russia engages during its own socio-strategic ‘exercises’ (‘Соотечественники и военно-мемориальная работа’ 2021), while, as it was described by Kallas (2016, 2), “claiming the diaspora.” Many in Estonia would argue that such a situation poses a threat to the country’s integrity, becoming pivotal for considering local security provision. Thus, a detectable countermeasure – for example, Integrating Estonia 2020 (‘Estonian Government approved integration goals until 2020’ 2018) – may directly or indirectly ‘argue’ on Russia-originated public diplomacy mechanisms being noticeable or not.

Overall, considering the aforementioned generalisations and a relative stability of societal interconnections within Estonia, it is worth testing this article’s main claim that Russia prefers channelling its communication with Estonia through public-diplomacy-bound mechanisms, all in order to project its strategic identity, system, and issue narratives. The general push, as argued by Saari (2014, 54), comes from the two distinct features of Russia’s public diplomacy objectives associated with Russia’s vision of empire’s immediate periphery – “the post-Soviet states are a priority” and the Baltics “continue to be included in the post-Soviet category despite being EU and NATO members.” These conceptualisation of the public diplomacy correlates with the interpretation of imperial paradigm and its understanding of periphery discussed above.

3. Russia communicating with the Estonian society: when terminological consistency is not important

Once Rawnsley (2015) noted that “the success of soft power [...] depends on communication via public diplomacy to make sure ideals, values, policies and behaviour are attractive to a target population.” In the particular case of Russia, as confirmed by Burlinova (2020, 5), “there is a conceptual confusion and often there is no understanding at all of which projects belong to the sphere of public diplomacy (сфере публичной дипломатии), and which – to the communal/societal (общественной).” Intriguingly, the fact that the Russian side makes a distinction between ‘public diplomacy’ and some kind of ‘communal/societal diplomacy’ does not assist in clarifying the aforementioned terminological confusion. More concretely, for the so-called

‘communal/societal diplomacy’ to be conceptually different from what Cull (2008) describes as “exchange diplomacy”, it should have absolutely nothing to do with the Russian state, but it is evidently not the case. Speculatively, it could be argued that Russia immensely benefits from this terminological vagueness and, most probably, opts to maintain such confusions.

At the same time, Burlinova (2020, 8) underlined that, within the Russian context, “public diplomacy is not perceived as a system of institutions, but is defined as one of the areas of work along with cultural and humanitarian cooperation, communal/societal diplomacy and strategic communications”, being focused on “specific target audiences” such as “representatives of political and business elites, the media community, the civil sector, young leaders, experts.” While the latter definition directly interlinks public diplomacy practices with the particular groups that are to be targeted, it is still difficult (if not impossible) to imagine a situation where a Russia-originated public diplomacy initiative can be precisely focused only on those high-profile decision-makers and decision-shapers, without attempting to capture attention of ordinary public. For example, a distinguishing analytical line can hardly be found between the Russian version of public diplomacy and the so-called гуманитарное сотрудничество (humanitarian cooperation), which, according to Klyueva and Mikhaylova (2017), has plenty to do with the protection of the interests of peripheral compatriots living abroad as well as their consolidation into a united community and establishing partnerships with the imperial centre on culture, education and science. Considering the region in focus, as argued by Saari (2014, 57-58), the Russian policy “stands on four pillars”, namely media policies, NGO diplomacy, political involvement, and cultural diplomacy. All of these pillars are seen ‘living’ within the previously specified elements of public diplomacy, and this fact assists in bringing the Russian Federation’s conceptual understanding of the phenomenon’s classification closer to what Cull offered in 2008. In any case, as Glebov (2018) noted, public diplomacy, be it of Russia or any other actor, represents a powerful tool placed under foreign policy’s strategic communications scope, where it stands along with public relations and information operations.

3.1. Who is the Estonian Russian speaker?

Out of Estonia’s total population of 1,328,976 people (‘Population figure’ 2020), the country’s Russian-speaking communities are diverse. The profile of these communities in each case is determined by different waves

and kinds of migration (deportations and directed migration of labour force included), generational shifts, geographic areas, professional background and many other factors (Kirch and Tuisk 2015). On the side of intra-societal communication, since the mathematics insist that about 85 per cent of the country's population are Estonian citizens, it can only mean that any representative of this societal cluster has the Estonian language proficiency to be at the B1 level at least ('Examinations and Tests' 2021).

Considering the above, when it comes to an attempt to communicate with Estonian 'Russian speakers' (especially, when this vaguely determined group is to be virtually placed in the same 'basket' with Estonia-based Russian citizens), there can be a problem of misidentification of whom a message should be directed to. Ideally, from the scientific perspective, these people would never be analytically 'unified' into one group – they belong to different ethnicities, hold different citizenships and have different levels (if any) of socio-political association with the Russian Federation. Moreover, their attitude to Russia may vary from extreme glorification to extreme antagonism, and they can hardly be precisely counted even in such a relatively small society as of the Republic of Estonia. Nevertheless, as noted by Klyueva and Mikhaylova (2017, 130), when it related to the Russian Federation's foreign policy, "[t]he strategic use of the Russian language and culture [...] aims to foster pro-Russian sentiments among the Russian-speaking communities, Russian Diasporas and compatriots living abroad." In a significant addition that still does not quite clarify the differences existing between these three societal groups, the same scholars argued that the notion of a "compatriot would then extend to many generations of individuals with Russian ancestry, including those defined above as the Diaspora, who may not or no longer identify as Russian and whose connection to the Russian language and culture is potentially conflicted" (Klyueva and Mikhaylova 2017, 131).

Therefore, this article understands Estonia's Russian-speaking communities as being intentionally generalised by Russia into a single quasi-group for the purpose of strategic communication. On the Estonian side, however, as KaPo (2012, 5) noted, Russia-originated compatriots policy makers understand that the fact of "[t]reating Russian-speaking diaspora as compatriots who are loyal to Russia" and the fact that "Estonia's wish to integrate its Russian-speaking population into the Estonian society" represent "competing concepts." The main security concern for Estonia here is about constraints-imposing activity – "[t]he success of Russia's compatriots policy is dependent on the segregation of the Russian-speaking

population within its country of residence” (KaPo 2012, 5-6). As argued by Miskimmon et al. (2013, 256), “[i]t is imperative for foreign policy makers to try to persuade their international rivals of the validity of their narrative”, therefore “the era of communication power opens up opportunities for practitioners of public diplomacy to reach beyond elite circles and reach overseas publics.” Thus, let us now see how Russia communicates with the Estonian society.

3.2. Advocacy, or “Друзья [...], прекрасен наш союз!” [“Friends, beautiful is our union!”]

Advocacy, as an element of public diplomacy, is analytically blurry and, thus, it is not an easy task to measure its direct effectiveness. Cull (2009, 18-19) defines it as “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by undertaking an international communication activity to actively promote a particular policy, idea or that actor’s general interests in the minds of a foreign public.” Advocacy can be considered an integral part of the communicational process, because, as a rule, it can hardly be found as ‘working alone’. Instead, it is usually integrated into every other element of public diplomacy (especially when it comes to international broadcasting) and informs different types of monologues on myriads of topics.

As for Russia on a concrete example of advocacy in Estonia, KaPo (2018, 8) detected, it “approved its new migration policy doctrine”, but its “State Programme for Voluntary Resettlement in Russia has not proved popular in Estonia” and “[t]he Kremlin’s attempts to boost its attractiveness have failed.” the Estonian society was advised by KaPo (2018, 8) that the advocated programme, among other things, intended “to extend the legal consequences of the Kremlin’s policy of division to the inhabitants of the formerly Soviet-occupied Baltic[s].” However, as noted by KaPo, since “such efforts by the Kremlin have not met with much success over the past few decades, it is in its interest to keep using a vague concept of Russian compatriots to justify its interference in the internal affairs of other countries.” However, even the Russian Ambassador to Estonia, Alexander Petrov, commented that Estonian Russians almost are not interested in resettlement – in 2018, there were only 17 people who expressed interest, but there is some noticeable interest in applying for Russian citizenship, with “more than 500 residents of Estonia hav[ing] received Russian citizenship” in 2019 (‘Russians in Estonia not very interested in resettling, ambassador admits’ 2019). Another example of advocacy, as argued by KaPo (2016, 10), was on “using alternative interpretations of World War II in an increasingly

aggressive manner” when “[t]he Immortal Regiment parade held in Tallinn on 9 May 2016 showed that revanchism and the display of provocative symbols are more important than celebrating the anniversary of the end of the war and commemorating fallen soldiers.” What is the system in place for advocating such programmes?

Even though conventional cabinet diplomacy may not pay in attractiveness, unable to deliver into masses and is restricted to a circle of finely groomed professional diplomats, evidently, the initial steps to communicate with the Estonian society ‘on the ground’ are arranged to be made by the Embassy. After all, the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots (CCRC), which is an umbrella organisation for Estonian non-governmental establishments that are interlinked with the Russian compatriot policy, “act[s] under the guidance of the Russian [E]mbassy” (KaPo 2013, 5) and the Embassy “have a decisive say in who belongs” to the CCRC (KaPo 2012, 6). In one of its more recent reviews, KaPo (2018, 7) claimed that the CCRC had “no real representative function or direct ties with local minorities”, being essentially “a virtual non-entity.” The Russian Federation uses diplomatic missions in its immediate ‘near abroad,’ assigning them with tasks of running the CCRC’s annual events, coordinating the agenda of an extensive network of institutions implementing policy abroad (Bulakh et al., 2014, 38). Indirectly supporting imperial paradigm, KaPo (2015, 6) suggests that “the near abroad” policy is based on “the idea that a good neighbour is a controlled neighbour”, which is distinctly imperial in its geo-strategic nature.

Structurally, the CCRC is tied in a solid power hierarchy, while administering movement of people whom Russia treats as compatriots. The first level of engagement comes in civic organisations of host countries, further expanding to national coordination councils. Davydova-Minguet (2018) specified that the upper level of the structure is called World Coordination Council. Advocacy-wise, the CCRC is notorious in Estonia. As Kallas (2016, 10) argued, the movement’s establishment in Estonia in 2007 was a reflection on “a gap [existing] between [Moscow’s] political ambitions and the realities of the compatriot movements on the ground”, but the “movement was [...] paralysed by a series of rivalries, favouritism and corruption scandals almost from its inception.” The blunders in the work of the local branch were spotted to be crucial. KaPo (2013, 6) reported that “[c]orruption is common given the lack of transparency in the financing of the Russian compatriot policy”, because “[t]here is no shortage of interested parties who would like to access a piece of the Russian national budget.” The

observational process introduced the КаПо to “the jargon of Russian officials” that was referring to either распил (“the slicing-up”) or откат (“kickback”). If the former is relatively self-explanatory, the latter is related to the fact that “money is always limited, but the number of people looking for an easy income from the funds is always high” – therefore, “a patron must be found from among the officials in Moscow”, and, in return for approving the allocation of the funds the patron receives some money back (КаПо 2013, 6).

In April 2011, RT reported about Russia’s plans to establish a fund to protect Russian compatriots abroad and quoted the then President Dmitri Medvedev stressing that “protecting the rights and interests of Russians living abroad would remain a priority for Moscow.” Later, the Fund for the Legal Protection and Support of Russian Federation Compatriots Living Abroad was created, and its aim was to preclude what was perceived as offences against the rights of the Estonian Republic’s multi-faceted minority of Russian-speakers or Russian citizens living in the country. More specifically, as КаПо (2012, 6) detected, Konstantin Kosachev, a high-profile Russian politician who is currently Deputy Chairperson of the Federation Council where he also chairs the body’s Foreign Affairs Committee, declared that “Russian compatriots could develop into the main link between Russia and the local civil society and elites”, shifting “from the consolidation stage over to the stage in which they legitimise themselves as influential civil society players who play a role in local power structures and decision-making.” The same КаПо’s review (2012, 7) singled out some of the Fund for the Legal Protection’s activities – for example, it decided to issue “financial support to the Estonian resident Anton Gruzdev so that he could compensate the material damages that he caused in Jõhvi in 2007 in the course of mass unrest.” Furthermore, the organisation financed the participation of activists of Мир без нацизма (World without Nazism) on OSCE-organised conferences (КаПо 2012, 7).

2.2. Who do you listen to...in exchange?

In a similar fashion as with advocacy, listening is no less vague in terms of its measurability, but its importance for public diplomacy can hardly be underestimated – it deals with collecting opinion of the public in focus. For Cull (2009, 18), this part of public diplomacy represents “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by collecting and collating data about publics and their opinions overseas and using that data to redirect its policy or its wider public diplomacy approach accordingly.” Moreover, as

Di Martino (2020, 133) argued, it was with the help of listening public diplomacy was able to be distinguished from propaganda. Defining exchange diplomacy, Cull (2009, 19) talked about an actor's "attempt to manage the international environment by sending its citizens overseas and reciprocally accepting citizens from overseas."

In the context of Russia's communication with the Estonian society, there is not much of an 'overseas' factor in place; instead, there is a strong evidence that the listening is tightly interlinked with the exchange diplomacy – the latter simply represents a means to achieve perfection of the former. Who does the Russian Federation listen to in Estonia, and, considering the context, how does it do it? KaPo (2013, 14) maintains the argument that "[t]he main strategic target of Russian military intelligence is NATO, the political and military planning of the alliance, its classified information, and the people who can access that information." As reported (KaPo 2019/20, 25), in the last decade, "20 people have been convicted of criminal offenses related to intelligence activities against Estonia", including "traitors and those who have simply worked for the Russian special services against Estonia." Those people represented the first and the smallest group to whom the Russian side was listening.

The second group of people are associated with the eastern fringe of Estonia, more specifically – the City of Narva, a border town where both the EU and NATO end their geographic presence. Intriguingly, Ivangorod, a Russian town on the other side of the border, used to be known as Jaanilinn, being an internationally recognised part of Estonia until 1944, when it was 'attached' to Russia during the second Soviet occupation of the country. Narva is Estonia's third most populous city of 58,610 residents, but it also has disbalanced ethnic and citizenship compositions ('Narva in digits' 2018). On 1 January 2018, ethnicity-wise, Narva hosted 48,535 ethnic Russians (83 per cent), 2,114 Estonians (4 per cent), and 1,393 Ukrainians (2 per cent). At the same time, citizenship-wise, 27,951 of Narva residents hold Estonian passports (48 per cent), while 21,134 of them are Russian citizens (36 per cent). Even though Estonian political elites tend to downscale the issue, addressing it in a very mild manner – for example, President Kersti Kaljulaid (2018) once noted that "Narva is of course very special, but it is an average Estonian city in the best sense of the word" – but this particular locality is where the Kremlin is very active on listening and exchange. As KaPo reported (2016, 8), at the Russian State Duma elections, a high-profile Russian politician Konstantin Zatulin "from the distant city of Sochi set up his candidacy in a minor electoral district, and visited the Estonian town of

Narva during his campaign”, stating “in connection with his Estonian visit that it was common practice in Estonia to repress representatives of the Russian-speaking community, that Estonia maintains a Russophobic stance in its internal and foreign policies, and has discontinued the broadcasting of Russian TV channels at the national level – all false statements that suit the Kremlin.” The same review (KaPo 2016, 11) had a picture of the Mayor of Narva signing a friendship agreement in Kingissepp (formerly Yamburg, a town in the Leningrad Oblast, about 20 km east of Narva), and a representative of the Russian town was wearing the controversial ribbon of Saint George during the ceremony.

The third group is much broader, and the observed methodology on listening to them is more sophisticated, often being interlinked with the other public diplomacy mechanisms. It is youth. KaPo (2017) marked several new formats to introduce youth to a broader compatriot movement: in 2017, the World Games of Young Compatriots were held (initially launched in 2015 as a common undertaking of the Ministry of Sport, Ministry of Education and Rossotrudnichestvo, held in Kazan, Tatarstan), the 3rd World Youth Forum of Russian Compatriots ‘Destiny of Russia: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow’ (held in Sofia, Bulgaria), and 19th World Festival of Youth and Students (held in Sochi). All these events were meant to serve patriotic (Russian) upbringing, consolidation of foreign youth and teaching or, at least, introducing the ‘correct’ language, culture and history. Considering the reception of these messages, the numbers of attendees were modest. In 2019, an event organised in Bulgaria, managed to gather only 130 participants and it became the largest of its kind in history (‘Fifth World Youth Forum of Russian Compatriots Opens in Sofia’ 2019). Moreover, there were two youth forums, BaltFest and My Baltics which took place in 2017 in Estonia. Both were organised by peer efforts from the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Russian Embassy in Tallinn. BaltFest managed to gather 40 youngsters (KaPo 2018). Russia’s urge to foster Russia-related youth living in foreign countries was implemented in 2013 by inviting them to athlete camp ‘Soyuz’ devoted to the Soviet Union’s victory in WWII. The event was attended by schoolchildren from one of Maardu schools (KaPo 2013).

2.3. Cultural diplomacy à la Russe

Cull (2009, 19) gives yet another classic definition, treating cultural diplomacy as “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad.” Language and culture are

strategic assets for states, thus some of them create cultural institutions, such as the British Council, King Sejong Foundation, Goethe Institute and Confucius Institute to project their messages globally. Russia established its own analogue of such organisations to promote the Russian language studies, the Pushkin Institute.

Klyeva and Mikhaylova (2017, 128) acknowledge that “culture as an axis of propaganda has long been an essential component of the Soviet information efforts,” but they argue that Russia’s approach is to treat the phenomenon of cultural diplomacy as humanitarian cooperation (гуманитарное сотрудничество). Remarkably, this element of public diplomacy enjoys plenty of normative ‘attention’. As argued (Klyeva and Mikhaylova 2017, 129), there are three main normative documents on the subject: the Cultural Diplomacy Conception (2010), the Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine (2013), and the Charter of the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (2008).

Arguably, today’s Russia builds its cultural diplomacy as a prototype of the Soviet one (Terry 2018, 29). Often this idea is proven with Russia’s revitalisation of Soviet-made institutions, referring to *Rossotrudnichestvo* together with its cultural policy. Language and culture became intertwined with the Russian identity (Klyeva and Mikhaylova 2017). Another powerful source is religion and ‘spirituality,’ which is ‘managed’ by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (the latter was revived by Joseph Stalin in 1943). Since 1991, the Estonian context was always on the strategic radar of the Russian Orthodox Church – Patriarch Alexy II who was in charge of the Patriarchate from 1990 until 2008, was born in Tallinn, a little more than a decade before Estonia was occupied by the USSR. Terry (2018, 42) argued that, due to the close cooperation between President Putin and the Church, the latter became yet another state institution dealing with foreign relations, being institutionalised as a special body responsible for the cultural side of public diplomacy and cooperation with outer public.

Indeed, Russian cultural diplomacy is a business of many: there are overlapped competences between the country’s Ministry of Culture and Education, *Rossotrudnichestvo*, Foreign Ministry, and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation. In the former Soviet Union, however, there was a more distinct structure designed for the process. Thus, Russian Association for International Cooperation (RAIC or, sometimes, RAMS) was established to coordinate the work of non-governmental organisations within the scope of

Russian public diplomacy in the near abroad and in the West. These days, as per Klyeva and Tsetsura (2015), RAIC/RAMS consists of 96 public organisations among which are Russia-Germany Society, Russia-Japan Society, Society of Russian-Chinese Friendship, Society of Russian-Armenian Friendship, Association of Friends of France and some other establishments.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation as a strategic agency was established by President Putin on 21 June 2007, and its work was declared to be devoted to “promoting the Russian language as Russia’s national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture, and supporting Russian language teaching programs abroad” (‘Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on the establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation’ 2007). It is a well spread organisation, which has 49 centres around the world, including in Estonia (‘Russian Centers of the Russkiy Mir Foundation’ 2020). As Terry (2018) articulated in her report, the Foundation was rather more politically biased and pressurised for more language right for the society in Ukraine than, for example, in Germany. Vyacheslav Nikonov, one of the top state-level Russian strategists and the grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov, is the organisation’s Chairman of the Management Board. This fact in itself underscores the significance of cultural dimension in the whole scheme of Russia’s strategic communication-building practices.

When it comes to the Russkiy Mir Foundation in Estonia, it appears that the Pushkin Institute is the full executant acting in its name. Positioning itself as an “educational, licensed institution of the Republic of Estonia,” Pushkin Institute (2020) notes that its local Russian centre enables it to act in multiple roles: informational, educational (Russian language study materials), creative (provides many opportunities to create cultural content), and communicative (formation of communication patterns). Since 2005, the Russian Language School has been operating at the Pushkin Institute, where, according to a special program, children are taught Russian language and literature, culture and history of Russia (Pushkin Institute 2020). Some of the formats arranged or co-arranged by the Pushkin Institute represent security concerns for Estonia. For example, KaPo (2018, 8) reported about a “joint programme of the Russian Embassy in Estonia and the local Pushkin Institute,” which “offers young people living in Estonia the opportunity to study at Russian universities and is financed by Rossotrudnichestvo,” “designed specifically for Russian-speaking young people living in expatriate communities and seen by the Kremlin as future carriers and promoters of the idea of the ‘Russian World’ in their home countries.”

Another important organisation that is directly involved in Russian culture promotional activities is the Russian Cultural Centre (Vene Kultuurikeskus) in Tallinn. In 2001, the Center was transferred under the authority of the Mayor of Tallinn and became a municipal enterprise ('О Центре русской культуры' 2020). Objectively, this particular institution, can hardly be treated as being or gradually becoming directly associated with Russian public diplomacy. Structurally and content-wise, it appears to be searching for its own niche in the Estonian cultural space. The Centre's activities revolve around classical theatrical performances as well as festival hosting and arranging, and the organisation visibly appears to be striving to represent the Russian culture of Estonia. Despite culture and language being named as strong anchors by Klyeva and Mikhaylova (2017), Kallas (2016) argues that Estonian Russians have already generated their territorial identification, naming Estonia their homeland. The younger generation raised in Nordic culture, may particularly dissociate from the Russian society since they do not know life there. For some, the identity may be described as 'in between' (Parshukov 2017, 39), neither purely Russian nor Estonian.

2.4. International broadcasting

As an integral element of public diplomacy, international broadcasting can be characterised as a method of communication, which enables translation of national soft power imperatives to foreign publics with the help of communication technologies. In other words, according to Cull (2009, 21), the phenomenon reflects a situation when an actor attempts to manage "the international environment by using the technologies of radio, television and Internet to engage with foreign publics." In addition, Ryzhova (2019, 15), while focusing on RT in the context of strategic narratives found in the Russian news media portrayal of Sweden, argued that, because of its tangible gains, some countries tend to prioritise international broadcasting over other ones.

Possibly, one of the most noticeable examples when international broadcasting was used by Russia in the Estonian context can be traced from 2011. As KaPo reported (2012, 9), "[w]ell before the official results of the [population] census became available, the news portals regnum.ru and newspb.ru tried to gain the upper hand by writing about census results that supposedly indicated that the Estonian population was dying out." Since those news items did not generate any social turbulence in Estonia, one of the top-TV channels in the Russian Federation (Rossiya/Россия) "made a

news story on the census” which was authored by Jekaterina Zorina, “who became well known in Estonia thanks to her unique take on the events that took place in Estonia in April 2007” (KaPo 2012, 9). Two years later, KaPo felt obliged to notify Estonia that the situation was to get more serious. In its review, KaPo (2014, 8) reported on “the establishment of the Russian state information agency Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today) in 2013” and that it “was preceded by the launch of the English-language TV channel RT [...], part of the information agency Rossiya Segodnya”; immediately after there was a note about “[a] new project [...], the multimedia channel Sputnik” that, as argued, “has the ambition of broadcasting multimedia content through radio stations, websites and press centres in 34 languages, including Estonian.”

Simons (2018, 208) argued that media is at the forefront of an information war that is taking place between Russia and the political West. Russia strictly controls media climate domestically, but it also managed to build and promote the concept of RT, with its extensive apparatus and global outreach, with an auditorium of about 700 million people that ‘consume’ pro-Kremlin narratives (Shukhova 2015, 74). In the ‘far abroad’ (дальнее зарубежье), it evidently hits two goals: it acquaints the people of a foreign country with Russia’s position on world affairs, reflecting advocacy element and gaining attention as a short-term goal; and traps people with catchy airing (using conspiracy theories), which further sway perceptions of audience.

In Estonia, media market has been traditionally liberal and market-oriented, which paved the way for Russian TV networks through a cable or satellite connection. However, the background in which Russia operates with its outreach is important, since Estonians and non-Estonians often ‘live’ in different information spaces, often with contrasting content (Bulakh et. al. 2014, 51). Estonians, whose language of daily communication is Estonian, are prone to use Estonian language and English-language media, trust Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR), Estonian language TV channels and online news reporters (‘Monitoring Integration in Estonia’ 2017). However, there is an ambivalent situation concerning the use of media by Russian speakers, and this factor has been extensively exploited by Russia. KaPo (2014, 9), while describing the process of launching the Baltnews media brand in the Baltics, noted that the project was “funded by Rossiya Segodnya” and that the baltnews.ee website would be “led in Estonia by Aleksandr Kornilov, a member of the local Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots and head of the propaganda portal baltija.eu.” Later on, the story

became even more compelling as KaPo (2016, 9) specified that “[t]he activities of the Baltnews propaganda portals [...] are coordinated by several employees of Rossiya Segodnya” who “effectively manage the work of the entire portal and the topics it covers,” with the same Alexandr Kornilov receiving “transfers of 11,400 euros every month from tax-free companies.” In a significant addition, as detected, “[t]he aforementioned coordinators also regularly communicate recommended topics to the offices of Sputnik, the official sub-division of Rossiya Segodnya”, and the latter “obliges the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Baltnews portals to cooperate with the Sputnik offices and to support and repeat the news they publish” (KaPo 2016, 9). On the Estonian side, the Russian-language Estonian channel ETV+ was launched in 2015, and this case deserves a separate study in the context of Russian public diplomacy. Apart from that, the country’s major media sources – Postimees and Delfi – provide for both Estonian and Russian language-based editorial teams, and this factor is often reflected in different contents produced by the two different editors in each case. When it comes to radio stations focused on Estonian Russians, it is worth mentioning Raadio 4 owned by ERR.

In a way, all these developments assisted the field in the process of collecting plenty of unique data on how the Russian Federation is channelling through its strategic messages to Estonia and its society. Evidently, Russia, when it comes to Estonia, is inclined to engage the whole spectrum of public diplomacy-associated mechanisms, since other types of communication cannot be used for different reasons. Even though, as KaPo argued (2019/20, 20), recently, “the Kremlin’s politics of division was dominated by a lack of ideas and resources,” that does not stop the world’s largest country from attempting to project its strategic narratives internationally and, particularly, to the localities that Russia considers its periphery. During the following discussion, an attempt will be made to link Russia’s imperial paradigm, main strategic narratives, and communicational methods used in the context of Estonia.

4. Discussion and conclusion

As Roselle et al. (2014, 79) argued, “[t]he challenge – and the promise – of studying strategic narratives lies in the conceptual underpinning that invites the use of multiple methodologies to inform our understanding of influence in the world today.” This article tackled the argument that the Russian Federation, while trying to make practical sense out of its imperial geo-strategic aspirations, endeavours to project its strategic identity, system,

and issue narratives via public diplomacy-associated modes of communication, when it comes to the Estonian society. The imperial paradigm brought its centre-periphery linkage to the conceptual framework. After all, as Zielonka (2012, 505) argued, “concept of empire is certainly not perfect, but [...] its use can be quite revealing.”

Firstly, Russia still treats Estonia as its periphery. Secondly, the world’s largest country never denies its intentions to take a decisive part in the global geo-strategic redesign, since the Yalta international system has become history. Thirdly, on the Estonian side, Russia’s communication with the country’s society openly brings myriads of serious security concerns, giving the KaPo to reflect on those in the agency’s every single annual review. Fourthly, due to the fact that the structural elements of public diplomacy are largely defined by the Russian state differently, if compared to the Western school of political science, this article detected a range of obvious terminological confusions existing in the field. This is where the instrumentarium of strategic narrative theory can be considered analytically determinant to link public diplomacy elements in their empirical association with strategic identity, system, and issue narratives.

In general, Russia, as any other major power (not to mention one of the four imperial entities of the contemporary), exhibits a formidable range of mechanisms when it comes to strategic communication. With Estonia which (together with Latvia and Lithuania) arguably represents a special case in the context of Russia’s behaviour in what it treats as its periphery, the Russian Federation has to adopt a softer approach as compared to Ukraine, for example. In the current Russia-Ukraine interactions, the Russian side opted to launch a hybrid war (Rácz 2015) to communicate its strategic narratives to the Ukrainians. As this article demonstrated, while remaining a powerful actor and possessing an astonishing range of possibilities, Russia lacks a comprehensive approach in linking its public diplomacy mechanisms with what it attempts to project as the country’s strategic narratives.

Remarkably, both listening and exchange diplomacy (these two elements are detected as being closely intertwined in the context of Russia’s communication with the Estonian society) as well as international broadcasting are not engaged in solidifying the Russian Federation’s strategic identity narrative. However, with its ‘combo’ of listening and exchange practices, Russia strives for achieving a common-for-theory goal, which is “to see public diplomacy responding to shifts in international opinion” (Cull 2009, 18). In this communicational framework, the Kremlin

is evidently combining the 'near abroad' strategic theme with how Russia would like to interact with the United States. In his widely cited Munich Speech, President Putin (2007) expressed his dissatisfaction with how NATO (understanding this organisation as something that almost entirely depends on the USA and its position) managed to be enlarged right through to Russia's borders:

It turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders, and we continue to strictly fulfil the treaty obligations and do not react to these actions at all. I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.

Therefore, since the idea is about "convincing others and consider changing course themselves" (Miskimmon et. al. 2013, 143), Russia's special attention to Narva and particular exchange practices (be it arranged in Russia or elsewhere) are indeed about one of the most stable strategic narratives of Russia that does not seem to be disappearing any time soon – the country's geo-strategic discomfort with the fact that the Baltics joined the EU and, especially, NATO without asking for Russia's permission.

Advocacy, which has a distinct 'active' self-promoting connotation, is ignored in the process of effectively projecting Russia's policy narratives – instead, the Russian side is predominantly using listening that is 'passive'. Nevertheless, Russia's advocacy activities in Estonia are directly linked with a particular theme, out of which the Kremlin is formulating and projecting its policy narratives on the peripheral 'near abroad'. This theme was clearly voiced by Putin (2012) when he was about to start his third presidential term:

We are determined to ensure that Latvian and Estonian authorities follow the numerous recommendations of reputable international organisations on observing generally accepted rights of ethnic minorities. We cannot tolerate the shameful status of 'non-citizen'. How can we accept that, due to their status as non-citizens, one in six Latvian residents and one in thirteen Estonian residents are denied their fundamental political, electoral and socioeconomic rights and the ability to freely use Russian?

This is the situation when the demanding tone of communication helps in arguing the case on setting out a particular policy of Russia towards Estonia.

In general, Roselle et al. (2014, 76) claimed that this is the case when issue/policy narratives are formulated on “why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished.”

On cultural diplomacy, since it involves the Russian language promotion, it can be easily misinterpreted as being contextualised with strategic identity narratives only. However, this part of public diplomacy is more sophisticated. When Parker (2010, 127) noted about “[a]n irony of arguing for the prominence of empire in geopolitics”, he was trying to make a point that “it is so often a form of geopolitics which dares not to speak its name.” Putin’s strategy-defining article (2012) proved that point with precision:

Russia has a great cultural heritage, recognised both in the West and the East. But we have yet to make a serious investment in our culture and its promotion around the world. [...] Russia has a chance not only to preserve its culture but to use it as a powerful force for progress in international markets. The Russian language is spoken in nearly all the former Soviet republics and in a significant part of Eastern Europe. This is not about empire, but rather cultural progress.

At the same time, one may argue that Russia’s cultural diplomacy-driven communication, while being imperial in nature, supports a particular strategic system narrative about the world’s largest country’s place in the international system. In a way, the citation above is only a continuation of what the Russian President noted in 2007, in Munich: “Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy.” Therefore, *Russkiy Mir* as a concept has never been about identity – it has always been about what Russia perceives as a just international system.

This article, while building a platform for linking the imperial paradigm, the theoretical nature of public diplomacy-bound mechanisms and strategic narrative theory, aimed to trace multiple dimensions of Russia’s communication with Estonia. As a bonus, it can provide for a possibility to academically ‘craft’ a message on the effectiveness of Russian public diplomacy in the Republic of Estonia. This research exposed numerous cases of divisive underground projects and networks featured by speculations, weaponised use of funds, corruption, connections of (the core imperial centre in) Russia with (peripheral) Estonian political circles – these factors made

Russia losing its credibility before the Estonian society in general. Since this research brought a more nuanced understanding of the situation, it could be a good chance for the two sides to eventually start reconciling the differences and move on as partners. If only...

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Iana Sabatovych

DO ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIA MATTER IN THE COURSE OF EUROPEANISATION? ANALYSING PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH IN POST-MAIDAN UKRAINE

Abstract

Ukraine is often perceived as a geopolitical frontier between Russia and Europe, which has been equally reflected in the multitude of its identities and political changes. While a number of historical events in Ukraine led to different perceptions of Russia, Ukraine post-Maidan follows a trend of de-Russification in which the paths of Poland and post-Soviet Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) serve as an example to follow. This paper investigates how Ukrainian decision-makers and, specifically, the younger generation of Ukrainians see their future in the context of this shift. The focus is on whether Ukrainians see the Ukraine's course for Europeanisation post-Maidan as a critical juncture and whether the relations between Russia and the Baltic States may be paralleled to Ukraine's case.

The paper explains how the path dependent approach fits perception studies with regard to the ideational change, as reflected in public attitudes. The findings of the paper reveal the importance of studying the context and dynamics of change during the critical juncture and particularly the counterplaying effects of positive and negative feedbacks for reinforcing the chosen path. In Ukraine's case, the change in attitudes towards Russia became a result of political processes rather than a deeper ideological change. However, some elements of this change appear to be established for a long run, particularly, the need for a more realistic approach in dealing with Russia.

Key words: Ukraine, Russia, Maidan, perceptions, Baltics

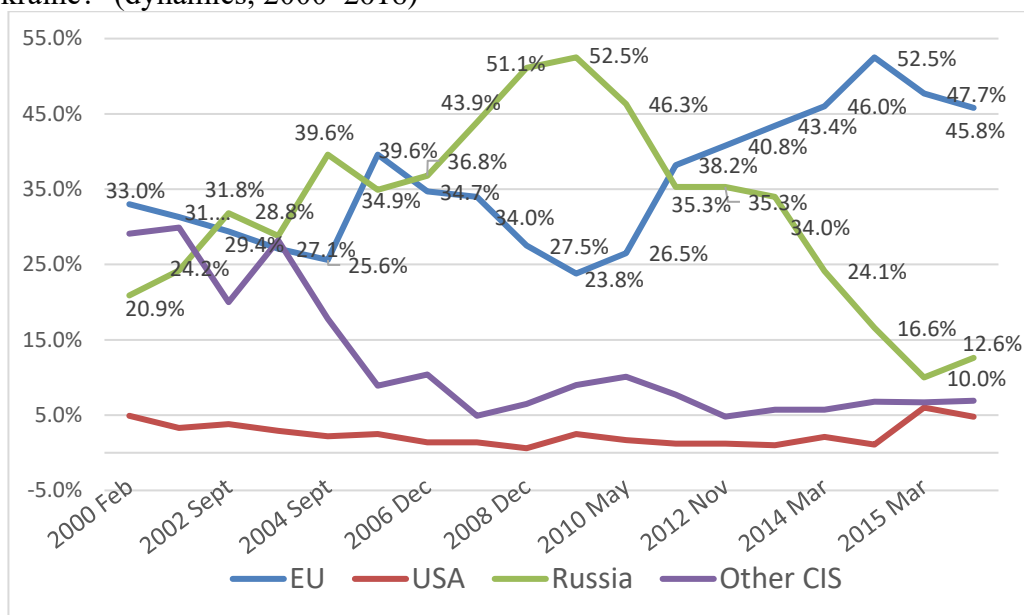
Introduction

Ukraine is traditionally perceived as a state locked in between Europe and Russia in terms of identity, culture as well as geopolitically (D'Anieri, 2012; Kuzio, 2000). While being a topic of historical research, this issue repeats itself in the course of Ukraine's political debates, prompting the recrudescence of local regionalism and internal divisions, closely tied to Ukraine's foreign policy choice (Prizel, 1998).

Although Ukrainians' preferences in this sphere have been unstable, public attitudes change even more drastically with every political shift in the country. Such changes are most visible in the aftermath of Ukraine's 'democratic revolutions'. While Ukrainians appeared to be reconsidering Ukraine's traditional geopolitical ties with Russia after the Orange

revolution, the share of Ukrainians who view Russia as a foreign policy priority has dropped below its 2000 level in post-Maidan Ukraine:

Figure 1. The results of opinion poll, ‘What foreign policy direction should be prioritised for Ukraine?’ (dynamics, 2000–2016)



Source: Razumkov Centre (2012: 73; 2016: 7)

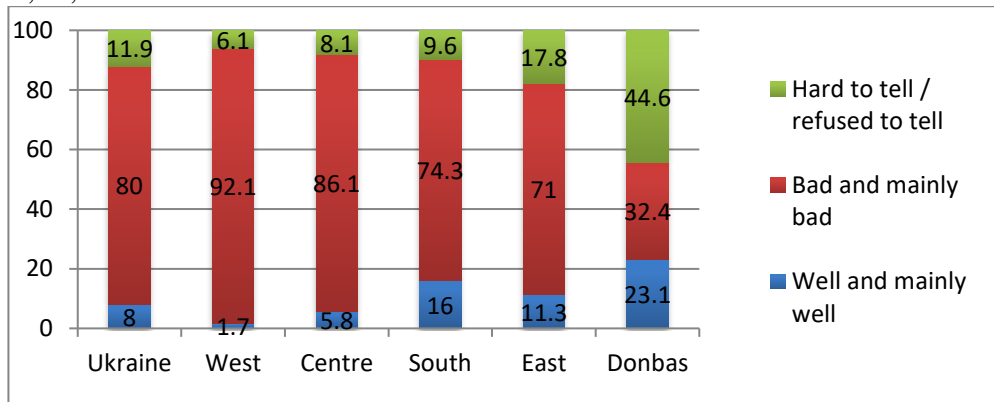
Notes: Since 2014 these polls exclude Crimea and the territories of Donbas where the anti-terrorist (ATO) operation takes place.

Moreover, the attitudes towards Russian authorities worsened even in Eastern Ukraine, which has been traditionally viewed as Russia-oriented: almost half of respondents in Donbas could not clearly state their opinion about Russian authorities (figure 2 below). Despite this may result from somewhat cautious attitude among local people in the course of the ongoing conflict, and neither these polls include Crimea or those territories of Donbas that are beyond the control of the Ukrainian army, these polls still indicate an overall change in the attitudes of Ukrainians towards Russia.

Russia's loss of attractiveness, however, has happened over time (figure 1). The peaks and drops in its support changed in the course of a number of events. Such events as Yeltsin's military attack on the Russian Parliament in 1993, the two Russian-Chechnya wars, and the 2008 Russian war with Georgia strengthened Ukraine's overall perception of Russia as of 'a negative ethno-cultural and territorial "other"' (Kuzio, 2001: 357). Meanwhile the Russian-Ukrainian conflict over island Tuzla in 2004, the gas wars of 2006 and 2009, and, most importantly, the Crimean crisis and the war in Eastern Ukraine paved a rift between the parties. Year 2014 became crucial in this sense (figure 3). In September 2014 only 48 per cent of

Ukrainians concerned Russia in positive terms and significantly fewer, 21 per cent, viewed Russian authorities in such manner. Yet whether this change in attitudes is permanent remains a debated issue.

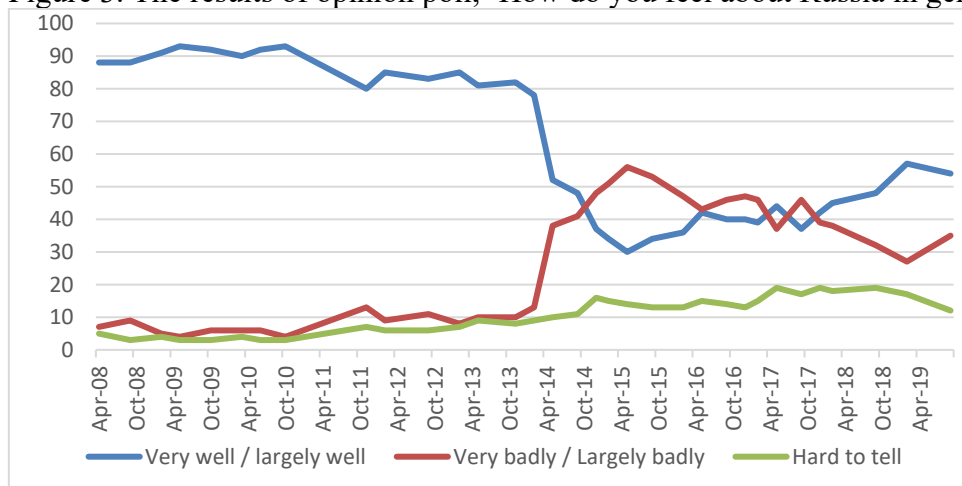
Figure 2. Ukraine’s public attitude towards Russian authorities, distribution by macro-regions, %, 2016



Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), by Paniotto (2016)
 Notes: Excluding Crimea and the ATO territories of Donbas.

While the decline in Russia’s positive perceptions among Ukrainians seemed definite in 2014, already in 2019, more than half of Ukrainians have viewed Russia in a more positive manner (figure 3). Therefore, public opinion polls are helpful but not accurate in explaining public views about international actors. Some polls, such as the one in figure 1, allow a comparison of various political actors in terms of their importance to Ukraine, yet even these polls do not reveal the reasons behind the change of public attitudes, including the possibility that, in Ukraine, attitudes towards Russia may be in a counterbalance with those of the European Union (EU).

Figure 3. The results of opinion poll, ‘How do you feel about Russia in general?’



Source: KIIS (2019)
 Notes: Since 2014 excluding Crimea and the ATO territories of Donbas.

While the importance of Russia as a priority direction for Ukraine's foreign policy has been reducing over the years, the opposite has been true for the EU. Its support had been steadily growing since 2010 and peaked at 52.2 per cent in 2014 (figure 1). Moreover, the very Ukrainian crisis that had begun with the Maidan revolution and poured into the Donbas War has derived from Russia–EU competition in Ukraine (Sabatovych, 2019, Ch5; Smith, 2015). Consequently, Russia's perceptions in Ukraine can be explained both by the policies it pursued with Ukraine and its declining importance due to Ukraine's convergence with the EU in the course of Europeanisation.

Europeanisation refers to the processes of constructing common European identity (Featherstone, 2003) and/or incorporating European norms into domestic political structures of Europeanising states (Cortell & Davis Jr, 1996). Such states either follow the path of European integration or accept EU norms while remaining outside the EU. Among post–Soviet states only Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia became members of the EU, while Ukraine joined the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004 and its initiative, Eastern Partnership (EaP), in 2008 without a promise of membership.

After the Maidan revolution and subsequent conflict with Russia, Ukraine made a strong political shift by declaring the break with its Soviet past, which is closely tied to Russia in post–Maidan political discourse. As the president of Ukraine Poroshenko declared in June 2017, Ukraine's acquisition of a visa-free regime with the EU was the 'final' farewell to the 'Russian Empire', signifying that Ukraine would 'never return to the Soviet Union' (Poroshenko in *Ukraïnska Pravda*, 2017).

Thus, the Maidan revolution symbolised a turning point in Russia–Ukraine relations, wherein post-Maidan Ukraine sought a quick and definite Europeanisation by signing the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2014 and following the example of those post–communist states that became members of the Union. In this context, comparing Ukraine to the Baltic states makes sense, because strong anti-Russianism in those countries became a driving force behind their pro-Western stances and, as a result, quick convergence with the EU straight after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Petrovic, 2013: 7).

This paper investigates how Ukrainians' attitudes towards Russia have changed post Maidan and, specifically, whether these attitudes have become

decisive in Ukraine's Europeanisation course. The objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. To investigate the dynamic of Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia post Maidan.
2. To examine whether this change in attitudes has become irreversible for the Ukraine-Russia relations.

In order to achieve these objectives, the paper adopts the path dependence approach as the theoretical base behind the mechanism of institutional change and its reproduction. The paper then draws on the methodological challenges of the research. In the third section, the paper describes Russia's perceptions in the context of EU-Ukraine relations. In the fourth section, Russia's image is discussed against the background of Ukraine's cooperation with the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia). Finally, this paper concludes by comparing the dynamic of Russia's perceptions in the context of Ukraine's future Europeanisation.

Theoretical framework

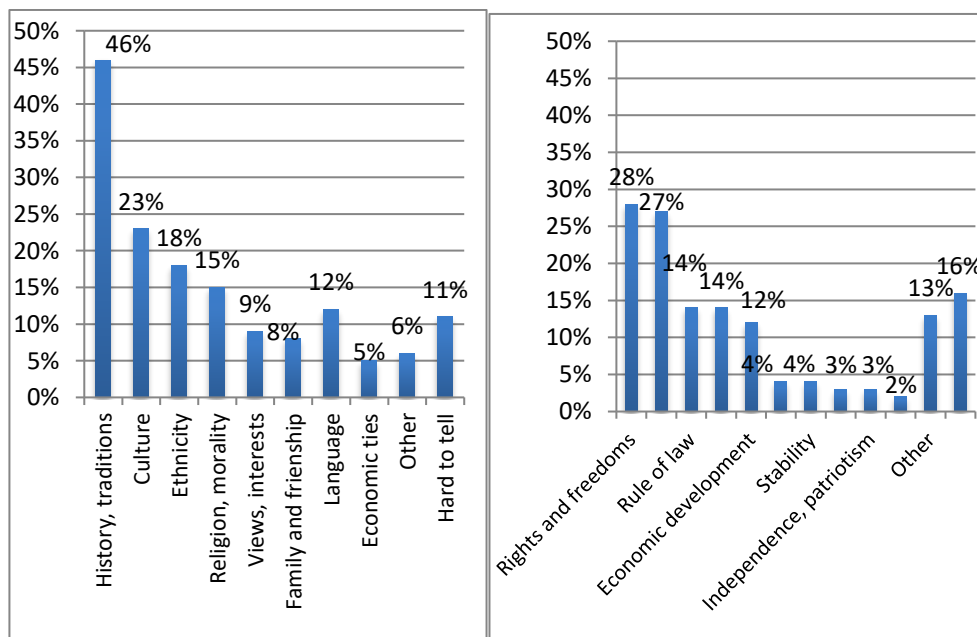
This paper offers to use path dependence as the main theoretical approach for the case. Traditionally, this school of historical institutionalism focuses on significant institutional change, but it may also advance perceptions studies by explaining the mechanism of change in public attitudes. On the one hand, perceptions tend to be rather stable because people do not change their cognitive maps overnight. Yet on the other hand, rapid changes in public attitudes — such as those discussed in the introduction to this paper — also take place (figures 1-3). This strong — if not sudden — change can be explained by the path dependence approach and, potentially, by such marker of an institutional change as ideology.

Similar to a balance achieved between “slow moving” (culture, religion) and “fast moving” (political) institutions (Roland, 2004), perceptions are formed on the base of ‘slow’ ideological and cultural context and are affected by events and processes (Weber, 2010). While ideational change represents a key feature of an institutional change in the path-dependent process (Hogan & Doyle, 2007), the same may explain the causes behind the change in public attitudes. Presumably, change in basic values and beliefs may produce a paradigm shift, which makes the core of the path dependence analysis. Yet when examined on the base of public opinion polls, perceptions may point to public reaction towards ongoing political events

and processes rather than an actual ideational change. In this context, Ukraine's 'farewell' to Russia post Maidan may be explained both either as a marker of a deeper ideological change in society or simply as a temporary change of attitudes in light of the ongoing political conflict.

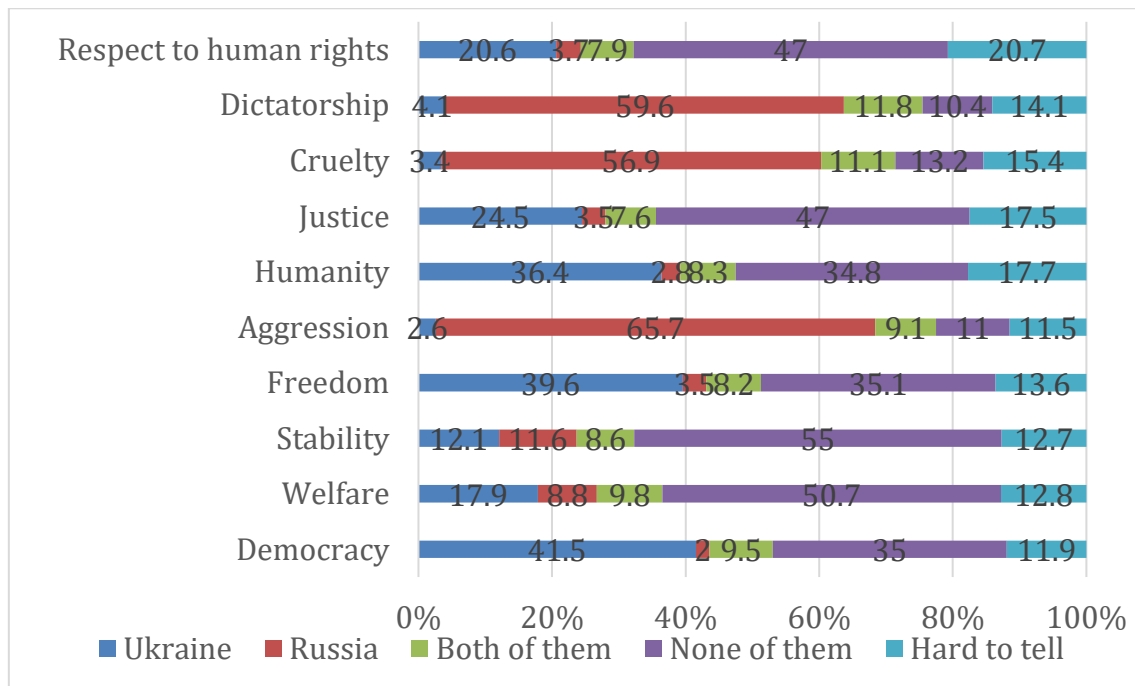
For example, when concerning 'slow' cultural context as opposed to the events analysis of Ukraine's perceptions about Russia, we can refer to public opinion polls concerning values. In one case, more than 40 per cent of Ukrainians considered history and traditions as something common with Russia, while associating the rest of values almost equally between Russia and 'the West' (figure 4). As such, Ukrainian respondents seem to associate their country as something between Russia and the West in terms of values. In another poll, however, Ukraine was contrasted to Russia. As a result, more than half of Ukrainian respondents associated Russia with 'dictatorship', 'cruelty', and 'aggression'; yet a third of them perceived Ukraine in terms of 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'humanity' (figure 5). While the first poll points to that Russia is of a significant importance for a deep, societal level of Ukrainian 'self'-perception, the second poll indicates a change towards portraying Russia as a more aggressive 'other'. The question remaining though is how to define whether this deep, ideological change has taken place in this case?

Figure 4. Values that Ukraine presumably shares with Russia (chart to the left) and the West (chart to the right), 2014



Source: retrieved from IFES (2014). Notes: Excluding Crimea and the ATO territories of Donbas.

Figure 5. Results of the opinion poll, ‘What country, Ukraine or Russia, do you associate the following terms with in the first place?’



Source: Razumkov Centre (2018)

Notes: Excluding Crimea and the ATO territories of Donbas.

Path dependence offers several solutions, the key factors behind which are focus on the context and dynamics of the change. First, path dependence implies that individuals may change the course of history during critical junctures (or turning points), when ‘the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological, organisational) influences’ (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007: 343) become weak to the extent that actors can literally change the course of history (Mahoney, 2001). The downfall of the Russian empire in 1917 as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 are clearly such turning points as they have caused radical institutional changes to and from communism, setting new developmental paths for Russia and Ukraine (Sabatovych, 2019: Ch3). Against these historical events, the Maidan revolution is not equally impactful in terms of the scale of the crises and/or institutional change; yet it can still be crucial for strengthening the perception of Russia as ‘other’ in the context of Ukraine’s choice for Europeanisation. Importantly, Ukraine’s focus on Europeanisation and, specifically, expressed desire to deliberately adopt European values (democracy, human rights, equality, solidarity, etc., as defined in normative power Europe) may serve an indicator of the ongoing ideational change in the Ukrainian society.

However, applying the path dependence framework is still problematic due to the lack of consensus over its several concepts. For example, while deciding whether a critical juncture represents a sequence of events or is dependent on initial conditions, Collier and Collier (2002) conclude that the antecedent conditions lead to a crisis, through which a critical juncture occurs. Yet they also treat antecedent conditions as ‘a base line’ against which the critical juncture and the legacy are assessed’ (30). A similar situation concerns legacies, since scholars believe that, on the one hand, old legacies partially reproduce themselves in newly established institutions but, on the other one, none of them ‘last forever’ (35). This paper attempts at addressing these dualities empirically by tracking the sources of change in Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia as well as the strength of this change. In such a manner, the paper investigates what factors in Ukrainian perceptions became the antecedent conditions and how they affected the perceptions of Russia post Maidan.

The ideal model of path dependence implies that by adopting particular institutions or policies actors focus on a specific institutional choice, paving a mechanism for its reproduction and, later on, self-reproduction (Mahoney, 2000: 510-511). Meanwhile, other scholars (Pierson, 2000) point to the importance of ‘positive feedbacks’ and ‘increasing returns’ for this change, meaning that the increasing number of individuals who benefit from this change prevents them from reversing the change (255). The latter is echoed by the ideas of an institutional ‘lock in’ by prevailing supporters of the choice (Page, 2006), or a tipping point, ‘at which the cumulative cause finally passes a threshold’ (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007: 351), thus enforcing the institutional change. Moreover, in some cases ‘negative feedbacks’, or ‘negative externalities’ may even reverse the whole set of ‘increasing returns’ and bring the institutional system back to pre-‘path-dependent’ equilibrium (Page, 2006), while in others it may develop a reactive sequence, where ‘each step in the chain is “dependent” on prior steps’ (Mahoney, 2000: 509).

In the context of Ukraine’s post-Maidan ideological change this implies two scenarios for a change in public attitudes. One implies that the actors benefiting from the change will reinforce the choice of European vector as the right one for Ukraine and the public will generally accept it. Another scenario implies that ‘negative feedbacks’ towards this choice will reverse public attitudes towards the pre-Maidan equilibrium. Considering the recently observed trend on somewhat ‘warmer’ perceptions of Russia on Figure 3, the previous change that seemed definite can be potentially

reversed. Furthermore, as the volatile dynamic of public attitudes on Figure 1 reveals, the second scenario would imply that the post-Maidan change in public attitudes may not be path-dependent and even represent a punctuated equilibrium. In further sections, we are discussing how to analyse this change specifically.

Methodology

Since this paper aims to investigate a seeming ideational shift in post-Maidan Ukraine, it applies thematic content analysis of elite interviews in dynamic in order to receive a more detailed portrayal of Ukrainian attitudes as an explanation to the findings of public opinion polls (figures 1-3). The paper also uses narrative analysis within the themes of Ukrainian perceptions to point out differences and examples. Such approach overcomes the key methodological limitation of public opinion polls — the lack of detail and explanatory power. The paper therefore analyses interviews with Ukrainian civil society, media, and political elites as primary sources of information.

The first group of interviewees includes twenty representatives of political and media elites (in an equal distribution and coded respectfully ‘Pol’ and ‘Media’), interviewed between November 2016 and March 2017 in the course of the C3EU project. These were deputies, representatives of parliamentary committees and ministries, local councils as well as newsmakers (journalists and reporters) of various political affiliations. Most interviews took place in Kyiv, with a third of them in Central (Cherkasy) and Eastern Ukraine (Kharkiv).

The second primary source of information concerns ten interviews with civil society, political and media elites (coded respectfully ‘Youth_cs’, ‘Youth_p’, and ‘Youth_m’), collected in Kyiv between December 2019 and April 2020 in the course of the E-YOUTH project. The selection of interviewees for this project also included parliamentarians and newsmakers. However, both projects had different focus, which posed several limitations to this paper.

C3EU interviews concerned perceptions of the EU in Ukraine, while E-YOUTH focused on perceptions of younger Ukrainians about cooperation with post-Soviet Baltic states. Therefore, the questionnaires and demographic of the interview sets are different. While C3EU had no limitations with regard to the age of interviewees, E-YOUTH included only young people not older than thirty-three. Moreover, none of the projects

focused on Russian perceptions per se. The C3EU questionnaire elaborated upon the image of the EU in Ukraine across such themes as international roles of the EU, partnership with Ukraine, diplomacy and conflict resolution, while the E-YOUTH questionnaire focused on Ukraine's cooperation with the Baltic states in the context of EU-Ukraine relations with a limited number of questions devoted to EU-Ukraine cooperation. However, these limitations have become advantageous to this paper.

First, the aim of both projects was to receive the most diverse perceptions across various topics. With this purpose, C3EU and E-YOUTH questionnaires contain thirty-three and twenty-one open-ended questions respectively; each interview lasted in average an hour. As a result, obtained data is extremely rich and diverse. Furthermore, the semi-structured character of interviews allows a balance between the structure of responses and the freedom of respondents to talk about the topics that they found most important to them. Consequently, responses contain a number of explicit elaborations upon Russia.

Finally, the different focuses of interview datasets further assisted the research purposes of this paper. Although the below analysis does not cover opinion of a broader public, the target group of interviewees – political and media elites – are making political choices about Russia and/or present them to the public. Furthermore, the three-year gap between interviews provides a glimpse into the dynamic of Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia. Finally, the E-YOUTH dataset focuses specifically on youth perceptions and allows a speculation about the future of Ukrainian perceptions.

For this reason, the logical fashion of the paper presents elite attitudes in two blocks: the first one describes the image of Russia in relation to the EU, while the second one reveals the parallels between Ukraine and the Baltic states, as perceived by Ukrainian elites. In both cases, the coding categories included “Russia,” “Soviet,” “the USSR,” and their derivative words concerning Ukraine's official approach towards retreat from the Russian imperial and Soviet past.

A Turning Point, Conflict and the EU. The Main Themes of Russia's Images in the Context of EU-Ukraine Cooperation, 2016-2017.

Considering the key role of Russia in the Crimean crisis and the ongoing conflict with Ukraine, the dominant theme in the perceptions of the Ukrainian elites is the conflict (Media6) itself. Russia is described as an

‘initiator’ of the conflict, an ‘actual aggressor’ (Pol6, Pol5), or an ‘enemy’ (Media3, Media9, Pol1). While Ukrainian elites name Russia one of the key international players for Ukraine on par with the EU and the U.S. (Media1, Pol4, Pol5, Pol10), Russian presence is somewhat ‘regretful’ (Media8) due to its military engagement (Media9). Meanwhile, the EU, which is seen in positive light, is not ‘equal’ to such ‘super powers’ as the U.S. or Russia (Media1, Media9), and this theme of contrast — between Russia and Ukraine as well as Russia and the EU post Maidan — is the key theme in this group of interviews.

The Maidan revolution as a turning point in the Ukraine-Russia relations

Although Ukrainian elites do not share a unanimous view on the Maidan revolution, they believe that post-Maidan Ukraine has changed Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia. They clearly see this period as a turning point in Ukraine-Russia relations, or a critical juncture for Ukraine’s self-identification as a European state. Some interviewees claim that the very ‘theme of the revolution was to change the course to European integration’ (Pol7) and that Russia’s aggressive response was to ‘the prospect’ of Ukraine’s membership in the EU (Pol3). Others do not see the Maidan revolution as ‘a geopolitical event’, but claim it was Russia that ‘took it [Maidan] as opposition to itself’ (Pol8). Nevertheless, all stress that the period of ‘multiple vectors has ended’ (Media10), and Ukraine’s movement to the EU ‘has no alternative’ (Pol8). This idea implies the irreversibility of the ongoing change; yet it is explained differently by different interviewees and not all of these explanations point to the irreversibility of the change. While some respondents consider Ukraine’s definite break with Russia as a ‘fortunate’ event (Media10), others treat it as a rational outcome:

‘[...] there isn’t any alternative for Ukraine’ in terms of new alliances, as ‘the Russian vector is closed for a long time, the perspective with the European / Atlantic military constituent is extremely vague, and the EU remains the only possible way’ (Media2).

Furthermore, when regarding the agency behind the change, it is Russia and its aggression (Pol5) rather than Ukraine that is seen as the cause behind it:

Before the Euromaidan [...] one third [of Ukrainians] saw their future together with Russia, another third of the respondents saw it together with the EU, and the rest couldn’t decide [...] But nowadays, two thirds

of Ukrainians see their future only within the European model. And the theme of the Russian World, of the union with Russia, after the war has disappeared. [...] The war has radically changed everything [...] those Ukrainians who strive (to have their future together with Russia) [...] are not well-informed [...] and at present they are not thinking about joining anything connected with Russia or the Russian World. (Pol4)

This observation refers to the public opinion polls that indicated regional distribution of attitudes towards Russian authorities (Figure 2) and is shared by a number of interviewees, who claim that the trend of pro-European attitudes is ‘intensifying’ and ‘the expansion of Europeanness [...] goes to Eastern Ukraine’, despite the latter is believed to ‘live under the pressure of Russian propaganda’ (Pol7). As a result, interviewees claim that ‘the “Russian world” has practically vanished for Ukrainians’ (Pol4), Ukraine is ‘pushing away from Russia’ (Media4), and the EU is even perceived as ‘a true version of what the Soviet Union actually declared’ (Pol4).

This narrative serves as a proper introduction into how Russia and the Soviet past are contrasted to the EU and European future in the minds of Ukrainian elites. Yet it is also unclear whether this radical change in attitudes came as a response to events and policies (as the interviews claim) or became a result of a thoughtful choice in favour of the EU as a new ideological vector to orient to. What remains present in these interviews is that Russia is perceived as the opposite of the EU in terms of identity and values, and whether this view refers specifically to Russia’s politics post Maidan or ‘the Russian world’ in general depends on the interviewees’ interpretation.

Russia as the antipode of the EU

According to the majority of Ukrainian respondents, the Russian image is ‘antagonistic’ to that of the EU (Pol6, Media4, Pol1, Pol2, Pol7, Pol8, Pol10) and ‘an absolute antipode’ of it (Pol4). The two actors ‘differ in values, politics, and freedom’ (Pol10) and are ‘like two poles in the minds of Ukrainians’ (Pol6). While Russia is ‘a... forced neighbourhood’, the EU is ‘a desired neighbour’ (Media4). Considering these differences, European integration represents ‘a possibility [...] to withdraw from Russia’s influence and to change the vector [of foreign policy] radically’ (Pol6).

Such a positive image of the EU arises from the idea that the EU may support Ukraine’s institutional transformation (Pol4) with regard to both

‘economic standards and standards in rights and freedoms’ (Pol6). It is ‘the most attractive model for Ukrainians’ (Pol4), ‘the benchmark [...] to follow’ (Pol6), and its image ‘is just improving’ with time (Pol2). By contrast, Russia is associated ‘with the former Soviet Union, with violation of human rights’ (Pol3) and ‘a [governance] model built on humiliation’ (Pol8). According to Ukrainian elites, ‘Russia [...] tramples all European values’ (Media9), and despite the fact that Ukraine is also believed to share some ‘rudiments of the Soviet era’, such as ‘I am the State’ attitude (Media9) or the lack of equality (Pol5), it is the process of Europeanisation through which Ukrainian elites see Ukraine as different from Russia.

According to the interviewees, Ukraine and Russia have become ‘two completely different societies’ (Pol3) not only in terms of ‘legislation’ but also mentally, as ‘a political Ukrainian is more freedom-loving’ (Pol3). Another interviewee states, ‘we have hostile, antagonistic, totally incompatible systems now in Ukraine and Russia’ (Pol4).

Importantly, Ukrainian elites view Europeanisation and the EU’s public diplomacy as the source of the change in Ukraine’s political institutions and values (Pol3). In this regard, ‘the [generational] gap in the world outlook’ is something that Ukraine faces with regard to EU values (Pol9), because the older generation was ‘brought up in the totalitarian Soviet regime’ (Pol3). While this view describes Ukrainian youth as EU-oriented, it also points to how the anti-Russian mood may reinforce and sustain, similarly to the mechanism of self-reproduction in the path dependence approach. Thus, one interviewee points out that the ‘attractiveness’ of ‘the European Union vector’ is ‘determined [...] by the unattractiveness of the Russian vector and the attractiveness of some other alternatives that are related’ (Media6).

However, other participants signal that the reverse of this situation is possible as well, because ‘a dramatic reduction of pro-Russian moods [...] did not give too many points to the EU’, just ‘took them from Russia’ (Pol5) and because the attractiveness of the EU or other international actors in Ukraine often depends on the political manoeuvring by Ukrainian elites. The examples of these were reflected in the consequences of the Kuchma’s Tapeagate scandal and Yanukovich presidency (Media6). As such, not only some rudiments of the Soviet past may pose ‘negative feedback’ to the post-Maidan change in Ukraine but also the choices of political elites in Ukraine and the EU’s weak presence in Ukraine’s societal institutions. Interpersonal relations also represent a sphere in which Russia stands out in a more positive way than elsewhere.

According to one respondent, millions of relatives in Russia and Ukraine cannot be the ‘enemies’, which creates some kind of confusion in the media portrayal of Russia, because, from the ‘state policy perspective’, it is an ‘enemy’ (Media3). However, Russia’s ‘simple play on’ the ‘general ignorance of the audience’ (Media3), as observed by the interviewees, is perceived by the elites very negatively. They believe that Russia’s ‘thesis of [...] sovereign democracy [...] is actually reduced to ‘securing human rights ‘by restricting civil liberties’ (Pol5), and if sovereignty prevails over human rights, ‘many people may be killed, just as in the Soviet Union.’ (Pol9). They also claim that the problem of ‘Russian-speaking citizens [...] is in fact a misinterpretation of human rights’ by Russia with the aim to ‘transfer’ its ‘propaganda messages’ (Pol5). Similarly, Ukrainian elites view the attempts of the ‘Russian propaganda’ to describe the EU as “collapsing” (Media7) or ‘falling apart’ ‘completely wrong’ (Media10) and are concerned about the efficiency of this Russian propaganda even more when it comes to the image of Ukraine abroad.

Therefore, while elites interviewees perceive the change of attitudes towards Russia as a turning point and an irreversible process, they still point to a number of issues that represent ‘negative feedbacks’ capable of changing the situation or at least making it more complicated.

Russian diplomacy in the EU

Ukrainian elites believe that Russia’s ‘financial and business influence on Europe’ (Media2) ‘hinders’ Ukraine’s relations with the EU (Pol11) and its members (Media2). Some suggest even that ‘most of the far-right movements and the Euro-skeptical attitudes in the EU are fuelled by Russian money’ (Pol7). The sense that Russia ‘uses a tremendous resource to influence politically within the EU’ and even to ‘affect the social awareness’ (Pol3) among EU residents through its ‘information war’ (Pol8) is a concern. Ukrainian interviewees believe that although European elites ‘understand Ukraine’, ‘ordinary Europeans who receive their information from the media’ are ‘subject to Russian propaganda’ (Pol6), and ‘Russia Today have already brainwashed millions of people [...] using democratic mechanisms’ (Pol4).

Consequently, the responsibility for the change of European attitudes towards Ukraine, as sensed by the Ukrainian elites, is placed on Russia as well, making it a source of agency not only in relations with Ukraine but also

in Ukraine's relations with third parties. While 'such events as the Euromaidan formed a very attractive and positive image of the country [Ukraine] further events related to the war', including 'active and effective Russian propaganda' changed European attitudes towards 'more pragmatic', 'not as fascinated as' in the aftermath of the Maidan revolution (Pol6). A similar idea is expressed in that Ukraine did not achieve visa liberalisation at the time, 'Russia is mainly to blame for this. Ukraine is also to blame. But mainly Russia' (Media8).

Moreover, internal divisions in the EU are seen as a key problem by the Ukrainian interviewees (Pol6). The EU may be more 'authoritative' or affirmative when 'there is no disunity between the major EU shareholders' (Pol4). However, there is a certain 'discord in positions of EU member-countries, on different international issues' (Media9). The most controversial opinion concerns France and Germany. On the one hand, these two states are viewed as the key mediators in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Yet, on the other hand, close economic and political ties between Russia and the EU and even more so between Russia and Germany (Media7, Media9) make them less interested in conflicting Russia (Media9, Pol6). Some respondents even 'suspect' Germany and France 'in some kind of playing along with Russia' (Media4) because they suffer from anti-Russian sanctions (Media9, Pol6). Finally, 'some countries have certain sentiments towards Russia' and 'a certain part of European elites focus on Russia' (Pol6), which altogether causes a certain disbelief in the EU mediation abilities among Ukrainian elites (Pol8).

Although Ukraine itself faces a number of 'negative feedbacks' that may reverse the change in attitudes to Russia, Ukrainian elites believe that the lack of the EU's actorness or presence in Ukraine may become another such factor, and they are extremely concerned by this.

Expectations vs. reality in conflict resolution

While Russia has been perceived as a significant anti-Ukrainian factor in the EU's domestic politics, its importance has grown even further with regard to the EU's ability to negotiate peace in Ukraine, as perceived by the Ukrainian elites. Importantly, this area, along with the EU's domestic policy-making, represent those areas, where the image of the EU is the most controversial and least positive, despite the fact that Russia's perceptions remain negative there.

On the one hand, the EU ‘took the responsibility to participate in a complex [Russian-Ukrainian] conflict’ (Pol1), and Ukrainian elites understand why the EU seeks a calibrated position, ‘dealing with Russia directly is futile’ (Pol9). However, they also find that the EU maintains the ‘status quo’ with regard to the conflict (Pol5), does not seem to have ‘a strategy of dealing with Ukraine’ (Media6) and is more ‘concerned’ with its internal problems rather than Ukraine (Pol6).

In addition, Europe remains a ‘soft power’ (Media7) and makes ‘concessions’ to Russia in exchange for European ‘core’ value, ‘human life’ (Pol3). As a result, ‘the EU’s stance towards the war with Russia’ is somewhat ‘compromising’ (Media3) or even ‘apologetic’ (Pol3), despite ‘[Europeans] believe that they have done even more than they could’ (Pol6).

Such perception may be caused by the fact that Ukrainians ‘expected more decisive actions after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas’ (Media7, Pol9) than they received afterwards, and this gap between expectations and reality is expressed across a number of issues related to the conflict. For example, the EU can still act as a ‘judge’, ‘an intermediary’ between Russia and Ukraine’ (Pol2), but it better be a ‘referee who has a good whip to punish’ (Pol8). Another example concerns anti-Russian sanctions. While the EU considers them effective, Ukrainians, find them ‘working’ (Pol5) but ‘insufficient’ (Pol6) and push for more sanctions (Pol5, Pol7) and ‘a tougher position towards Russia’ in general (Pol6). Ukrainian interviewees explain it by their concern that ‘the EU underestimates Russia’s margin of power’ (Pol8).

Therefore, an overall perception of Russia in this aspect as of an aggressor is contrasted to the less decisive ‘soft power’ EU, causing a sense of helplessness among Ukrainian interviewees. This is partially caused by the fact that Russia appears to be neglecting ‘the multilateral approach’ favoured by the EU (Pol8), and that Ukraine’s ‘calls for a broader international participation’ (Pol5) do not work, as seen by the elites. Some interviewees even claim that ‘the influence of Russia on the OSCE is great, which is why Russia recognises the OSCE’, but the organisation itself is barely advancing to peace-keeping (Pol4 Pol9).

In this respect, some of the interviewees pointed to the need for Ukraine to resolve the crisis on its own (Pol9) and propose two scenarios of doing so. According to the first scenario, ‘getting it [Donbas] back using military force [...] is impossible’ (Pol4), because ‘Ukraine’s forces, resources and

possibilities are absolutely incomparable' to those of Russia (Pol6). Therefore, Ukraine needs 'economic, political' assistance but not 'military' (Pol9).

In contrast, the second scenario involves much more radical measures:

if we are unable to punch in the face via our own military forces, if we are unable to resist and cause very substantial losses to the aggressor then the external factor will not work in our country at all. The only threat is that Russia will suffer enormous casualties, because it is now suffering from casualties. (Pol4)

Such a 'hard power' view offers a reflection of Russia's own militarised approach, yet it remains in minority among Ukrainian interviewees, who profess largely diplomatic methods of conflict resolution.

The Baltic states and the alternatives

Since this paper concerns Ukraine's views on the Baltic states as a potential example to follow, an interesting finding refers to the fact that these states appeared in the C3EU interviews when Russia was mentioned. First, Lithuania and Estonia are viewed as 'former brothers and sisters from the Soviet bloc' (Pol4) and have an 'active' position with regard to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict] (Pol9, Pol3, Pol8, Media2). They are considered 'the main lobbyists for the Ukrainians' in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, 'because they have experienced occupation by the Russian Federation, or by the Soviet Union' (Pol3). As such, the Russian factor here serves as a unifying force behind Ukraine's relations with these countries. Their experience of Europeanisation reforms is also considered inspiring: 'if I were the EU, I would have been smarter and would send the Balts here [...] their ability to be persuasive is much greater, than that of the representatives of wise, experienced, and old Europe' (Pol4).

Yet on the other hand, neither the Baltic experience of European integration can be replicated by Ukraine in full (the EU 'wouldn't be able to accept' bigger countries like Ukraine (Media6)), nor their power capacity is big enough to solve Ukraine's problems (they 'are trying to make some small things' (Pol5)). As a result, the perception of them as of potential allies is rather vague, e.g. 'neither GUAM, nor the Baltic / the Black Sea union' can be compared to the EU in impact. These unions 'exist on paper at best, at

worst – only in the imagination’ (Media2). A similar view is reflected in the following: ‘the Baltic countries can form their own alliance [as opposed to the membership in the EU]’, but it ‘will result in their weakening’ (Media8).

Considering such diverse views about the role of the Baltic states in Ukraine’s Europeanisation and the Russia–Ukraine conflict, observing perceptions of these states in dynamic may be informative as well.

Soviet past, Europeanisation and the Russian Aggression. The main Themes of Russia’s Images in the Context of Ukraine-Baltic Cooperation, 2019-2020.

The topic of the shared past with the Baltic states as a unifying block for the Ukraine-Baltic relations remains a key theme of the second group of interviews. However, here, ‘Soviet’ and ‘Russia’ appear to be even more identical. Meanwhile, the theme of the Russia–Ukraine conflict slowly transforms into the theme of international cooperation and solidarity as a solution to it.

Shared history

Ukrainian elites stress that Ukraine shares a lot of historical and cultural ties with the Baltic states (Youth_cs4) but vary in the views on the impact that these ties may have on the modern state of affairs between the parties. Some go to deeper history and point to similarities of suffering from wars ‘with Muscovy, Poland, Rzeczpospolita’ (Youth_p5). Some even claim that various periods of history have ‘influenced’ the minds of the people and ‘the vision of Ukrainians today’ (Youth_p2). In the context of the path dependence approach, it is an important finding, because new institutional choices usually work on the base of the old ones. Similarly, modern perceptions of international actors and partners may be to an extent shaped by various historical experiences. It is hard to measure, however, which part of history is defining in setting a new ideational path, particularly in Ukraine’s relations with other actors.

For example, some interviewees assume that the Rzeczpospolita period became very visible (Youth_m10) in the history of Ukraine’s relations with the Baltic states. It also left a ‘good’ impression about some Baltic states among the people in Western Ukraine but not among those ‘in the East of Ukraine’ due to the ‘historical approach by the Russian Empire’. Similarly, it is believed that during the Soviet era there was ‘probably somewhat

negative... perception... of the Baltic states by Soviet people' which may affect attitudes of Ukrainians nowadays (Youth_p2).

Yet the majority of respondents view the Baltic states primarily as 'post-Soviet' (Youth_p2), and the modern 'period of post-Soviet Europeanisation' as the most important in the course of Ukraine-Baltic relations (Youth_m7; Youth_cs9) 'simply' because these respondents are 'living' in this period and may 'feel' and observe the change (Youth_m1), while 'Rzeczpospolita [...] was long time ago' (Youth_m6).

In this regard, the 'post-Soviet tint' (Youth_m7), 'the history of all the atrocities that our countries [Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia] went through during the Soviet era' (Youth_cs8) are considered 'the unifying factors' that help both parties to 'understand each other' (Youth_m6) and develop their 'own strategy in the international arena' (Youth_p2; also Youth_sc9). As such, 'it is the independence after the Soviets', that Ukraine and the Baltics 'can finally make' what they have 'always fought for' (Youth_p5), meaning that the Soviet past is not 'defining' (Youth_m6).

This idea of achieving together translates into the idea of Europeanising together. In the context of the path dependence approach, this points to the importance of structure, or base, for building bilateral relations with other actors, yet also a possibility to change this structure in course of policymaking in real time.

Transformation from Soviet to European

One of the key themes, where Russia is extremely visible with regard to the Baltic states, is the prism of transformation from 'Soviet' to 'European'. A vivid example of this is provided below:

'Vilnius, I think, is the best... the best way to describe the transformations in Lithuania, because Vilnius used to be a very, let's say, Soviet city. And now it's a very European modern city, [...] the epicentre of culture, epicentre of science and arts, and everything that makes a city developed and civilised and, maybe, European' (Youth_cs4).

Yet, the very process of this transformation in Ukraine's context is viewed as much more complicated. On the one hand, Ukraine's current course for Europeanisation is viewed as a result of 'a good information policy' and the change in 'minds of Ukrainian people' (Youth_p2),

supported by the understanding that Ukraine ‘should be ready to learn [...] the Baltic know-how’ as well as ‘understand’ and ‘implement it’ (Youth_m6). Yet on the other hand, this has to be done ‘on the Ukrainian scale’, because these two kinds of partners are ‘completely different countries’ or even ‘parts of Europe’ in terms of ‘mentality, culture’ or ‘civilisation’ (Youth_m6). Once again, civilizational factors viewed as ‘negative feedbacks’ to the ongoing change in the minds of Ukrainians. Even with regard to the Soviet history, the Baltic states are perceived as ‘similar to Ukraine, but not so much [similar]’ (Youth_p2), with a ‘faster’ post-Soviet transformation and ‘bloody change of elites in the nineties’ (Youth_sc4) as opposed to the one in Ukraine.

Among the three state, ‘Estonia and Lithuania’ are considered ‘very supportive of the reforms’ in Ukraine (Youth_sc4) and ‘the most vocal and strongest in combatting Russian aggression’ (Youth_cs9). As a result, Estonia is perceived not only in terms of its expertise on electronic elections, cybersecurity and Parliamentary ethics (Youth_sc4), or being ‘E-Stonia’ (Youth_cs8), but also as an example of a country that ‘managed to become a member of NATO while having a territorial dispute with Russia’ (Youth_cs8) — an issue of great concern in the context of Ukraine’s potential membership in the organisation. Estonia may thus serve an example of a ‘post-colonial country’ that ‘managed to break away from its [...] Soviet occupation legacy’ (Youth_cs8).

Meanwhile, Lithuania is perceived as ‘one of the countries that understand Ukraine the most’ and is ‘the most vocal in the international fora regarding Ukraine’s fight for independence’ (Youth_cs8). Lithuania ‘wants to play this mentorship role for Ukraine’ (Youth_m6) and is also viewed as an example of ‘how to get rid of the Soviet heritage and get into the European family’, or how to ‘become a post-Soviet member state in the EU’ (Youth_m6). By contrast, Latvia is considered less supportive in this sense due to a strong ‘Russian influence’ there (Youth_p3) or even as a perception of it as a sort of ‘pro-Russian country’ (Youth_m10).

While this theme in the youth elite perceptions does not reveal a lot about the ideational change that has happened in Ukraine post Maidan, it points to post-Soviet Europeanisation as a way to eliminate Russia’s influence in the transforming countries. In parallel, Russia becomes a key element in building Ukraine’s relations with the Baltic states.

Combatting Russian aggression

Russian aggression remains one of the most defining themes in the youth interviews. Here, some stories circulate around the narrative of ‘weak Ukraine’ fighting against Russia (Youth_p5) in a turbulent world (Youth_m1), but the majority of them focus on ‘partnership [with the Baltics allies] in [...] combatting Russian aggression’ (Youth_p2).

The notion of countering Russia is so strong because Ukrainian elites believe that the Baltic states have also experienced ‘this aggression’, (Youth_p3) and see it as the common ground to further strengthen their mutual ‘relationship’ (Youth_sc4) as of ‘allies’ (Youth_m10). The interviewees provide several examples of such a relationship, e.g. ‘Lithuania is working with Ukraine on [...] combatting Russian propaganda in the EU’ (Youth_p3) and being ‘very supportive of Ukraine’ in the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Youth_sc4), or ‘Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania [...] supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia’ by ‘taking care of soldiers, [...] supplying important equipment, medical equipment or certain things that support our [Ukrainian] military’ (Youth_sc8).

Moreover, the narrative of the Baltic states supporting Ukraine in its struggle against ‘Russian aggression’ also feeds into the Ukrainian media, according to the Ukrainian elites: ‘they [Baltic states] do a lot of statements regarding condemning the occupation of the Crimea and aggression in the East of Ukraine’ (Youth_p2), or ‘I read a lot about them, even in Ukrainian news’ (Youth_sc4). Still, it is believed that a better narrative for the Baltic states should be present in Ukraine’s media in order to ‘present’ them ‘better, as friends [...], as countries that [...] share a lot of common history with Ukraine [...] that are very much interested in Ukraine’s success [...]’ (Youth_cs8).

While some interviewees consider ‘the relationship with the Baltic states’ as ‘strategically important’ but ‘not defining’ for the EU-Russia relations and the EU-Ukraine-Russia triangle (Youth_m6), the majority see the Baltic states as vitally important for Ukraine, e.g. ‘the Baltics understand how important it is to be clear with your international obligations, to be clear with whom you are speaking at the international fora when you are speaking with aggressor like Russia’ (Youth_p5). This is explicitly stated by another interviewee:

‘They [Baltic states] always clearly say about the conflict in the Eastern part of Ukraine and also annexation of Crimea by Russia exactly, without any negligence and saying that... even thinking that it could harm them, but they clearly support us in that. Also, they provide a lot of assistance for our military [...] humanitarian support and medical support to our armed forces [...] a lot of support for central governmental institutions’ (Youth_p5).

Once again and similarly to the idea expressed in the previous block of interviews, ‘the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass’ are viewed as the ‘turning points’ for Ukraine’s closer cooperation with the Baltic countries because ‘in your bad times you really know who your friends are. And [...] our Baltic neighbours [...] really supported us’ (Youth_p3).

In general, the aftermath of Maidan revolution and particularly Russia’s response to Ukraine’s European choice is perceived by Ukrainian elites as a turning point not only for Ukraine’s perceptions of Russia as ‘other’ in the context of Europeanisation but also for the perceptions of the Baltic states as ‘allies’ in combatting Russia. While the irreversibility of this change in attitudes is questioned due to a number of structural differences between the parties, the more important question is the basis behind this change.

It is hard to judge whether a newly achieved friendship between Ukraine and the Baltic states is guided by Ukraine’s desire to transform and adopt European norms following the examples of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, as is claimed, or by the idea of the ‘common enemy’ Russia. As one interviewee states, the Baltic states are ‘friends’ of Ukraine because they ‘share a lot in terms of history and challenges’ and ‘in particular those posed by Russia’ (Youth_cs8). Furthermore, as Kleinberga and Vizgunova (2020), demonstrate in this issue, Latvian media are similarly preoccupied with the ‘Russian issue’ rather than with the Ukrainian issues even when portraying Ukraine or reporting on it. If this is true for both parties, the post-Maidan change in attitudes may not be deep enough to cause an ideational change in the country, because of the situationality of the character of the change. A situational alliance against a common enemy does not require a deep ideational change as opposed to a deep ideational change that leads to a new situational alliance.

Geopolitics

Despite Ukrainian interviewees believing that Ukraine receives visible support from the Baltic states with regard to combatting Russia, the majority

of respondents are rather pessimistic about Ukraine's ability to achieve its aims in the conflict resolution. According to some, Ukraine needs 'strong partners to protect' it from the 'Russian aggression', to help Ukraine 'be independent, and play a strong role in international arena' (Youth_p2); and in this narrative, the EU performs as such a partner, offering 'good cooperation', sanctioning Russia and participating in the Minsk process. This scenario therefore may allow Ukraine 'not to be [...] an object in international relations, but to be a subject' of them (Youth_p2).

However, most of the interviewed elites describe partnership with the EU as rather ambiguous. This is due partially to the EU's not being a unanimous 'leader in international politics' (Youth_p3), because as opposed to 'more aggressive' Russia and the U.S., the EU 'is more like, "okay, we're in the middle, we're, like, good guys, trying to be good"' (Youth_cs9). While while this is not seen necessarily as a negative development, 'I don't know whether it's good or bad – not to be a leader' (Youth_cs9), this issue overlaps with a number of other problems faced by the EU.

For example, the Ukrainian youth elites believe the EU 'could have done more' for Ukraine (Youth_sc4) and, potentially, for other countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus with regard to the Russia aggression (Youth_sc8). Yet the reasons behind the EU's inaction lie in the internal conflict between EU values and interests. While Ukrainian youth elites claim they realise that 'national interests always prevail over the continent's interest', the youth are still concerned by the fact that the 'agenda' of some EU member states (Germany or France) is 'most of the time [...] in the way of Ukraine's agenda when it comes to the war with Russia' (Youth_sc4).

While some interviewees state that the EU has 'no united position on Russia' (Youth_p3), others call the Nord Stream a 'betrayal of Ukraine' due to Germany's 'willing to do business as usual' and call for the EU elites to finally decide, 'whether they stand for European values or they stand for business as usual' (Youth_cs8). As a result, this sense of neglect by the EU, as perceived among the Ukrainian youth, extrapolates from member states to the EU as a whole: 'most of the time Ukraine is not treated fairly by the EU' (Youth_cs4).

According to the interviewees, this sense of unfair treatment explains why Ukraine starts seeking to achieve its own agenda, same as other international actors (Youth_sc4) and even in the course of 'all these geopolitical games' that the EU and Ukraine play in the EU-Russia-Ukraine

relationship (Youth_m6). Yet Ukraine is not perceived as being successful in these games by its own young elites due to geopolitical constraints and the lack of power, e.g. ‘how they [Germany, France] communicate with Russia, how they communicate with the U.S.’ (Youth_m6). Russia thus is perceived not only as a capable actor for Ukraine’s relations with third parties but also as an international player that discredits multilateral institutions (Council of Europe) and plays a key role in the ‘dissolution of the global liberal order’ (Youth_cs8). In general, youth find Ukraine locked between ‘different cultural and political projects’ of Russia, the EU and the U.S. (Youth_p2), which, together with the perceived power asymmetry, portrays Ukraine as being in a weak position:

Ukraine cannot really compete in the international politics right now. Because as it is, as a state [...] it is dysfunctional [...] But still, it has a prominent role, as a territory. [...] very important for relations between the EU, the US and Russia. But as a state at the table of negotiations’ Ukraine decides nothing. (Youth_m6)

In this narrative, Ukraine is weak, and it needs the EU, but Russia will ‘never’ let Ukraine ‘join the EU’ (Youth_cs4). Moreover, Ukraine’s domestic developments are seen as threatening to Ukraine’s future in the EU:

Well, I became more negative in the last year because I see a lot of steps in the wrong direction [...] We are getting closer to becoming an ally with Russia, and that worries me a lot. And I think that we are giving up a lot of our national interest in order to end this war, and I understand perfectly why it has to be done, but I just think that too many people have died in the aim for that. And this discourse, this cultural discourse that we share with Russia more and more is very worrisome because I think that in a few years we won’t even notice that we are part of the same cultural space, and it’s going to be like with the Black Sea fleet in Crimea back in 2010. When nobody even heard about the Kharkiv agreements, but they took place and nobody cared, and then it led to [...] to some very significant events. And I think the same is going happen now. We won’t notice it, but step by step we will become more and more integrated with Russia, and this scares me a lot. It scares me a lot because many people just don’t care. (Youth_cs4)

This view refers to Ukraine’s potential rapprochement with Russia, because Ukraine needs to be ‘consistent with its European path’ as opposed to deviating towards Russia: ‘I would like to see our future, I don’t know, either

as a part of the EU, or closer at least to the European values. I don't want to go back to this Russian world' (Youth_cs9).

Although such a view of a reversing change seems rather pessimistic, it slowly transforms into a theme of being recognised and respected among other interviewees. They, too, see Ukraine as a state 'suffering from the aggression of another state in the world, which is already constructed in a peaceful way'; however, it is this area where they see Ukraine's potential as of an international actor, at least for now (Youth_p5):

[...] we are the voice of the international relations [...] we have to show everyone that each country can be in such a situation. [...] we have to connect the global community to say everything out loud, to be on the one side. And then, when we are united, we can tackle everything, like we are trying now to do with the Russian aggression. This, I think, is our role now, but I don't want it to be a constant role for Ukraine. I think that in the future we have to overcome this problem and to become an example of the state, which transforms itself from post-Soviet period to the developed country. (Youth_p5)

In this context, the Baltic states are seen as crucial partners for Ukraine, because they can prove Ukraine is not 'alone', and other actors also 'stand firm by Ukraine' (Youth_cs8). Moreover, this view even portrays Ukraine as a potentially influential actor in international relations. Ukraine's 'historic' mission could be to 'facilitate the dissolution of one of the last empires, which is now the aggressive Russian Federation [...], to make Russia free and democratic, to influence Russia in this way and [...] to set all of Europe free of authoritarianism' (Youth_cs8). In this context, the Baltic states and even Germany, France, or the United Kingdom are seen as partners who 'are interested in the preservation of the European Union' and European values (Youth_cs8). Therefore, there is 'hope' among some younger Ukrainian elites that Ukraine 'will find general understanding with the European Union, with the United States, with the Russian Federation' and will 'overcome' its current situation (Youth_m1).

The theme of international relations thus represents the most controversial section of this analysis. Some interviewees share a more pessimistic view about the change from the anti-Russian stance towards less so certain one. However, others see a chance to maintain and entrench this choice through international cooperation. The prospects of using such

‘positive feedbacks’ however are questionable due to the perceived impact that Russia has on undermining Ukraine’s position.

From the perspective of the path dependence approach, the youth interviewees support the idea that the Russian aggression has become a turning point for the bilateral relations between Ukraine and Russia, Ukraine and the EU and even Ukraine and the Baltic states, as well as for the respective perceptions about Russia in Ukraine. However, unlike those interviewed in 2017, youth interviewees in 2020 are less certain in the irreversibility of this change and are more concerned about the dynamics of political processes.

Conclusions

By comparing the two sets of interviews held at different times albeit with a similar focus on the EU-Ukraine cooperation, this paper reveals that certain trends in Ukrainians’ perceptions of Russia remain unchanged. First, both groups of interviewees see Russia’s response to the Maidan revolution and Ukraine’s choice of the European vector as a crucial juncture in Ukraine-Russia relations. In this context, Russia is viewed as an aggressor, successor of the USSR and its illiberal policies, and the antipode of the EU. Meanwhile, Ukraine is seen as a country with European aspirations in need of assistance that looks up to the EU members (including post-Soviet Baltic states) as an example to follow.

Interesting is the perceived lack of agency by Ukraine and the EU as opposed to that of Russia, because agency is crucial for a change in a path dependence process. In Ukraine’s case, local elites place the responsibility for the change in Ukrainian attitudes completely on Russia. From their viewpoint, Russia’s aggressive response towards Ukraine’s European choice provoked a negative shift in public attitudes. Not only interviewees call this change a ‘turning point’, but even they indicate a series of ‘negative feedbacks’ that may reverse the change. These vary from structural and cultural constraints (rudiments of the Soviet past, shared political culture with Russia, family ties) to such policy-related factors as choices of Ukrainian elites, interests of EU member states, and the situation in the international arena.

Meanwhile, the perceptions of Russia differ even with regard to what constitutes Russia. For example, some interviewees differentiate between Russia as an enemy and Russia as a country where their relatives live, while

some associate Russian policies with the ‘Russian world’ — a much broader geopolitical and cultural concept that concerns the ‘Russian issue’ in the process of Ukraine’s self-identification. This means not only that Russia’s perceptions among Ukrainian elites vary, but also that the elites may concern Ukraine’s Europeanisation both as a political and/or a civilisational process.

The decisive role of the elites in determining this process is also hard to evaluate. While the choices of political elites seem to be important for public attitudes, Ukrainian youth are more pessimistic about this, particularly when concerning Ukraine’s potential rapprochement with Russia. When contrasted to the results of the recent public opinion polls, this reveals a potential gap either between Ukrainian elites and Ukrainian public or even a generational gap among Ukrainian elites — an issue that may be considered in the future studies.

In general, examining the change in public attitudes through the prism of path dependence requires knowledge of context and dynamics. This paper reveals that path-dependent choice should be evaluated against the counterplay between the positive and negative feedbacks it causes. As the above analysis demonstrates, the negative feedbacks in post-Maidan Ukraine have appeared and, with time, may change the dynamic of public attitudes towards Russia. Therefore, a seemingly definite change has largely concerned political processes rather than a deep ideational change. Meanwhile, the sources of the change remain another question for a research. While Ukrainian interviewees clearly see these sources as external (Russia), very few of them point to the EU’s public diplomacy and generational change as other factors that caused the change. Therefore, while this paper focused specifically on the dynamics of change post critical juncture, a longitude analysis of the context that produced the antecedent conditions may explain the causes behind the change better.

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Gintaras Šumskas

**PORTRAYING RUSSIA IN LITHUANIAN INTERNET MEDIA:
THE SUPPLY AND DEMAND SIDE**

Abstract

Based on the representation of Russia in the leading Lithuanian online media outlet, the article attempts to examine the structure of news demand. The images and main narratives of Russia constructed by the media are relatively easy to identify and analyse through quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Nevertheless, an even more important part of the reception or the demand side of the news content is more difficult to assess. Audience interest can be measured by examining the attributes of articles of greatest interest and endorsement. Article share statistics is utilized as an indicator of the interest of active readers. Comparing the selected characteristics of the most shared articles with the control group of the mainstream articles, the article investigates the difference between the thematic frames, sentiment and length of the pieces. The results demonstrate that audience demand attributes differ from the general supply of media texts. Readers tend to endorse less intellectually demanding texts. Trivia and non-political texts are shared more often by the audience than deeper analytical texts.

Keywords: Russia, communication, audience research, corpus analysis, framing.

Introduction: Communicating Russia: Message Inception

The average person is not directly familiar with world affairs and public policy but learns about them from the media. Media at the same time reflect the public reaction (reception) to the policies implemented. Therefore, the nature of public information in the media is important for both the opinion and for politics.¹

Historic memory studies demonstrate that the assessments of Russia and especially the period of the Soviet Union in Lithuania are salient and polarizing. Russia is traditionally perceived as a historical threat to the country's independence, and its perceptions are predominantly negative.²

¹ Soroka, Stuart, and Christopher Wlezien. "Tracking the Coverage of Public Policy in Mass Media." *Policy Studies Journal* 47, no. 2 (2019): 471-91. See also: Falck, Fabian, Julian Marstaller, Niklas Stoehr, Sören Maucher, Jeana Ren, Andreas Thalhammer, Achim Rettinger, and Rudi Studer. "Measuring Proximity between Newspapers and Political Parties: The Sentiment Political Compass [in Press]." *Policy & internet* (2019): poi3.222

² Snyder, Timothy. "Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939–1999." In *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, edited by Jan-Werner Müller, 39-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. See also: Lašas, Ainius, Irmina Matonytė, and Vaida Jankauskaitė. "Facing Past, Present, and Future: The Role of Historical Beliefs and

However, since 1990 after the restoration of independence, the perception of Russia's image in Lithuania has not been homogeneous. The first decade of independence 1990-2000 was a kind of honeymoon when under Boris Yeltsin Russian political regime was mostly treated neutrally and positively. After Putin came to power, Russia's ratings deteriorated. Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 has affected the country's assessments negatively. Aggression against Ukraine in 2014 further aggravated negative assessments of Russia in Lithuania. The level of hostility was topped by former Lithuanian former President Dalia Grybauskaitė who officially called Russia a terrorist state: "If a terrorist state that is engaged in open aggression against its neighbour is not stopped, then that aggression might spread further into Europe."³ Attitudes and opinions have changed little since that period. Public opinion polls show that Russia is considered a threat to Lithuania. The role of the media in shaping perceptions goes along with politics. Major news channels largely reflect the political mainstream, with almost no variance among the lead outlets (including TV, papers, internet outlets).⁴

Media tone in depiction of Russia in Lithuanian news sources corresponds with the securitization theory concept. Janušauskienė et al. (2017), in their analysis the portrayal of Russia in the Internet media, reveal the importance of threat and security topics, many with references to the situation in Ukraine, the attribution of the threat to the whole region, and the importance of international partners such as the EU and NATO allies.⁵

Haas (2009) argues that media can be an intermediary for the speech act which helps to convince the audience about the necessity to take extraordinary measures to meet a threat. The success or failure of the speech act, therefore, depends on the way in which it is reported, that is, whether the media support the securitising move or not.⁶ Côté (2016) goes even further stressing out the importance of audience engagement arguing that the

Experiences in the Lithuanian Public Perception of Military Threats." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2020/04/02 2020): 199-221.

³ The Baltic Times, Lithuania President calls Russia 'terrorist state', 2014-11-20, Rayyan Sabet-Parry, <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/35799/>, access date: May 21th, 2020.

⁴ Gintaras, Šumskas, and Matonytė Irmina. "Impact of the Mass Media on the Assessment of Military Threats". *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 16, no. 1 (2018): 425-54.

⁵ Janušauskienė, Diana, Eglė Vileikienė, Laima Nevinskaitė, and Ingrida Gečienė-Janulionė. *Ar Lietuvos Gyventojai Jaučiasi Saugūs? Subjektyvus Saugumas Kintančiame Geopolitiniame Kontekste* [in Lithuanian]. Vilnius: Lietuvos Socialinių Tyrimų Centras, 2017.

⁶ Hass, Rabea. "The Role of Media in Conflict and Their Influence on Securitisation." *The International Spectator* 44, no. 4 (2009/12/01 2009): p.84.

audience reception and adoption are crucial for the completion of securitization act.⁷

Based on the Lithuanian internet media case study, the article examines the main narratives depicting Russia, its contents and audience reception mechanism. The volume of media narratives and frames (referred to as the supply side) is estimated against the audience attention and engagement measured by article shares statistic (the demand side). The analysis employs several analysis levels. The initial aggregated text corpus-based analysis helped to reveal the main narratives and trends within the information flow. Both the main text bodies and the headlines analysis produced a rather one-sided negative picture of Russia. Russia is mostly associated with aggression, violations of the law and other negative information. Does this supply-side really meet the needs of the audience? Further content analysis of the most shared articles (which implies the most attention) revealed the incongruencies among the most mainstream media-driven topics are not necessarily the most readable and popular.

Theoretical Framework: Reception Issues

It is not the message transmission, but the issue of the message reception by the audience that raises the most concerns. The position of the political elite and the media is explicitly manifested and can be assessed relatively easy. However, reception of media messages is more difficult to operationalize and measure. Simple criteria for selecting articles can be very arbitrary. The average reader would probably be reluctant to read attention- and time-demanding long research reports and journal articles.⁸ Perception problems also should not be ignored since the receivers of mediated and verbal and visual messages often get something completely different out of a message than that the sender intended to communicate.⁹ Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2019) employ the term “stickiness” while developing the concept of strategic narratives and looking for answers to the question of why some elite and media narratives are better accepted by audiences, while others are ignored and rejected. Audience reception (or demand side) was measured with a q-methodology that combines both qualitative and

⁷ Côté, Adam. “Agents without Agency Assessing the Role of the Audience in Securitization Theory.” *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 6 (2016): 541-58.

⁸ Tang, Chris, and Gabriella Rundblad. “When Safe Means ‘Dangerous’: A Corpus Investigation of Risk Communication in the Media.” *Applied Linguistics* 38, no. 5 (2015): 671.

⁹ Schroder, Kim Christian. “Media Discourse Analysis: Researching Cultural Meanings from Inception to Reception.” *Textual Cultures* 2, no. 2 (2007): 77-99.

quantitative attributes.¹⁰ The above-mentioned studies provided excellent insights on the justifications why some strategic narratives are better accepted than others. Those studies focused on narratives incepted by political elites while leaving behind the “mainstream” information flow and potential rationales why audience tend to choose particular media stories. Based on Schudson’s (1998) concept,¹¹ Zaller (2003) introduces the notion of the “monitorial citizen” which is different from that of the informed citizen. The monitorial citizen is less interested in gathering and systematizing information, but more in the surveillance role. The audience should not necessary follow (and engage) in the leading media narratives in order to be aware of the situation. According to the author, most people do not need to proactively seek out information, but that does not mean they will be inactive all the time.¹²

Is actual and active interest of the audience required at all? Soroka and Wlezien (2019) introduced the concept of thermostatic responsiveness which states that the audience basically does not need much information about politics and everything that is needed can already be found in the mass media. The public reacts to policy changes similarly to thermostatic process, adjusting their preferences for more policy downward (upward) when policy increases (decreases). The authors suggest that “broad shifts in policy may be captured in news content, that citizens may thus be able to learn relatively easily about the general direction (and magnitude) of policy change, and that this allows for effective thermostatic responsiveness.”¹³ Moreover, next to the questionable need to be (not) informed, the issue of information fatigue is addressed. According to Moeller (1999), due to the massive and almost repetitive coverage, many people may have experienced some sort of *compassion fatigue*.¹⁴ The authors argue that extensive coverage of the certain topics (information hypes) might have quite an opposite effect on

¹⁰ Miskimmon, Alister, and Ben O’Loughlin. “Narratives of the Eu in Israel/Palestine: Narrative “Stickiness” and the Formation of Expectations.” *European Security* 28, no. 3 (2019/07/03 2019): 268-83. and Roselle, Laura, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O’Loughlin. “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power.” *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 70-84.

¹¹ Schudson, Michael. *The Good Citizen : A History of American Civic Life* [in English]. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1998.

¹² Zaller, John. “A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen.” *Political Communication* 20, no. 2 (2003): 109-30.

¹³ Soroka, Stuart, and Christopher Wlezien. “Tracking the Coverage of Public Policy in Mass Media.” *Policy Studies Journal* 47, no. 2 (2019): 471-472.

¹⁴ Moeller, Susan D. *Compassion Fatigue : How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*. New York; London: Routledge, 1999.

audience attention: “It was too intense; we lose interest and get bored of it all.”¹⁵

The motives why the audience opts to read and endorse certain topics remain in the black box which needs further research. This paper attempts to assess the congruence between the media framed image and the perceived image of Russia. Through analysing the sample of the most shared (endorsed) news stories against the randomly selected control sample, various article attributes are compared, namely *topics*, *sources* and *sentiments*.

Methods

Methodological considerations

Several methodological approaches are competing while processing and analysing big volumes of textual data. More technologically advanced and computer contingent linguistic *corpus* analysis relies on the semi-automated or automated keyword processing.¹⁶ For large text collections, only the second approach is feasible. Some authors present the evidence that automatic keyword search and assignment based on naive Bayesian learning algorithm can be even more efficient and accurate than the manual keyword assignment method. In large text corpus, word frequency and proximity analysis are not inferior to traditional keyword analysis.¹⁷ Although this approach has obvious limitations in tackling subtle meanings and links in texts, experiments with checking its results against human coding show over 90 percent accuracy under some conditions.¹⁸ Automated programme analysis of the corpus facilitates quantitative research, for example, to search

¹⁵ Beyer, Audun, and Tine Ustad Figenschou. “Media Hypes and Public Opinion. Human Interest Frames and Hype Fatigue.” In *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, edited by Peter Vasterman, p. 260: Amsterdam University Press, 2018.

¹⁶ Smith, Nicholas, Sebastian Hoffmann, and Paul Rayson. “Corpus Tools and Methods, Today and Tomorrow: Incorporating Linguists’ Manual Annotations.” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 23, no. 2 (2008): 163-80.

¹⁷ Conway, Mike. “Mining a Corpus of Biographical Texts Using Keywords.” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 25, no. 1 (2009): 23-35. See also: Duguid, Alison. “Newspaper Discourse Informalisation: a Diachronic Comparison from Keywords.” In *Modern Diachronic Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies*, edited by Alan Partington. Corpora Volume 5, Number 2, p.114.: Edinburgh University Press, 2010

¹⁸ Koltsova, Olessia, and Sergei Koltcov. “Mapping the Public Agenda with Topic Modeling: The Case of the Russian Livejournal.” *Policy & Internet* 5, no. 2 (2013): 212-13.

for the most frequent words. However, in-depth analysis and interpretation require both quantitative and qualitative methods.¹⁹

Modern corpus analysis tools offer a wide range of functions that greatly facilitate linguistic analysis of large volumes of authentic language data (frequency distribution, collocates, context analysis, etc.). However, these tools are usually not able to satisfy the fundamental need to add interpretive information to a wide variety of quantitative analysis toolbox. Adding contextual and discursive and other qualitative inputs next to the quantitative queries are necessary for a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon being studied.²⁰

This study combines both automated and manual ways to handle keywords. Whereas the analysis deals with the relatively big linguistic corpus (unique words volume N= 2,379,721), the primary aggregate explorative assessment is based on solely automated process such as text concordance and keyword collocation study. Therefore, quantitative parameters of articles related to Russia provides only one-sided (supply side) information about the dissemination of narratives. To investigate the information reception (demand side), one of the engagement criteria was used - the number of article shares. This criterion was chosen as one of the indicators of deeper involvement or interest. It means not only the number of passive reads but also the proactive dissemination of information in the person's social circle. The following analysis which includes audience involvement was based on smaller samples (N=139 most shared articles and N=300 for control group) which allows a closer look at the data and overcoming some obvious limitations of the big data approach. Manual keyword selection and topic coding still allows more nuanced context understanding and isolating irrelevant “noisy” data fragments.

Sampling and text corpus processing

Sample frame. Internet media outlet *Delfi.lt* is the leader of online media in Lithuania and all Baltic States. This news channel is appropriate for media

¹⁹ O'Halloran, Kieran. “Investigating Argumentation in Reading Groups: Combining Manual Qualitative Coding and Automated Corpus Analysis Tools.” *Applied Linguistics* 32, no. 2 (2010): 172-96.

²⁰ Conway, Mike. “Mining a Corpus of Biographical Texts Using Keywords.” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 25, no. 1 (2009): 23-35.

analysis, as it not only creates its content, but also functions as a kind of media hub, publishing selected information from other media (local and central).²¹

Sample size and selection criteria. The initial sample covered 2019 January - 2020 February period. The selection criteria were articles which contained keywords: Russia, Russian. According to the selected criteria, the search returned 4669 news texts matching the search parameters. To select the most focused articles, the share (the number of shares) indicator was selected as it well reflects person's interest and engagement. The selected threshold for including into the analysis was 300 shares. 139 articles met the selection criteria and this sample was used for further analysis. A control (benchmark) sample of 300 randomly selected articles also is included into analysis to crosscheck whether these texts of greatest interest differed and in the overall context.

Corpus file: Automated content analysis (computer-assisted content analysis) employed the aggregated text corpus with 2,379,721 words (additional articles heading corpus contained 59,274 words). Prior to the analysis, the text corpus was automatically translated into English. Then the text was pre-processed by removing the most common word forms (or stop-words such as articles) and lemmatized to reduce the variation of word forms for the further analysis.²²

Variable selection. The quantitative content analysis includes a thematic framework, sentiment, and geographical and engagement indicators.

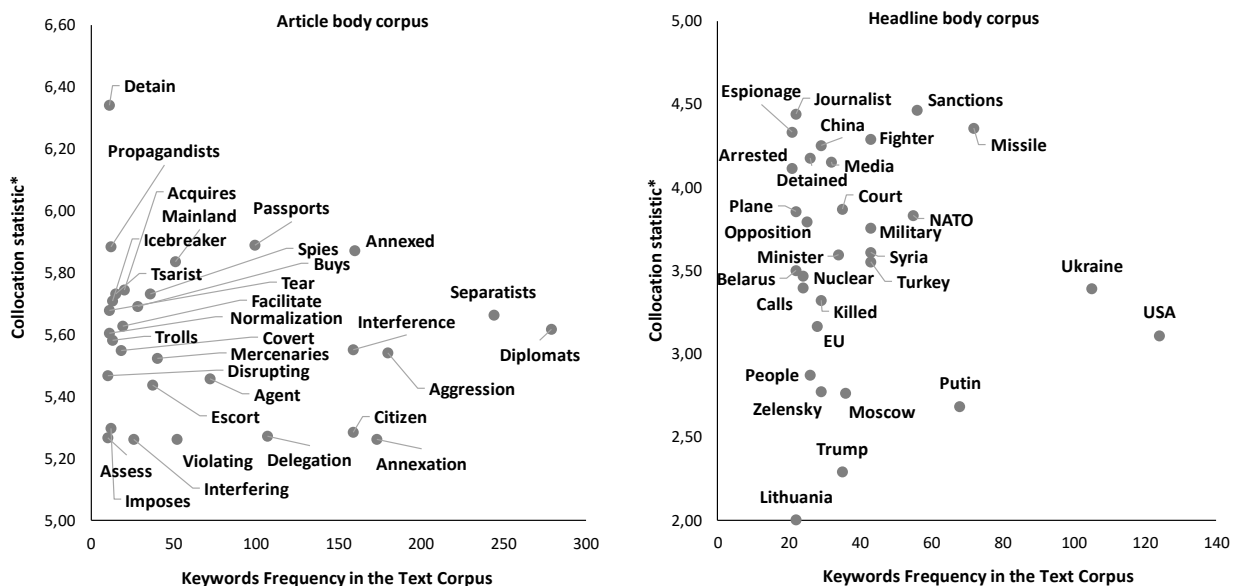
²¹ According to Gemius Audience, in 2019 Delfi.lt attracted twice as many audience attentions as its nearest competitors. Comparing the time spent on Internet news outlets, Delfi.lt takes 29.95%, 15min.lt - 14.95%, Lrytas.lt - 15.68%. <https://rating.gemius.com/lt/tree/59>, accessed on July 12th, 2020.

²² Lucas, Christopher, Richard A. Nielsen, Margaret E. Roberts, Brandon M. Stewart, Alex Storer, and Dustin Tingley. "Computer-Assisted Text Analysis for Comparative Politics." *Political Analysis* 23, no. 2 (2015): 254-77.

overall picture of the thematic frames, but a deeper understanding of the problem requires additional study. In any language, words are not isolated entities. Collocation analysis allows evaluating how words occur in relation to each other (within close proximity).

Corpus-based collocation (proximity) textual analysis helps to reveal the context of the narratives and main thematic frames. Collocation data provides greater insight into ways in which languages are being represented (or not) within sites identified through rate of recurrence and statistical significance.²³ Targeted keywords Russia/Russian most frequently appear in close proximity with words which have negative connotations. Out of the top 30 most associated keywords in the article corpus, two thirds (19) had a negative overtone. Most of them were attributed to various realms of hostile politics: information warfare (e.g. propagandists, trolls, interfering, agent), overt aggression²⁴ (e.g. annexed, aggression, interfering, violating, mercenaries, tear, separatist) and espionage (e.g. agent, spies, covert) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Most prominent collocates with the keywords *Russia / Russian* in article body and headline corpus (body corpus N= 2,379,721, heading corpus N=59,274)



* Mutual information (MI) statistic. It is a measure of the strength of association between words. This text corpus contains 2,379,721 total

²³ Vessey, Rachelle. “Corpus Approaches to Language Ideology.” *Applied Linguistics* 38, no. 3 (2015): 277-96.

²⁴ Majority of these articles can be attributed to the aggression against Ukraine. Small proportion concerns Russian role in the Syrian conflict.

words and 48,020 unique word forms. The article heading corpus has 59,274 total words and 6,664 unique word forms.

Analysing headlines proves to be a good down-sampling option to reduce large news corpora to a workable amount of data. However, the practical sampling frame consideration is not the only purpose to opt for the headline analysis. Headlines function to frame the event, summarize the story, and attract readers.²⁵ Applying the same collocation strength assessment to the article headlines' corpus returns quite similar results. The overall proportion of negative context words in the nearest proximity to target keywords (Russia / Russian) is smaller in comparison with article body corpus - 8 out of the top 30 collocates had a negative connotation. Given the specificity of the heading genre to include basic information about the storyline, main actors, geographical context and the outcome, this proportion is also significant. If we do not take into consideration geographic vectors and actor names (13 items in top 30 collocates), the part of negative context keywords becomes even more substantial.

Sentiment analysis

Subsequent sentiment analysis in the target group with the most readership endorsement and the control group also showed a predominant negative context. More than half of the most shared articles related to Russia are negative (55%), with positive texts accounting for only 5% of the texts. (Figure 3) In the control group, the average proportion of negative texts is even higher (62%).

Figure 3: Articles by sentiment among the most shared articles group (N=139)



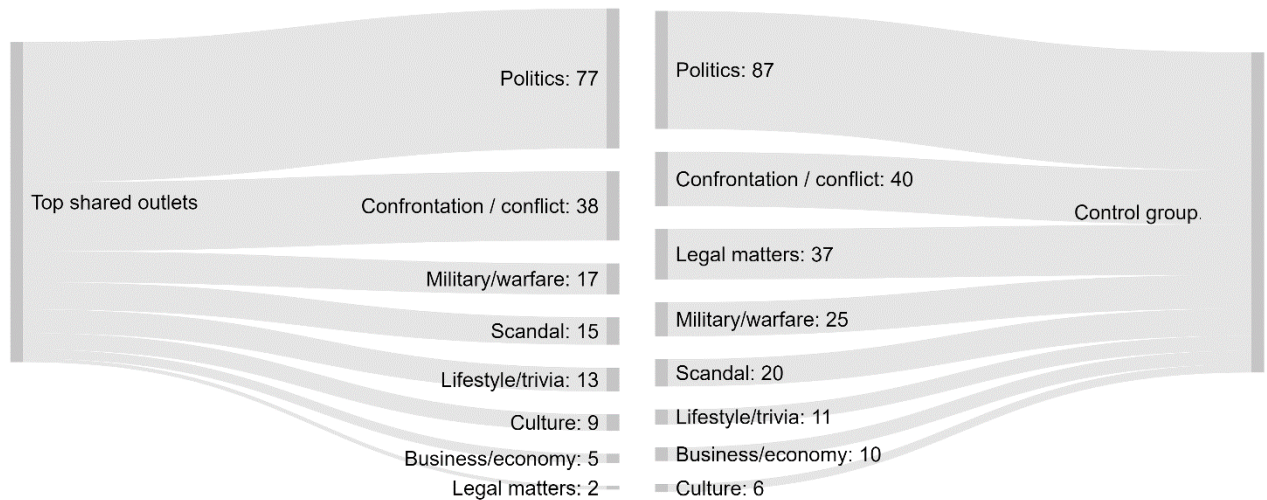
²⁵ Haider, Ahmad S, and Riyad F Hussein. "Analysing Headlines as a Way of Downsizing News Corpora: Evidence from an Arabic–English Comparable Corpus of Newspaper Articles." *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2019).

Thematic frames

Politics is a lead topic within the most shared articles sample (77%). A very important part consists of articles analysing conflict situations (international or diplomatic conflicts and Russia's role in them - 38%). As many as 17% of the texts relate to topics that directly analyse military topics.

Control group statistics show slightly different trends. In the general population of texts, politics occupies as much as 87%. Along with politics, articles related to law/justice stand out in the very general mass of texts - 37% (among the most popular articles there are only 2% of them), military-related texts - 25% (among the most popular there are 17%) (Figure 4). This again shows that easy reading content is more popular than specialized analytical texts.

Figure 4. The most shared articles and control group articles by topic (Top shares N=139; control group N=300)



Although most of the articles relate to political topics, the data from the shares shows that politics is not the most attractive and engaging topic for readers. Everyday tabloid-style texts receive twice as much attention as serious analytical texts. Scandalous information (both serious and trivia texts) is also shared much more frequently (Figure 5).

Figure 5 The most shared articles by topic and length (N=139)

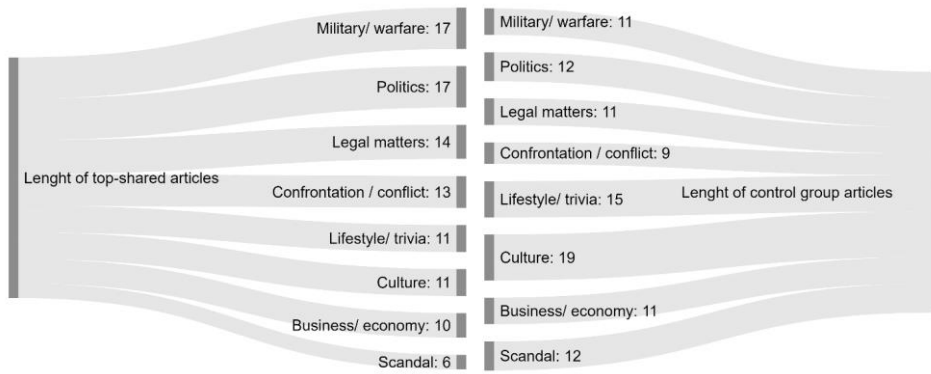


* number of occurrences normalized (sum 100)

	Military/ warfare	Politics	Legal matters	Confront ation/ Conflict	Lifestyle/ trivia	Culture	Business/ economy	Scandal
Text length (average characters)	8015	7979	6404	5862	5228	5084	4562	2971
Average share count	434	685	559	664	1634	1117	624	1107

The length of articles in the target group (the top shared) differs significantly from the general context. Compared to the control group, the volume of the most shared texts is larger for almost all topics. On political, military, legal and conflict-related topics, the average length of texts is almost twice as big. In only two areas (culture and scandalous topics) are the lengths of the texts of the most popular articles lower than those of the control group. An interesting trend is observed, which allows us to assume several significant segments of the media audience. The first type, conditionally called *easy readers*, are mostly interested in, and share everyday topics (lifestyle, culture/society, scandals) and, in a sense, avoid longer texts. The second type of *sophisticated readers* are engaged in longer, more detailed analytical texts. The intensity of text sharing in this group is on average lower than the involvement in information dissemination among *easy readers*. (Figure 6)

Figure 6: Articles by topic and length. Most shared and control groups compared (Top shares N=139; control group N=300)



* number of occurrences normalized (sum 100)

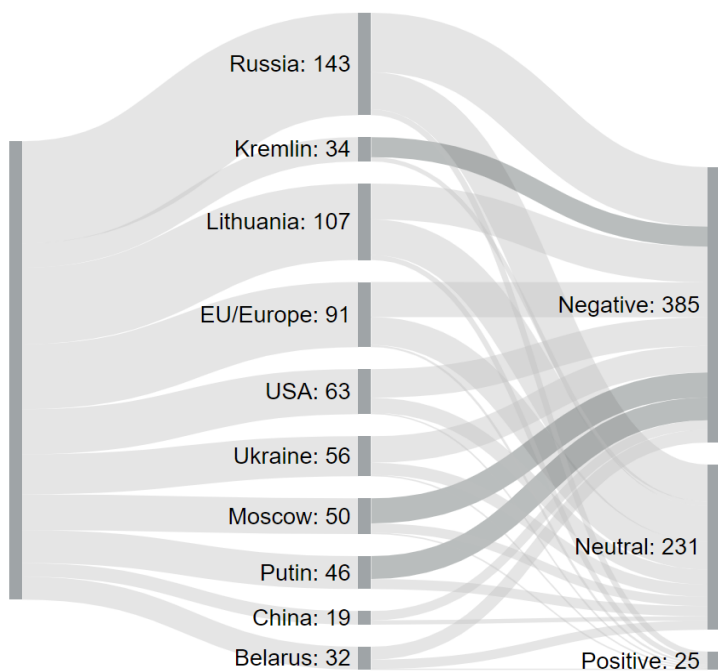
	Military/ warfare	Politics	Legal matters	Confront ation / conflict	Lifestyle / trivia	Culture	Business economy	Scandal
Top shared articles	8015	7979	6404	5862	5228	5084	4562	2971
Control group	3475	3910	3574	2965	4939	6092	3665	3797

Shares and sentiments

The most frequent negative texts related to Russia also include China (a growing trend in recent years), Ukraine, and the US. Ukraine and the US are usually portrayed very positively in the Lithuanian media discourse, but in connection with Russian framework²⁶ they find themselves in a negative context. Neutral texts related to Russia are usually limited to a single keyword: Russia. Interestingly, negative texts almost always include synonyms to the keywords “Russia/Russian”: Kremlin (most negative connotations), Moscow and/or Putin. This shows that when depicting Russia in a negative context, the media seek to define the image of the negative actor clearly—it is the government and the centres of power, not the Russia the country or its citizens. Articles related to Europe, neighbouring Belarus, or Lithuania itself (the local hook will be described later) are relatively the more neutral. (Figure 7).

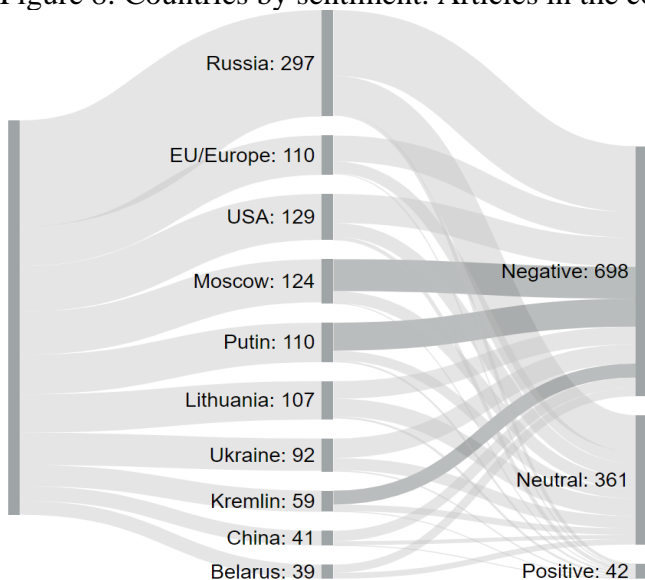
²⁶ Cumulative references to the following keywords: Russia, Russian, Putin, Kremlin, Moscow.

Figure 7: Countries by sentiment. Top shared articles (N=139)



The overall proportion of negative-positive articles related to Russia in the control group does not differ from the sample of the most popular articles (the proportion of negative items in both samples is about 60%). The distribution of positive and negative items in the context of these countries is also very close in both cases. Putin, Moscow, Kremlin (political power centres) in the control group are also more often associated with negative text sentiment compared to the keyword “Russia” (Figure 8).

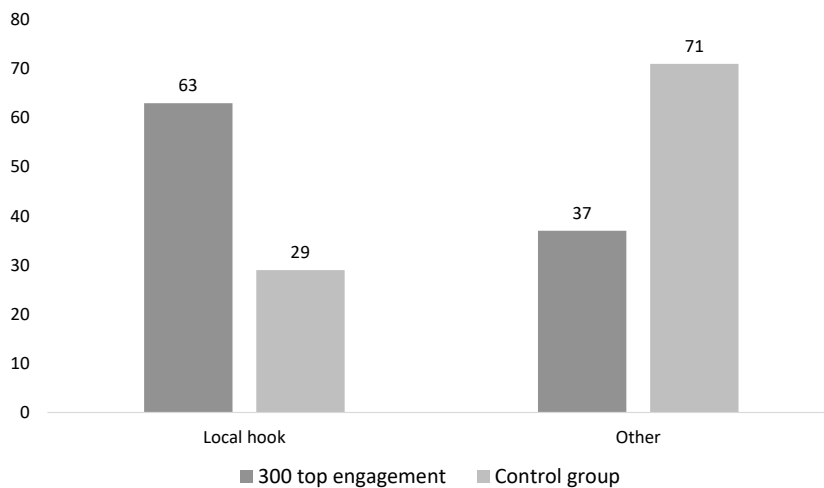
Figure 8: Countries by sentiment. Articles in the control group (N=300)



Local context

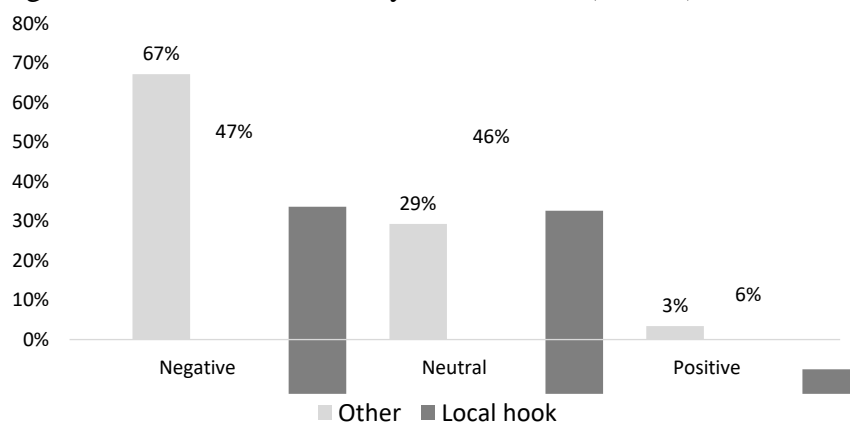
The analysis results suggest that ‘local hook’ is without a doubt one of the key factors in attracting readers’ interest and engagement. Two-thirds (63%) of the most shared articles in Lithuanian online media had a ‘local hook’ (Figure 9). In the control group, local context was present in only 37% of the texts. This suggests that Russia is an intrinsic part of Lithuania's foreign policy agenda, which is why it is receiving more attention and analysis in the context of local politics and current affairs.

Figure 9: Local hook in proportions (%) in most shared and control samples (N=139)



Media texts including related to the local context also bear more neutral sentiment. The proportion of negative and neutral sentiments among the articles with the ‘local hook’ is nearly equal, while articles without any relation to local contexts tend to be more negative (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Article sentiments by local context (N=139)

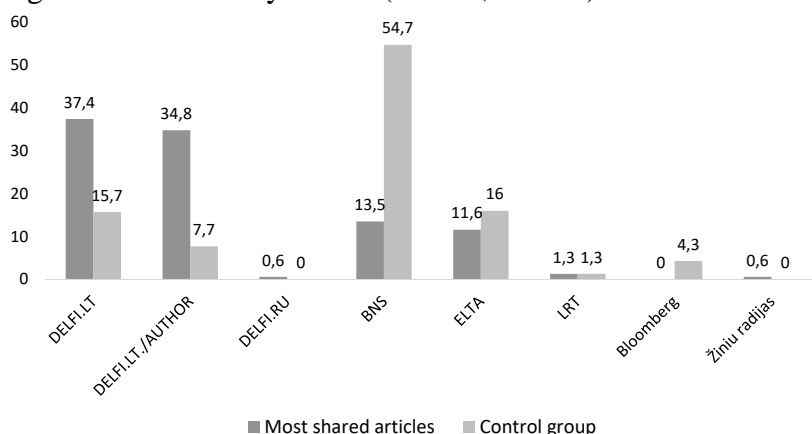


Sources

There is a clear trend that outlet-owned (DELFI) production is predominant (37%) among the most shared articles, while the lion's share of the general volume of articles is produced by the local news agency BNS (55%). Analytical texts especially stand out among the mostly shared segment, as they account for 35% (only 8% in the control group).

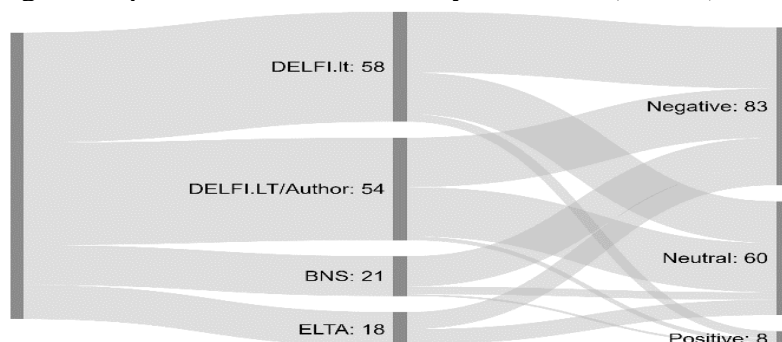
There is a tendency for many Russia-related texts to be produced by an external news agency, however it does not guarantee the leadership in reader's interest. In contrast to very "generic" (the agency focuses on the fact reporting only) news agency production, authored, more detailed and analytical articles receive more interest and engagement. (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Articles by source (N=155, N=300)



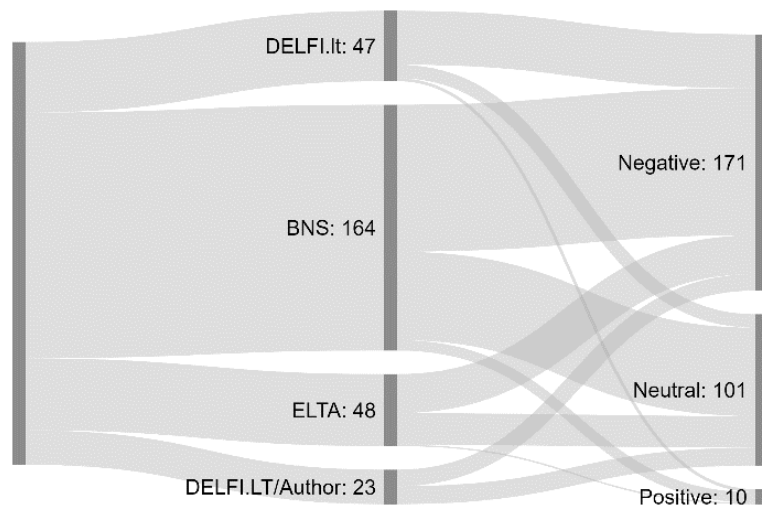
In the group of top shares, it is observed that the content of texts prepared by the outlet (with acknowledged authorship and unacknowledged) is evenly distributed between negative and neutral assessments. Negative sentiment is prevalent in the news stories sourced from news agencies, especially BNS. Yet, news agency reports lag behind Delfi's texts in popularity (Figure 12).

Fig. 12 Top shared article sources by sentiment (N=139)



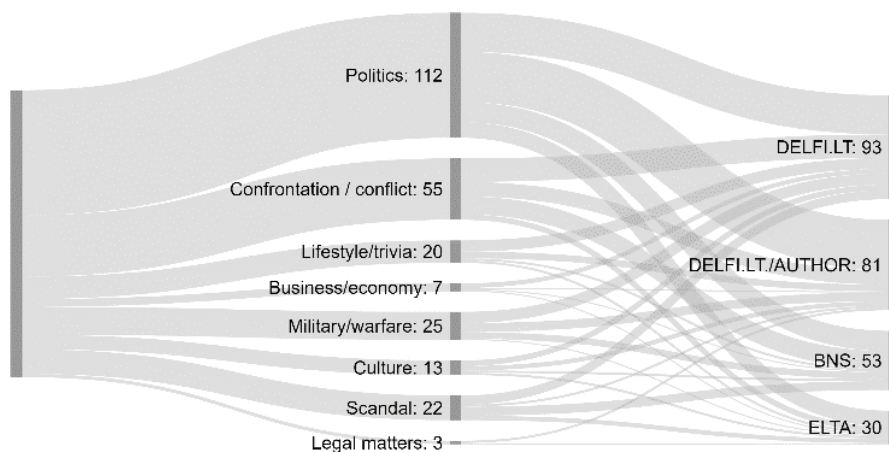
In the control group, we observe very interesting trends. Here, Delfi.lt production, in contrast with the group of the most shared texts, is predominantly negative. The largest news provider BNS with approximate negative-neutral text proportions occupy more moderate positions here (Figure 13). It suggests that readers choose more neutral articles from the more “militant” authors of Delphi.

Figure 13: Control sample article sources by sentiment (N=300)



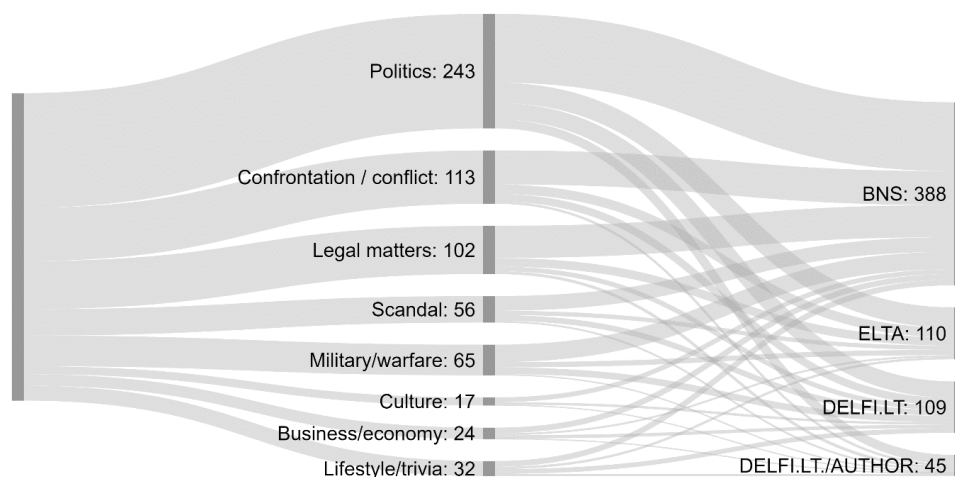
Key thematic frames in the top-shared group of articles do not differ from the total volume of articles. Political themes and the narrative of a conflict predominate in both groups are compared (Figures 14 and 15). However, in other thematic frames, it is observed that lifestyle/trivia texts are relatively popular among the top-shared articles (the demand side), although in the total volume of texts (supply side) they make up a relatively small proportion of all articles.

Figure 14. Top shared articles by source and thematic frames (N=139)



The control group also shows a relative abundance of texts related to law and legal matters, although according to the popularity-sharing statistics they elicit the least interest. Supply in this area far exceeds demand (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Control sample articles by source and thematic frames (N=300)



Concluding Remarks: Is the Balance Between Information Supply and Demand Relevant?

The study revealed a clear incongruence among the internet media content supply and actual reader demand. In depicting Russia, politics, military frames although sufficiently engaging the audience (shares), are far more frequent in the general sample. Texts with a legal topic are quite common in the general sample, but they are completely unpopular (shared very rarely). Easy reading content including articles on culture and tabloid-style texts are more popular than specialized analytical texts.

It is evident that *easy topics* attract more reader's attention and engagement, consequently the strategic narratives "wrapped up" in the general and neutral context potentially would be better accepted by audience. Another factor attracting audience attention is local hook. Articles involving local context in the narrative get more readers' attention and engagement.

Is the media missing the target? Despite the incongruencies between the message supply and demand, the audience accepts the message, at least in the case of securitization. Russia is mostly represented as a negative actor. While analysing text sentiments, the results indicated that among the most

shared (demanded) articles as well as in the general volume of articles (supply side) the negative context is highly predominant. In most cases, Russia-related keywords appear in close proximity with the words which have negative connotations. This relation especially becomes evident in the articles mentioning Putin, the Kremlin and Moscow. This suggests that when depicting Russia in a negative context, the media seek to define the image of the negative actor clearly - it is the government and the centres of power, not the Russia itself or its citizens.

The case study of the Lithuanian leading news provider demonstrated that the main messages disseminated by the media do not necessarily attract readers' attention and active involvement through message sharing. The evidence on audience (dis) interest fits the general idea of passive audience involvement (Zaller's 2003 concept on "monitorial" citizen). The public does not necessarily need to be actively engaged in systematic news gathering and analysis in order to be informed. Therefore, the question about how the actual government policies could be transferred and understood (necessary conditions of democratic participation) by the media-inattentive public remains unanswered and requires additional audience perception analysis.

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Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska, Anatoliy Chaban

**VISUAL AND EMOTIVE: RUSSIAN E-NEWS COVERAGE
OF EU-UKRAINE AGREEMENT ON UKRAINE'S VISA-FREE
ENTRY INTO THE SCHENGEN ZONE**

Abstract

This article contributes to the burgeoning field of the study of emotions in politics. Admitting the difficulty to assess emotions directly, we track emotions through verbal and visual representations available in political narratives, and media narratives in particular. In our focus are visual images (cartoons and photographs) contributing to the Russian media narratives on Ukraine. Our research case deals with the coverage of EU-Ukraine agreement on Ukraine's visa-free entry to the Schengen zone by the Russian popular e-news portals in 2017 (sample of 108 visual images). We question potential influence of emotive messaging on long-lasting perceptions of Ukraine in Russia in the context of the ongoing conflict and employ the image continuum of 'difference' – 'otherness' – 'enmity' to understand the particular link between emotions and othering. We find visual imagery demarcates the boundaries between the Russian Self and Ukrainian Otherness, and risks long-lasting effects on perceptions and understandings, which will continue to feed into diagnosis of the ongoing conflict, and to influence the behaviour and relations around it.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, the European Union (EU), visa-free entry to the Schengen zone, visual images, emotions

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed the 'emotional turn' in international relations (IR) scholarship (Crawford, 2000; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008; Wolf, 2011; Brader and Marcus, 2013; Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014; Clement and Sangar, 2018 among others), where previously emotions were in the periphery of scholarly attention. In his comment on the lack of interest in emotions in IR, social psychologist Siamak Movahedi (1986, pp. 1-2) observed that the predominant reluctance to "acknowledge the significant role of social-psychological, cultural and ideological forces in the daily conduct of international affairs" was due to a particular pre-set vision of foreign policy – as a "rational-bureaucratic and strategic process." The 'emotional turn' in IR resonates with the theory of political images and perceptions that traditionally stresses the central role played by the emotive/affective image element, on par with cognitive and

normative/evaluative elements (see the works by Boulding, 1969; Hopmann 1996), and specifically in political communication of such images. The study of emotions in politics, as an exponentially growing field, agrees that it is almost impossible to assess emotions directly. That is why in most instances researchers track emotions through verbal and visual representations available in political narratives, media narratives in particular. Exploration of their visual plane has become the latest addition to IR studies (Bleiker, 2009; Hansen, 2015; de Buitrago, 2018; Pshenychnykh, 2019). In line with the most recent trends in IR research, we focus on politically relevant images tailored by media narratives, and explore emotions projected through photographs and political cartoons published by leading Russian e-news platforms when depicting Ukraine after the EU granted it visa-free entry to the Schengen area in 2017. We question potential influence of emotive messaging on long-lasting perceptions of Ukraine in Russia in the context of the ongoing conflict.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, as well as the rapprochement of Ukraine towards the West, especially the European Union (EU), challenges Russia's regional leadership visions and respective foreign policies. The visa-free travel for Ukraine was yet another affront to Russia's foreign policy within the Russian-Ukraine conflict since the Euro-Maidan movement in 2013. It demonstrated the next step in cementing personal encounters of Ukrainian citizens with Western socio-political norms, values and the way of life. It also indicated the priority the EU assigns to Ukraine (Russia attempted to negotiate no-visa entry to the Schengen area for its citizens, yet after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, these negotiations have been frozen indefinitely). Perhaps more importantly, Ukraine's growing closeness with the EU/the West is sensitive for Russia's psyche and national identity. For Russia, the ever-contesting West is a historical narrative. Western empires challenged the Russian Empire throughout centuries, and the West opposed the USSR in the Cold War era. After the collapse of the USSR, the EU's Neighbourhood Policy (first outlined in 2003) and especially its Eastern Partnership framework (initiated in 2009) indicated to Russia Europe's advance into geopolitical areas traditionally within Russia's influence and control. In the eyes of official Russian narrators, by turning to the West, Ukraine – formerly a member of the Soviet 'family' – ultimately betrayed Russia and set a dangerous precedent for other post-Soviet states as well as many nations that build the Russian Federation.

One of the factors that can endow emotions with political relevance is their projection vis-à-vis identity (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014). For Janet

Holland (2014, p.203), national identity requires the production of difference, and this process may also include the “creation of otherness.” The nation state level could be used to amplify and intensify emotions towards other states (Wolf, 2011, p.11), including negative emotions that may lead to the extreme images of “otherness” – the enemy. Chaban, Zhabotynska and Knodt (2019a,b), who studied Russian e-news portals in their textual framing of Ukraine’s visa-free entry to the Schengen area, concluded that emotive messages conveyed through the narrator’s attitudes rendered the image of Ukraine at the end of the transition process from ‘difference’ to ‘otherness’. Yet, according to the findings, the intensity and range of emotions conveyed by the media texts did not move the image of Ukraine towards the image of the ultimate ‘enmity’ at the extreme end of the image continuum of otherness. In this article, we ask if and how visual images (cartoons and photographs) contribute to the Russian media narratives on Ukraine and position it within the image continuum of ‘difference’ – ‘otherness’ – ‘enmity’. According to de Buitrago (2018, p.307), “there is little research on the particular link between emotions and othering,” and our study addresses this scholarly deficit.

Attention to visual images allows for triangulation of the new findings against our previous research into textual emotive portrayals of Ukraine gaining visa-free access to the Schengen area (Chaban et al., 2019a,b). Relevant literature warns that research into emotions, and particularly into emotions in visual analysis, is challenged by researcher’s subjectivity. Triangulation is one powerful tool to counter this challenge, alongside a “systematic, theory-led method” (de Buitrago, 2018, p.305). In our research, such method is informed by the strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al., 2013) which maintains that the narrative has a potential to be strategic if it is able “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). To specify this definition, we previously argued that the distinctive properties of the strategic narrative include its firm grounding in historical and cultural contexts, its abundance in emotions-loaded narrative techniques, and its potential to entrench in the public consciousness due to multiple iterations of the intended ideas in verbal and visual representations (Chaban et al., 2019a,b). This article highlights the visual aspect as it integrates with the verbal aspect of the strategic narrative, so as to create emotive framing of the image. Therefore, this study offers one more conceptual innovation – visual elements in strategic narrative theorisation that remain an overlooked topic (for review see Pschenychnykh, 2019).

We start this article with a brief contextual section detailing the 2017 event of the EU granting Ukrainian citizens visa-free access to the Schengen area. We proceed with the presentation of our theoretical and methodological frameworks and then present the results of the empirical analysis of our sample of 108 visual images. We conclude with a discussion of the importance of visual means in political media discourse. We outline special role of emotions rendered by visual means in the formulation and projection of strategic narratives of ‘otherness’ and argue our contribution to the ‘emotional turn’ in IR which is intrinsically linked to tailoring strategic narratives indispensable for foreign policy making. Emotionalisation of visual imagery, working in consonance with the textual emotive means, contributes to the process of Ukraine’s ‘othering’ in the Russian political discourses. We conclude that visual imagery further demarcates the boundaries between the Russian Self and Ukrainian Otherness, and risks long-lasting effects on perceptions and understandings, which will continue to feed into diagnosis of the ongoing conflict, and to influence the behaviour and relations around it.

Historical contexts

According to the European Commission (2019), “visa liberalisation is one of the EU’s most powerful tools in facilitating people-to-people contacts and strengthening ties between the citizens of third countries and the EU.” The EU and Ukraine negotiated visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens into the Schengen area for almost a decade – between 2008 and 2017. According to Ukrinform (2018), the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) signed and ratified the agreement on the facilitation of visa issuance between Ukraine and the EU on January 15, 2008. A visa dialogue between Kyiv and Brussels started at the EU-Ukraine Summit in Paris on September 9, 2008. In 2010, the European Parliament adopted a resolution recognizing Ukraine’s right to join the EU and granted the European Commission a mandate to elaborate a “road map” on visa-free travel between Ukraine and the EU member countries. In April 2011, the President of Ukraine approved of the National Plan for the Implementation of Visa Liberalization. On April 6, 2017, the European Parliament confirmed the right of Ukrainian citizens to enter the EU without visas. Approved by the European Council on May 17, 2017, (the text of the decision was published on May 22, 2017), visa-free travel came into effect on June 11, 2017. According to the EU Delegation to Ukraine (cited by Ukrinform, 2018), “5,799,360 Ukrainians took advantage of visa-free travel to the EU in the first three months, namely from July 11

to September 11, 2017. Sixty-one people were denied entry.” Between June 2017 and January 2019, 2,000,000 Ukrainians used their right to enter the Schengen area without a visa (Unian, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Strategic narrative theory – a critical reinterpretation of the ‘soft’ power concept (Nye, 2007) in the age of globalization, global governance and new media – aims to explain how communication flow may serve an instrument in producing influence. Strategic narratives, intended to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p.2), have a life-cycle that includes phases of formulation, projection and reception. The theory also differentiates between three intertwined yet distinct levels of the system, identity and issue narratives. According to Chaban et al. (2019), the construct of the three levels helps to “addresses the intersecting visions of the Self and the Others critical in the study of images and perceptions in external relations.” Specifically, narratives about the international system outline how actors view the international order and the Self in relation to other powerful global players. Identity narratives focus on those norms and values (often linked to and interpreted in historical and cultural terms) that make the Self distinctly different (if not unique) from other actors. Narratives deployed by political actors with the intent to influence specific issues often highlight the theme of a range of capabilities and benefits the Self has vis-à-vis others in particular issue domains.

While research informed by the strategic narrative theory often purports to explain influence projected towards international actors, in this study we are interested in strategic narratives projected towards domestic audiences yet with a focus on external actors. In our case, these are narratives projected by the Russian popular e-news media towards their domestic audiences who are informed about the EU-Ukraine relations (i.e. visa-free access to the Schengen area granted to Ukrainian citizens by the EU). On a systemic level, this event triggers the necessity to produce narratives that have to rebuff the EU’s successful contestation of Russia in its geopolitical ‘neighborhood’ (or ‘near abroad’ in the Russian political parlance). These are also narratives that have to convince domestic audiences that Russia is not losing in the geopolitical competition to the West, and it makes sense for multiple nations that form the Russian Federation to stay within it. On the identity level, the considered narratives have to portray Russian values and norms as unique and superior to those of the EU and Ukraine that strives to Europeanize its

normative outlook and practices (for more discussion on the normative dialogue between Russia and the EU see (Headley, 2015a,b; 2018)). On the issue-specific level, the considered narratives have to convince that the Others – the EU and Ukraine in our case – perform with flaws on operation level, which questions rationality of Ukraine’s ‘European choice’. Arguably, narratives existing on the three intertwined levels provide means to structure the “possible interpretation of the world” (Movahedi, 1986,) among its target audiences. For Siamak Movahedi (1986), “the interpreted world involves elements of an action situation, including national interests and security as well as the intention, capability, and national characteristics of the other party, such as reliability, aggressiveness, and trustworthiness.”

We follow the social identity theory that argues that the construction of the Self-Other nexus is never emotion-free. Self-visions tend to be heavier on the positive side, while images of the Other are prone to acquire negative characteristics. This inherent bias stemming from the human’s strife for self-preservation is exploited for ideological purposes, with an ideological system – defined as a “system of basic beliefs” (Movahedi, 1986) – providing “grounds and rationale for certain foreign policy decisions” (ibid.). Relevant literature points to three positions in identity-emotion intersection instrumental for the existence of ideological systems (on the level of nation states): ‘difference’, ‘otherness’ and ‘enmity’. Anthony Smith (1991, p.9ff) proposed that national identity is about “describing political community with institutions, rights and duties in a historic and defined territory, with shared myths and memories, and a given way to comprehend and define the self.” Sybille de Boitrago (2018, p.304) follows this thought by stating that “a national identity is differentiated from something other in order to exist” and thus emphasising the role of difference. However, according to Janet Holland (2014, p.203), the production of difference may also include the creation of “otherness.” The process of othering, where a state frames another state as the key or radical Other, leads to Self-Other relations conceived from a negative point of view (Neumann, 1999). Ultimately, provided the process of othering is loaded with ample and intensive negative emotions, the Other may end with the image of an enemy (Wolff, 2011) – an antagonistic, hostile, harmful and potentially deadly opponent.

Here we stress that the analysed media are not the “oppositional voices” (the latter are not many in Russia), and the content of media narratives is similar to that of official (power) narratives. The difference is in their “language” (verbal and pictorial) which is less expressive (more diplomatic) in official narratives and more expressive in the media. Our previous inquiry

into the Russian mainstream media framing Ukraine's visa-free access to the Schengen area (Chaban et al. 2019a,b) demonstrated the weighting in evaluations and the share volume and frequency of negativity in verbal texts. The inquiry exposed solidifying the image of Ukraine as the Other, and moving Ukraine to the extreme in imagining the Other vs. the Self. We also concluded that the texts profiled only minimally positive images of Ukraine and its actors when "historical links in the past and shared culture between Russia and Ukraine were cited as common grounds" (Ibid.). In this study, we want to explore the contribution of visual imagery to the emotive load behind the process of Ukraine's othering in Russian opinion-making discourses. We predict that the emotionalisation of visual images will serve yet another powerful input into the shift of meanings assigned to Ukraine in the Russian media framing – from 'difference' to 'otherness' – echoing, amplifying and strengthening the textual framing. Our special attention will be on political cartoons and photographs. We ask how visual imagery complements the textual imagery we observed previously and adds to/intensifies the existing emotive framings to move the meanings assigned to Ukraine from distinct 'otherness' to 'enmity' exposed in a conflict. According to de Buitrago (2018, p.306), conflicts "allow for emotionalisation, in that they provide fertile ground and give room for emotionalising the contested issue(s) as well as self and other." Importantly, "emotionalising the situation and the involved issues and actors adds weight to the claims made" (de Buitrago 2018, p.306).

We conceptualise the resulting emotive framing of the Other as a key part of a complex architecture of factors that can make a narrative 'strategic', or aimed to influence the public outlook and behaviour (Miskimmon et al. 2013). These factors – the narrative's contextualization within a cultural and historical continuum shared by the communicants, the narrative's emotionalization through particular verbal descriptions, and the narrative's accentuation achieved through iteration of the key ideas that are to be entrenched in the public mentality (Chaban et al. 2019a,b) – are presumed to be relevant not only for verbal, but also for visual semiotic means. Although the strategic narrative theory has been tested in a great number of textual productions, the role of visuals remains under-researched. Visual element in the strategic narrative theorisation and testing has been increasingly argued as important and requiring an in-depth analysis (see Pschenychnykh, 2019 for its motivation). Our paper responds to this query with examination of cartoons and photographs integrated into media texts.

Method

In current IR scholarship, the so-called ‘visual turn’ is becoming a prominent trend that reflects on growing realisation that “visualisations in various forms [are] an integrated part of contemporary culture and everyday life” (Knoblauch et al., 2008, para 1). As Bocken (2005, p.24) aptly noted: “Pictures rule out our world. ... Anything that doesn’t appear as image has hardly any clout in culture and society.” A dramatic increase in “society’s use, production and transmission of visual forms of communication” (Knoblauch et al., 2008, para 2) has been echoed by increasingly widespread application of visual research methods throughout social sciences.

Operationalisations

One of the most challenging research issues is the question of how to approach visual data analysis. We are positioning our protocol within the interpretive social science tradition, using a qualitative approach within which methodologies “address the cultural meaning of visual data and relate to the ways in which actors themselves interpret visual data” (Knoblauch et al., 2008, para 3). Abundant relevant literature invites to consider a number of categories in the analysis of visual images. We prioritize literature that treats visual means as a tool to explicate the construction of the Self and Other in the observed discourses and convey emotively-loaded messages aimed to elicit emotive and affective responses. For example, Hughes (2007) attracted attention to how visual means are used for expression about the Self and Other and advocated to study how they render emotional amplification as well as intentions and motivations for actions. Andersen et al. (2015) invited to take note of the discourse regarding the behaviour of the other; assumed/interpreted motivations for specific behaviour; and character ascription made to the other.

Multimodal approaches – when the visual and verbal interact – remain under-researched in studies of visual imagery (Fahmy and Kim, 2008, as cited in Chaban et al., 2014). Our research contributes to the study of multimodality innovatively – via considering visual images within the entire narrative space instantiated verbally and visually. This narrative space features information understood as the narrative-based political concept (NBPC) (Zhabotynska, 2017a, p.32; Zhabotynska and Velivchenko, 2019, p.366). We maintain that within an NBPC, the information rendered verbally and visually displays thematic, emotive, and emphatic interaction. Importantly, there is a link between an NBPC and strategic narrative theory:

any narrative has content (it renders some homogeneous information) which is represented by an NBPC.

Thematically, a verbally rendered NBPC is hierarchically structured into domains divided into parcels that include thematic quanta generalising information which is provided by particular textual descriptions. This structure represents the NBPC's conceptual ontology (Zhabotynska, 2017a). We further argue that the information featured by the visual images integrated with the verbal texts has its own conceptual ontology mapped onto the ontology of verbal information in a specific way: it highlights the issues (actors and the constituent events) related either to a particular focus of the verbal ontology or to its several foci that have the same actors. Therefore, our analysis of the visual means representing the NBPC "Visa-free travel for Ukraine" includes exposure of their content and building its conceptual ontology mapped upon the respective ontology of the verbally rendered information (see Chaban et al., 2019a,b).

Emotive interaction of the verbally and visually rendered information has two interrelated aspects. First, it is the interplay of the verbal and visual information within an entire textual message. Second, it is the impact of the verbal information upon the visual one, due to which the latter acquires an implicit assessment. The interplay between verbal and visual homogeneous emotive connotations (neutral, positive or negative) has a number of potential options:

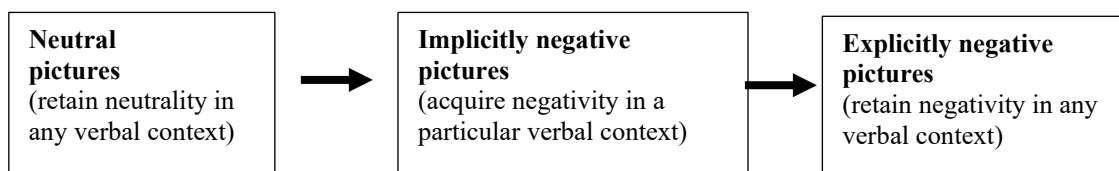
- (a) TEXT: neutral + PICTURE: neutral
- (b) TEXT: neutral + PICTURE: explicitly connoted
- (c) TEXT: explicitly connoted + PICTURE: neutral
- (d) TEXT: explicitly connoted + PICTURE: explicitly connoted

Option (a) suggests a neutral row of compatible visual and textual images, which is declared to be optimal for an objective reporting style. Meanwhile, emotion-free media messages are seldom. Our previous study of the verbal devices that instantiate the NBPC "Visa-free travel for Ukraine" in the Russian news media (Chaban et al., 2019a,b) demonstrated evident negative connotations in evaluations of Ukraine moving closer to the EU: out of 555 verbal descriptions of the NBPC, 241 were negative. According to the above interaction options, the visual accompaniment of these verbal narratives contributes to their content in two ways: explicitly negative visuals may amplify explicit negativity of the verbal text, as in (d), or explicitly negative visuals may attach negativity to a verbally neutral text, as in (b). In

the last case, the placement of the visual image adds a nuance to understanding of the intertextuality. A negatively connoted picture placed at the beginning of an emotionally neutral text may programme its further negative interpretation; and when placed in the middle or at the end of a neutral text, a negatively connoted picture may partially or entirely change its initial neutral perception.

Option (c), when a negatively connoted text includes a neutral picture, may have two outcomes of the text's interaction with this picture: depending on the visual content, the picture may either remain neutral (thus serving as a mere illustration of some verbally rendered issue) or it may obtain implicit negativity (that supports a similar assessment which is explicit in the verbal manifestations of the NBPC). Thus, the total body of visuals representing the NBPC "Visa-free travel for Ukraine" may be stratified within a tripartite evaluative continuum related to negativity: neutral pictures – implicitly negative pictures – explicitly negative pictures (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Evaluative continuum of the visual means in connoting negativity



We presume that the full length of the evaluative continuum (the presence of its three parts) exposed in thematically homogeneous pictures relates to the emphatic type of interaction between the verbal and visual representations of an NBPC. With regard to the NBPC "Visa-free travel for Ukraine," it means that the longer evaluative continuums shaped by the visual information correspond to the prominent thematic issues – the facts emphasized by numerous textual descriptions.

The thematic, emotive and emphatic interactions of information featured in an NBPC verbally and visually defines the resulting research procedure for the analysis of visuals portraying the NBPC "Visa-free travel for Ukraine." This procedure includes such steps: (1) thematic grouping of the visual means according to a conceptual ontology, which is matched with the respective conceptual ontology arranging information rendered verbally; (2) analysing the thematic chunks of the visuals' conceptual ontology with regard to the evaluative continuum of negative connotations; (3) defining the most prominent topics represented with a complete, tripartite, evaluative

continuum of visuals, and describing the semiotic techniques that assign negative connotations to the visual means.

Visual means in the focus of analysis

Our empirical focus is on two types of visual images that accompanied the articles on Ukraine's no-visa access to the EU in the selected Russian e-news platforms – political cartoons and photographs. Both types add to the process of creating the resultant emotion-loaded frames.

Keeping the conceptual focus on Self-Other perceptions, we choose cartoons as they “can express critical views of self and other, and of their relations” (de Boitrago, 2018, 308). Relevant literature considers political cartoons to be an important part of political opinion discourse (Wiid et al., 2011, p.138). Bain et al. (2012) stress that cartoons are “sources of significant discursive and interpretive power” (consider, for example the scandal surrounding the so-called ‘Mohammed cartoons’ in Denmark or tragedy of Charlie Hebdo in France). IR scholarship is increasingly interested in political cartoons (Dodds, 2010; Manzo, 2012, de Bouitregu 2018). Here, Gombrich (cited in Bigi et al., 2011, p.153) argues that the power of cartoons comes from their ability to capture both context and relationships into a single visual ‘snapshot’, which can “re-contextualize events and evoke reference points in ways that a photograph or even a film cannot.” Thus, cartoons can offer condensed and simplified portrayals of complex situations in order to aid audience cognition. We extend this argument and offer that cartoons are often more than a “single visual snapshot” but in many instance a multi-modal visual means. They combine a picture and a text and as such the visual in cartoon establishes relationship to its own verbal text as well as the text of the article it is situated in. The text in the cartoon might do quite a lot of explicit explaining.

Irrespective of the presence of the text in cartoons, “cartoons seize upon and reinforce common sense and thus enable the public to actively classify, organize and interpret in meaningful ways what they see or experience about the world at a given moment” (Greenberg (2002, p.181). By capturing a moment in this way, cartoons are often argued to have a “universal’ readability and appeal” (Connors, 1998, cited in El Refaie, 2009b, p.182) – yet in a particular culture. Being culture-specific, they may invite different interpretations (Dodds, 2010; Hughes, 2007). Importantly, cartoons – through provocation – are effective in triggering certain emotions. As Bigi et al. have noted, a cartoon can “[expose] viewers to a point of view for or

against its subject, either by presenting it as a figure worthy of sympathy or by distorting it into a figure of ridicule” (2011, p.153). Political cartoons are an “effective way for artists to express their thoughts about the events in a certain period in a comical manner” (Becker, 1959). And while irony or mockery are the most typical emotive strategies employed by cartoons, Dodds (2010) observed cartoons rendering danger and threat. By their nature, cartoons cannot be “neutral.” Political cartoons are not humorous, they are sarcastic. Multiple iteration and involvement of the historical and cultural memory of the audience central for the cartoon production resonates with characteristics of strategic narratives rendered verbally.

Photographic visual means is a popular subject in political communication literature. Its detailed overview remains beyond the limits of this article. Here, we cite works that invite to consider photographs in a two-pronged approach – as images that “...are produced to serve as records of reality, as documentary evidence of the people, places, things, actions and events they depict” (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2002, p.4) as well as images where their maker or makers “have (re-)constructed reality, as evidence of bias, ideologically coloured interpretation” (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2002, 5, as cited in Chaban et al., 2014). We share the argument that photojournalists’ outputs may be not random but “manufactured and framed for consumption...” (Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004, p.95). We also share an argument that image selection by the editors may be based on aesthetics or political motivation (Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004, p.94). By undertaking a visual images analysis of photographs, our study aims to explore “the hidden or implicit text that lurks behind any given icon and photography” (Sekula, 1982, p.85, as cited in Chaban et al., 2014). We presume that in portraying a particular image rendered by media narratives, photographic images that record reality as well as frame it in a particular, ideologically coloured way interact with the verbal text as well as with each other.

Aware of the challenge of subjectivity in the analysis of emotive connotations, we conducted data analysis independently from each other and compared results. The research team had only minor instances of disagreement in the coding of the visual images, and differences were discussed and resolved. Analysis of two types of visual images allowed to increase validity of the analysis, while a bigger sample strengthened its reliability.

Sample

Our focus is on Russian e-news portals as a part of mainstream media camp. Despite the rising influence of new social media, mainstream media (which have acquired a digital format) remain a “vital actor in the system creating and reinforcing misperceptions” (Duffy, 2018, p.15). This is especially true in non-democratic societies where elites and governments monitor and censor media, while media is subordinate to the elites.

The case selected for observation is granting Ukrainian citizens visa-free travel to the Schengen area. The periods of observation are 11-18 June and 12-16 July, 2017, representing two timeframes – one week after the visa-free travel started and one month after it came into effect. The data was collected in real time, as the news items were appearing. The key search terms included: Ukraine, the European Union/EU, Europe, European Commission/EC, European Parliament/EP, European Court of Justice/EJC, and case-specific visa-free travel. The key search words included full names, abbreviations and composites typical of the Russian language (e.g. Evrokomissii). The media were processed by a native speaker of Russian. Overall, six mainstream e-news portals were observed, with the final sample of 52 articles: Aif.ru (8 articles); Life.ru (14), Mk.ru (5), Novayagazeta.ru (1), Republica.ru (1), Ria.ru (23). The analyzed Internet e-news portals are recognised as popular and influential media sources, with wide reach inside Russia and outside its borders (Malashenko, 2015). Out of the 52 articles, seven were reprints, while the rest were original articles. Our sample is 108 visual images, among which two are multiply iterated cartoons. One more cartoon considered in this study came from a later article published by Luga1news.ru a year after the visa-free agreement’s enactment and focused on the evaluation of its consequences.

Findings

Analysis of information rendered by 108 pictures that accompany 53 (52+1) media narratives on granting the visa-free travel for Ukraine allows for building the visuals’ conceptual ontology that includes three thematic domains: (1) UKRAINE – THE EU RELATIONS, (2) UKRAINIANS TRAVELLING TO THE EU, and (3) RUSSIA ABOUT VISA-FREE TRAVEL FOR UKRAINE. Each domain has several parcels, the negative evaluation of which fits into the tripartite continuum which is either incomplete or complete (Table 1).

Table 1: VISA-FREE TRAVEL FOR UKRAINE: Conceptual ontology of visual images with a matrix of the evaluative continuum (six mainstream e-news portals)

Thematic domains and their parcels	Number of pictures	Neutral pictures	Implicitly negative pictures	Explicitly negative pictures
1. UKRAINE – THE EU RELATIONS	50	37	10	3
1.1. Ukraine	1	1	-	
1.2. President Poroshenko	11	3	7	1
1.3. Ukrainian officials	5	5	-	-
1.4. The EU officials	5	5	-	-
1.5. Visa-free travel enactment: celebrations in Ukraine	9	9	-	-
1.6. Visa-free travel enactment: celebrations on the Ukraine-Slovakia border	8	6	1	1x2
1.7. Ukraine's getting closer to the EU	10	8	2	-
2. UKRAINIANS TRAVELLING TO THE EU	46	24	9	13
2.2. Getting biometric passports	1	-	1	-
2.2. Transportation	10	9	1	-
2.3. Crossing the border. Passport control	26	15	7	3+1x10
3. RUSSIA ABOUT VISA-FREE TRAVEL FOR UKRAINE	12	11	1	-
3.1. Russia	1	1	-	-
3.2. President Putin	4	4	-	-
3.3. Russia's officials and Russia's Ukrainian allies	2	2	-	-
3.4. Russia-Ukraine relations	2	1	1	-
3.5. Lermontov's poem "Farewell, unwashed Russia"	3	3	-	-
TOTAL	108	72	20	16

Among the three thematic domains in table 1, the most salient visually are the first and second themes, UKRAINE – THE EU RELATIONS, and UKRAINIANS TRAVELLING TO THE EU, which agrees with the thematic salience of the respective verbal texts (Chaban et al., 2019a,b). Thematically and emotively, the parcels of the visual ontology agree with representation of actors throughout the domains of the verbal ontology (Table 2).

Table 2. VISA-FREE TRAVEL FOR UKRAINE: Assessments of the actors in the conceptual ontology of verbal descriptions (Chaban et al. 2019a, b).

Actors	Negative descriptions	Positive descriptions
Visa-free travel for Ukraine	30	-
Ukraine	93	5
Ukrainian people	50	-
Ukrainian authorities	11	-
Ukrainian president Poroshenko	35	3
The EU (all actors together)	22	-
Russia	-	12
Russian President Putin	-	7
Total	241	27

Comparison of the negative evaluation realised verbally and pictorially reveals a larger portion of negativity depicted verbally: out 555 verbal descriptions instantiating the NBPC “Visa-free travel for Ukraine,” almost a half of the sample (241) are negative, while out of 108 attendant visual images, one third (36) are negative. Among the emotively connoted visual images, 20 have implicit negativity, and 16 have explicit negativity that makes the evaluative continuum complete. A complete evaluative continuum has been found in three parcels of the visuals’ conceptual ontology: 1.2. “President Poroshenko,” 1.6. “Visa-free travel enactment: celebrations on the Ukraine-Slovakia border, and 2.3. “Crossing the border. Passport control.” These three parcels, prominent in the visual ontology, are also prominent in the verbal ontology (see Chaban et al., 2019a,b). The remainder of the section considers the ways in which the pictures feature the above three topics.

Parcel 1.2. “President Poroshenko.” The Ukrainian president, as a key person in the development of Ukraine – the EU relations and an actor of a number of events constitutive for the NBPC “Visa-free travel for Ukraine,” is portrayed in 11 pictures, three of which are neutral, seven have implicit negativity, and one has explicit negativity. Some visual images are photos taken at the festivities celebrating the enactment of Ukraine’s visa-free travel. At those events, the Ukrainian president said farewell to Russia and emphasised Ukraine’s progress in cooperation with the EU.

The three photos classified as neutral are official, contextually free portraits of the president. The seven photographs, classified as implicitly negative, portray Poroshenko participating in different events. In these photographs, he is not maintaining a direct eye contact with the reader, which may imply that his addressee is not the Russian audience. Besides, avoiding a direct eye contact with the interlocutor may point to insincerity of the speaker. The photos also depict Poroshenko with a clenched fist, arguably a symbol of threat. In most photos, Poroshenko is speaking in front of a microphone, which may indirectly reference his love of public appearances, PR and publicity.

One visual image, classified as explicitly negative, is the cartoon portraying Poroshenko as a saint in a conventional Orthodox icon. The halo around his head has the stars symbolising the EU, and near the halo are the words “Sacred Visa-Free Travel.” Similar to a tsar, Petro Poroshenko holds the ‘sceptre’ and ‘power’ – a toilet brush and night pot respectively. The pot also associates with the Saint Grail (de-sacralisation of “Sacred visa-free

travel”), while reference to plumbing and toilet hints at the ‘careers’ awaiting Ukrainians in the EU. Referencing his position in power, Poroshenko is clad in an official suit, yet he also wears a shabby casual scarf the match to which is a crumpled euro banknote in his lapel pocket. The cartoon has obvious historical and cultural resonances for the Russian-speaking audiences. Historically, it alludes to Peter the Great, the most famous Russian tsar whose first and patronymic names (Pyotr Aleksyeevich) coincide with those of Poroshenko, and whom the Ukrainian president allegedly wants to resemble. Culturally, the reference to an Orthodox icon is accompanied by Poroshenko’s parallel with Ostap Bender, a character from the satirical novel “12 chairs” by Ilf and Petrov popular in the former USSR. Ostap Bender, a notorious swindler, is prompted by a banknote in Poroshenko’s pocket and a scarf around his neck (Bender’s distinctive feature). Also, potentially, the scarf alludes to scarves worn by gay men – reference to “Gayropa” (gay [Eu]rope) to where Ukraine is seen to be heading, with its commitment to European liberal values different from the Russian conservative values. The narrative strategy – destruction of the image – is realised through the narrative tactic of mockery that is also most used in verbal descriptions (see Chaban et al., 2019a,b referring to the narrative strategies of suppression, destruction and direction described in Wagnsson and Barnzje, 2019). This cartoon was encountered once, in the article published a year after enactment of Ukraine’s visa-free travel and concerned with its value for the country. The cartoon precedes the verbal text thus prescribing the further emotive perception of Ukraine and its European choice.

Parcel 1.6 “Visa-free travel enactment: celebrations on the Ukraine-Slovakia border.” This theme is represented by nine visual images, six of which are neutral photos, one is a photo with implicit negativity, and one is a cartoon with explicit negativity.

Six photos classified as neutral depict the Ukrainian and Slovakian presidents at the festivities dedicated to the enactment of the visa-free travel agreement. One photo with implicit negativity features the Ukrainian and Slovakian presidents walking towards each other with open arms. And while neutral, or even positive image at the first site, in combination with the verbal representations, the image hints at Ukraine’s “European embrace” (and Ukraine’s subsequent betrayal of Russia).

In one of the neutral photos, the Slovakian president meets his Ukrainian colleague in a symbolic ‘door’. The door theme gets continuation in the

explicitly negative cartoon featuring Poroshenko as a tiny person who tries to reach a red button (named “Visa Regime”) that opens a metal garage door/window blind (arguably, with the potential allusion to an iron curtain). The opening is half-closed, we can see only a partial perspective on a zig-sag road leading to the horizon. The road is paved in a familiar blue colour of the EU flag. The cartoon is entitled “To reach the stars” – reminiscence of the Latin saying *Per aspera ad astra* (lit. Through thorns to stars), with the stars understood also as a symbol of the EU. The clues – a half-closed opening, the tiny height of the Ukrainian leader that does not allow him to reach the button, the zig-zag road behind the curtain – frame Ukraine’s cooperation with the EU as hardly attainable, challenging in progress and out of scale for Ukraine. Arguably, an opening, no matter how small, another lifting of the “iron” curtain, and a road ahead may hint some positivity, yet it is negated by a minute figure of the Ukrainian leader, who is suggested to be out of proportion for the grand task. As such Ukraine’s break-through to Europe is metaphorically diminished. Historically, the cartoon also cross-references Peter the Great, who “cut out a window to Europe” (A. Pushkin) by conquering the Baltic coast. The figure in the picture, though, is very small to be compared to Peter the Great. Another historical allusion is the rising curtain that looks like an iron one, and thus refers to the “Iron Curtain” – the ideology that separated the USSR from the West. Similar to the cartoon discussed above, this cartoon also employs the narrative tactic of mocking. Arguably, it instantiates the narrative strategy of destruction that may be coupled here with the subsidiary strategy of direction: Ukraine should not try to attain unattainable and be more sensible and realistic in its aspirations and directions. The cartoon’s title – “To reach the stars” (alluding to the EU stars but also to celestial unreachable objects) – reinforces this message. The cartoon was used twice, in both cases after neutrally-connoted texts. The cartoon offers a means to re-interpret the neutral emotivity rendered by the text.

Parcel 2.3 “Crossing the border. Passport control.” This theme is most prominent, being represented in 26 visuals – 15 neutral photos, seven implicitly negative photos, and four explicitly negative images, three of which are photos and one is a cartoon.

The neutral photos show a Ukrainian passport, the Ukrainian border, Ukrainian border guards and Ukrainian passport control officers at work. The photos classified as implicitly negative depict long lines of vehicles at the Ukrainian border waiting to cross (5 photos). Other photographs supporting this message are photos of a border officer with a sizeable pile of

Ukrainian passports implying big numbers of Ukrainians ready to leave Ukraine for Europe. Finally, in one picture a female is holding two Ukrainian passports in a way that resembles a card game (potentially, invoking idea of a gamble).

One of the photos with explicit negativity features a Ukrainian passport with a 100-euro banknote inside – an allusion to corruption of the border officers. Two photos depict a huge crowd of Ukrainians (headed by aged women with worn-out frowning faces) who try to cross the Ukrainian-Polish border. The narrative tactic employed in such images – the fact’s pejoration – instantiates the narrative strategy of destruction. In the same category is the cartoon that represents crossing the country’s border as a symbolic event in the life of a Ukrainian. Here, a dishevelled person with a missing tooth who is dressed in the Ukrainian national costume and who has a sack stuffed with what not (including a bottle of vodka, sausage and a toilet plunger) and decorated with a ribbon in the colours of the Ukrainian flag is standing in front of the EU starred flag. He recites a verse in ‘surzhik’ (a vernacular blend of Ukrainian and Russian, characteristic of lower education groups), with the Ukrainian words being intentionally distorted, or “errativised”:

Я достаю из широких штанин гордость украинську, паспорт помятый та еду в Европу зранку! Дивитесь, завидуйте, я еврогражданин... или еврогражданка!

[I pull it from the wide pants, my Ukrainian pride – the crumpled passport, and go to Europe in the morning! See and envy, I am a male citizen of Europe... or a female one!]

The above verse has a vivid cultural resonance. It is a parody of the verse “My Soviet Passport” by the renowned Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930). The verse, which was compulsory for learning in the Russian literature course at Soviet schools, reads:

Я волком бы / выгрыз / бюрократизм. / К мандатам / почтения нету.
/ К любым / чертям с матерями / катись / любая бумажка. / Но эту...
/ Я / достаю / из широких штанин / дубликатом / бесценного груза.
/ Читайте, / завидуйте, / я — / гражданин / Советского Союза.
(1929)

No reverence for mandates — / good riddance! / Pack off to very hell / for good / any old paper, / but this one... / As / the most valuable / of

certificates / I pull it / from the [wide] pants / where my documents are:
/ read it / envy me — / I'm a citizen / of the USSR! (translated by Dorian
Rottenberg).

The cartoon utilises the narrative tactics of mocking and pejoration of the fact (pointing to 'Gayropa', with its system of moral values very different from those in Russia) that instantiate the narrative strategy of destruction. The cartoon has a high degree of frequency. It accompanied 10 articles published on the Ria.ru news platform. In all articles, the cartoon was placed after the verbal text. In half of the instances, the text was emotionally neutral, and the cartoon placed at the end re-directed neutrality to negativity.

Concluding discussion

Scholars (Hayakawa and Hayakawa, 1990) describe the war on consciousness as a universal phenomenon, and protest against its use by governments against their own people. In this paper, we have considered an example of such a 'war on consciousness' waged for the minds of the Russian-speaking audience. We explored visual images employed by the leading Russian e-news platforms in their framing of Ukraine. Our study focused on one of the milestones in Ukraine's move towards Europe and a major event in the framework of Ukraine's strategic narrative of 'European Choice' – Ukraine obtaining its visa-free entry to the Schengen area. Our attention to visual images is intentional. The strength of visual imagery lies in its ability to dramatize issues, generate emotional responses, and "create cognitive shortcuts that compress complex arguments" (Hannigan, 2006, p.77-78).

Our analysis of the visual means – following an earlier analysis of the verbal representations of the same event (Chaban et al., 2019a,b) – provides an empirical insight into the solidification of Russia's strategic narrative on Ukraine as Russia's ideological "Other." Visual images allow it to happen on two levels – othering of the Ukrainian state/government/president, but also of Ukraine as a country and its people. Here, our message is that it is important to consider the multimodal impact: most of negativity in the verbal descriptions was assigned to Ukraine and its people (Chaban et al., 2019; as well as Table 2 above) and the visuals have supported and magnified this verbal message. It is the combination of the textual and visual means that adds to the resulting message of Ukraine as increasingly an ultimate "Other" to Russia and its people (see the Introduction to this Special Issue quoting the most recent statement by the Russia President Putin on Ukraine

becoming “anti-Russia”, “requiring our special attention from a security point of view” (Osborne and Marrow, 2021)).

We add to the strategic narrative theorisation. Visual means, as well as verbal texts into which they immerse, expose the distinctions typical of strategic narratives – multiple iterations, pronounced historical and cultural resonances and emotive load. At the start of this article, we asked if visual images framed Ukraine for Russian readers on the continuum of ‘difference’– ‘otherness’ – ‘enmity’. Here, we conclude that Ukraine’s ‘difference’ was prominent in the visuals. Multiple visualisations stressed Ukraine is ‘different to Russia’ – it has a different passport, different state emblem, and different flag. Ukrainian folk costumes and embroidered shirts worn by Ukrainians at celebrations intensify this frame. Yet, visual images insist on framing Ukraine as moving from ‘difference’ to ‘otherness’. As such, they amplify the dynamics of a similar image that we found in our earlier analysis of the verbal news texts. Visual means depict Ukraine embraced/embracing with Europe, its young people being enthusiastic and positive about this change and huge crowds celebrating – all this while Ukraine is adopting European values (e.g. ‘Gayropa’). At the same time, the reproachment with Europe is shown to be more about Ukrainians’ feverish desire to leave Ukraine (e.g. long lines at the borders or piles of passports) and even crimes they commit to get out of the country by any means (e.g. images hinting at smuggling children out of Ukraine). Visuals also convey that Ukraine is not really Europe (e.g. images of Ukrainians looking poor and haggard trying to get passports or cross the border, or a cartoon with a dishevelled toothless Ukrainian migrant with a toilet plunger). Ukraine’s European aspirations are rendered to be out of Ukraine’s reach. However, there are only occasional pictures than may indicate a further move to the image of ‘enmity’ (e.g. Poroshenko’s clenched fist). The detected shift from ‘difference’ to ‘otherness’ rendered by the visual images arguably feeds into the key characteristics of the strategic narrative – it may mobilise and justify certain actions. It is easier to justify conflict, annexation and enact support for military aggression if the opponent is seen as not ‘just different’ from the Self, but as distinctly the Other – with different values, outlooks and orientations.

Directed at the domestic audience, visual images contribute to the strategic narrative on the three levels. On a systemic level, depictions render an image of the EU as a contender who is associating with a weak, underperforming Ukraine. As such, Russia is not losing in the geopolitical competition to the West, but rather becoming stronger by disassociating from

poor Ukraine whose citizens are swarming to the borders to leave the country. On the identity level, images portray Russian values and norms as superior to those of the EU and Ukraine (references to ‘Gayropa’, to smuggled children, to corruption, or to former partner Ukraine who is embracing/embraced by the West). On the issue-specific level, visuals deliver narratives that convince domestic audiences that the Others, the EU and Ukraine, perform with flaws on the operational level (huge lines at the borders or at offices to get biometric passports) – the portrayal that downgrades the EU as compared with Russia to where Ukrainians may come without problems.

We conclude that any insight into emotively coloured images (visual and textual) must be necessarily nuanced. In our article, we propose a particular protocol of human-led analysis of emotivity delivered by visual means – an evaluative continuum of negative intensity evolving from neutrality to implicit and, finally, explicit negativity. Moreover, we map this continuum against the thematic references within a cognitive construct of the narrative-based political concept developing an analytical matrix. We argue this protocol is applicable for other studies concerned with the intersection of cognitive and emotive aspects of IR. Finally, we advocate multimodal consideration of connotations assigned to both visual and textual means in their interactions. Thematic and emotive resonance between visual and verbal modes in framing the Other will amplify the political message and serve a solid ground for strategic narratives to take off.

Our analysis demonstrated that out of two the types of visual images, cartoons were the most effective at realising narrative strategies and tactics (namely, the strategies of destruction and re-direction) similar to those employed for framing by the verbal means discovered in our earlier study. Cartoons specifically are an example of simplifications accompanied by emotionalisation of conflictual relations: political actors may also have stakes in such simplifications and apply these to benefit their political agendas” (de Buitrago, 2018, 306) (not lastly due to their multimodality). We invite to interpret cartoons as ‘catchy’ memes disseminated by mass media through the Internet. Similar to genes that replicate information in the physical world, memes, like viruses, replicate ideas and influence human thought and behaviour (Dawkins, 1989). The unusual “protein shell” of political cartoons is their expressive external form that “hooks attention and injects negative assessment which causes mind-numbing. Being “immobilized” by a deep negative emotion, one accepts an accompanying virtual fact without any critical thinking” (Zhabotynska, 2017b, 240).

In our follow up analysis, we examine cognitive, normative and emotive reactions by the readers of the news to the reports on Ukraine's visa-free arrangements. In it, we ask if textual and visual images projected by popular e-news portals have triggered resonant emotive images among their readers in terms of valence and intensity, elicited similar strategies and tactics in the narratives of reception, and mapped a similar positioning of Ukraine on the continuum of 'difference' – 'otherness' – 'enmity'. Future research may also assess visual images accompanying news texts of other major events in Ukraine – in the context of its relations with the EU as well as Russia. Future studies may also try to gauge the impact of visual images on readers directly – e.g. through social psychology experiments. Comparative analysis – across time and space – may provide additional insights into the dynamics of Self-Other representations in Russian political and media discourses and question evolution of Russia's strategic narratives on Ukraine.

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Šarūnas Liekis and Viktorija Rusinaitė

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY NARRATIVES OF GREY ZONES

Abstract

This article is produced in the framework of the policy analysis project: “Challenges to the European Security Architecture: Narratives of Control and Influence” by Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis to examine how the European security architecture and international law are challenged by strategic narratives promoted by Russian foreign policy elites who seek “great power” status for their country, pursue exclusive influence in Russia’s European neighborhood, and are increasingly active in efforts to destabilize Western democracies. The article will answer the questions if these Grey Zones might be dangerous to the European political order. Who are the actors proliferating them and what are their intentions? What kind of narratives and media manipulations are these proliferators using? The authors argue that Grey Zones flourish on some of the differences in perception of the international order. The West largely understands international law and democracy as universally normative and technical. On the other hand, the Russian model of plural civilizations, promoted by the government undermines the possibility of a shared normative basis for institutions. The Russian effort is received as universalist while being local and Russian and thus have consequences in difference of perception for both sides. Consistency of the Russian narrative indicates that in spite of the current fixation with disinformation and Russian-led information warfare, Russia has been coherent in drawing on an imaginary “security”, establishing how much adaptation of Russia to international order is “possible” by building the image of the neighboring countries as the grey zones and connecting activities and effects of its activities with the narrative.

Keywords: Russia, security, hybrid threat, grey zone narratives,

Introduction

Following the Crimean occupation and annexation of 2014 by the Russian Federation there has been a steady rise in pro-Kremlin rhetoric by the policy think tanks in the West. Russian think tanks and non-governmental organizations are among the most important tools at the disposal of Moscow and are widely used to exercise soft power in the international sphere. These think tanks seek to influence policy discourse, not unlike other means of disinformation or propaganda, but their activity is much more targeted, directed and precise. The Russian think tanks seek to imitate a model of alleged free speech and open discussion while only presenting and promoting conceptions of European security that would be the most favourable to the Russian state interests. The Russian strategic establishment attempts to apply the system/identity/issue framework in a systematic manner. While

there is a wealth of literature analyzing these features of Russia's worldview we attempt to what do think tanks distinctively bring to Russian narratives, often without consistency across the think tanks, and illustrate the idea of 'grey zones' in Russian narratives of contested regions.

Before being presented in the West, these narratives were actively tested internally by the Russian policy analysis community immediately following the 2008-2009 Russian-Georgian war and the 2014 occupation of Crimea. These narratives of Grey Zones are not just simplistic interpretations of EU and NATO policies on the western frontier of Russia. These strategic narratives are utilized in order to weaken western political alliances, diminish their prestige and decrease their support of the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, Ukraine and all of Eastern Europe.

What are the Grey Zones?

There is a temptation to frame Grey Zones in terms of a conflict phase or operational environment. There are attempts to operationalize the Grey Zones as type of hybrid influence, which is used to destabilize rival states. The term or concept of Grey Zone is neither new nor unique to the relations of Russia to the Baltic states, Poland, Finland or Ukraine. For example, Turkey for several decades (intensively since the 1996 Imia crisis) in territorial disputes with Greece over the Aegean Islands, claims that 132 of the small islands belong to a Grey Zone. The Grey zone in the Greek-Turkish dispute came forward when historical, ideological and linguistic arguments began to be used to justify territorial claims on the Mediterranean islands as of undefined sovereignty (Heraclides 2010). The terminology of Grey Zones was applied to the Baltic states after the 1997 NATO summit in Madrid, when Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic were invited to join NATO. Eastern and Central European states, which were not invited, in the eyes of foreign political analysts and in the view of the political elites of those countries were seen as being in a position of uncertainty and insecurity, a kind of Grey Zone, over their uncertain future membership in NATO. For the Baltic states being in the Grey Zone translated to a cultural and political insecurity and an alarming prospect of becoming forever separated from the West and turning into a zone of instability.

Political instability becomes one of the key characteristics of countries that find themselves in the Grey Zone. In such countries, politicians battle each other by providing increasingly radical choices. Pro-Western political and cultural elites can easily lose their ground because the overall insecurity

in these countries can manifest itself in questions of cultural and civilizational identity. The Grey Zone as a rule is characterized not only by insecurity but also by uncertainty. All this takes place in the framework of the Russian policies negating international law as an instrument of power. In the Russian view, existing rules reduce room for manoeuvre. In its *modus operandi*, Russia has violated these rules in the past and presented this as an opportunity to redefine international law. Contrary to the Russian strategic narrative, Russia resorted to violence not in reaction to what the West has been doing in Europe but due to its own limited capabilities to match the goals of great power domination and a lack of resources to achieve these goals. This discrepancy led to Russia's overuse of coercion and kinetic power resulting in the further fostering of Grey Zones across Europe in Donetsk, Luhansk, Crimea, and Transnistria. (Pugsley et al., 2015)

The complexity and unpredictability of the security situation directly correlates to how difficult it is to answer the question whether there is a strong guarantee of NATO countries being able collectively to respond to Russian aggression. The western neighbors of the Russian Federation in the face of international cataclysm may not have a clear position on the European security architecture or the capability to ensure NATO guarantees or self-reliance in a specific situation. Division and disunity, "patronage" or lack of from the larger countries in the medium or long-term perspective and a state of uncertainty and insecurity may cause the countries to fall into an economic "grey zone", which would quickly spell economic weakness and exclusion from the safety networks of the international system.

In the conditions of a shifting security architecture, divisions between the EU and NATO always become apparent. However, this disconnect becomes apparent not because of indigenous cultural-historic development but mainly because of cultural-historic projections narrated by Moscow. Russia consistently tries to entrench into political rhetoric its portrayal of all of Eastern-Central Europe, but especially of the Baltic States, Poland and Finland as dependent on Russia economically, culturally and in a wider civilizational sense. Russia expects that countries, which its propaganda considers and maintains as "theirs" and "being bound by close ties" with Russia, in the end can be easily pushed toward "neutrality" or even allied relations with Russia. Metaphors take on an important role in justifying and constructing their version of reality, instead of consistent, adequate, and clearly formulated reasoning. Various biases and stereotypes are presented as facts on the ground.

With the developments of international security environment, it is very important that states bordering Russia do not become targets of Russia's Grey Zone policy processes. Is it possible to stay to the wayside of these processes? Clearly not. However, it is also impossible to clearly answer all questions that may arise. There is no distinct boundary between certainty, strong belief and doubt that NATO and EU allies will defend the Baltic States or the rest of the East Central European countries in the face of a Russian threat. The current debates probably will not increase the certainty of whether the alliance security apparatus will come in to play as intended in the case of crisis. Uncertainty is always part of the perceptions in bilateral or multilateral relations in the past and future.

The ideological context of Grey Zones

According to the conventional thinking of the Kremlin, recent NATO expansion, conflict and disagreements between Russia and European countries are impeding and destroying the capability of international organizations such as the OSCE or the Council of Europe to resolve such tensions. Neither side has cancelled the Paris charter or the founding NATO-Russian Act, however their contents regarding unilateral United States actions have begun to be disputed. They allege that the weakening international arms control regime is contributing to this turn of events. (Marten 2018)

Recently, Russian analysts in the international sphere have begun ramping up the dialectic of the undefendability of the Baltic states and all of Eastern-Central Europe and of its belonging to the Russian sphere of influence. As a reaction to the supposed weakening of the arms control regime, they suggest disarmament of the Eastern part of Germany and the Baltic states and the disarmament of the corresponding parts of Belarus and Russia. Russia meanwhile is stoking distrust between the Baltic states and their Western partners, while simultaneously questioning the sustainability of this partnership in the West while aiming at retaining Russia's historical status as a great power and hegemon in the former Soviet Union and in engaging in competition with the United States (Clunan 2014).

On the level of discourse, for many years in Lithuania, other Baltic States and Poland, we commonly encounter a conservative narrative of anti-communism and an eventual turn toward Europe. In Lithuania, as in Poland, there is a certain longing for the East, directed toward Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, i.e. a certain "orientalism" (Zarycki 2010). Without a doubt, this

orientalism is associated with a superiority complex and internalized Western civilizational mission. On the other hand, there is no doubt that it is important to support the real and perceived benefits of human rights, democracy and free market. These contradictions are easily exploited by the adversaries in Russia. They easily manipulate the conservative perspective.

The proponents of the mono-perspective view often misunderstand that narratives are used to inculcate life scenarios that portray overcoming obstacles and victory over difficulties. All scenarios have their cultural and sociodemographic filters. Very often narratives are used to demolish a particular view held by outsiders and to reinvent the self according to a plan. On the other hand, narratives operate within diverse past-present and future perspectives. There are attempts to classify narratives in terms of ideological narrative wars. On the other hand, it is apparent that in the wars of narratives nobody has the clear upper hand. Some narratives weaken and lose importance, but they are never truly “defeated.” Their followers may dwindle and lose interest due to a changing political, economic or socioeconomic context, as well as people’s deaths. All states that harbour a single perspective, such as conservative or authoritarian, are very vulnerable to narrative invasion and the destabilizing effects thereof, both within the country and internationally. Maintaining multiple viable perspectives will be effective in countering a systematically propagated authoritarianism or an imperial view of the world.

Strategic narratives

Strategic narratives enable us to explain causality in the political process and to connect seemingly different political events in the past, present and future into a logical chain and worldview. If necessary, these narratives help mobilize audiences in support of required political decisions. Strategic narratives enable the integration of different political challenges and solutions into a discrete and believable story. Strategic narratives help observers to interpret the past, the present and the future. They can help muster political support for certain decisions not just within the country, but also internationally (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle 2013, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle 2017).

Strategic narratives are immensely useful to politicians and state administrations in attaining long-term strategic goals. With their aid, members of international organizations, politicians operating in the international sphere, transnational elites, decision makers, institutional

actors and others can rationalise their course of action. Usually strategic narratives are directed toward audiences acting internationally and strategically, classified into identity, systemic and problem narratives or narratives of political goals (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2019, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2017). Sometimes they may be directed also at societies at large and include storytelling about (a) what the country is like, (b) in what international space it operates, but also (c) problem narratives, that are utilized to achieve certain political decisions (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2019, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2017).

Strategic narratives are directed at transnational and foreign policy actors, while states use these narratives to strategically solidify their status in the world and to justify their goals in international politics. Strategic narratives are tools used by political subjects to create shared meaning in the past, present and future. Strategic narratives are understood as a cyclical progression in the formation of narratives, the projection of narratives and their perception. Analysis of narratives allows us to understand how the identities of are created, shaped and how they are opposed by others.

Strategic narratives have a powerful regulatory potential and act as certain “instructions” directing how one should act now as well as in situations that may arise in the future (Brockmeier & Harre 1984). Strategic narratives are not prototypical, they do not follow the blueprints typical of the novel or of autobiography. Typically, they refer to one or two components that characterise the view the storytellers hold of themselves. Narrative research turns storytelling away from narratives as structures and looks at narratives as context, within which there is the storyteller and the listener. Narratives also influence why certain events instead of others are viewed as meaningful or meaningless. The internalised narratives of social groups characterise their expectations, historical goals, past sacrifices, allies and enemies (Chaban, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2019).

Russia employs strategic narratives to shape perceptions and ensure the development of Russian political, economic and military interests (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2017). In its strategic narrative, Russia projects the international system as being populated by “great powers working in concert, an elite group of states reinforcing a hierarchy to which Russia claims membership” (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2017). Russia occupies a central place in its foreign policy narrative and narrative of the global order. The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 2000 and Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 both reinforce ideas of Russia's greatness, by

claiming that it is a centuries-old country among the largest of the Eurasian powers (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2017, Russian National Security Concept and Nuclear Policy 2021, The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2000).

While feuding with the EU and USA, Russia feels increasingly pressured by China. Despite the possible Sino-Russian disagreements and conflicts in the future, Russia still defends its interests through foreign policy imagery stemming from the Eurasian narrative where Russia is seen as a core of the Eurasia and still tries to maintain and control its zone of influence along the borders of the former USSR. There is a huge rift between the EU and Russian perspectives. For example, Moscow portrays Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova as lacking attributes of sovereignty, while Brussels considers these states as having the right to self-determination.

The guilt symmetry approach is one of the essential blocks of the Russian narration of the international system. Russia claims that a lack of recognition of legitimate Russian interests led to annexation of Crimea, and thus the West also bears responsibility for the strained security situation in Europe (Interview given by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov 2014, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview 2015, Washington Post Staff 2020). Using this strategy, Russia tries to "balance out" its own digressions, building them on the idea that big players use international law to secure their own interests all the time, and that international law is an instrument of great power competition. Subscribing to guilt symmetry means normalizing infringements of rule-based order and simultaneously subscribing to the ideas of great power competition. If international fora were to accept the ideas that Russia annexed Crimea defending its own interests and reacting to Western foreign policy, it would effectively eliminate the primacy of sovereignty of states in rules based international order ("Rossiia ne tol'ko narushaet mezhdunarodnoe pravo" 2018).

Russia actively uses strategic narratives to justify the international policy decisions it undertakes to further its foreign policy agenda. The Russian strategic narratives operate as a system of smaller narratives dispersed around different countries and regions which support and justify one another. Some larger narratives are engrained in Russian history and political culture. Among those historical narratives are those on Russia saving "the bourgeois West from its iniquities" and "bringing order" while other nations are sinking into anarchy (Wesson 1974). The narrative of

defending rights of compatriots is at least few hundred years old – Catherine II justified the invasion in Poland and Lithuania on behalf of the Orthodox peasantry that needs protection from the predominantly Catholic nobility (Wesson 1974). The narration of Russia as a peaceful actor acting in self-defence and on behalf its own security while expanding into lands of weaker states is also not new (Wesson 1974). These older narratives are reused today for political ends. Some new strategic narratives that are in use today were developed and detailed in Russian think tanks to be later better adapted in the policy world; these include ideas on multipolar world order, defendability of the Baltic States, and NATO expansions. The objective of these narratives today is to project Russia's great power status and to minimize the effect of possible repercussions for disregard of international law, and utilize all tools to curb NATO accession process and prevent post-Soviet countries from, and punish them for, selecting a pro-Western path.

Think tanks as tools to promote Russian strategic narratives in the West

For economic reasons the Kremlin is much less able to spread its narratives via creative industries, lifestyle offers or technological innovation, than, for example, the United States. However, this fact alone does not mean that Russian efforts are less effective. Moscow's toolbox for strategic narration include political statements and initiatives, favourable media outlets, GONGO's, think tanks and expert networks; when all of this fail, Russia is known to engage in war and land grabs, as in case of reacting to Georgia and Ukraine. Think tanks are one of the most convenient tools to distribute strategic narratives.

In Russia, the majority of think tanks working on foreign policy and security are either directly financed by the state or through businesses associated with the Kremlin. Such think tanks have the task of reinforcing the Russian strategic narrative. The Global Go To Think Tank Index Report identified a total of 143 think tanks in Russia in 2020 (McGann 2021). However, the number of think tanks that are producing actual policy-oriented work in foreign affairs and security is much lower. Among think tanks used to project Russian soft power, Pallin and Oxenstierna, in a report published by Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), identify the following: RIAC, Valdai club, Council for Foreign and Defense Policy CFDP, the Gorchakov fund, The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), Rethinking Russia, Jakunin initiative for the dialogue of civilizations, Information Security Institute (ISI) (Vendil Pallin & Oxenstierna, 2017).

Barbashin and Greaf, in their analysis for the Atlantic Council focused on Russian think tanks and grand narratives, name RIAC, Valdai club, SVOP (Sovet po Vneshnei i Oboronnoi Politike), PIR Center, CAST, CENESS, INSOR, CSR among those think tanks that instead of academic or contract model function according to the advocacy model. Unlike the academic model which focuses on academic research, and contract one which focuses on contracted research, advocacy think tanks recruit people with different background and seeks to “influence policy making and public debate” (Barbashin & Greaf 2019).

In our analysis, we focus on advocacy think tanks that publish in the English language, thus seeking to internationalise their model. These are Rethinking Russia, RIAC, Valdai, PIR Centre, CAST, CENES, Gorchakov Fund and IDC Paris; we also included the academic institution IMEMO which despite focusing more on the academic model is very active in English.

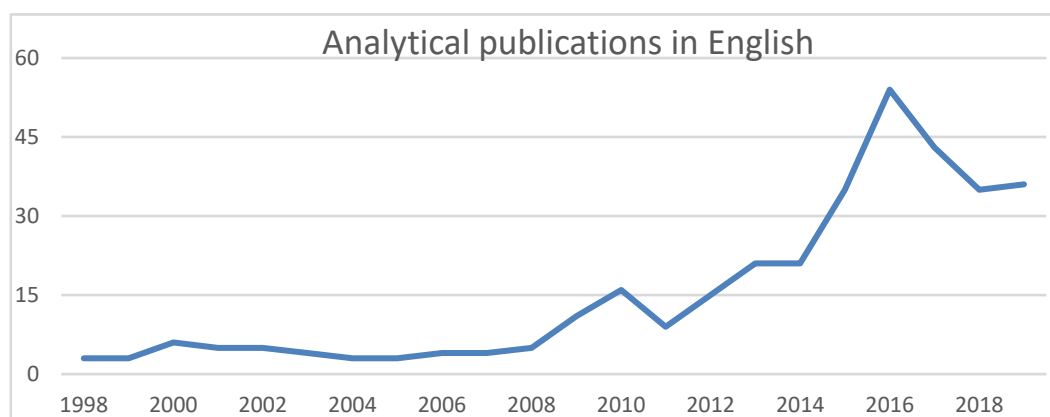


Figure 1. Russian think tank publications throughout 1998-2019

As is evident from Figure 1 which details the number of analytical publications in the English language throughout time, the number of analytical production grew significantly after 2008 and after 2014 and continues to be relatively high. The first spike in 2009 speaks of the need for Russia to explain its position and change foreign outlook after the Russo-Georgian war. The 2015 and 2016 spike is most likely in reaction to the declaration of sanctions and other deterrent measures that the collective West applied to Russia after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Behind this growth of numbers is the need for Russia to formulate narratives that would support ideas of great power competition, guilt symmetry between the collective

West and Russia and simultaneously prevent countries from joining NATO and muddle Russian infringements of international law.

English language PUBLICATIONS 2012-2019

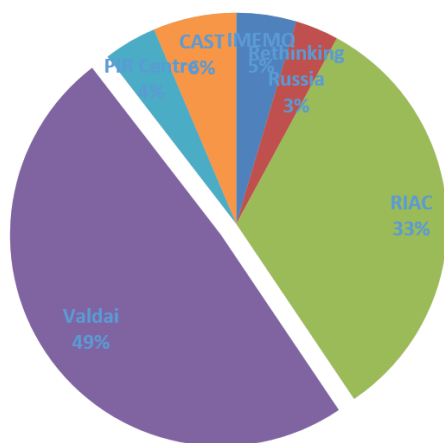


Figure 2. English language publications according to the institution

The primary institutions that are spreading Russian strategic narratives in English language are the Valdai Club and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) (Figure 2). Posing as independent establishments, Valdai and Russian Council as well as other think tanks analysed are either directly founded and supported by the state, or supported by the businesses close to the Kremlin. Interest in the topic of sanctions might directly stem from the boards and funders of some of these institutions whose members and representatives are individually sanctioned. The best example of this is Valdai Club, an influential discussion platform on foreign policy and security. The Valdai yearly conferences from the very beginning have been attended by Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. The Valdai Club is currently managed by RIAC, MGIMO and National Research University. The sources of funding of Valdai are not clear. But among their partners they name banks and large industrial corporations. Among these is Alfa Bank, headed by Mikhail Fridman and Petr Aven, who were in danger of being sanctioned by the US, also VTB bank, which has been sanctioned by the US, EU, Canada and Ukraine, and its president Andey Kostin is also the subject of sanctions, BF Renova fund, which is headed by Victor Vekselberg, who is on the sanctions list of the United States. Another supporter is the steel company Severstal whose main shareholder is Alexei Mordashov. Alexei

Mordashov is the fourth richest person in Russia and the fifth largest shareholder (OCCRP 2016) of Rosiya Bank, under US sanctions.

Academic and social capital (Bourdieu 1984) of the Russian research institutions and think tanks allows the distribution of strategic narratives beyond the network available in Russia. This is enabled by associating specific narratives with already familiar personalities, recognized situations, familiar truths and a recognizable analytical centre. To legitimize their narratives Russian think tanks employ:

- Network authorship. Co-authors, editors and other ‘helpers’ from Western Institutions are engaged in the authored documents. These can be representatives of well-known think tanks, foundations or diplomats. The social capital of the persons and organizations can help legitimise the controversial content through co-authorship.
- Internationally recognized patrons. Having the patronage of well-known funders helps legitimise content.
- Repetition of the same message increases persuasive effect (Schulz-Hardt, S., Giersiepen, A., & Mojzisch, A. 2016) while the repetition from the multiple sources creates the so called “truth effect”, or in other words the perception that the message resonates with a significant number of people and thus is correct (Koch, T., & Zerback, T. 2013). If the message arrives from several recognised sources, this both increases its availability to audiences and its believability.

In recent years, not only the number of Russian think tank publications grew, but also that of Russian expert engagements with their Western counterparts through workshops and seminars, and common publications.

Rearrangement and peripherisation: Narratives of the Grey Zone

Russian foreign policy towards the collective West functions to the backdrop of the following three narratives:

- European security architecture is in crisis,
- US/NATO is destabilising the region,
- Russia has its sphere of influence.

The goal of the narratives is to shape perceptions of the Western policy elites, including the advisors and analysts, on the Russian understanding of the international system. We argue, that these are three main narratives that are used to back up Russia's aggressive military stance on the NATO's Eastern Flank and in the Mediterranean.

Though identified separately, these narratives act as an argumentative whole. They rely on similar discursive premises of great power competition and draw support from one another. For example, in public statements and analyses it is argued, that European security is in crisis, because US and NATO are destabilising the region and the collective West does not recognise the legitimacy of the Russian sphere of influence (Putin 2021). Below we provide analysis of three narratives focused on rearrangement of international system and peripherisation of states that Russia calls its sphere of influence.

We analyse these narratives based on the analytical framework proposed by O'Loughlin, Miskimmon and Roselle (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2013, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2017) and expounded on in earlier sections of this article. All of these narratives are geared towards specific policy changes that would allow Russia to contain NATO enlargement and impose its authority on neighboring countries, thus effectively peripherising them. To achieve this it seeks to shape Western policy elites perception on functioning of international political and security systems.

Narrative 1. Crisis of the European Security Architecture

Quick rundown:

Gist. The European security architecture is disintegrating. Former arms control regimes are disintegrating, militarization is rapid, tensions are growing. This might lead to 'inadversible collision' between NATO and Russia.

Activity. Political and diplomatic activity of Russia pushing European Security Treaty, adapted version of the CFE treaty, failing to update its Vienna document, etc.

Intended effects. Cancel infringements of international law by adopting new provisions, restrict sovereign decisions of independent states to choose political alliances, diminish trust in NATO and EU.

The foundation of this narrative is a centuries-old sentiment of Russia “bringing order” to the “decadent” Europe (Wesson 1974). The narrative of European security crisis states that Europe is militarising steadily and this threatens European security. According to this narrative, arms control regimes such as the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and political declarations such as the 1997 Russia-NATO Founding Act and other were instrumental in keeping the security sphere of Europe transparent and predictable (Ellehus & Zagorski 2019). According to this narrative, Russia is concerned with the security of Europe and thus proposes new treaties and amended versions of the existing treaties.

Among early proposals is Dmitri Medvedev’s European Security Treaty of 2009 (Zagorski 2010) - a document aimed at legally impeding new NATO accessions and deployments. (Weitz 2012) Later policy proposals stem from the same institutional network at the centre of which is the Russian International Affairs Council and IMEMO (Primakov Institute). These proposals come in the form of expert policy recommendations signed by a number of authors associated both with the above-mentioned institutions in Russia and with analytical and academic institutions in Europe and the US.

One might ask why Russia, which violated these treaties and documents or withdrew from them, is now complaining about the lack of predictability safeguarded by these documents? The US have claimed since 2013 that Russia possesses weaponry banned by Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) until in 2019 US pulled out from the treaty (U.S. Withdraws From Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty 2019). Russia withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 2015. Back in 2007, it announced it would no longer keep up with the stipulated provisions. The Russian Foreign Ministry formally announced that Russia withdrew from the treaty and will no longer inform about, or accept inspections of tanks, armed vehicles, heavy artillery, helicopters or military aircraft. It also announced that Russia is no longer bound by the “ceiling” of armaments. Russia has violated principles of the Russia-NATO Founding Act repeatedly, most recently by the annexation of Crimea, supporting military formations in Donbass, fostering break-away regions across Europe and by many other illegal activities. Although the NATO-Russia Founding Act is only a goodwill, non-binding document, its repeated violations are reflective of the overall tense and distrustful situation between Russia and the collective West. Complaining about the dissolution of these documents helps Russia present itself as a constructive force in the context of rapid militarisation.

The narrative about European security crisis aims to show Russia as seeking order, justice and dialogue, while the international arena is immersed in anarchy and chaos in which countries are frantically arming themselves. The collective West is presented as driven by irrational fears and Russophobia (DFRLab 2018, Belikova 2019). It portrays the international system as being crisis, which could subside if new agreements proposed by Russia were be in place (Ellehus & Zagorski 2019). A narrative that calls to return to the violated principles international law distracts attention from the illegal activities of Russia, instead pointing at flaws of international order, that allegedly are the reason why Russia violated them in the first place. This narrative portrays the international system and its pillars in a crisis that could subside once the new agreements proposed by Russia are in place. This would effectively cancel possible effects of the Russian violation since documents would be adapted to these violations.

The issue or problem narrative here revolves around arms control mechanisms in Europe. These mechanisms ensure the transparency of deployments, they allow planning the resources and could foresee upcoming acts of aggression. They also allow to predict what kind of resources other countries can mobilize in case of a potential crisis.

In conclusion, the narrative of the crisis in European security architecture aims to portray Russia as a constructive actor and to enable Russian access to arms control regimes, while still maintaining benefits of annexations and military deployments abroad, as well as malign influence in other countries.

Narrative 2: The US/the West are Destabilizing the Region

Quick rundown:

Gist. Transferring the blame to the US and/or NATO by claiming that the US/NATO are destabilizing the international system by withdrawing from arms control treaties, supporting sanctions for Russia, new NATO accessions, etc.

Activity. Expulsions of Western diplomats from Russia, support for anti-European parties with the EU, meddling in the US elections, internal propaganda, disinformation efforts in the West.

Intended effects. To diminish trust in the US and NATO, increase doubt in sanctions mechanism. To cause doubts about US motives in Europe. Project great power status for Russia. Support the Russian mantra: “The West and Russia need dialogue.”

It is a multifaceted practical policy-oriented narrative, which claims that the United States and NATO are destabilizing European security situation. Some iterations of this narrative are focused on shaping perceptions on arms deployment, others are focused on sanctions. For example, withdrawal of the US from nuclear non-proliferation treaty within Russia’s expert narratives is considered a world order destabilizing action that is “leading the world towards a new arms race” (Batiuk 2017). US military deployments in the Baltic States are presented as illegal, despite the fact that Baltic States fully approve and welcome these deployments (Astakhova 2015). Belarus is presented as worried about US-led militarisation in Poland and the Baltic States (V. Sutyryn 2019). US is presented as the main architect of the Three Seas Initiative that allegedly is simply an anti-Russian coalition (“Troemor’e – amerokansko-pol’skaia zapadnia dlia postsovetskikh respublik” 2018). Narratives focused on sanctions claim that by using sanctions the US is splitting the world into their own camp and outsiders and that Russian sanctions are hurting the West (Zagorskii 2017). According to this narrative, the main tool of the US in Europe is NATO (Zagorskii 2017) and NATO activities in the Baltic States and Poland are leading to a new arms race.

All these examples speak about Russia’s deliberate alienation by the collective West. Similarly, to the narrative of the Crisis of the European Security Architecture, Russia is presented in this narrative as a peace- and dialogue- seeking actor, which only aims to defend its own security, while the West continues the unjust victimisation of Russia. Within this narrative, references to the Russia-NATO Founding Act are frequent. In this act, signed in 1997, goodwill intentions between Russia and NATO were expressed in order to create more security and stability in Europe. After the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and after the 2014 Crimean annexation and Russia’s support for armed formations in Donbass, it became obvious that Russia is not interested in security and stability of Europe. Even though this document was never legally binding, but merely envisaged political intentions (Deni 2017), after the events in Georgia and Ukraine, it is clear that the Russia-NATO Founding Act is void also in practical sense.

This narrative presents the international system as a platform for great power competition (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin 2017), where great powers

either work “in concert” or compete, while smaller countries follow their lead. Such thinking today includes Cold-War-like territorial divisions, ignoring the right of states to choose alliances and independent political paths. In this narrative, the European Union and NATO are presented as aggressors and revisionists who are coveting countries that historically and culturally lie in the Russian sphere of influence. This narrative seeks to present the international system governed by great powers, instead of relying on international law. By replacing a law-based approach with great power competition ideas, Russia aims to show that the West breached the unwritten rules of the former by inviting countries to join NATO or Eastern Partnership format, or in general to choose a pro-Western path, because those countries were already in the Russian sphere of influence. To further this view, Russia employs the idea of guilt symmetry, a claim that the West is also to blame for Russian digressions from the international law. According to this narrative, the EU and the US through the Eastern Partnership format are practicing historical revisionism: “With the launch of the EU’s EaP in 2009, which offered the countries “in between” (Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) political association and economic integration with the EU, though not full membership, the EU became a major revisionist actor alongside the United States in Moscow’s eyes” (Charap et. al. 2018).

In its policy goals, this narrative is practical and geared towards greater political influence by containing the collective West or individual countries using new arms control regimes and security building measures, as well as weakening the effect of the sanctions that were imposed on Russia. In addition, the idea of great power competition is detrimental for the US and transatlantic alliance, as it diminishes trust in these players by casting doubt on their motives and support for the law-based international order. This narrative also promotes the idea that the West needs dialogue with Russia (Batyuk 2016). Russia has violated the principles of international law by annexing Crimea and further acting to destabilizing the region of Donbass, Russian security services are murdering political opponents in the West, their agents are interfering in elections, while attacks on critical infrastructure in Ukraine are financially damaging both Europe and the US. Sanctions can be regarded as a form of dialogue appropriate for the current political situation.

To conclude, the narrative about the US and NATO destabilising the region relies on ideas of a world order based on great power competition and guilt symmetry between the collective West and Russia. This narrative is geared towards actual international policy changes and sets basis for a

narrative on Russia's sphere of influence which will be analysed in the following section.

Narrative 3. Russia's Sphere of Influence

Gist. Historically, some countries are Russia's sphere of influence.

Activity. The Belarus-Russia Union State, the annexation of Crimea, the militarisation of Kaliningrad, defending compatriots, handing out Russian passports in the Donbass region, refusing to withdraw from Georgia and Transnistrian Moldova, modernisation of military forces in Abkhazia, etc.

Intended effects. To decrease the trust in NATO and the European Union, projecting great power status for Russia.

Russia's narrative of the sphere of influence claims that post-Soviet Europe is historically part of Russia's sphere of interest and influence (Trenin 2009) or "privileged interest" (Kramer 2008). Along with other above-mentioned narratives, it aims to push countries Russia considers its sphere of influence into the Grey Zone, where provisions of international law do not apply. The narrative about Russia's sphere of influence is of a varying cultural and historical depth and strength depending on the country. For example, applying it to Ukraine and Belarus it is based on the idea of an All-Russian Nation, which purports that the three countries (Russia, Ukraine and Belarus) have origin in the same unified "Russian substrate" (Smith et. al 1998). For the Baltic states, the narrative is historically legitimated by claiming that these are territories that were part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union and thus are naturally part of the Russian sphere of influence (Vorotnikov & Ivanova 2019). This narrative claims that the Baltic States joined NATO due to the grace of Russia (Charap et. al. 2018), that Russia had hopes of countries bordering on it to become a "buffer zone" from NATO (Trenin 2009), that countries bordering Russia would form "a belt of friendly, loyal neighbors" (Trenin 2009). More policy-oriented iterations suggest that independent states should consult Russia before joining alliances (Ellehus & Zagorski 2019), or that the West and Moscow should supply independent states with proposals on their aligned or non-aligned statuses (Charap et al 2019). Most of these narratives sometimes casually or unintentionally are overtaken and supported by branches of foreign thinks tanks or other policy organizations in Russia in order to please local policy environment. The internalisation of these stories happens when attitudes

towards the issues by the strategic communities are not well expressed in the targeted countries

In terms of identity, this narrative seeks to portray Russia as a great power, the sovereign that transcends the sovereignty of smaller states. This narrative can be considered inheritance of imperial Russia which expanded at the expense of its neighbouring states, unlike European imperialism which was much more oriented towards overseas territories (Wesson 1974). After the end of the Cold War and the beginning of greater fluidity, with the rapid increase of Chinese international influence, the projection of this narrative helps maintain the idea that Russia ranks among great powers. However, this narrative is unstable due to the size of the Russian economy and continues to be challenged by other players. Thus the notion of Russia as a great power is supported and furthered by the Russian ideas of multipolar (Timofeev 2019) or polycentric world order. In contrast to China or the US which utilise their economic influence, Russia, because of its limited economic power, much more often resorts to methods such as diversion, coercion, persuasion and blackmail. One of the ways to maintain the narrative of Russia having privileged zones of influence is purporting military threats and consistent disregard for the sovereignty of smaller countries.

The narrative on the Russian sphere of influence is only possible in the context of international system narrative based on ideas of great power competition. It would not be possible, from the perspective of international law as a primary organising principle of international system, because spheres of influence would simply be illegal. Guilt symmetry plays important role in this narrative: the West is portrayed as seeking to “softly oust it [Russia] from European politics” and engaging in hybrid warfare through organising colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space (Timofeev 2016).

In the practical sense, the spheres of influence narrative aims to restrict sovereign states’ seeking and joining alliances and to empower Russia to have more influence in these matters. Numerous policy proposals have been put forward on how to achieve them. Among them is a proposal for countries to seek consultations with Russia before joining alliances: “Without questioning the right to freely choose alliances, Moscow insists that it should not be exercised at the expense of the security of other states (including Russia), and that the indivisibility of security should be taken into consideration—another promise of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. In particular, the 1994 OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of

Security explicitly commits the participating states to “bearing in mind the legitimate security concerns of other states” while exercising the freedom of alliances (Ellehus & Zagorski 2019). Another proposal of this kind is focused on a “third way” or neutral status. In contrast to the currently accepted notion of neutrality, such as the neutrality declared by Switzerland, this “third way” neutrality would be offered by great countries to smaller ones, a stipulation that they ought not to join alliances (Charap et al 2019).

Conclusions

Russia uses Grey Zone policy processes and the supporting narratives in order to establish itself as superior to NATO in the region along Russian borders. Russian think tanks, as distinct from academic institutions focusing exclusively on academic forms of debate, participate actively in public policy debates which aim to change perceptions of the international environment in the targeted countries.

Government-backed think tanks’ and their public personas’ collaboration with think tank networks in the West, their publications and presentations in English, their organised international forums and discussions are among main tools that help to promote Russian strategic narratives in the West. These should be recognised as part of the Russian hybrid toolbox.

Think tank narration of the international system, its structure, and main problems, as well as Russia itself often reflects narratives promoted by policy elites. Therefore, we conclude, that it is very likely that this narration is intentionally designed to reflect Russia’s interests in the European region. In its strategic narration, think tanks and policy elites present a fabricated dilemma of strategic stability in Europe to be solved in one way only – by recognising Russian sphere of influence and restricting NATO and the US. On the one hand, in strategic narratives, national governments on the Russian western frontier are portrayed as incapable of offering a viable defence. On the other hand, within Russian strategic narration on its spheres of influence, these states to a different extent are stripped of agency of governance and ability to make their own policy decisions and are rather presented as territories, zones, and spheres governed by their more powerful Eastern or Western neighbours

The political goal of such narratives is to diminish trust in international formats such as NATO on one hand, and, on the other hand,

persuade individual states within NATO, that NATO Eastern Flank efforts are pointless. It is detrimental for the law-based international order and alliances built on these principles to juggle with the ideas of Russia along with other great powers deciding the foreign policy and security issues of other states. It would violate core principles of European international relations – democracy, sovereignty of states and the right to make independent foreign policy decisions. As a second order effect, such narration might cast doubt on various behind-the-curtain deals of trusted partnerships. This strategic narrative promoted by the Russian think tanks and their analysts is also detrimental for EU's Eastern Partnership format, as its portrayed international system and political motives leave little choice for countries to actually follow a pro-European path. The Russian objection to legal and moral obligations (international law and international decency) as leverage and, along with political correctness, might undermine stability and endanger peace. The Russian foreign policy community needs strategic narratives that would help to shape the perception of Russia's breaches of international law in the eyes of policy players in Europe and the US as necessary and justifiable. The situations of the targeted countries are deteriorating as Russia's perception starts to be taken for granted as an objectively existing state. The solution is however not a change in policy with mind-projection fallacy to satisfy the opponent's phobia-based expectations, but rather to assist in combating the phobia itself.

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Henrietta Mondry and Evgeny Pavlov

**RUSSIA'S FUTURES, FROM FAIRY TALES AND EDITORIALS
TO KREMLIN NARRATIVES: PROKHANOV, DUGIN, SURKOV**

Abstract

The article examines narratives of Russia's geopolitical future that originate in Neo-Eurasianist ideology. These narratives, rooted in the pre-war Russian émigré school of historiography, identify Russia's special civilisational destiny as a land-based power that makes it distinct from Western sea powers. These narratives have circulated among Russia's right-wing intelligentsia since the late 1980s and have recently become mainstream. Their partial adoption by the Kremlin ideologists demonstrates their exceptional staying power and also raises questions about how the Russian ruling elite sees the future. The case studies selected here include the writings of the veteran author Aleksandr Prokhanov, influential theorist Aleksandr Dugin, and the Kremlin advisor Vladislav Surkov. We argue that while Prokhanov's and Dugin's visions are based on eschatological notions rooted in the Russia's pre-Petrine past and in folklore. Surkov's programmatic article that takes some of the same notions as its point of departure is nonetheless a poor attempt at imagining a future as an indefinitely suspended present of the Putin regime.

Keywords: Prokhanov, Aleksandr; Dugin, Aleksandr; Surkov, Vladislav; Neo-Eurasianism; newspaper editorials; time in political narratives.

Мы рождены, чтоб сказку сделать былью
[We are born to make fairy tales come true]

The Song of Soviet Aviators, 1923.

Ever since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Putin's ideologists and propagandists have been busy devising narratives of the "Russian world" "getting up from its knees" and correcting an "outrageous historical injustice" imposed upon Russians outside the Russian Federation by the Western powers intent on weakening their defeated Cold War foe. Thus, given Russia's resolute choice not to abandon its people outside its borders, residents of Crimea "were able to peacefully express their free will regarding their own future" (Putin 2014), while the residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions had to resort to armed insurrection and war in order to defend the future of their language and culture on their own land. These narratives are all too familiar to the viewers of Russia's state-controlled TV channels and other media outlets that have been exploiting them for the last seven years. More recently, following Putin's increasingly draconian political measures, including the decision to change the Constitution and

have the two-term limit on power it stipulates “zero out” for himself, one wonders what sort of future he envisions for his country and, no less importantly, how this future is legitimised. Already in his speech on the annexation of Crimea, he resorted to various historical narratives and myths through which the future of the peninsula was framed and, in a sense prefigured: the original unity of the three East Slavonic nations, the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Chersonesos, the glorious imperial and Soviet military history in which Crimea played an important part as a stronghold common to a whole number of nations united under Russia’s fold. In thinking about the future, Putin’s speech writers and advisors draw their inspiration from a range of sources in all of which the vision of the present and the future is prefigured and predetermined. This vision is always ultra-conservative, most often religious, ultra-nationalist, utopian, at times racist, and on occasion downright bizarre. In what follows we would like to examine a particular futuristic narrative line that is firmly rooted in Neo-Eurasianist fantasies and, in part, in Russian fairy tales. We find traces of the same type of thinking in the rambling, baroque editorials regularly penned by the veteran author Aleksandr Prokhanov, militant scholarly and journalistic texts of the ultra-right philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, and a recent programmatic article of the Kremlin’s long-term ideologist Vladislav Surkov. We argue that although the three approaches to futurity share some of the same ideological basis, they demonstrate a clear difference when it comes to the future. Where Prokhanov envisions the past as prefiguring the future in dreams and fairy tales, Dugin sees the future as a deliberate return to a certain kind of past which to him is an expression of eternity, and Surkov expects the future to be nothing but an extension of the present.

Prokhanov and his editorials: the evolution of the Soviet genre

Among the Russian online newspapers, the weekly *Zavtra.ru* occupies a special position because, as its title [*Tomorrow.ru*] suggests, the newspaper’s identity is constructed around the notion of the future. The concept of futurity, which the newspaper develops and promotes, is a symbiosis of science and eschatology, technology and religious beliefs, all of which are given political dimensions. This combination makes the idea of achieving the ultimate futuristic dream of humanity - that of immortality - possible, providing there is state leadership which directs the nation along the right path. Historically, from the year of its conception in 1993, this newspaper has been a platform for strong nationalistic and patriotic views.¹

¹ The newspaper is available online and in hard copies, its declared circulation is 100.000 copies.

It promotes the geopolitical views of popular Neo-Eurasianist ideology which groups or juxtaposes civilisations in terms of their alleged in/compatible worldviews based on historically divergent or similar pasts. As a platform concerned with futurity, the newspaper often generates visions and scenarios for the future which are linked with utopian narratives and, in some cases, fairy tale motifs. In the case of the specific futurity of *Zavtra.ru* the development of this vision is steered mainly through the editorials of by its editor-in-chief, Aleksandr Prokhanov (b. 1938), a veteran journalist and essayist with the career spanning from the late Soviet era to the present. An important public personality, Prokhanov's political vision is based on drawing a line of continuity between pre-modern Russia, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. He terms this alleged overarching line of permanence "the Empire" and dubs the current juncture in time/space as the stage before the final "Fifth Empire", and presents his vision of Russian religious-technocratic messianism. Focusing on the culture-specific genre of editorials, we demonstrate that the editorials in *Zavtra.ru* are the laboratory of creation of a specific brand of futurity, which is proleptic in its incorporation of the past into a vision of the desired future. We argue that this futurity is simultaneously forward looking and conservative because it glorifies the events of the past on the basis of their futuristic potential which could not be fully realised earlier. The ability to dream as well as the subject matter of dreams become a category for evaluation of the past, present and future of the national states and their people. Moreover, the will and ability to turn dreams into reality are presented as unique characteristics of the Russian people and their leaders.

The style and rhetoric of Prokhanov's editorials are strongly grounded in the form of this genre as it was defined and practised in the Soviet Union. *Peredovitsa* or *peredovaia stat'ia* is a front-page newspaper article which was one of the important means of propaganda in the USSR. In the 1970s, *peredovitsa* was charged with "informing and influencing the wider readership." According to the definition of the style of *peredovitsa* in the 1973 textbook *The Language and Style of the Editorial Article* ("Язык и стиль передовой статьи"), editorials are texts which are used for expressions of subjective and emotive views with the aim of influencing political opinions of a wide collective of readers:

In the editorial articles the factors of subjective evaluation have the decisive influence in the usage of language resources which solve communicative tasks of persuasion, giving directives and aiding the critical evaluation of unfolding events. The language of the editorial

expresses the subjective aspirations of the authors to influence the political and ideological views of the wider readership. Language forms here acquire deeply expressive character [...]. (Solgalnik 1973 58)

Moreover, according to the tenets of the newspaper style and structure, there should be a sharp distinction between a dry and informative style of the rest of the newspaper and the emotive style of the editorial:

Study of newspaper narratives shows that there is a clear difference between informative articles and editorials. The first kind use documentary style conveying information. The second kind have an overtly evaluative polemical character and have the effect of agitation, in many parameters coming close to the language of fiction. (ibid.)

Starting from the Perestroika period of the late 1980s, the Russian language of mass media has developed significantly and became enriched with religious vocabulary and homiletic rhetoric, identified by scholars as “*religiozno-propovednicheskii stil*” – “religious homiletic style” (Gosteeva). This style, in turn, borrows its vocabulary and rhetoric from literary and ceremonial genres, intersecting them with long-form journalist writing (*publitsistika*). The new style partially overlaps with the style of Soviet editorials which synthesised various genres and allowed an expression of authorial subjectivity. What was a set of characteristic features of Soviet editorials becomes a feature of contemporary *publitsistika* with its emphasis on emotive expressivity which has to have an appeal to the large collective of the speakers of the Russian language (Solgalnik 2006). Of special relevance to Aleksandr Prokhanov’s editorials in *Zavtra.ru* is the notion of the symbiotic style of the narrative, which brings together elements of essayistic writing, reportage and fiction. Moreover, Prokhanov also incorporates and even develops a religious-homiletic style by introducing not only religious themes but also by using the rhetoric of religious sermons. Notably, Prokhanov is not only an essayist but also an author of award-winning novels with phantasmagorical conspiracist plots, most of which promote Neo-Eurasianist ideology (Livers 2010, 2020).² His experience in a wide range of writing makes him a competent author of the culture-specific genre of newspaper editorials.

² His 2002 novel *Mr. Hexogen* (*Gospodin Geksogen*) won that year’s National Best Seller competition. He also won the prestigious literary Bunin Prize in 2009, the aim of which is “to revive the best traditions of Russian national literature”. In “Obladatelem Buninskoi premii stal Aleksandr Prokhanov”. *Kommersant*. 23. 10. 2009. 12.

Narratives of eternity and continuity in history

In his editorial “The Fifth Stalin” (“Piatyi Stalin”) (19. 12. 2018) Prokhanov formulates the idea of a homogenous cultural continuity in Russia (Prokhanov 2018). He explains this continuity by the idea of common aspirations for the implementation of dreams into reality. To develop the concept of such unifying continuity he creates the notion “Stil’ Stalin”, “Stalin Style” which he uses proleptically and transhistorically, but, importantly, not transnationally. According to him, this Style already existed in Kievan Rus which united disparate peoples into a cohesive nationality and made way for the building of an empire. The Stalin Style, Prokhanov maintains, achieved its high point during the time of real Stalin whose leadership helped Russia to realize its industrial, technological and military might. Of relevance is the fact that between 1930 and 1953 (the year of Stalin’s death) there indeed emerged style known as *stalinskii ampir*, Stalinist Empire style, which found its representation in architecture, sculpture and interior décor. Characterised by grandeur and pomposity, the style incorporated elements of Deco, Baroque and Napoleonic Empire but, notably, after Stalin’s death, this Stalinist Empire style was criticised for its excesses and extravagant spending.³ And while today the most iconic architectural monuments of this style adorn the cityscape of Moscow as well as its underground metro stations, they are artefacts of a particular epoch and particular ideology. Scholars of the semiotics of grand buildings and sculptures of the Stalin period note that these structures were erected as “intentional” monuments. They were meant to represent “ahistoricity”, and function “as some sort of utopian preserve of the future where time would not flow” (Yampolsky 98). At the same time, as monuments, they also bridged the past with the future thus creating and reinforcing an idea of homogenous continuity in a given culture.

Fittingly, in Prokhanov’s definition, the Stalin Style is transhistorical, encompassing past, present and future, and, for this reason, it is presented as a cultural phenomenon which emerged long before the historical Stalin. Prokhanov conceptualises this style as a specifically national phenomenon, which unifies national character with the uniquely specific style of leadership. This essentialised uniqueness, in turn, has strong messianic connotations. Notably, the alleged continuity in culture is interrupted only by the outside enemy. Historical Stalin, whom Prokhanov calls the fourth

³ See a discussion on this in Day.

Stalin, is presented as the apogee of the so called “Russian time”: “Stalin is a splash of the Russian time from the peak of which eternity opens up” – “Сталин — это всплеск русского времени, с вершины которого видна бесконечность”.

This chronotopic image creates an intersection between time and space, where the space is geopolitically bound to the Russian Empire’s territories while both time and space converge in eternity. The implication is that territorially the Russian Empire will not diminish and that those who live within its borders are guaranteed the kind of future which goes beyond the limits of earthly existence. This eternity is achieved by technological advances and hard work, which will make the return of Stalin himself – the Fifth Stalin - possible. The rhetoric and the imagery have distinct religious-propagandistic overtones in line with the tenets of the Soviet editorials combined with the developments of the last decade of the Soviet Union.

Addressing the issue of real physical immortality, Prokhanov characteristically enmeshes science, art and dreams in his formulation of Russian futurity, in which the resurrection of Stalin becomes a reality:

Скульпторы и художники, стремящиеся поставить монумент Сталину, не спешите и дождитесь его нового появления. Пятый Сталин не будет отлит из бронзы, не будет высечен из гранита или мрамора. Пятый Сталин — это скорость света, это скорость русской истории, это русская мечта. Художник, ты можешь изобразить скорость света? Можешь изобразить русскую мечту?

Sculptors and artists, who aim to put a monument to Stalin, do not rush but wait for his new appearance. The Fifth Stalin will not be cast in bronze, nor will he be cut out of granite or marble. The Fifth Stalin – is the speed of light, the speed of Russia’s history, it is Russian dream. Artist, can you represent the speed of light? Can you represent the Russian dream?

Prokhanov’s vision of the future has broad appeal because it converges elements of religious and scientific utopianism. Notably, Prokhanov is a Fedorovian, and on many occasions he refers to Nikolai Fedorov’s *The History of the Common Task* (1903) as the source of his beliefs in the possibility to achieve the corporeal resurrection of generations of dead ancestors. Fedorov’s scientific utopian thinking had an unparalleled impact on both religious and atheistic futurity in Russia and the Soviet Union. It also

influenced the development of Soviet cosmism which was driven by Fedorov's idea that new planetary spaces will be needed to accommodate the resurrected humans and a growing population of now immortal people (Young). However, unlike Fedorov's quest for a global and transnational collaboration in achieving this task of resurrecting the dead, Prokhanov's cosmism is centred around the nation state and even alludes to the current race towards the colonisation of planetary spaces. It is, perhaps, for this latter reason that he equates Stalin and new Russian Empire of the future with the speed of light.

In Prokhanov's editorials the narrative of historical continuity in Russian missionary dreaming and the strength of the state inevitably has to include the country's current leader, Vladimir Putin. In an article with an explicitly futuristic title, "Putin, a Russian Dreamer" (30.01.2019) "Путин - русский мечтатель", Prokhanov further develops the topic of the Russian dream. In this article, his Fedorovian utopianism and cosmism become overt and enmeshed with folk dreams about a better future. Opening with the question "I would like to understand, what is our state-power, our multi-ethnic Russian Dream?" Prokhanov proceeds by formulating the dream:

Эту Мечту не угадаешь сразу. [...] Её можно понять, если кропотливо исследовать весь путь нашей истории от древних времён до нынешних дней, если услышать, как высказывают эту Мечту самые прозорливые, самые просвещённые люди разных русских времён: её пророки, её ясновидцы, её великие, прозревающие будущее, политики и поэты.

This Dream cannot be guessed quickly. [...] It can be understood by scrupulously examining the whole path of our history from ancient times till recent days; it can be understood by hearing how this Dream is expressed by the most foreseeing and enlightened people of various times in Russian history: its prophets, its seers, its great future-seeing politicians and poets.

Of note is Prokanov's use of the words such as "*prozrevat*" which he borrows from the religious vocabulary and uses in a new meaning. *Prozrevat*' means to start seeing after being blind, which is an allusion to Christian Scriptures (John 9:25), while figuratively the verb means to foresee and predict. This lexical choice results in the image of Russian leaders as anointed by Providence in their historical mission, which includes the current activities of the president of Russia.

National dreams and fairy tale narratives

In this editorial Prokhanov turns to dreams in their relation to various nationalities. He also uses fairy tale motifs as the foundation for what he conceptualizes as specific national dreams. His strategy is to show that dreams need to be turned into reality. Today, the dreams of the Russian nation as expressed in Russian fairy tales are realised by people toiling in science, industry and agriculture: “Русские сказки своим неповторимым языком поведали нам о нашей Мечте, которую сегодня мы продолжаем воплощать в наших лабораториях, на наших нивах, на наших хлебных полях”. (“Russian fairy tales revealed to us our Dream in their unique language, and today we continue to realise it in our laboratories, in our cornfields and farmlands.”)

Turning to Russian fairy tales allows Prokhanov to create a narrative of Dreams which synthesises pre-Christian folk motifs with religious eschatology and scientific futurity. Importantly, Prokhanov uses fairy tales as an expression of a nation’s specificity. Dreams in his rendition become reflections of a nation’s mentality determined by its historical past. Importantly, he mentions dreams of other peoples of Russia and strategically confines his examples to the territorial borders of the Russian state. Describing his conversations with people of various ethnic groups during his travels through Russia, he focuses on the themes in the dreams of immortality and the good life on this earth. He then turns to defining various national dreams of the main powerful states globally, and his choice of the nations allows him to show contrasting dreams as well as different ways in which these dreams are implemented in reality. He first identifies and glorifies the Russian dream as well as the dreams of some ethnic groups of the Russian state, and then formulates his understanding of American and Chinese dreams. The choice of the United States and China is grounded in the geopolitical doctrines of Neo-Eurasianism. According to Neo-Eurasianist views, the United States represents an Atlanticist civilisation, driven by mercantilism and expansionism. Countries of the Atlanticist groups represent civilization which is incompatible with the Eurasian mentality of continental peoples presented as deeply rooted in native soil. China also stands outside of the notion of “complimentary” nations of Eurasia.⁴ This is in line with the original Eurasian thinking of the 1920s

⁴ The tenets of Neo-Eurasianism are essentialist and were developed by Lev Gumilev whose work came to prominence with the fall of the Soviet Union. Gumilev coined

defined by Nikolai Trubetskoi, who excluded “old Asiatic kingdoms” such as China from the Eurasian world. The reason for this exclusion was explained by the fact that China as an ancient civilisation was formed before Genghis Khan’s unification of the peoples of Eurasia under the “Pan-Asiatic imperialism” (Trubetzkoy 195). According to Trubetskoi, in its subordination to the Muscovite State, the Eurasian world “achieved for the first time a cultural self-sufficiency” (Trubetzkoy 197). Contemporary Neo-Eurasianist thinking valorises this idea of the homologous development and unity of the peoples of Eurasia.

According to Prokhanov, dreams about futurity develop differently among different nations. In Russia, such dreams materialise in achievements in science which, importantly, in his rendition are presented as being in harmony with both the Russian Orthodox faith and pantheistic beliefs. Fittingly, Prokhanov’s choice of nationalities within Russia itself is selective and in line with the categories of Neo-Eurasianism. His description of conversations held with wisemen and sages during his travels mentions a carefully selected group of the peoples of Eurasia. The absence of some nationalities is particularly evident in his descriptions of travels in the Caucasus when he writes about the dreams of the Ossetians but excludes dreams of the Muslim minorities. Another illustration of strategic choice of ethnic groups is Prokhanov’s mention of the Mari people of the Volga region who traditionally practice animism. The choice of Mari fits current trends in the neo-pagan revival in Russia which accommodates ancestral cults of *rodnoverie* and serves the nationalist agenda (Laruelle). Having paid tribute to the role of dreams expressed in fairy tales—such as the desire for abundance and eternal life—Prokhanov prepares the ground for the culmination of these dreams in the scientific futurity of the Fedorovian brand, which is materialised in the victories of space exploration:

Русская Мечта — мечта космическая. Она несётся в мире с первой и второй космической скоростью, она несётся в мире со скоростью света. (Prokhanov 2019)

The Russian dream is cosmic. It moves with the first and second cosmic velocity, it moves with the speed of light.

His summary of the Russian Dream celebrates the role of the state and its leaders:

concepts such as *komplimentarnost'* and “ethogenesis” to argue that some ethnic groups (including Jews) are not compatible with the others. (Gumilev)

Так в чём же она, Русская Мечта? Это мечта о могучем и праведном Царстве, которое окружает и охраняет общество великой справедливости, любви и благодати, где в гармонию приведены силы природы и силы техники, силы отдельного человека и всемогущего государства. Где жизнь лесного цветка и жизнь мерцающей звезды небесной соединены общим ощущением мировой симфонии. Эта благодать добывается великими трудами, великими усилиями всего нашего российского общества, каждой российской земли, каждого проживающего на этих землях народа. (Ibid.)

So what is the essence of the Russian Dream? It is a dream about a mighty and saintly Kingdom which defends the society of great justice, love and grace, where the forces of nature and powers of technologies harmoniously unite with the forces of the individual and the almighty state. It is the place where the life of a forest flower and a shining star in the sky are united by the collective sense of world harmony. This grace is achieved by great labour, great efforts of the whole of our Russian society, of every bit of the Russian soil and of every nationality that lives on this soil.

While Prokhanov pays tribute to the nationalities of the Russian state, he nevertheless maintains that all dreams and hopes of these nationalities converge into a homogenous Russian dream.

Having identified the Russian dream, Prokhanov defines “the American Dream”. While he pays tribute to the US’s achievements in science and technology, he denies the eschatological dimensions of the dream of the American people:

Американская мечта — это “град на холме”, это крепость, построенная на горе, с которой видны все другие, лежащие в долинах, города и селения. И если в каком-то из этих селений возникает беспорядок, американцы из своих бойниц посыпают долинские города и селения своими крылатыми ракетами. (Ibid.)

The American dream is a city on a hill, it is a fortress from which all other cities and villages are observable. And if there is trouble in one of these places Americans start firing rockets from their arrowslits at these cities and villages.

Prokhanov not only promulgates the Soviet image of the United States as a country of aggressors, he specifically limits the so-called American dream to the defence of the existing order without wanting to change the present for a better future.

His definition of “the Chinese Dream” similarly diminishes the role of futuristic visions and presents China as a civilisation of secular orientation:

Китайская мечта, которая сопрягается с Великим Шёлковым путём, — это мечта о восстановлении китайского достоинства, того достоинства, которое на протяжении долгих лет попиралось то англичанами, то японцами, достоинства, которое было растоптано. И сегодня Китай, достигая великого возрождения, стремится утвердить своё существование в гармоничном и цветущем мире. (Ibid.)

The Chinese dream is connected with the Silk Route. It is a dream of re-establishing Chinese dignity, the kind of dignity which for many years was insulted at times by the English, or by the Japanese, a kind of dignity which was trampled upon. Today China, reaching its great rebirth, aims to assert its existence in a harmonious and flowering world.

What explicitly characterises and distinguishes these two national dreams from the Russian dream is their lack of daring eschatological aspirations. Both of these dreams, in Prokhanov’s construal, are concerned with this worldly life but lack the vision of immortality. Having described these alternative national dreams, Prokhanov’s editorial makes a rhetorical conclusion about the distinctive character of the Russian dream:

Русская мечта — это храм на холме. Мы построили холм из наших верований, страданий, поражений, из великих побед и откровений. На вершине этого холма мы построили храм, который своими крестами касается небесной лазури, касается света Фаворского. И этот свет проливается к нам, на землю, в наши семьи, на наши космодромы, в наши гарнизоны, на наши заводы. (Ibid.)

The Russian dream is a temple on a hill. We have built the hill from our beliefs, suffering, defeats, from great victories and revelations. On

the top of this hill, we have built a temple whose crosses touch heaven and the Tabor light. And this light shines on the earth, on our families, on our cosmodromes, on our garrisons, on our factories.

Russia is presented as a country of dreamers who are united by transgenerational ties:

Мы — мечтатели. Ты, я, родившийся вчера младенец и старик, доживающий свою долгую жизнь. Россия — это страна мечтателей и героев.

We are the dreamers. You and me, the baby who was born yesterday and the old man, who is at the end of his long life. Russia is the country of dreamers and heroes.

In this editorial Prokhanov suggests that only those who have a common dream can have a future. Russia comes out as a leader because of its alleged ability to implement the boldest futuristic dream of its peoples, namely, to achieve immortality. Of note is the fact that Prokhanov is prepared to grant people of nations such as the USA and China the ability to dream, albeit in an inferior way. This can be explained by the fact that his notions of future are proleptic and take into account a common historical past. This model of assigning significance to the shared past and an affinity of goals is in line with the main principles of Neo-Eurasianism.

In this context, Prokhanov's selection of nations and their dreams has a telling void – it excludes European states, nations and their dreams. The absence of Europe in this scheme of civilizations is quite conspicuous and as such it is a void which must serve a purpose. In terms of the Neo-Eurasianist geopolitical doctrine, Western Europe is an Atlanticist civilisation due to its colonial expansionism and the de-territorialisation of continental borders. The editorial article is a mix of subjective imagination, fiction and political discourse, and as such it is a form of literature which relies on deconstruction by its readers. It is expected that the reader will fill the void based on his or her general knowledge. Readers of the newspaper cannot fail to notice this void as Europe/EU today is an important political entity. The void thus becomes a device that signifies a hidden meaning. The question which Prokhanov invites his readers to ponder on is this: Why is Europe not part of his thematization of national dreams? The answer, we propose, lies in a carefully chosen strategy: If the narratives of the unifying dream are a foundation of a given nation, then the European Union does not fall into this

category because it is a young and inorganic entity. Eurasian Russia is presented as a homogenous civilization which is founded on identical drives and hopes in spite of its multi-ethnic composition.⁵ (Hence the purpose of mentioning diverse nationalities such as formerly animistic, but today mainly Orthodox Mari people of the Volga region and Orthodox Ossetians.) The United States and China also are the entities which have, according to Prokhanov, a common task. They have been integrated historically into nations with people who share the same dreams because they were moulded by common mythologies. Europe and the EU are fragmented entities when it comes to the “dream” reflected in fairy tale motifs and narratives. From this follows that the EU/Europe does not have a common dream and therefore cannot have a future. Historically the systematic collection of fairy tales by folklorists occurred at the time of the rise of the nation state at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Romantic philologists such as the Brothers Grimm collected fairy tales in the Germanic lands, and not in “Europe”. Viewed in this context, the EU might be a political entity, but, by implication of the Prokhanovian notion of dreaming together, it has no future because its people were not brought up on the same dreams. The logic of Prokhanov’s reasoning is circular: in order to have a dream one has to be brought up on the same dreams. If people do not share the dreams through generations, they cannot succeed in the way they think about the future because they do not dream together. The implication is that the EU is not going to be a major player in the domain of futurity because its mission is not based on the firm foundation of the narratives which have homogenous beginnings and happy endings.

Mixing Fairy Tales with Geopolitical Doctrines

While Prokhanov’s editorials perform the same function as they did in the Soviet press, his style has characteristic features which correspond to new developments in the essayistic writing that emerged since the 1980s. Prokhanov’s editorials both reflect this development of religious-homiletic style and imagery and employ a number of features of the Soviet newspaper editorials, one of them being an expectation to refer to a wider political context. In this case, the context relates to the geopolitical situation of Russia *via-à-vis* the European Union in all its complexity. Moreover, his implicit categorization of fairy tales as underpinned by the unifying role of the national state is a manifestation of his authorial subjectivity. Such subjectivity was a prescriptive feature of the Soviet editorials which has received further developments in current Russian media.

⁵ On Neo-Eurasianism and futurity in Prokhanov’s fiction see Mondry.

By choosing to treat dreams and fairy tales within the notion of the nation state Prokhanov adheres to a view of fairy tale motifs which has its beginnings in the era of Romanticism with its emphasis on national heritage. Importantly, according to this folkloristic paradigm, the phenomenon of similar plots in fairy tales and myths among peoples is explained by similarities among *rodstvennye narody* (kinship peoples), stressing their common genealogical origins. A later concept of *brodiachie siuzhety* (migratory plots), articulated by Aleksandr Veselovsky (1838-1906), puts an emphasis on cross-cultural influences and the mobility of plots. Fittingly, in the Stalin era in the post-WW2 period, followers of the Veselovsky school of folkloristic thought were criticized for the notion of migratory and transnational plots.⁶ Such theoretical views were regarded as unpatriotic as they diminished the notion of exclusivity and specificity of national myths (Veselovsky).

Prokhanov's concept of the specifically national dreams and fairy tale motifs conforms to the nationalistically-tinted understanding of fairy tales. More importantly, his adherence to the notion of the common plot motifs among the *rodstvennye narody* intersects with the Neo-Eurasianist geopolitical ideology. Yet he adjusts the notion of *rodstvennye narody* by excluding other Slavic peoples such as Ukrainians making his void politically motivated and recognisable by readers. With Ukraine's leanings towards Euro-Atlantic structures, the current rift between Russia and Ukraine clearly has an impact on Prokhanov's elaborations on the dreams about the future.⁷ It is for this reason that he selectively concentrates on ethnic groups situated geographically to the east of Moscow to both reiterate and politically modify the foundations of the original Eurasianism. (In Trubetskoi's writing, Ukraine, in spite of the period of colonisation by Poland, was viewed as a Eurasian civilisation.) Additionally, Prokhanov's inclusion of dreams of shamans and wisemen intertwines animistic beliefs with the Orthodox faith to reflect the fashionable syncretistic religious and cultural trends, such as *rodnoverie* and quasi-New Age movements in vogue in Russia today. This syncretistic collage, in turn, echoes the phantasmagorical plots of his novels as well as the plots of other fantasy

⁶ On the history of trends in Russian and Soviet folkloristics see Meletinskii. The publication of Meletinsky's book became possible during the brief period of Thaw in the Soviet Union. The second edition came out after the fall of the Soviet Union.

⁷ On Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic orientation see Vineta Kleinberga and Elizabete Vizgunova in this issue.

literature which deal with the resurrection of famous historical personalities, including Stalin and even Nikolai Fedorov himself.⁸

It is important to reiterate that dreaming together is not the only factor which guarantees a radiant future for Russia. In line with his notion that the Russian people turn Russian fairy tales into reality, Prokhanov maintains that political leaders have to be able to implement common dreams into reality. In his editorial “Lenin, a Man of the Sky” (“Lenin – chelovek neba”) (22.04.2020), dedicated to Lenin’s birthday, Prokhanov calls Lenin a great “futurologist” who could not only predict future but also “realise it.”⁹ Notably, in fictional genres, such as Soviet science fiction, dreams and the future have to turn to reality while realisation and actualisation of dreams have to complement the ability to dream collectively (Gomel). At this juncture Prokhanov’s narratives link the pathos of the newspaper editorials with the plots of Soviet futurity fiction and current fantasy literature in line with the canonical principles of Soviet newspaper writing. In terms of the tenets of the genre of the editorials, Prokhanov incorporates all its major characteristics. On the one hand, his editorials have a degree of subjectivity which renders critical questioning of his revelations superfluous. On the other hand, his views about futurity and the achievement of immortality are not entirely fictional. To be effective they are grounded in the futuristic trends and activities of contemporary Russian society which, according to a recent anthropological study, has strong movements and communities who work on the achievement of immortality and the extension of life beyond the confines of the earth by techno-biological means.¹⁰ In this way the emotive-subjective writing of Prokhanov’s editorials responds to the wider context of trends and aspirations of contemporary readers. Notably, his propagandistic editorials promote political agendas by advocating the cohesiveness of the multi-ethnic empire – “the Fifth Empire” – whose future is construed as invincible and eternal because its past and present are fortified by homogenous dreams. The political leaders of this Empire are presented as great visionary dreamers and futurologists who have the ability to mobilise people “to make fairy tales come true”.

⁸ Viktor Sharov’s novels fall into this category. See an interview with him on “Shkola zlosloviia”. On these plots see Mondry 2017.

⁹ “Ленин был экономист, политик, futuroлог, он остро ощущал будущее, он его предрекал и потом реализовывал” (Prokhanov 2020).

¹⁰ See Bernstein, a recent anthropological study of contemporary futurity groups, including followers of Nikolai Fedorov and Cosmists. The study is based on interviews and placed in the context of Russian thinking about scientific and religious immortality.

These last words – “we were born to make fairy tales come true” which come from the song of the Soviet aviators written in the 1920s encapsulate the overarching expression of Soviet and post-Soviet national futurity advanced by Prokhanov. Read against the backdrop of the newspaper editorials, the line from the song embodies both continuity and change between the Soviet and post-Soviet propagandistic futurity. The wording of the song of the early aviators has a remarkable flexibility which captures both the overt and the hidden dimensions of collective dreams’ propaganda powers. In the 1920s, this line served as an incarnation of the atheistic technocratic dream to fly and to conquer the sky. Notably, the line-slogan strongly alluded to the motifs of Russian and Slav fairy tales about the flying carpet, “*kover-samolet*” which, as a form of folk creativity, were interpreted as devoid of religious mysticism. Overtly, the conquest of the sky by Soviet aviators was positioned to negate religious beliefs in the sky as heaven. Yet, paradoxically, the dream of reaching the sky could not be separated from religious eschatology, and the atheistic state’s propaganda learned to make veiled use of people’s quest for the afterlife. In Prokhanov’s editorials the three components – the scientific-technological, national fairy tales and trendy post-Soviet syncretistic beliefs - are amalgamated in line with, and by means of, this genre as defined by Soviet textbooks and practiced in Soviet newspapers. The continuous effective power of these editorials lies in their emotively expressed use of the proleptic futurity grounded in the power of historical narratives to incite patriotism and nationalism.

Dugin on being, time and eternity

Prokhanov’s figure is now mainstream; the resonance and influence of his writings is significant: he is invited to TV talk shows and gets interviewed in major media outlets on a regular basis. This is not only due to his indisputable literary talent and long-standing reputation as a radical journalist. The Neo-Eurasianist ideas that drive his prolific visions are also influential and inform the writing of political theorists and even key politicians whom they advise. It is hardly surprising, considering that in search of a new master ideology that would make sense of Putin-age Russian and Soviet history as a continuous line, the latter have been increasingly tempted to adopt the Neo-Eurasianist model that largely ignores the political nature of successive regimes but instead employs the geopolitical logic of particularism. Aleksandr Dugin, the supreme guru of this movement, throughout his illustrious career, has been consultant to a wide array of politicians, from former Russian State Duma Speakers Gennady Seleznev

and Sergey Naryshkin (the latter currently head of SVR, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service) to LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. His geopolitical theories to this day inform some of the ideological tenets of the regime even though the man himself is no longer welcome in mainstream media and government offices due to the extremist nature of his ultra-right views. Long-time friends and associates, Prokhanov and Dugin share roughly the same platform, but where Prokhanov works mainly by creative association and flights of literary fancy, Dugin, former Chair of Sociology of International Relations at Moscow University from which he was banished in 2014 for his public call, at the peak of the Donbass war, to "kill, kill, and kill Ukrainians" (Dugin 2014) relies on scholarly methods. Dugin's evolution as a thinker led him from membership in the late Soviet chauvinist and anti-Semitic Pamiat' movement to the creation, together with the writer Eduard Limonov and rock musician Yegor Letov, of the Nationalist Bolshevik Party, and finally to the International Eurasianist Movement.¹¹ His ideas owe as much to Eurasianism as they do to the German Conservative Revolution (esp. Karl Haushofer), pioneers of geopolitical discourse (esp. Halford Mackinder), European National-Bolshevism, the French Nouvelle Droite, as well as to Martin Heidegger whom he quotes in just about every treatise. As Andreas Umland points out, the term Neo-Eurasianism, in his case, is not entirely accurate (Umland 466f). More recently, Dugin rebranded his political philosophy and now calls it "the Fourth Political Theory": it serves as an alternative and a counterweight to those three that dominated the 20th century and beyond: communism, fascism, and liberalism. In Dugin's "fourth theory," the original Eurasianist premise discussed above in reference to Prokhanov, morphs into the notion that collectivistic and traditionalist land powers, or tellurocracies, are poised to fight against individualistic, liberal sea powers, or thalassocracies. These two poles are still centred around Eurasia on the one hand and the Atlantic on the other, but the geographic principle does not necessarily always apply as countries in outlying regions could be co-opted by the Eurasianist cause as long as the strict criteria of nationalism and traditionalism are adhered to. But what is behind these criteria?

Like Prokhanov, Dugin too often contributes to *Zavtra*. His style is quite different from his older colleague's, but his contributions also seek to furnish the readers with edifying political narratives that, like Prokhanov's, focus on the future, albeit as one would expect, Dugin's are formulated with more scholarly precision. In 2017, *Zavtra* featured a very revealing conversation between Prokhanov and Dugin. In it, Dugin goes to the heart

¹¹ For a comprehensive assessment of Dugin's evolution as a thinker see Shlapentokh 2017.

of what his “fourth political theory” is all about: a future defined by a specific, axiological understanding of time as infused with eternity. This eternity is easily accessed if one follows Dugin’s lead:

Современный либерализм тоталитарен, глобален. И чтобы противостоять ему, ни в коем случае нельзя возвращаться ни к коммунизму, ни к фашизму, ни даже к их национал-большевистской помеси, потому что это тот же самый Модерн. Четвёртая политическая теория предлагает выйти за пределы политического Модерна, за пределы и либерализма, и коммунизма, и фашизма, и соединить будущее — постсовременность, постмодерн — с традицией, с возвратом к традиции, интерпретированной как вечное, а не как прошлое. В духе Нового времени мы обычно считаем, что настоящее отменяет прошлое. [...] То, с чем мы имеем дело, — это время, отпавшее от своей оси. Возвращение к оси, по образу и подобию которой время и создано, есть задача Четвёртой политической теории. На этом основании строится проект будущего, который воплощается в теорию многополярного мира, поскольку каждый народ в ней являет главную ценность. Народ становится носителем той вечности, о которой идёт речь, поэтому пробиться к ней, минуя народ, невозможно. Универсализм здесь очень тонкий. Соединение всего происходит через углубление каждого народа в своё частное.

Contemporary liberalism is totalitarian and global. And in order to resist it, one should by no means go back either to communism, fascism, or even their national-Bolshevik cross because it is still modernity. The fourth political theory offers us the opportunity to step beyond political modernity, beyond liberalism, communism, and fascism and to connect the future—postmodernity, the postmodern—with tradition, a return to tradition interpreted as eternity, not as the past. In the spirit of Modernity, we generally hold that the present cancels out the past [...] What we are dealing with here is time that has fallen off its axis. To return to this axis in whose image time has been created is the task of the Fourth political theory. The project of the future is built upon this foundation—it is embodied in the theory of a multipolar world because in it, every nation manifests its own supreme value. The nation becomes a carrier of the eternity we are talking about here; therefore, it is impossible to get through to it bypassing the nation. The universalism here is very subtle. Everything

is bound together through an immersion of every nation into its own particularity. (Prokhanov, Dugin 2017)

This vision is clearly eschatological as it anticipates the end of time and the Second Coming when time is no more. In *V poiskakh temnogo Logosa (In Search of the Dark Logos)*, a volume of essays published in 2013, Dugin offers an erudite excursion into Greek philosophy, early Orthodox theology as well as the work of Martin Heidegger all of which are used to support his geopolitical doctrine. Pointing to Heidegger's location of the possibility of authentic *Dasein* in the temporality of the future, Dugin explains that it is only by a decisive "switching of one's regime of existence towards *Er-eignis* [singular event]" that one can be saved by the eventuation of "the Truth of Being." (Dugin 2013 347). This, to Dugin, is not just a philosophical premise but rather a call for political action that neatly fits into his political-religious construct. It is by transitioning to the latter that the Truth of Being can be entered as the authentic future. What is this construct? In essence, Dugin champions the pre-Petrine and pre-Schism political order based on the Byzantine paradigm. In his view, Ivan the Terrible is the model, quintessential ruler, "the figure of the tsar philosopher, an eschatological analogy of the first Christian emperor Constantine setting the church and political order in his kingdom as the execution of God's will" (Dugin 2013 37). More recently, Dugin has consistently asserted Russia's role as the *katechon*, that which holds the Antichrist at bay as per 2 Thessalonians 2.5-7: "And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes." In Dugin's 2018 "Theses on the Antichrist" published in his videoblog on the *zavtra.ru* website, he asserts that "the Orthodox Tsar is he who stands at the last stronghold, before the Antichrist. And when he falls, and a hole opens up in Being, the Antichrist comes" (Dugin 2018). Predictably, when in the 2017 conversation we just cited, Prokhanov who, as we have seen, is fond of the "city" metaphor, asks Dugin to "fantasise" about a city built according to his own views, Dugin paints the following picture:

Он, во-первых, должен быть концентричен. Если мы сейчас предложим этот город, мы придём к Москве дораскольного периода. В центре находится ось — воплощение самой вечности в человеческом мире. Царь и патриарх, духовное и земное, связанное воедино. Этот город строится вокруг своего центра. Центр является священным. В нём находится дворец и храм. Два уровня вечности: вечности небесной, которая воплощена в патриархе, в церкви, и вечности земной, недвижимым двигателем

которой является царь. Соответственно, вокруг него эта вечность расходится лучами, как солнце нисходит по вертикали. [...]

First of all, it must be concentric. If we offer [a vision] of this city now, we will come to the Moscow of the pre-Schism period. At its centre, there will be an axis: the embodiment of eternity itself in the human world. The tsar and the patriarch, the earthly and the spiritual, bound together. This city is built around its centre. The centre is sacred. In it, we have the palace and the temple. There are two levels of eternity: heavenly eternity embodied in the patriarch and earthly eternity whose immoveable mover is the tsar. This eternity radiates from him same as the sun descends in a vertical. (Prokhanov, Dugin 2017)

This picture is consistent with Dugin's adherence to the Byzantine notion of a symphony of the secular and ecclesiastical powers which in Muscovy was presumably in place from Ivan III to the Time of Trouble and subsequently in the 17th century, during the rule of the first Romanovs until Nikon ended it with the Schism of the Church. Dugin's model does not envisage more than three classes or castes (*sosloviia*) in this society: below the symphony of the philosopher tsar and the Church patriarch, stand philosopher priests, noble warriors, and, finally, labourers on the land: "Так мы приходим к идеалу Святой Руси. Есть Святая Русь — перемещаем в XXI век. Другие материалы, но вечные формы." (Prokhanov, Dugin 2017) ("Thus we come to the ideal of Holy Rus. There is Holy Rus—we move it into the 21st century.") Dugin's authentic *zavtra* is neo-medieval: it is both archaic and post-modern in that it steps over hated modernity with its utopia of liberal democracy. This said, his understanding of modernity is peculiar: he does not cast away the Soviet experience—not in its entirety anyhow—because, as he asserts in his 2012 textbook *Geopolitika sovremennoi Rossii* [*Geopolitics of Contemporary Russia*], Stalin's USSR, despite its atheist and internationalist ideology, was nonetheless "a new edition of the Russian land-based tsardom, while Stalin was a 'red tsar'" (Dugin 2012 327). In this scheme, Moscow as the 15th-century Third Rome becomes, post 1917, home to the Third International, "a *geopolitical instrument* of spreading Russia's tellurocratic, land-based influence" (*ibid.*, original emphasis). Thus, the Christian messianism of the Muscovite Tsardom is equally reflected in the messianism of the world revolution centred in Moscow, particularly after the arrival of Stalin's 1925 "socialism in one country" doctrine which makes the Soviet capital the centre of messianic gravity, a different kind of *katechon*. Given Stalin's fascination with Ivan the Terrible, this parallel is rather self-

evident, and, much like Prokhanov, Dugin is clearly inclined to incorporate Stalin both into his geopolitical and eschatological construct of Holy Rus, despite Stalin's dogmatic Marxism, an obvious product of modernity and an offshoot of the European Enlightenment project. This, no doubt, is due to the fact that Stalin, Dugin's red monarch, somehow re-established, if unconsciously, the umbilical link to the authentic *Dasein* of eternity which after his death is lost again.

Importantly, although Holy Rus in Dugin's scheme, is the *katechon*, other Indo-European nations that set themselves up according to his vision will be welcome in his empire. This empire stretching "from Dublin to Vladivostok" will embrace them if they share this vision and agree to be part of it on Dugin's terms. The terms stipulate, for example, that while most nations should retain their particularity, some other ones have no claim to it whatsoever. Thus Ukrainians (with the exception of those living in the far West of the country to whom Dugin allows some form of nationhood) must realise that they are actually Russian. This is precisely what he asserts in his intimate "geopolitical diary" *Ukraina: moia voina (Ukraine: My War)* (2015) whose title, genre, and the overall preoccupation with the geopolitics of the future allude in no uncertain way to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (even as Dugin's book condemns the Ukrainian "junta" as a quintessentially Nazi project). Ukraine as a nation state within its current borders, in his view, is nothing but a pernicious utopia spun by the Western liberals:

Большая Украина – это чушь, несбыточная, злобная, мелкая, завистливая и кривая, основанная на ressentiment в качестве национальной идеи. А вот Великая Россия не чушь. Это было, и это будет. Наши земли сужаются, а затем – как пружина – расширяются. И так всегда. Это бьется русское сердце. В 1991 году мы снова сжались. С Осетии, Абхазии и особенно с Крыма и Новороссии начался обратный отсчет – время Империи. Многие хотят нас сдержать, но не удастся. Мы строим вообще другое общество, другое Государство, чем то, которое есть сейчас. От нынешнего переходного состояния не останется камня на камне, как не осталось камня на камне от Российской империи, а затем от СССР. И мы идем не назад, но вперед. Вечность не прошлое, она всегда еще и настоящее и, главное, будущее. Вечность вообще впереди. Это и есть самый настоящий авангард. Индоевропейская Священная Империя Конца – вот наше истинное будущее. (Dugin 2015 485).

Greater Ukraine is nonsense: unrealisable, evil, petty, envious and crooked, based on *ressentiment* as its national idea. Great Russia, however, is no nonsense. It has been, and it will be. Our lands shrink and then, like a spring, they expand. This has always been so. This is the Russian heart beating. In 1991, we shrank again. A reverse countdown began with Ossetia, Abkhazia, and especially with Crimea and Novorossiia: the time of Empire. Many want to restrain us, but they won't succeed. We are building a completely different kind of society, a different kind of State from the one we have now. No stone will remain from today's transitional state as no stone was left from the Russian Empire and then the USSR. We are going forwards, not backwards. Eternity is not the past, it is always the present, and most importantly, the future. Eternity is ahead. It is the very real avant-garde. The Holy Indo-European Empire of the End: this is our true future.

Dugin's vision of the future has no alternatives: as someone who believes he can access eternity, the axis of time, he clearly considers himself in possession of the knowledge of what is to come, even if this future may be deferred. Dugin's 2014 diary ends on the note of bitter disappointment as Russia, despite starting the war in Donbass, setting up and supporting the separatist "republics," fails to move to a direct annexation of "Novorossiia" with its own troops and instead settles for a stalemate, signing the Minsk agreements, while he himself gets fired from his position at Moscow University for inciting hatred and murder. This failure, according to him, is due to the efforts of the liberal fifth column within the Russian society as well as what he calls "the sixth column," the oligarchs who only look after their own purses. Of all the Kremlin officials whom he castigates throughout the book, the most blame goes to Vladislav Surkov, Putin's erstwhile ideologist and in 2014, the person directly in charge of the Kremlin's Ukrainian diplomatic and military front. Surkov, too, has visions of the future inspired by Neo-Eurasianists.

Surkov, the "deep people" and Putin's "long state"

In February of 2019, Surkov, at this point a presumed private citizen as he had resigned from his official position as Putin's advisor for the CIS countries, caused quite a stir in the Russian media, both conventional and social, with an article entitled "Putin's Long State" in which he made a few bold pronouncements about the future of the regime, its place in the country's history and its fundamental difference from Western democracies. Overall,

this article is far from spectacular, and it would have passed unnoticed had it not been written by the author of the “sovereign democracy” concept coined in the mid-2000s as the main slogan of Putin’s 2007-2008 election campaign. In “Putin’s Long State,” Surkov starts out by discarding the very notion of democracy altogether as so much illusion. “The illusion of choice,” he argues, “is the most important of all illusions, the trademark trick of the Western way of life overall, and of the Western democracy, in particular. [...] A rejection of this illusion in favour of realistically acknowledging what is predetermined has led our society first to contemplate its own, special, sovereign version of democratic development, and then to a complete loss of interest in discussions on what democracy should be like and whether it should exist at all” (Surkov 2019)

What we have in Russia, instead, is a state that does not need this imported “chimera” but is guided by the logic of historical processes. This country, whose place in history, is “far from modest,” went through a period of disintegration and then “returned to its natural and solely possible state of a great power” – a great power that increases in size, gathering communities of nations. This state, gathering lands, like Muscovy in the 14th-15th century, is of course Putin’s Russia, an “organically shaped model” of Russia’s “survival and elevation” for the coming years and decades until the end of this century. Surkov’s horizons of futurity are modest. His historical horizon, however, are rather less so. Echoing the 15th-century slogan of Moscow the Third Rome, he proposes a fourth. According to him, Putin’s Russia is the fourth model of statehood in the country’s history: it sits next to Lenin’s USSR which in turn is preceded by the Russian Empire of Peter the Great and the Grand Principality of Muscovy of Ivan III. Yeltsin is conspicuously absent from this list, as the founder of post-Soviet Russia and Putin’s anointer. Even more noteworthy is the fact that neither Ivan the Terrible, nor Stalin are mentioned as the current president’s political antecedents but are simply subsumed under the Muscovite and Soviet models. It is, however, quite clear that the main national idea articulated in Surkov’s article is that of “land gathering” and military expansion.

“These political machines replaced one another, got fixed up and adapted along the way, ensuring the Russian world’s consistent upward movement, century after century.” Their creators, were, according to Surkov, what Lev Gumilev calls “people of long will.” Gumilev’s figure is very significant in the context of Surkov’s ideological proposition: Gumilev first applied the term “people of long will” to the “passionary” Mongols who eventually co-opted their neighbours to conquer the boundless steppes and

thus ensured their own survival. Thus, the ideology of Eurasianism that propounds Russia's middle path of development, distinct from both Western and Eastern, is a clear subtext to Surkov's vision and is so signalled, just as it is the foundation of Prokhanov's and Dugin's views. At the same time, Surkov's article also contains echoes not of Peter the Great's Roman, secular, and Westernised vision of a Russian Empire, but rather of the Russian empire of Nicholas I, the police state of the gendarme of Europe reigning under the aegis of Count Uvarov's official nationality doctrine, with Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality guiding the way forward. There is no conspicuous Orthodoxy in Surkov's opus, because his too is ostensibly a secular, and presumably religiously inclusive vision, but it is a vision that resolutely refuses to import any Western notions, and also one in which the very idea of Russia's uniqueness replaces (or implicitly incorporates) the religious component. Without this component, however, the uniqueness rings rather hollow as there is no divine "eternity" from which his model could be suspended.

Autocracy and nationality (*narodnost'*) feature very prominently in the article, and again Surkov's versions of these two concepts are presented in counterpoint to the Western notion of the democratic state. Just as Peter the Great, on his visit to England, rejected the idea of parliament as nonsense for a country like Russia and just as Lenin, in *The State and the Revolution*, rejected the idea of multi-party democracy as bourgeois veneer that hides and protects the exploitation of the masses, Surkov unmasks Western democracy to expose what in Turkish is known as *derin devlet* or the deep state. This term, explains Surkov, "signifies a hard, totally undemocratic network of real power structures concealed under the window dressing of democratic institutions. [...] It is a mechanism hidden deep under the surface of the civil society that in practice operates through violence, corruption and manipulation." This kind of exposure of Western democracies is of course nothing new and forms the core agenda of the Russian media, broadcasting both domestically and to foreign audiences. What is new, however, is that in Surkov's manifesto, the Western deep state is countered with the Russian one—a state that while certainly not quite as pretty, is far more honest. It has no need for Western hypocrisies because it has no need to hide its power structures, no need to drape the truth with illusions: "The high inner tension associated with maintaining control of vast non-homogenous spaces and the constant participation in the thick of geopolitical struggle make the military-police functions of the state most important and the decisive." The honest Russian state has no need to conceal its necessarily brutal police and military functions; furthermore, they must be displayed for everyone to see.

Instead of the deep state, Russia has “a deep people” (глубинный народ). What is this people? No definition is given, and the description is more than vague.

Глубинный народ всегда себе на уме, недостижимый для социологических опросов, агитации, угроз и других способов прямого изучения и воздействия [...] Своей гигантской супермассой глубокий народ создает непреодолимую силу культурной гравитации, которая соединяет нацию и притягивает (придавливает) к земле (к родной земле) элиту, время от времени пытающуюся космополитически воспарить.

The deep people always has its own idea of what is going on, is inaccessible to sociological surveys, threats, indoctrination, and other methods of direct impact [...] With its giant supermass, the people creates an insurmountable power of cultural gravitation that binds the nation and pushes (presses) down to earth (the native soil) the elite which from time to time attempts to hover up in a cosmopolitan flight.

One finds out its true feelings and desires always too late. This inner *narod* is truly mysterious in that it does not fully coincide with the population. There is no point idealising its sections which is what at various points in time did Russian populists, Slavophiles, and Bolsheviks.

Surkov’s new understanding of *narodnost*’ is then immediately linked with Putin’s “long state.” This state is unique in that it can actually hear and understand the people, the *narod*, “see through it,” and act accordingly. The Russian model is based in trust. The deep people can only trust the leader, “первое лицо.” This is not the naïve faith in the good tsar as exhibited by the Russian peasants for centuries (even though it has its roots in this faith). The deep people is not naïve, and the trust it has in the leader is based on understanding, cooperation, and effective communication exercised through various institutions of the state as well as informally. Thus, instead of the Western oppositional model based in accountability of the leader and consequently inherent mistrust, the Russian one is open, honest and based in utter trust. And because of this trust, Putin’s state is a long one, its principles will outlive Putin himself and will continue long afterwards, akin to the Gaullist state in France or even the state of the founding fathers in the US.

While Dugin's nation is a bearer of eternity, Surkov's model of futurity, as we have seen, lacks this essentialist religious axis or Prokhanov's essentialist national dreams. Surkov's vision is, on the one hand, hollow and bland and, on the other hand, no less fanciful and fairy-tale-like. Instead of the Christian eternity beyond our fallen time or dreams that drive nations' development through socio-economic formations, Surkov proclaims the implied eternity of Putin and his regime—supported by nothing, except some dark magic of “the deep people” about which we know nothing and never will. In 2020, the current Speaker of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, put it in even plainer language when asked whether the Constitutional amendments adopted at Putin's suggestion that year were introduced in order to create a system that will come after Putin: “Why, after Putin, there'll be Putin!” (Volodin 2020). Surkov and Volodin thus openly suggest that Putinism is larger than Putin the man and will outlive him. Surkov's article did not get an official response from the Kremlin (apart from a lukewarm nod from Putin's press-secretary Peskov), but just about every pro-Putin commentator praised the article as an important discussion document, while most liberal commentators predictably ridiculed it. Dugin and Prokhanov, too, were asked what they thought. Prokhanov, in an interview with the Kremlin's top propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, said that while Surkov was right to name the deep people as the nucleus of Russian history, he failed to identify “its content” which, in Prokhanov's view, is “the dream of a strong, benevolent state, a kingdom that defends the meek, the poor [...], often the dream of the kingdom of heaven” (Prokhanov 2019). This dream that, as we know, according to Prokhanov, was cherished by the deep people throughout both the imperial and the communist era is something Surkov “is afraid to talk about” (ibid.).

Dugin went further in his criticism. While stating many logical and legitimate facts, Surkov, in Dugin's opinion, spoke for the country's entire elite which desperately wants for Putin's status quo to last forever. Such pronouncements, says Dugin, are usually made just before a state, on the eve of its collapse, loses touch with reality. This is akin to hypnotising people to believe that everything will stay as it is in the present. Putin, for his part, although a hero, has exhausted his potential, and the future is not his.

Путин сделал огромный вклад в развитие России, его заслуги нельзя ставить под сомнение. Это спаситель и герой нашей страны. В этом отношении я считаю, что его миссия выполнена. Путин полностью исчерпал все, что он мог сделать хорошего. [...] Соответственно, Путину полностью принадлежит настоящее и

совершенно не принадлежит будущее. В будущем потребуются полное изменение и пересмотр всех параметров сложившейся в России системы. (Dugin 2019)

Putin has made a tremendous contribution to the development of Russia; his achievements are beyond any doubt. He is the saviour and hero of our country. In this regard, I think that his mission is accomplished. Putin has completely exhausted everything good that he could do. [...] Thus, the present fully belongs to him, but the future does not belong to him at all. The future will require a complete overhaul of all the parameters of the system that has taken shape in Russia.

Surkov may have borrowed some key notions from the Neo-Eurasianist discourse that drives the ideas of Prokhanov and Dugin, but his future is indeed far from “passionary.” Just as the secular dreams of the Americans or the Chinese in Prokhanov’s editorial, Surkov’s future is devoid of eschatology, aspirations towards eternity, or dreams of immortality. Emptied out of that content, it is indeed a suspended present, with nothing but Putin’s person to prop it up.

Conclusion: eschatology, nationalism, and geopolitics

It is quite apparent that Putin’s propaganda machine has hit a wall after the initial wave of post-Crimea euphoria subsided. The narrative of the Russian people rising up from its knees following years of post-Soviet humiliation clearly had a limited shelf life, with an ideological void at the core of the Putin regime urgently requiring new concepts in order to shape a vision of the future that would logically stem from a narrative of the past. Neo-Eurasianist discourse provides a very tempting model to follow. In our case studies of Aleksandr Prokhanov’s editorials and Aleksandr Dugin’s we have demonstrated that the future proposed by these utopian ultra-right figures is based on eschatological notions rooted in the Russia’s pre-Petrine past and in folklore. Proleptic or analeptic, their future is neo-medieval and not entirely compatible with the reactionary yet secular nature of the Putin regime. Vyacheslav Surkov’s desperate attempt at adapting the Neo-Eurasianist narrative to the geopolitical requirements of the Kremlin is, however, devoid of any emotive appeal and is an apt reflection of the stagnant state of Putin’s regime whose increasing draconian qualities make its future prospects ever so much dimmer.

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