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Defence and promotion of desired state identity in Russia's strategic narrative

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how the Russian state promotes and protects its preferred self-identity, using the conceptual framework of 'strategic narrative'. Nation-branding practices, including state-funded 'mega-projects' like the Sochi Olympics, have contributed to the narrative by characterising Russia as a welcoming, attractive destination. However, a more salient feature of Russia's strategic narrative is intense 'anti-Western' and 'anti-American' political and media discourse, formulated to defend against rival, threatening narratives projected from other countries. Through analysis of official statements and state television content, the article demonstrates how determination to protect 'Great Power' and 'European' identities underlay Russia's strategic narrative in 2014. It considers responses which the narrative has prompted, arguing that desired results in domestic reception have been achieved at the expense of unsatisfactory results internationally. Heavy-handed attacks on the identities of other states boost collective self-esteem among Russian citizens, but they fail to produce – and arguably obstruct – desired responses among foreign audiences.

For much of the Putin era, Russian foreign policy has been rooted in the perception of international relations as a ‘competitive struggle’ (*konkurentnaya borba*).¹ In this struggle, Russians like to envision their country as one of the emerging powers which are challenging Western hegemony in the international system. Those who run Russia speak of ‘the West’ (*Zapad*), led by the USA, actively obstructing their country’s rise and pursuit of legitimate interests. From this Russian perspective, the global competitive struggle inevitably entails undermining one’s rivals as a means to strengthen one’s own position.

Mass communication is considered by the Russian leadership to be a crucial arena of the competitive struggle. Proceeding from the belief that Western governments use Western media to attack and undermine Russia,² the Russian leadership has worked to develop appropriate means of defence and counterattack. As set out in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, Russia is committed to ‘creating instruments for influencing how it is perceived in the world’, ‘developing its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad’ and ‘counteracting information threats to its sovereignty and security’.³ The Russian state is striving to promote a positive narrative about itself to audiences both at home and abroad. At the same time, it is seeking to neutralize rival, critical narratives by denigrating those (mainly Western) countries in which the most strident criticism of Russia originates. In all these efforts the state is motivated at least in part by the desire for recognition – domestically and internationally – as a particular type of self.⁴

This article examines the Russian state’s approach to promoting and protecting its preferred self-identity. It uses the conceptual framework of ‘strategic narratives’,⁵ which allows state-led attacks on critical others and self-promotion via ‘nation-branding’ to be seen as different but related means to the same end. Drawing on Russian official statements and state TV news from summer 2014, the article demonstrates how the ‘anti-Western’ and ‘anti-American’ plotlines of a strategic narrative served to defend the idea of Russia being a European great power. The article then considers two major state-funded projects – the Sochi Winter Olympics and the Skolkovo innovation hub – which have also contributed to Russia’s strategic narrative, being used to characterise Russia as a welcoming, modern country attractive to investors and visitors. Finally, the article looks at responses to the Russian state’s strategic narrative about its identity. It argues that desired results in domestic reception of the narrative have been achieved at the expense of unsatisfactory

results internationally. Heavy-handed attacks on the identities of others states boost sentiments of collective self-esteem among Russian citizens, but they fail to produce – and arguably obstruct – desired responses among important audiences beyond Russia’s borders. The fact that the Russian leadership continues such attacks in the face of negative international responses does not mean it is unconcerned about the country’s international status. Rather, it reflects the fact that the Russian public and elite experience greater affirmation of their desired international status by defying Western criticism than by pursuing Western approval on Western terms.

Conceptualising the projection of state identity: from soft power to strategic narratives

The deliberate projection by a state of a particular self-identity is usually done with a view to exerting non-coercive influence beyond national borders. The literature which deals with non-coercive international influence has been dominated for more than two decades by the concept of ‘soft power’.⁶ Soft power, in Nye’s account, is the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by ‘framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction’.⁷ It is understood as coming principally from a state’s ‘resources’ such as culture, political values and foreign policy, which are turned into soft power by ‘skilful conversion strategies’. Nye associates these strategies with practices of public diplomacy, including symbolic events, communication campaigns and long-term relationship-building through international exchanges, scholarships, conferences, and so forth.

Nation-branding policies are considered soft power policies because one of their aims is to elicit a positive, emotional reaction from foreign audiences, generally in the hope of boosting foreign investment.⁸ However, nation-branding is not only about appealing to foreigners. It is also concerned domestically with communicating ‘values and identity narratives to citizens’, enhancing their self-esteem and making them ‘feel better about themselves’.⁹ This domestic dimension is obscured within the ‘soft power’ framework, which directs attention towards audiences in targeted states abroad, while largely ignoring audiences within the state doing the targeting.

There are other recognised problems with using soft power as an analytical tool. In Nye’s writings, different kinds of ‘attractive power’ are conflated: the kind which ‘arises naturally’ from *shared* priorities and values, and the kind which is ‘produced’ by getting subjects to

change their priorities and values.¹⁰ The mechanisms underpinning soft power are further obscured by the fuzzy dividing line between power that is ‘hard’ and power that is ‘soft’ – a division of questionable usefulness. Soft power has been conceptualised such that its existence is hard if not impossible to trace empirically. It is envisioned as ‘a long-term process that should be barely noticeable’,¹¹ but this raises doubts about the concept’s validity. Without some kind of evidence of soft power effects, how can one be sure it is powerful at all? Meanwhile, the tendency to sweepingly apply the soft power label to all international communicative resources is problematic because the latter can exert tangible effects on international relations which do not fit within the soft power framework – when a focus on ‘attraction’ is inappropriate. There has been great concern, for example, about Russian television having a divisive and destabilizing impact in Ukraine.¹² The problem lies not so much in its capacity to make Russia seem ‘attractive’ to some Ukrainians, but rather its capacity to make Ukraine itself seem deeply ‘unattractive’ (since 2014 Russian TV channels have been describing the government in Kyiv as ‘fascists’ who seized power in an ‘illegal coup’ and are now ‘bombing their own people’ in the East).¹³ Scholars and analysts who describe Russian mass media as a soft power tool are therefore perpetuating a misnomer,¹⁴ or at least encouraging a partial and distorted view of the media’s role in relations between Russia and its neighbours.

In fact, the adjective ‘soft’ – connoting something benign and non-disruptive – is misleading when applied to other countries’ programmes of international persuasion/attraction too. As Price observes, so-called soft power approaches adopted by Western governments can be ‘surprisingly aggressive’, perceived among the elites and wider societies of target states as ‘hostile, debilitating intrusion’ which threatens established societal norms.¹⁵ A recent study interpreted wary reactions to Russian identity-projection in Ukraine as evidence that the Russian leadership ‘does not grasp’ how to exert genuine soft power,¹⁶ but this is missing a wider point. It seems that most governments (not to mention journalists and scholars) do not fully grasp that widely disseminated, politically motivated messages about identities and values are always likely to generate diverse responses (including some negative backlash), because audiences are diverse and the promotion of one set of values and identities may implicitly or explicitly detract from other sets to which certain groups feel strongly attached.¹⁷

Given the shortcomings in Nye's writings, attempts have been made to critically reconceptualise soft power. Feklyunina, for instance, proposes a 'social-constructivist take', where the soft power of State A vis-à-vis State B depends on (a) how widely narratives of collective identity projected by the former are accepted or resisted in the latter, and (b) how much influence the receptive audiences have over policymaking.¹⁸ This is an improvement on previous conceptualizations since it emphasizes the heterogeneity of audiences and their agency in producing divergent interpretations of any given event or policy. Yet Feklyunina, like others before her,¹⁹ ultimately explains soft power in terms of the reception of narratives. It is unclear what 'value-added' is gained by translating the tangible reception of a state's projected narratives into an assessment of its intangible (and misnamed) soft power. Feklyunina's assertion that compatible narratives of collective identity generally equate to shared interests may also be a little overstated. Belarus provides some evidence to the contrary. The Belarusian and Russian leaderships have for years emphasised their countries' 'fraternal' relationship rooted in a shared culture and historical experiences; few among their citizens would challenge that view. Yet consensus over a narrative of shared identity has not prevented periods of extremely antagonistic divergence in the two states' narratives concerning other issues, especially in the economic sphere.²⁰ Identities projected through narratives are an important element in the exercise of international influence, but they do not necessarily have explanatory power that is independent from or greater than other dimensions of narratives.

Kiseleva provides an additional constructivist take on Russian soft power applied in the post-Soviet context. She treats soft power as an important signifier in discourse, rather than a type of influence that can be gauged empirically.²¹ Her approach is helpful for understanding the Russian elite's interest in soft power and their shifting understandings of it, but the empirical questions which she sidesteps remain of substantive interest and merit addressing. When states attempt to exert non-coercive influence through mass communication, how should their efforts be studied and how can the outcomes be assessed and explained, if not through the 'soft power' lens?

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle propose the conceptual framework of strategic narratives to break the 'straitjacket' of soft power and advance research into international influence in the contemporary media environment.²² They define strategic narratives as a

form of communication through which political actors attempt to give meaning to the past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives. Strategic narratives, they argue, have the potential to shape behaviour domestically and internationally by structuring thought and action – by defining who ‘we’ are and what kind of order ‘we’ want. Strategic narratives may clash, with states trying to generate maximal support for their own narrative while undermining those of rivals. A narrative can be considered strategic if it integrates the interests and goals of its communicator, i.e. by suggesting a desired end state and how that might be achieved.

According to the proposed framework, strategic narratives derive their power from working simultaneously at multiple points on a ‘spectrum of persuasion’.²³ At the ‘thin’ end of the spectrum, a strategic narrative can convince rational actors to behave in a particular way. At the ‘thick’ end of the spectrum, a strategic narrative can structure the experience of international affairs, the identity of actors and the meaning of the system. The spectrum should not be understood as implying that strategic narratives come in thick or thin varieties. Rather, it implies that any strategic narrative has the potential to affect not only the conscious appraisal of different arguments, but also the subconscious, longer-term formation of interests.²⁴

The framework of strategic narrative thus offers a theoretical account of the relationship between communication and international influence that is more transparent and coherent than soft power. Importantly, it also allows for the fact that communication in international affairs is often a matter of contestation, not just soft or benign attraction. Marketing consultants may be employed to ‘softly’ improve and promote a country’s nation-brand, but such practices and their impact are best studied in the broader context of other discursive efforts (soft or otherwise) which all governments make to characterise their own country, other countries and the international system.

The strategic narrative framework allocates identity an important place in the relationship between communication and international influence. As Brubaker and Cooper (among others) have pointed out, the term ‘identity’ carries a range of meanings, dependent on the analytical context in which it is used.²⁵ In the context of communication and international influence we are concerned with identity as a shared understanding of the collective self,

where the collective self of principal interest is the state as an actor on the global stage. The strategic narrative framework emphasises that governments work purposively to shape that shared understanding domestically and internationally, projecting a characterisation of their own state which serves various strategic goals. No self can be characterised in isolation,²⁶ so when forming and projecting a strategic narrative, governments inevitably characterise (ascribe identities to) other states as well. With governments around the world engaging in this process, generating narratives with characterisations that can be contradictory or at least rivals for limited attention, competition ensues to win the support of key audiences.

References to 'competitive identity' have tended to occur in the context of attempts to win an economic edge over rivals. Certainly, a state may benefit economically if its strategic narrative and associated characterisations are accepted and widely reproduced. A state may, for example, attract foreign investors by successfully convincing them that its citizens are skilled and legal protections are sound. Such a success – achieved through rational argument – would fall at the 'thin' end of the spectrum of persuasion described by Miskimmon et al. Yet there is more at stake – both economically and politically – at the 'thick' end of the spectrum. Representatives of State A may, for example, emphasize a particular axis of division when defining threats in their strategic narrative (e.g. 'we' in democratic countries are threatened by 'them' in authoritarian countries). If audiences in State B internalize such a narrative and come to understand their own identity in State A's terms (part of the democratic 'we'), this may constrain them from perceiving threats and their own identity along other possible axes (e.g. 'we' in socially responsible countries are threatened by 'them' in free market capitalist countries). National policy priorities and international alliances are likely to be shaped accordingly.

The potential for affective (i.e. emotional) dividends from successfully deploying a strategic narrative should be mentioned too. Identities have been described as something 'we desire but can never fully attain',²⁷ as something states do not *have* but rather *seek to realise*.²⁸ The process of realising an identity involves achieving its acceptance by salient actors,²⁹ expressed in their behaviour. Winning such acceptance can increase the self-esteem of those invested in the identity.³⁰ Thus, a state's struggle through strategic narrative to be recognised as a particular kind of self is driven simultaneously by the desire to achieve

concrete political and economic objectives and the desire for more abstract rewards – pride and prestige.

Russian identity aspirations and the critical West

For at least the past decade, the self-identity dominating the Russian state's strategic narrative has been that of a great power and a strong, autonomous state.³¹ Increasing antagonism towards the West in Russian political discourse since the mid-2000s has been attributed to Western countries' reluctance to treat Russia in line with the great power status which Russia's leaders feel their country deserves.³² At the same time, Russian perceptions of a Western threat were fuelled by the 'coloured revolutions' and American unilateralism under George W. Bush.³³ Some would say that these phenomena evoked a selfish fear in the Russian political elite – a fear that Western-backed regime change might lead to a loss of personal power and wealth. Yet the coloured revolutions and American unilateralism also posed a clear challenge to the Russian state's desired self-identity because they exemplified Western disregard for Russia's expected great power 'rights': a zone of 'privileged interests' in the regional neighbourhood and a veto over major international security decisions. Western criticism of Russian democratic failings was similarly grating to Russians who perceived such 'preaching' as inappropriate condescension.

The anti-Western flavour of Russia's strategic narrative intensified prior to Putin's re-election as president in March 2012. Large public protests which broke out over electoral fraud in December 2011 were interpreted by Putin and his supporters (at least in public) as a Western-backed plot.³⁴ TV coverage of the trial of anti-Putin punk rockers Pussy Riot over summer 2012 further emphasized the idea of a Western conspiracy against Russia. Yablokov describes how state-aligned channels portrayed Pussy Riot's protest in a Moscow cathedral as 'an attempt on the part of Russia's enemies from the West to destroy the Orthodox religion and thus deprive the Russian people of their identity'.³⁵

The 2012 surge in negativity about the West has been interpreted as a straightforward self-preservation tactic by Russia's vulnerable ruling elite, which manufactures foreign enemies to distract the masses from its own shortcomings and marginalise the opposition.³⁶ This kind of analysis is focused on the 'thin' end of the spectrum of persuasion: it emphasises the Russian elite's desire to exert *behavioural* power over the population, persuading rational

citizens to conclude that supporting the opposition would be unwise. Yet many in Russia's ruling elite most likely believe they are serving the national interest, not just personal interests, by keeping a tight hold on power in the face of domestic and international pressures. The idea that a great power must act and develop autonomously has deep roots in Russia. The domestic upheaval and decline that coincided with Russia's turn to the West in the 1990s did little to dispel the impression that Russia is better off resisting Western influence and calls to democratize. The fact that such ideas are currently used instrumentally to bolster support for Russia's incumbent authorities should not obscure the fact that such ideas have also been internalized among those in authority and thus influence the direction of policy. Plotlines in Russia's strategic narrative which emphasise rivalry with the West have a constitutive effect on interests and collective identity among the elite and the public alike, which means the narrative's power is also of the *structuring* kind, at the 'thick' end of the spectrum of persuasion.

'The West' (*Zapad*) has a high profile in Russian political and media discourse, but so does 'Europe' (*Yevropa*) – and the distinction between the two needs to be underlined. Despite referring to overlapping groups of states, 'Europe' and 'the West' are signifiers filled with quite different geopolitical meanings.³⁷ In recent years the West is has primarily been imagined in the context of international affairs as an entity from which Russia is excluded – 'a community of states separate from Russia', which is dominated by Russia's rival, the United States of America.³⁸ Europe, in contrast, is an entity to which many Russians still imagine their nation culturally connected.³⁹ The question of whether Russia is 'European' has been a matter of debate for centuries.⁴⁰ When studying Russian geopolitical imaginations in the early 2000s, O'Loughlin and colleagues found that some 15 per cent of survey respondents 'definitely' considered Russia a European country; a further 29 per cent felt it was 'mostly European' while 36 per cent felt it was 'equally European and Asian'.⁴¹ The 2001 'Westward turn' in Russian foreign policy was deemed politically 'risky', however, because the Russian public understands the West as a US-led bloc and perceptions of the United States, although fluctuating with events and contingent on context, are consistently marked by high levels of suspicion.⁴²

There is similar ambiguity in how Russia's political leadership speaks of the West, Europe and their constituent countries.⁴³ Even during the rockiest periods of relations Putin has

consistently advocated closer ties with European states located in the West. The Russian leadership has described Russia as ‘unambiguously a European state and part of European civilisation’, even if its vision of a greater Europe is not widely appreciated beyond Russian borders.⁴⁴ Writing in the mid-1990s, Neumann argued that the Russian state had traditionally claimed to represent ‘true’ Europe, in opposition to a ‘false’ Europe that has lost its values (‘false’ Europe is blamed for the existence of bilateral tensions).⁴⁵

Although contested, a European identity thus ‘resonates deeply’ in Russian society and is desired among the Russian elite.⁴⁶ The following section demonstrates how Russia’s strategic narrative worked to protect and reify both the ‘European’ and ‘great power’ aspects of the state’s preferred self-identity during 2014.

An ‘anti-American’, ‘anti-Western’, but not ‘anti-European’ strategic narrative

The analysis presented below draws on official statements made by the Russian president and foreign minister (41 separate transcripts and texts published on kremlin.ru and mid.ru) and Russian TV news (nine episodes of the popular 90-minute news and analysis programme *Vesti Nedeli*, broadcast each Sunday evening on state channel Rossiya 1) from June and July 2014. The period under study was a time of extremely strained relations between Russia and Western countries due to the conflict in Ukraine: Russia was facing condemnation in Washington and most European capitals for its annexation of Crimea and its support for rebel fighters in the Donbas region. Analysis focused on how the collective West (‘*Zapad*’, ‘*zapadnyye strany*’) and its various constituent states (including the USA, the UK, France, Germany and others) were characterised, and on plotlines in which they were referenced. Characterisation and plotlines are in fact two sides of the same coin, as the character of actors in a narrative are brought out by their actions which in aggregate constitute the plot. The texts were coded and analysed qualitatively using the CAQDAS tool Atlas.ti to identify frequently recurring elements. Translation of the presented quotes from Russian into English was done by the author.

Hypocrisy was among the characteristics most often attributed to the West collectively and to individual Western states in both Russian official statements and media commentary. Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and *Vesti Nedeli* journalists all regularly mentioned Western and American ‘double standards’. Consider the following examples:

‘There are hardly any of our Russian troops abroad. But American troops are abroad everywhere... Everywhere they take part in settling the fates of other nations while they are thousands of kilometres from their own border. So to say that we are violating something is very strange on the part of our American partners.’⁴⁷

‘[Former] US President Woodrow Wilson... proposed that democracy and national self-determination should be considered the highest values in the post-war world instead of national interests. But that was just for export. Nobody had cancelled the greed of the Americans and their friends the English. As for democracy, the Americans calmly continued to hang Negroes, so to speak, and there was no mention of self-determination for Native Americans. Meanwhile, the USA has claimed the right to judge everyone by its own very flexible pattern for a hundred years.’⁴⁸

Characterising Western states as hypocritical helps to defend Russia’s great power identity in more than one respect. On the one hand, when Russian actions (such as the deployment of troops abroad) are justified by reference to ‘similar’ American actions, it implies that Russia is acting as great powers do – for few doubt the USA’s great power status. On the other hand, such statements underline that Russia is acting regardless of international protestations – emphasizing that Russia has the great power strength necessary to defy rules set by others. Meanwhile, the validity of international protestations is undermined by the insistence that those protesting have only their own selfish interests at heart – not any kind of moral values. The narrative preserves the quality of righteousness for Russia’s identity by denying it in the identity of critical others.

Russian TV news goes further than Russian official statements in characterising Western states and their representatives as not just hypocritical, but risible and foolish. *Vesti Nedeli* repeatedly mocked US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki, claiming, for example, that internet users had adopted the word ‘psaking’ to mean issuing categorical statements without first checking their accuracy.⁴⁹ When Putin gave an interview to French journalists, the *Vesti Nedeli* presenter said the Russian president had ‘patiently and politely engaged in tackling illiteracy, as if warming up ahead of meetings with colleagues from America and

Europe'.⁵⁰ The implication is clearly that negative characterisations of Russia originating from such sources are not credible.

Criminality and immorality are likewise emphasized as longstanding Western – or specifically American – characteristics in Russian TV news. Over the summer US 'war crimes' in Ukraine were highlighted regularly by *Vesti Nedeli*, and the programme drew multiple parallels with past events to make its case. On 15 June, for instance, the presenter claimed:

'Ten years ago the Americans used white phosphorous against people in the Iraqi town of Fallujah. Afterwards the White House lied that it hadn't done so... Now the USA is covering up its accomplices in the criminal deployment of incendiary ammunition in Ukraine.'⁵¹

Other techniques for establishing America as the 'bad guy' of international politics included references to popular (American) culture. On 1 June the *Vesti Nedeli* presenter spent a long time analysing Obama's foreign policy speech at the West Point military academy. Images of Obama addressing neat rows of servicemen and women were loudly accompanied by the Imperial March (Darth Vader's theme) from the Star Wars movies. As Obama spoke of his readiness to 'use military force, unilaterally if necessary', the presenter described the footage as resembling 'another planet', arguing that the USA was suffering from 'paraphrenia', a condition which combines 'megalomania and delusions of persecution'.⁵²

Such extreme media attacks on the USA perhaps pertain more to the Russian leadership's goal of legitimising its stance on Ukraine than the defence of Russian self-identity. However, it is noteworthy that charges of moral corruption tend to be directed at the USA without much reference to its European allies. The UK more than others is mentioned as an accomplice in US 'crimes', but even the British are portrayed primarily as American stooges with a lesser degree of responsibility. On 6 July, for example, *Vesti Nedeli's* presenter commented:

'What is the foreign policy line of England nowadays?⁵³ What is its strategy, its tactics? You will be surprised: it does not have the first, second or third. The entire plan is to completely lay under the USA, to dissolve in the USA, to completely give its sovereignty to the Americans.'⁵⁴

The USA generating the world's problems while European states are (to varying degrees) led astray by US influence is a prominent plotline in the Russian narrative which serves to protect the European component of the Russian identity. It is projected clearly in official statements and TV news, as the following examples illustrate:

'All this is happening despite the obvious and objective advantages which both parts of the European continent could enjoy if our technologies, resources and human capital were united. To a well-known degree, this contradiction can be explained by the fact that the policy of restricting Russia's possibilities is led primarily the USA, not the European powers.'⁵⁵

'The aim of their [French and German] mediation [over Ukraine] is the protection of their own economies from sanctions against Russia, which are being forced through by the USA to weaken the Europeans along with the Russians and get them hooked on their shale gas.'⁵⁶

This plotline is used to suggest that Russia and Europe would enjoy a close and untroubled relationship were it not for American interference. Tensions with European countries can thus be accounted for without having to acknowledge any fundamental differences that might threaten the European-ness of Russia's self.

Differences between European states are accentuated with particular reference to their degree of subordination to US interests. Thus, the European Union's Eastern Partnership policy to build closer ties with Ukraine (and other post-Soviet states) had been initiated by 'members of the EU which are extremely loyal to the USA', Lavrov argued.⁵⁷ After meeting the Finnish premier, Lavrov expressed hope that Brussels would 'heed the voice of the majority of EU members who see the situation sensibly and do not want a confrontation'.⁵⁸ Finland, he said, was 'part of this camp'. Similar statements were made about Austria and Slovenia after bilateral meetings with those countries' representatives. In contrast, the UK was characterised by *Vesti Nedeli* as the USA's 'Trojan horse' in Europe.⁵⁹

As for Germany and France, these are the countries which – in the Russian narrative – the USA is particularly desperate to prevent drawing closer to Russia. Historical parallels are

used to undergird this idea. For instance, around the anniversary of the outbreak of World War I *Vesti Nedeli* reported:

‘Then, as now, Germany and Russia were acquiring strength. With their peaceful cooperation, the old world had every chance for prosperity and influence. Then, as now, the English and Americans had a common goal – to put discord between Russia and Germany and in doing so, exhaust them. Then, as now, willingness to destroy part of the Orthodox world was used to bring Russia into a big war. Then, it was Serbia, now it is eastern Ukraine. In the end, both then and now, England and the USA seem to be on the sidelines, but dream of using the results of the fight in their interests.’⁶⁰

Strategic narratives ‘integrate interests and goals – they articulate end states and suggest how to get there’.⁶¹ Three dominant plotlines in Russia’s strategic narrative point particularly to the Russian leadership’s goals vis-à-vis Western countries. The first relates to Western ‘interference’ causing instability around the world. This plotline situates unrest and violence in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Georgia, Ukraine and elsewhere all within the same explanatory paradigm: the West, led by the USA, gets involved then countries fall apart. The resolution proposed – either implicitly or explicitly – is for the West, above all the USA, to adopt a less interventionist foreign policy.

Russia’s desire to see the USA less involved in the domestic affairs of other states relates particularly to Ukraine and the post-Soviet region, but extends similarly to parts of the world where Russia’s comfortable and profitable dealings with entrenched autocratic leaders (Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, Bashar al-Assad) have been disrupted by American support for such leaders’ removal.

A second goal-oriented plotline relates to the West, above all the USA, seeking global dominance and acting without due consultation with others. The logical resolution to this plotline favoured by the Russian leadership is to grant non-Western countries such as Russia (or perhaps more accurately, Russia and those who agree with Russia) a greater say in international decision-making. This goal is expressed in Russian calls for ‘multipolarity’ and endorsement of formats such as BRICS and the G20.

A third major goal-oriented plotline relates to the 'inevitable' continuation of Russia's cooperation with Europe. The narrative projected by Russian leaders and state media insists that commercial and business ties between Russia and the EU are continuing to develop, despite political tensions, because both sides have so much to gain from 'pragmatic cooperation'.⁶² The end state which Russia's leaders envisage to resolve security problems in Europe is a 'single economic and humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok' (a space which obviously attaches Europe to Russia while detaching it from the USA).⁶³

All the above-mentioned Russian goals have roots in the 'great power' or 'European' identities favoured by the Russian state. By opposing the US-led West's 'interference' abroad, the Russian leadership hopes to block political changes – particularly in the post-Soviet region – which might diminish the international influence which it 'must' as a great power exert. By rejecting international formats in which Russia's preferences are overridden in favour of formats where Russia's voice is louder (e.g. BRICS), the Russian leadership is claiming the right to be heeded which great powers 'must' enjoy. By pushing for greater economic cooperation with the EU and promoting the idea of a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, Russia is asserting its membership of Europe, while striving to minimize Europe's 'Western-ness' – the aspect of Europe's identity that connects with the USA and excludes Russia.



Figure 1: Screenshot from Vesti Nedeli on 1 June 2014, showing the words 'West - sponsor of genocide' over an image of US President Barack Obama meeting Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk

In the studied political statements and media content, 'the West' ('*Zapad*') and the USA or America ('*SShA*', '*Amerika*') often appeared to be used interchangeably. This is well illustrated by Figure 1, a screen shot from *Vesti Nedeli*, where the words 'West – sponsor of genocide' ('*Zapad – sponsor genotsida*') are superimposed on an image of US President Barack Obama. Russia's strategic narrative can thus be described both as anti-Western and anti-American; references to the West are essentially references to the United States lumped together with subordinate allies. 'Anti-Western' in this context should not, however, be read as unequivocally 'anti-European'. European countries certainly face criticism in Russia's strategic narrative, but the criticism is directed above all towards their alignment with the USA rather than their own independent shortcomings. Whereas America's flaws and misdeeds are narrated with relish and implied inevitability, Europe's are narrated with regret: Europe is redeemable, America is not.

The above analysis is based on a limited number of sources – two top politicians and one widely-watched TV programme – which were chosen for their prominent positions in the communicative apparatus of the Russian state. However, the characterisations and plotlines described above can be observed in the statements of other government representatives, as well as the numerous media outlets supported from the Russian state budget (be they news agencies, newspapers or broadcasters, for domestic audiences or international ones).

The contribution of nation-branding and 'mega-projects' to Russia's strategic narrative

Negativity about the West and America is a central feature of Russia's strategic narrative. Yet the Russian narrative does not exclusively consist of this kind of self-defence; it also incorporates some self-promotional practices of the nation-branding variety, designed partly to enhance the national image abroad. Between 2006 and 2015, for example, the American public relations firm Ketchum received tens of millions of dollars from the Russian state to make Russia more attractive to investors.⁶⁴ Ketchum reportedly advised members of Putin's inner circle on how to deal with the press and liaised between Russian officials and media organizations in an attempt to secure more favourable coverage. Meanwhile, so-called 'mega-projects' or 'mega-events' have received substantial state funds to impress the world. Russia's hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 FIFA World Cup are

examples, as are the Skolkovo technology and innovation hub founded in a Moscow suburb and the tourist complex being developed on Russky Island.⁶⁵ The Russian state's support for mega-events and mega-projects arises from, and is designed to consolidate, the great power aspect of its preferred self-identity. Such events and projects are supposed to demonstrate 'to the world as much as to oneself that Russia is still and again a force to be reckoned with'.⁶⁶

The self-identity which the Russian state has tried to project via these self-promotional efforts is still that of a 'great power', but it is also welcoming, cooperative and non-threatening. 'Russia – Great, New, Open!' (*Rossiya – Velikaya, Novaya, Otkrytaya!*) was a slogan displayed (in Russian and English) at the Sochi Games.⁶⁷ As Putin said in one 2014 interview:

'The Olympics are very important for us, because I believe (and I would like it to be so) that the Games opened the door not only to Russia, but also to the Russian soul, to the hearts of our people. Others could look and see that there is nothing to fear, that we are open for cooperation.'⁶⁸

Moreover, Gronskeya and Makarychev highlight the (ultimately unsuccessful) 'normalization agenda' underlying Russia's hosting of the Olympics: the Kremlin wanted to give Russia the reputation of a 'normal country' that can meet the highest international standards.⁶⁹ They observe that the Russian understanding of normalcy is very Western-centric. In other words, it is Western recognition that is sought for the idea that Russia has 'finalised its post-1991 transition to effective statehood' and thus won back its international status as an equal of other great powers.⁷⁰

The welcoming Russian self speaks English in order to engage actively and constructively with the wider world – even the nefarious Americans. For example, at Skoltech – a Skolkovo-based institute of science and technology founded in 2011 with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as a partner – all tuition is in English, many members of the teaching staff have been brought in from Western universities and the aim is to attract a substantial number of international students onto PhD and master's programmes. Political discourse relating to the creation of Skolkovo sought to downplay the difference between 'ours' and 'outsiders' and make the idea of foreigners working in Russia compatible with Russian

patriotism.⁷¹ Like other Russian mega-projects, Skolkovo was designed to have an appealing visual impact. Kinossian and Morgan argue that its creators were hoping to recreate ‘images of Western urbanism inspired by ‘global-city’ thinking’.⁷²

The Skolkovo project was launched and prioritised by former Russian president Dmitriy Medvedev; it has undoubtedly become less prominent in Russia’s strategic narrative since Putin resumed his presidential role and it appears to have fallen victim to power struggles between conservative and liberal factions in the Russian elite.⁷³ Nevertheless, it remains a recipient of considerable government funding. Moreover, the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the 2018 World Cup are very much Putin-backed and Putin-led initiatives which emphasize the same open, welcoming and non-threatening aspects of Russia’s character. When presenting Russia’s bid for the 2018 World Cup, Sports Minister Vitaliy Mutko struggled to speak ‘from my khart’ in English,⁷⁴ but joked that by 2018 he would speak English ‘like my friend Jack Thompson’.⁷⁵ The message that Russia and Russians have a sense of humour and are willing to poke fun at themselves was again conveyed (wordlessly) in the Sochi 2014 closing ceremony, at which a much-discussed technical malfunction from the opening ceremony (the non-appearance of one of the five Olympic rings) was deliberately recreated for laughs.

The desire to project a welcoming and open Russian identity stems partially from economic goals. Modernization and international competitiveness are still considered necessary by the Russian leadership, which sees a chance to boost national economic performance by attracting foreign investors,⁷⁶ partners for development and visitors more generally. An analysis at the ‘thin’ end of the spectrum of persuasion would interpret the mega-events and megaprojects as attempts to exert behavioural power, with international economic elites the primary target.

At the same time, the Russian state is motivated to characterise itself as welcoming and open by the potential collective self-esteem that could ensue from praise in international public discourse. Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Kozak claimed that the Sochi Olympics had ‘broken the ice of scepticism towards the new Russia’, making Russia, its culture and people ‘into something that is a lot closer, more appealing and understandable for the rest of the world’.⁷⁷ As the next section argues, one might read this claim as wishful thinking.

Responses to Russia's strategic narrative

How effectively has the Russian state defended and promoted its preferred self-identity in its strategic narrative? Miskimmon et al. suggest that success in strategic narrative entails getting audiences 'to experience the world' through your preferred narrative and rendering it plausible to the extent that it is 'commonsensical and not even noticed'.⁷⁸ Yet not all audiences are equal. Internationally, achieving the acceptance of a narrative among opinion leaders (such as journalists) and decision-makers (such as investors or foreign politicians) is likely to be more rewarding than achieving acceptance among people who are less influential and less visible. Responses in some parts of the world may be valued more highly than responses in other parts of the world. Even domestically, securing a consensus around the state's strategic narrative may matter most in the social strata that have greatest political weight or the most to contribute economically. Scholarly and public discussions of soft power and the images of different countries usually fail to discriminate between different audiences and their relative significance to national strategic goals. There is an unfortunate tendency to quantify countries' soft power at an overall global level, or proclaim national images 'positive' or otherwise, without acknowledging that perceptions of any country inevitably vary hugely from place and group to group, while places and groups in turn vary in their significance to the prosperity and security of the country in question.

Soft power is regarded as a phenomenon of the international arena, with domestic audiences being of limited relevance. Yet strategic narratives are meant to work at home as well as abroad and the Russian electorate is certainly an audience of paramount importance to the Kremlin. Domestic acceptance of the strategic narrative is not only a matter of perpetuating authoritarian rule, even though it probably does facilitate the political leadership's hold on power. Domestic consensus around the strategic narrative is integral to the process of realising the leadership's preferred state identity – no less so than international recognition. The leadership's claims that Russia is a European great power ring hollow unless the Russian people themselves recognise and accept it as such.

On the domestic front, the Russian strategic narrative appears to be achieving the intended reaction. Survey data reveals close alignment between the views of the general population and the state's narrative concerning itself and others. For instance, a survey conducted in

late September 2014 found that 79 per cent of respondents viewed the united position adopted by Western countries towards Russia's Ukraine policy as evidence of 'the USA and the West trying to pressurize Russia and weaken Russian influence in the world' rather than criticism of Russia being justified.⁷⁹ Russians have little doubt that their country occupies the moral high ground: in October 2014 a poll found that some 68 per cent felt their country was playing a positive role in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.⁸⁰ Some 44 per cent of Russians believe that global respect for Russia has increased in the past decade, against 22 per cent who say it has fallen.⁸¹

In contrast, Russia's strategic narrative seems much less effective on the international front. In international coverage of the Sochi Olympics, the 'appealing, understandable' Russia struggled for traction against a Russia of 'homophobia, human rights abuses and corruption' – not to mention a Russia accused of imperialist ambitions towards its neighbours.⁸² Anholt writes that enhancement of a nation-brand requires coherence between 'strategy, substance, and symbolic actions'.⁸³ The Kremlin had arranged a major symbolic action, but the message symbolized (tolerance, openness, normalcy) clashed with visible substance, such as crackdowns against protesters. Domestically such issues could be kept out of the public eye, but not internationally.

Despite wavering in some quarters, European political leaders have for the most part vocally condemned Russia for being authoritarian at home and aggressive in foreign policy. As for potential investors, sanctions are likely to outweigh any positive impressions generated by Russia's nation-branding initiatives. At a 2015 investment forum in Sochi, organizers wore 'Keep Calm and Do Business in Russia' t-shirts, implicitly acknowledging this problem.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, survey data indicates that Russia is still very much viewed as the hostile other by ordinary Europeans. A YouGov poll in March 2014 found that 53 per cent of British and French respondents and 61 per cent of Germans agreed with the statement that 'Russia today has an aggressive foreign policy and is actively trying to control or take territory off neighbouring countries'. In all seven European countries surveyed, over 40 per cent of respondents felt that Russia posed a military threat to the West, against 17 to 29 per cent who felt it did not.⁸⁵ Similarly, the Pew Research Global Attitudes Project found the proportion of respondents declaring an 'unfavourable' view of Russia in spring 2014 had

risen above 70 per cent in Europe and the USA (Greece was the only European country where favourable views of Russia were in the majority).⁸⁶

The survey data cited above has limitations as a measure of narrative reception. Items about how 'favourably' Russia is viewed are not ideal proxies for assessing the more specific identity qualities which the Russian state projects (greatness, openness and so on). Moreover, most survey questionnaires allow only a limited number of response options, so respondents may be directed towards endorsing narratives that reflect the pollster's reasoning more than their own. In the current repressive political climate, it is possible that some Russian survey respondents might be too wary to answer honestly when asked political questions. However, on that point, recent work by Frye, Gehlbach and Reuter offers reassurance: they used a 'list experiment' to gauge whether Russians were expressing their genuine opinions in sensitive survey items and discovered only a small degree of social desirability bias.⁸⁷

Overall, on the available evidence, Russia's strategic narrative about its identity does look like it is failing internationally if identity-recognition from Europe and the West matter to Russia in the way scholars claim.⁸⁸ In fact, Russian self-promotional efforts have fallen so far short of impressing Europeans and other Westerners that one might conclude the Russian policy-makers responsible are either incompetent, or not seriously pursuing this aim.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the competitive projection of state identities is not exclusively a matter of benign attraction as the 'soft power' framework implies. Promotional measures like 'nation-branding', designed to attract, are only one aspect of competition to secure desired identities in international relations. Defensive measures, which may involve state-led attacks on the identities of critical other states via official pronouncements and the mass media, are also important. The strategic narrative framework allows both these aspects of state identity communication to be studied together, and thus aids holistic analysis of whether attempts to secure desired identities are succeeding.

In the case of Russia, it appears that the state's efforts to defend its European and great power identities by denigrating the West and the USA are undermining its efforts to

promote an open, welcoming identity through nation-branding to international audiences. When Russia's politicians and state media generate exaggerated anti-Western denouncements, this is observed from abroad and slotted into prevailing Western narratives, according to which Russia is authoritarian and aggressive rather than a good place to visit or do business.

The gulf between the international reception of Russia's strategic narrative and its domestic reception can be partly attributed to different media environments. Within Russia, the state's strategic narrative is mediated by multiple, uncritical and widely-consumed TV channels, newspapers, radio stations and websites, while rival narratives are suppressed. Elsewhere, Russia's strategic narrative is mediated by foreign journalists working for news outlets without any particular loyalty to the Russian state. Although the Russian state has some media of its own for delivering its narrative to foreign audiences (e.g. RT and Sputnik, which project more or less the same narrative as the sources studied in this article), their impact is limited by their low profile and market share relative to outlets carrying alternative and incompatible narratives about Russia. Of course, narrative reception is not determined by media exposure alone – pre-existing attitudes towards the 'narrating' state based on historical or other experiences are also influential.

The fact that Russian leaders are doing relatively little to address international rejection of their strategic narrative reflects the order of their priorities. Unlike the soft power framework, the strategic narrative framework acknowledges that state-led identity projection is targeted at domestic audiences as well as foreign ones. Within Russia itself, the state's strategic narrative seems to be effective: it is widely accepted and reproduced,⁸⁹ allowing Russian citizens to continue perceiving their country as 'great' and its tensions with Europe attributable to malign American influence rather than any lack of 'European-ness'. The Russian leadership is placing a higher value on the reactions of its domestic audience than the reactions of international audiences. This may be partly due to the leaders' desire to stay in power, but it is also a matter of maximising collective self-esteem. Zarakol argues that Russia is engaged in a perpetual quest for parity with the 'established', 'more developed' West, with its self-esteem dependent on receiving acceptance and inclusive treatment from Western states.⁹⁰ Yet for the Russian elite and public, there is perhaps greater collective self-esteem and ontological security to be derived from defying Western

criticism, and from interpreting such defiance as evidence of their country's great power status. The acceptance which Russia would like from Western states pertains to its right to be 'equal but different', not 'equal and part of the liberal democratic club'. While such acceptance is not forthcoming, tensions are likely to continue.

NOTES

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³ Russian Foreign Ministry, 12 February 2013, www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/6D84DDEDEDBF7DA644257B160051BF7F.

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⁷ Nye, *The Future of Power* (note 6), p. 20.

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⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 196, 202.

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- ¹⁴ Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, *A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine* (London: Chatham House 2012).
- ¹⁵ Monroe E. Price, *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication (Kindle edition)* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2015).
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- ¹⁷ Joanna Szostek, 'The power of detraction: Belarusian reporting of Russian social problems during 'information war'', *The Journal of Social Policy Studies (Журнал Исследований Социальной Политики)* 14/1 (2016) pp. 99–112.
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⁴⁴ Luke March, ‘Nationalism for export? The domestic and foreign-policy implications of the new ‘Russian idea’’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 64/3 (2012) pp. 401–425.

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⁶⁰ *Vesti nedeli*, 29 June 2014 (note 48).

⁶¹ Miskimmon et al. (note 5), p 5.

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⁸⁶ Pew Research, 9 July 2014, www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine.

⁸⁷ PONARS Eurasia, November 2015, www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/putins-popularity-real; in a list experiment, survey respondents are presented with a list (in this case, a list of Russian leaders) and asked to state *how many* items on the list they support or agree with. For a randomly selected control group, the list only includes non-sensitive items. For the treatment group, the list contains a sensitive item in addition to these non-sensitive items. The difference in results between treatment and control groups provides an indication of the incidence of the sensitive item.

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