

CAPITOLUL 6.

Russia's Strategic Narratives as a Great Power in the War in Ukraine: Exploring the Context of The Black Sea

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INTRODUCTION

The War in Ukraine, a protracted and multifaceted conflict, has not only tested the resilience of regional stability, but has also emerged as a crucible for Russia's ambitions to assert itself as a great power on the world stage. At the core of this geopolitical theater lies the intricate interplay of descriptions intertwined by Russia to justify, explain, and project its actions both domestically and internationally. These strategic narratives are not mere rhetorical tools; they are the linchpin in shaping the understanding and perception that surrounds Russia's role in the ongoing conflict.

The war in Ukraine stands as a watershed moment in contemporary geopolitics, a canvas upon which Russia paints its vision of itself as a formidable global actor. Russia's strategic portrayals, akin to a masterful narrative technique, serve as the brushstrokes that delineate its self-perceived role and objectives. Within this intricate narrative framework, the Black Sea region emerges as an important point, characterized by historical precedents, security concerns, economic imperatives, and a carefully cultivated sense of cultural and historical identity.

Against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has become a crucible for Russia's strategic ambitions. The interplay between historical context and contemporary maneuvering is palpable, shaping Russia's narratives to frame

its actions. This essay analyzes the complexity of Russia's strategic narratives and examines their impacts within the strategically vital Black Sea area. The region is a geographical crossroads where history, security concerns, and cultural ties intersect, and Russia is seeking to establish itself as a major power.

This article undertakes the task of unraveling the layers of Russia's strategic narratives, analyzing the complex relationship between historical echoes and contemporary geopolitical dynamics. By exploring the various aspects of these stories, we seek to understand the implications and manifestations of Russia's great power aspirations within the context of the Black Sea region. As the conflict continues to unfold and the Black Sea region remains a focal point of global attention, understanding Russia's strategic narratives becomes not only an academic pursuit but a crucial key to decoding the evolving geopolitical scenery.

RUSSIA'S PURSUIT OF POWER AND WAR IN UKRAINE

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States and Russia experienced a period of increased cooperation that was previously unheard of.¹ Russian leaders expressed their desire to adopt liberal democracy, free-market economics, and the ideas of Western states. However, the partnership between Russia and the West quickly fell apart, with some blaming Russia's lack of preparedness. Others pointed fingers at the West, underlining that the West invited Russia to join but left the door only half-open.² In the aftermath of this breakdown, Russia turned inward, examining its past identities to inform its future actions, which ultimately led to Putin's rise to power.

Since the beginning of his presidency, Vladimir Putin sought not only to rebuild Russia's status as Great power by controlling energy resources, assuring its economic dominance and the integration of the former Soviet space, but also created a great power narrative, institutionalizing the idea of

¹ Mankoff, J. (2016). *Russia's Revival*. *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*. Routledge, pp. 336-346.

² Trenin, D. (2006). *Russia leaves the West*. *Foreign Aff.* 85, pp. 87.

the Russian World as the foundation of the young Russian state. Thus, within this narrative, Putin expressed the idea of borders as a relational concept defined by shared history and ancestry, with an abstract, imagined spiritual bond and an understanding of Russian political leadership.³

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States provided Putin with an avenue for Russia's return to the international stage as an equal and active participant cooperating with other great powers against international terrorism.⁴ Putin's willingness to cooperate was further exemplified by Russia's cooperation with NATO forces in Afghanistan, allowing the transit of military supplies and personnel through Russian territory.

However, as time progressed, the relationship between Russia and the West began to encounter obstacles. The expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, particularly the inclusion of former Soviet bloc countries, raised concerns in Moscow. Russia perceived these moves as encroachments into its sphere of influence, and suspicions grew regarding the true intentions of Western powers.

The turning point in Russia-West relations came with events such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003. Putin viewed these developments as Western-backed attempts to promote political and economic reforms in countries that were historically within Russia's orbit. The perception of encirclement and the erosion of its influence in its immediate neighborhood led to a shift in Russia's approach.

When in 2014 Ukraine shifted towards a pro-democratic regime that was more Westernized, Russia viewed this as a rejection of the Soviet legacy,

³ Akchurina, V., & Della Sala, V. (2022). Russia, Europe and the ontological security dilemma: narrating the emerging eurasian space. *The European Union, Russia and the Post-Soviet Space*. Routledge, pp. 96-113.

⁴ Snetkov, A. (2015). From crisis to crisis: Russia's security policy under Putin. *Russian analytical digest*, 173, (2015), pp. 2-8.

which threatened Putin's *Russian World* identity narrative.⁵ In response to the pro-democratic demonstrations, Russia provided support to its political allies in Ukraine and annexed Crimea, despite international condemnation and costly Western sanctions.⁶

To mitigate the impact of the ensuing sanctions and economic challenges, Russian media projected narratives of economic resilience and spiritual solidarity, reinforcing the Russian identity. Reports scapegoated the US and its Western allies, portraying them as attempting to weaken Russia. Portrayals of economic resilience highlighted the Russian solidarity, while Putin introduced narratives of Russian spiritual identity through the Russian Orthodox Church, aiming to enhance legitimacy.

THE BLACK SEA AND RUSSIA'S PURSUIT OF POWER

The Black Sea stands as a geopolitical linchpin for Russia, holding immense strategic and economic importance as a gateway to the world. Moscow has historically viewed this region as pivotal for its geopolitical and economic influence. The strategic calculus in the Black Sea is intricately linked to Russia's pursuit of power and its historical confrontation with major powers, notably NATO, reflecting Moscow's emphasis on homeland security and power projection capabilities. Russia seeks to safeguard its economic assets in the Black Sea region while extending its influence in the Mediterranean and preserving crucial trade links with global markets.

Throughout its history, spanning the Russian Empire and Soviet eras, the Black Sea has served as the southern flank of Russian power, facilitating its influence in the Mediterranean, Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Europe. This strategic positioning allows Russia to sustain military activities in distant regions, such as Libya and Syria, where it maintains a naval base in Tartus. The Black Sea fleet, headquartered in Sevastopol since 1793, forms

⁵ Akchurina, V., & Della Sala, V. (2018). The European Union, Russia and the post-Soviet space: Shared neighbourhood, battleground or transit zone on the new Silk Road?. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70.10, pp. 1543-1551.

⁶ Freire, M. R., & Heller, R. (2018). Russia's power politics in Ukraine and Syria: Status-seeking between identity, opportunity and costs. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70.8, pp. 1185-1212.

the backbone of Russia's military presence in the region. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union dominated the Black Sea, controlling its northern and eastern shores with compliant socialist governments in Romania and Bulgaria. NATO-member Turkey provided the sole counterbalance, leading to the region being occasionally referred to as a "Soviet lake." Post-Soviet Union dissolution, the balance of power shifted, but the Black Sea retained its geostrategic significance for Russia, even as EU and NATO borders realigned.

In recent years, the Kremlin has actively sought **hegemony in the Black Sea region** through instigating regional conflicts and aggressive actions. The 2008 invasion of Georgia and subsequent consolidation of military presence in Abkhazia marked a resurgence of Russian influence. The pivotal moment, however, was the 2014 annexation of Crimea following Ukraine's Euromaidan protests, a strategically important point as a base for the Russian navy in the Black Sea. Putin framed this narrative emphasizing that everything in Crimea "speaks of our history and pride".⁷ To create an image of great power status, the Kremlin used the idea of Crimea as a "fetish", a thing of physical, spiritual, and imperial importance.⁸ Putin stated that the region was crucial to Russia because it was where Russian people lived and where the Grand Prince Vladimir was baptized in the tenth century, leading to the unification of Eastern Slavic tribes and lands around Christianity.⁹

This move granted Russia control over Crimea's Black Sea coastline, expanded its military presence, and sparked a surge in Putin's popularity, coupled with nationalist sentiment celebrating the return of Crimea. In 2022, Russia escalated its influence by launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, resulting in a humanitarian crisis, and expanded its control over coastal

⁷ Vladimir Putin addressed State Duma deputies, Federation Council members, heads of Russian regions and civil society representatives in the Kremlin. March 18, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

⁸ Pleshakov, C. (2017). *The Crimean nexus: Putin's war and the clash of civilizations*. Yale University Press.

⁹ Akchurina, V., & Della Sala, V. (2022). Russia, Europe and the ontological security dilemma: narrating the emerging eurasian space. *The European Union, Russia and the Post-Soviet Space*. Routledge, pp. 1645.

areas. Despite holding only about 10% of the Black Sea coastline under international law, Russia now controls roughly one-third, solidifying its grip on the region. The Black Sea remains a critical element in the broader geopolitical landscape, embodying a complex history and ongoing strategic considerations.

MASS-MEDIA IN RUSSIA

Russian media plays a pivotal role in shaping political control, defining the national identity, and influencing state policy. The post-Soviet era witnessed substantial political and economic transformations, leading Russian media outlets to grapple with financial challenges following the disappearance of state subsidies. In response, they adopted Western-based business media models¹⁰. The significance of Russian media solidified in the mid-1990s, with political and business communities recognizing its crucial role in achieving political success. Media demonstrated its ability to mold Russia's political landscape by exerting substantial influence on public opinion during election campaigns¹¹.

To consolidate Russian identity and assert state control, President Putin strategically acquired or reaffirmed state ownership of key segments of the media sector. Although not complete, the state's control over major media outlets proved sufficient.¹² Unlike the strict censorship of the Soviet era, Putin aimed for a more nuanced approach, asserting the government's right to determine permissible content.¹³ This resulted in a distinctive media-political clientelism, where influential patrons, including politicians,

¹⁰ Lehtisaari, K., & Miazhevich, G. (2019). Introduction: the Russian media system at a crossroads. *Russian Journal of Communication*, 11.1, pp 1-5.

¹¹ Belin, Laura. "Unexpected Outcomes: Electoral Systems, Political Parties, and Representation in Russia. By. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies". Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001. xii, 183 pp. Notes. Index. Tables. \$19.95, paper. *Slavic Review* 61.1 (2002): 176-177.

¹² Gehlbach, S. (2010). Reflections on Putin and the Media. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26.1, pp. 77-87.

¹³ Wegren, S. K., & Herspring D. R., (eds) (2009). *After Putin's Russia: past imperfect, future uncertain*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

governors, oligarchs, and financial tycoons, supported media outlets in exchange for deference and political services.¹⁴

Since the 2000s, there has been a shift in the Russian media landscape, with a decline in commercial capital and an increase in state and mixed capital.¹⁵ Consequently, media outlets became platforms for owners and sponsors to promote their interests, leading to a distancing from neutral and objective reporting. Many news outlets now practice self-censorship and advocacy reporting, favoring positive coverage for patrons and negative narratives for opponents.¹⁶

Following the Crimea occupation in 2014, the Russian government intensified media control, restricting journalists' access to information and subjecting them to external pressures. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine saw the Kremlin tightening its grip on the narrative by criminalizing the spread of "fake" information discrediting the Russian armed forces. This led to the blocking of access to Western media outlets like BBC Russia, Deutsche Welle, Radio Liberty, Euronews, and France 24. Experts expressed concerns over the vague and broad fake news laws that could potentially stifle government critics.¹⁷

Press freedom in Russia has witnessed a steady decline since Putin's presidency in 2000, with the country's World Press Freedom ranking dropping from 148th in 2014 to 164th in 2023.¹⁸ Numerous journalists left Russia due to safety concerns, and several independent news outlets relocated their newsrooms outside the country to navigate the uncertain implications of new laws. This trend underscores the challenges faced by

¹⁴ Lowrey, W., & Erzikova, E. (2010). Institutional legitimacy and Russian news: Case studies of four regional newspapers. *Political Communication*, 27.3, pp. 275-288.

¹⁵ Vartanova, E., et al. (2016) The Russian media industry in ten years: Industrial forecasts. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 11.1.

¹⁶ Lowrey, W., & Erzikova, E. (2010). Institutional legitimacy and Russian news: Case studies of four regional newspapers. *Political Communication*, 27.3, pp. 275-288.

¹⁷ *Russia fights back in information war with jail warning*. Reuters. March 4, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-introduce-jail-terms-spreading-fake-information-about-army-2022-03-04/>

¹⁸ World Press Freedom, 2023. Reporters Without Borders. <https://rsf.org/en/map-2023-world-press-freedom-index>

media professionals in maintaining journalistic integrity and independence in the face of tightening state control.¹⁹

STRATEGIC NARRATIVE AND THE QUEST FOR THE GREAT POWER STATUS

This article builds on the work of authors that made vital contributions to understanding the relationship between communication and power, and how the use of narratives allows actors to manage the power relationship. The narrative is “a story”, a “socially constructed discourse often involving a logically plausible plot with actors, a beginning, middle, and end”, according to Colley.²⁰ This logic of “the story of the world” has also been applied to the collective level of human behavior, leading to recognition of the narrative’s important role in shaping and expressing political identity, perspective, and ideology,²¹ and is designed “to structure the responses of others to developing events.”²²

The significance of narratives in political discussions is largely based on their importance in the creation and preservation of worldviews, and the effectiveness of narratives in simplifying complex situations into a sequence of events also contributes to their widespread use.²³ At the same time, in the political realm leaders are creating narratives and using them to generate power relationships, to dominate by creating the myth-narratives, while average citizens come to be captivated by them, accepting the narratives as common sense. The same is true regarding the state actors, where “the state handles the *narratives of power* between the leaders and the citizens. The assumption is that the “*leaders-narrators* use this as a means to politically indoctrinate the average citizens.”²⁴ Nevertheless, in the recent years, the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Colley, T. (2019). *Always at War: British Public Narratives of War*. University of Michigan Press.

²¹ Shenhav, S. R. (2006). Political narratives and political reality. *International Political Science Review* 27, no. 3, pp. 245-262.

²² Freedman, L. (2017). *The transformation of strategic affairs*. No. 379. Routledge.

²³ Bruner, J. (1986). Play, thought and language. *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education* 16, no. 1, pp. 77-83.

²⁴ Anastassov, V. H. (2018) *Power and truth in political discourse: Language and ideological narratives*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

operation of power is being reconfigured by a network of media technologies to enable new networked patterns of relations, creating a “network society”, thus creating a narrative is no longer the role of elites.²⁵

Narratives are frameworks or stories constructed to allow people to make sense of the world, policies, events, and interactions. Miskimmon et al. argue that narratives are “communicative tools through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give a determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives.” Those narratives are identified as *strategic narratives*. Strategic narratives, intended specifically for achieving certain political objectives, are formulated, and promoted by leaders to influence domestic and international audiences, to drive them towards particular outcomes.(Miskimmon et al., 2017).

Roselle, O’Loughlin, and Miskimmon delineate three pivotal levels of strategic narratives, i.e. system, national/identity, and issues narratives. The system narrative delves into elucidating the prevailing situation on the global stage, offering insights into how the world operates, identifying key actors in the international arena, and interpreting their actions. The national/identity narrative contains a story about the values and identity of a given actor, be it a nation or state. Lastly, the issue narrative provides comprehensive information about the nature of a problem, the requisite policy, its rationale, and the implementation strategies. Simultaneously, the crafting of narratives, tailored for both internal and external audiences, may serve the dual purpose of legitimizing foreign policy initiatives. The advent of new media has ushered in an era where the public enjoys access to an extensive array of information sources, courtesy of the “new communicative environment.”²⁶

The analysis of the strategic narrative embedded in the ideational approach focuses on the ideational or cognitive aspects of international relations, emphasizing the role of ideas and beliefs in shaping state behavior. Ideational approaches to the study of international relations, most often

²⁵ Castells, M. (2013). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press (UK).

²⁶ Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A., & O’loughlin, B. (2014). Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, war & conflict*, 7.1, pp. 70-84: 77.

associated with constructivism, would argue that we must look at the climate of ideas, at the norms and notions of identity that shape strategic thinking. Strategic narratives, according to this perspective, are not just tools for conveying information, but are integral to the construction of shared understandings and the formation of collective identities.²⁷

The next sections explain the above theoretical framework with an analysis of narratives regarding Russia's quest for great power status in the context of the Black Sea area during the war in Ukraine. The great power status narrative is analyzed from the perspective of the system, national, and issues narratives.

METHOD, DATA, MEASURING AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The research method is the content analysis of Russian mass media from 1.01.2022-1.01.2024, carried out by the data set acquisition from IntegrumWorldwide Corp., containing access to 22,611 sources of mass media. The empirical data comprised of the following news sources from Moscow: newspapers and magazines (256), news agencies (93), online media (5,672), TV and radio (123). From the regional level, the data included newspapers and magazines (1,651), news agencies (229), online media (14,121), and TV and radio (466).

To analyze the texts, 3 deductive categories of codes were set (strategic system narrative, strategic national narrative, strategic issue narrative).

The measurement included 3 deductive stages of coding. In the first stage, the main strategic narratives were identified by type – systemic, national, and issue. In the second stage, thematic coding was applied to the identified narratives.

Themes of system narrative include: “about the world order”, “about the multipolar world”, “about the unipolar world” “about BRICS”, and “about the Cold War”. Themes of the national narratives include: “national

²⁷ Clunan, A. L. (2009) *The social construction of Russia's resurgence: aspirations, identity, and security interests*. JHU Press. Tsygankov, A. P. (2012). Assessing Cultural and Regime-Based Explanations of Russia's Foreign Policy. ‘Authoritarian at Heart and Expansionist by Habit’?. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64.4, pp. 695-713.

identity”, “our history”, “our values”, “about our national qualities”, “self-sufficiency”, and “tolerance to others”. Themes of issues narratives include: “our security”, “the threat from Ukraine”, “Black Sea security”, “Turkey and Black Sea security”, and “Romania and Black Sea security.”

The study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the analysis specifically addresses the strategic narratives propagated by mass media, and an examination of the narratives presented by state, political, and military leaders is not part of this article. Furthermore, the study does not delve into the influence of media messages on public perception or the ramifications of communication strategies. In this context, this article could serve as a foundational exploration, intended to pave the way for further research of other facets of the topic within a broader context.

SYSTEM NARRATIVES ANALYSIS

System narratives were used to officially explain “The World,” international relations and, accordingly, Russia's position in shaping the World Order.

Analyzed Russian media constructs a narrative that the West and the United States are losing their dominance over the World Order, portrayed as the *end of the World Order domination by the West and the United States*. And the reason given is that more and more countries, such as Russia, China, some Latin American countries, and ASEAN countries, are “quietly but firmly rejecting the Western world order”.

The narrative is used as a communication attack on the West and the United States, insinuating that the US has undermined the foundations of the world economic order and that trust in the dollar and pound sterling has been lost. Russian media are distributing Putin’s speeches where he unilaterally debates that the world order promoted by the Western countries is nonsense because no one has seen these rules and no one ever agreed upon them. Furthermore, those countries themselves are not obeying the rules, as they have violated international laws numerous times. The discourse stipulates that Russia could not accept the country’s loss in the greatest geostrategic rivalry of the century – the Cold War - as the story’s final

chapter. An important piece of Moscow's strategy in challenging the West included reestablishing Russia's position on the Black Sea.

At the same time, *Russia is creating a new World Order*, and the new basis for this is not the globalism and global economy, but the self-sufficiency of national economies. This narrative explains that the world reserve currencies are a fading phenomenon, and de-dollarization is inevitable. The new economic order will replace the global economy controlled by international transnational corporations with formal residence in the United States. The new world order is impossible without a strong Russia, - proclaimed Putin.

Another aspect of this narrative is the portrayal of Putin as a strong leader who can not only lead and unite the Russian society, but also achieve greater power for Russia - *Putin became the builder of a new world order*. This image of a strong leader is created by highlighting Putin's role as the President of Russia, as well as a national hero and international leader. He is portrayed as meeting international leaders and deploying nuclear weapons to Belarus, as well as giving advice to the government, instructing businesses, urging the modernization of certain sectors of the economy, and advising artists.

Russian media suggests that a world-wide radical change is already underway. Without calling Kremlin's intervention in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, by its real name - war, - the Russian media has disseminated the speeches of the Russian president, claiming that fundamental changes to the structure of the world order were made by the special military operation (специальная военная операция SVO) carried out by Russia in Ukraine. And the Russian special operation to protect Donbas influenced the world order and weakened the US hegemony.

Regarding the distribution of power on the world stage, Russian media is promoting the narrative that the *world order is becoming increasingly multipolar*, and the US hegemony, "which in the recent decades has provoked chaos and instability around the world, is weakening." The media is using interchangeably the word "multipolar" and "polycentric", stating that the process of establishing a polycentric world is already irreversible, and Russia is playing a pivotal role in establishing a new center of power. In this context,

the message is primarily oriented towards dismissing the power status of the United States and boosting the power status of Russia.

The narrative of a multipolar world gives importance to the BRICS states and their rising power: *BRIC states are the basis of a new world order*. Russian media often highlights the contrast between BRICS and G7 countries, the conflict between developing and developed nations, and the economic, industrial, and monetary accomplishments of other power centers. Media outlets are emphasizing the possibility of creating a single BRICS currency. They also suggest that the BRICS countries should have a say in the global decision-making processes by taking a seat at the table with the EU and the US. Moscow and Beijing are planning a new world order, emphasizing European chaos, and Asian order.

The Russian media seems to emphasize a closer relationship with the BRIC states, particularly with China and India. The import-export trade between Russia and China has been breaking records. Russia also seems to be requesting more weapons, and they are going to hold joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman with China and Iran. China is calling for the US, NATO, and EU to have an equal dialogue with Russia and take into account Moscow's security concerns. Furthermore, Russia and India are enhancing their import-export trade, and they are experiencing an increase in the exchange of air travel and tourism.

Russian media is reusing the Cold War narrative and presenting it as an ongoing conflict, rather than one that ended: *the Cold War did not come to an end, it is still ongoing and is happening here and now*. They are portraying the war in Ukraine as a result of the gratuitous Western provocation. This allows Russia to position itself as a victim, rather than the aggressor who initiated military intervention. The narrative of the Cold War is also being used to describe the US's current relationship with China, as well as to suggest that a new Cold War is occurring within America itself. Meanwhile, Russia is claiming to be against a "new Cold War" with the West, accusing them of unleashing it in order to preserve the unipolar world order.

The portrayal of narratives in Russian mass media reveals trends in the utilization of specific systemic narratives. The predominant topics include

an exploration of the world order and Russia's role, followed by the mediation of the multipolar order and the Cold War narrative.

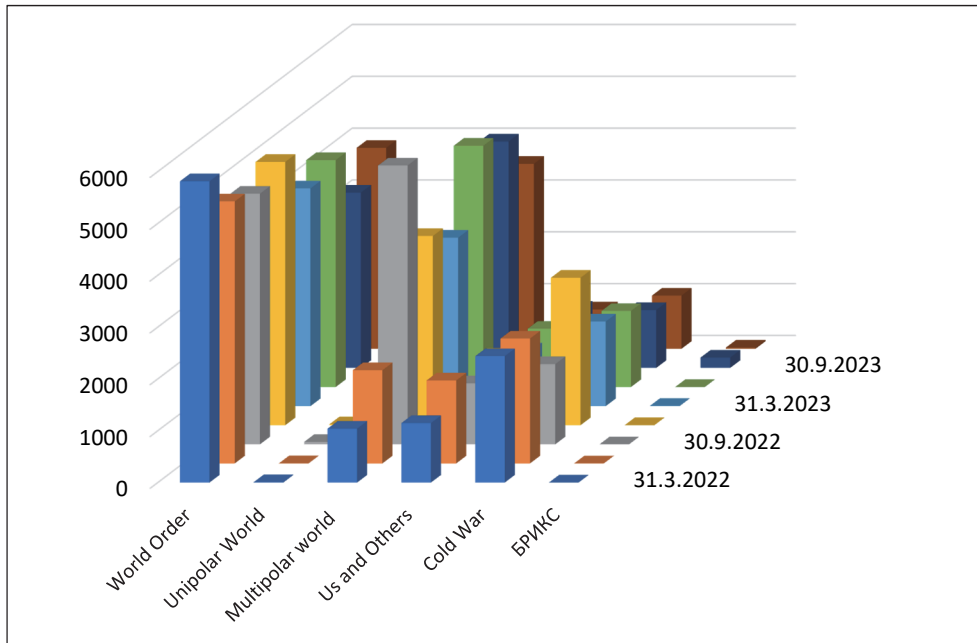


Figure 1. The frequency of occurrence of system narratives in Russian mass media from 1.1.2022 to 1.1.2024

National Narrative

The national narrative includes messages related to national identity and qualities, our history, and our values.

The narrative of national identity serves as the bedrock of Russia's power - *Russian identity is the power of Russia (мощь России)*, - and it is imperative to maintain its distinctive character deeply rooted in the country's history, culture, and traditions. Messages about national identity are employed to underscore Russian national cultural sovereignty, preserve uniqueness, and emphasize differentiation from the Western culture and identity.

In Russia, the concepts of national identity and civic identity are significantly intertwined, and the narrative of national identity promotes Russian cultural unity. The Russian language stands as the pillar and

unifying component of the people, encompassing not only those within Russia but also the Russian-speaking residents of neighboring countries (ближнего зарубежья). Mass media promotes national cultural identity and unity of the people of Russia and other former Soviet States, this emphasis being tied to historical narratives and patriotic themes.

The narrative of national identity extends to the people of Ukraine, with Russian mass media echoing the president's message, denying a distinct national identity of the Ukrainians. The invasion of Ukraine is portrayed as an imperative necessity to protect Ukrainians from attacks by the Western, fascist aggression aimed at “destroying their national identity.” In this context, the West poses an alarming threat not only to Ukraine but also to Russia and its national identity.

The narrative of the *Russian World* (Русский Мир) in this context refers to the people associated with Russian culture, who speak Russian and share Russian values. The Russian world relies on Russian civilization, which is supported by the entire Great Russian nation. This nation carries a common Russian ideal and shares a common Russian soul.

The Russian media has employed the narrative of *Our national qualities* to underscore the distinct characteristics of the Russian nation, *uniqueness of our national qualities*, highlighting its uniqueness, spirituality, mercy, and love for the people (любовь к человеку). These national qualities find particular emphasis within the context of Russian culture and are often associated with the unique cultural and spiritual traits of the Russian people, commonly referred to as the “Russian soul” (Русская душа). This essence is vividly exemplified in the literary works of classic Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev. Furthermore, these national qualities, including morality and spirituality, serve as the foundation of the country's educational system, and play an integral role in shaping relationships among all individuals in Russia. This narrative also underscores the exceptional nature and greatness of Russian culture, asserting Russia's right to be recognized as one of the “major players on the world stage.”

The narrative of *Our unique values and civilization* emphasizes the Russian “traditional” “spiritual and moral values,” deeply embedded in Christian and Orthodox traditions, and promoting family traditions. The idea of values was repurposed to substantiate the concept of a *unique Russian civilization* and became the tool to boost patriotism and Russian exceptionalism.

The narrative of *our values* is invoked to explain the war in Ukraine as “a struggle” to protect Russian “spiritual and moral values” from the ostensible infringements advanced by the “decadent and liberal” West. Russia’s values have become *completely irreconcilable with the values of the Western society* and “the Kremlin has moved very far away from these values.”

Multinationalism in Russia, a country characterized by vast territories and diverse nations, employs a narrative emphasizing *Our tolerance for other people and religions*. Russian media predominantly conveys messages about tolerance in the form of aspirations, discussing the importance of tolerance, spiritual and moral education, and the imperative to instill a sense of tolerance and acceptance in the younger generation. This is achieved through various means, including lessons, contests, festivals, and training sessions on tolerance held in schools, libraries, within the military, and at workplaces.

The overarching objective is to foster unity within society and mitigate the risks of extremism, terrorism, and crises. Religious and ethnic tolerance is depicted as a pivotal component of both national and international security, contributing to the promotion of a cohesive and united country (единая страна).

The narrative of *Our self-sufficiency*, as portrayed by Russian media, emerges as a response to Western sanctions imposed due to Russia's actions in Ukraine. The media underscores Russia's ability to overcome adversity, highlighting advancements in its national economy, financial sector, and cutting-edge technologies. Self-sufficiency is positioned as the foundation of the country's sovereignty, seen as a crucial element in ensuring “the

greatness of the state.” The narrative asserts that Russia's greatness is rooted in the strengthening of its sovereignty, and this, in turn, is contingent on achieving self-sufficiency.

The surge in production is depicted across various sectors, including food production, the economy, defense capabilities, as well as culture and education. Simultaneously, the narrative of self-sufficiency is intricately linked with the broader theme of economic development, emphasizing the mobilization of internal forces and the unity of all Russians.

The narrative of our history plays a pivotal role in illuminating the heroic past, especially during the Second World War, both within Russia's borders and throughout the former Soviet Union and Western Europe. This theme frequently emerges in Russian society, emphasizing the unifying influence of the former republic and other European states, while also seeking to highlight the greatness and power of Russia. The tool of a collective memory shared by Russians and Ukrainians is strategically wielded as a rhetorical device to justify the invasion of Ukraine. The media asserts that the Russian army in Ukraine is liberating Russian land from Western invaders, aiming for a reunion within the framework of an all-Russian civilization. Simultaneously, historical events unfold before us, marked by the annexation of Crimea and the establishment of the Lugansk and Donetsk national republics, casting Putin as a figure destined for a lasting place in our country's history.

The depiction of narratives in Russian mass media highlights trends in the application of distinct national themes. The matter of national identity persists throughout the entire analyzed period, manifesting a notable upswing in the last quarter of 2023. Concurrently, the heightened emphasis on the self-sufficiency narrative in mass media could be the answer to the surge in international sanctions against Russia during the same period. The substantial increase in the media's focus on tolerance towards other nations and religious narratives could be explained as the media's response to the increased international pressure against Russia concerning alleged war crimes during the conflict in Ukraine.

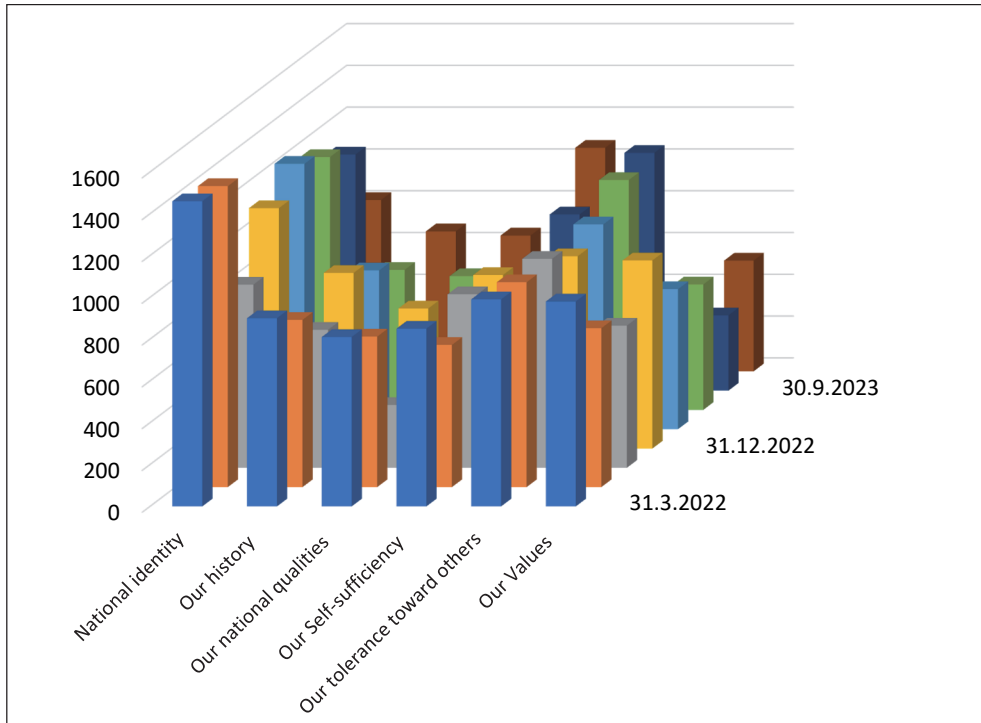


Figure 2. The frequency of occurrence of national narratives in Russian mass media from 1.1.2022 to 1.1.2024

Issues narratives

The issue narratives approach themes such as our security, the threat posed by Ukraine, the Black Sea region’s security, and the relationship with the neighboring countries.

The narrative of *Our security* actively advocates the notion that Russia must take the necessary measures to safeguard itself against external aggression, asserting that the actions of the West have forced Russia to defend itself. Russian media assiduously amplifies the President’s message, emphasizing that the initiation of the special military operation (специальная военная операция (СВО)) is a response aimed at protecting people, ensuring the security of Russia, and neutralizing the perceived threat posed by the external forces. The mass media strategically portrays a heightened sense of threat emanating from NATO, emphasizing that the alliance has breached its promise not to expand following the dissolution of

the Soviet Union. The mass media claims that “NATO is in Ukraine” and controls all the military actions. The narrative contends that NATO's actions now constitute a tangible and imminent threat to Russian security. This framing underscores the perceived necessity of the military operation as a defensive measure against external aggressive NATO forces that are seen as jeopardizing the safety and stability of Russia.

The narrative asserting that *Ukraine poses a threat* emphasizes the idea that Ukraine lacks control over its affairs, with NATO and the US allegedly dictating political decisions and actions to the leadership in Kiev. According to this narrative, Ukraine is depicted as having lost its state independence, being reduced to a pawn of Western colonialists who determine both its domestic and foreign policies. Furthermore, the narrative contends that Ukraine is afflicted by the “disease of neo-Nazism,” posing a perceived threat to the security of Russia. The media asserts that Ukrainian officials lack legitimacy, going so far as to call for the removal of President Zelensky, citing his purported inability to address the country’s corruption. Mass media underscores this claim by pointing out that this situation has persisted for an extended period, including the eight years during which Ukraine allegedly refused to implement the UN Security Council’s resolution on the settlement in Donbas. Within this narrative, there are accusations that Ukraine has committed, attempted, or planned genocide against the Russian-speaking population in the territories of Donbas and Luhansk, which Russia has annexed.

The narrative is reinforced by the assertion that Ukraine's potential NATO membership could bring aggressive forces to the Russian border. The message implies that Russian forces will act to protect not only the peaceful citizens of Ukraine, particularly in Donbas, but also to prevent a direct threat to Russia's security. The narrative underlying the motive of this mission reveals and explains that the successful completion of the operation in Ukraine would signify the end of US hegemony.

The narrative on the *Geopolitics of the Black Sea* underscores the significance of the Black Sea region in relation to Russian interests. Russian mass media portrays NATO's alleged intention to initiate geopolitical battles and rivalries, framing the militarization of the Black Sea region as a

longstanding objective for NATO. The narrative suggests that NATO has viewed the Black Sea region as a strategic front line for an extended period.

According to this narrative, the United States and NATO, having lost control over the Black Sea and Sevastopol, are perceived as generating new threats and contemplating the deployment of alliance battle groups in the Black Sea region. The overarching goal, as portrayed by the Russian media, is for NATO to transform the Black Sea region into an arena for geopolitical confrontations. Additionally, the United States is using the conflict to regain influence in the region.

The activities of NATO countries are depicted as a genuine threat to Russian security in the Black Sea region, particularly concerning Crimea and the Russian base in Sevastopol. The narrative asserts that Russia needs to increase its security to address the challenges in the Black Sea region. Concurrently, it emphasizes that the naval bases in Crimea provide Russia with a comparative advantage, a source of concern for NATO and the US, and that Russia's dominant role in the Black Sea has made NATO's plans for the region vulnerable.

The narrative also projects the potential leadership role of Russia in the region, suggesting that Crimea could serve as the focal point for the development of the entire Black Sea region. By implementing the "Black Sea Tiger" model in Crimea, the narrative contends that Russia could drive development across the Black Sea region, including the Caucasus and the Balkans. Moreover, the narrative posits that only Russia has the capacity to ensure the development of Crimea, emphasizing the region's critical importance to Russia.

The other aspect of this narrative emphasizes the power and the might of the Russian Black Sea maritime navy, underlining that the Russian navy is the only one that is developing, in contrast with the Turkish navy, which is having difficulties, and others, which are deteriorating.

The narrative of *Turkey in the Black Sea region* stresses the significant implications of Turkey's powerful position in the area, with the potential closure of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits emerging as a central topic of debate. Turkey is portrayed as the gatekeeper of the Bosphorus and

Dardanelles straits, while stressing Erdogan's willingness to play the role of negotiator during the conflict.

In this context, the Russian media's narrative places emphasis on the maintained relationship between Turkey and Russia, citing the visit of Turkey's Erdogan to Russia's Sochi for grain exports. This meeting is portrayed as a significant encounter between two heavyweights of the Black Sea region, solidifying Russia's power and, consequently, Putin's role.

Russian media actively promotes the narrative that the West was taken aback by the revelation of Russia's new ally in the Black Sea—Turkey. This narrative highlights Turkey's expressed position that NATO will not transform the Black Sea region into another Middle East and will refrain from engaging in militarization of the area.

The narrative regarding *Romania and the Black Sea region* features Romania's commitment to supporting NATO's military presence in the area, and President Iohannis advocating for a strengthened NATO position and collaboration, with the US to play a leading role in ensuring the security of the Black Sea region. Russian media emphasizes Romania's focus on Washington, highlighting its strategic partnership with the United States and its aspirations to be a trusted representative in the Black Sea region, with a particular focus on reinforcing NATO's eastern flank.

The Russian media's narrative explains that Romania's position lies in its fears regarding "the strengthening of the Russian military presence near Ukraine and in the Black Sea region" and in its desire to strengthen its defense positions. This justifies why it was in Romania that the first military base with a US missile defense system appeared, and why Romania is in the wake of a large American aircraft carrier.

The narrative expresses concern that Romania will be given the "key to destroying" Russia's underwater monopoly. This concern arises from Romania's plans, not only to purchase submarines, but also to announce intentions to acquire new minesweepers and upgrade existing missile corvettes. As a NATO member, Romania is actively modernizing its naval forces, prompting new anxieties for Russia, given the shared border - the Black Sea.

Through its issue narrative framing, the Russian mass media conveys distinct messages and themes. As expected, during the years 2022 and 2023, amid the war in Ukraine, the primary focus was *Our security*. The narrative addressing *security in the Black Sea region* follows the *Our security* narrative. The exploration of Ukraine as a definitive threat to Russian security was extensive before and during the outset of the Russian invasion. This emphasis gradually waned as the conflict unfolded. In the discourse on *Black Sea security*, the roles of Turkey and Romania are portrayed with some degree of parity. This nuanced portrayal in Russian mass media reflects the dynamic nature of geopolitical narratives, highlighting shifts in emphasis and evolving perspectives over time.

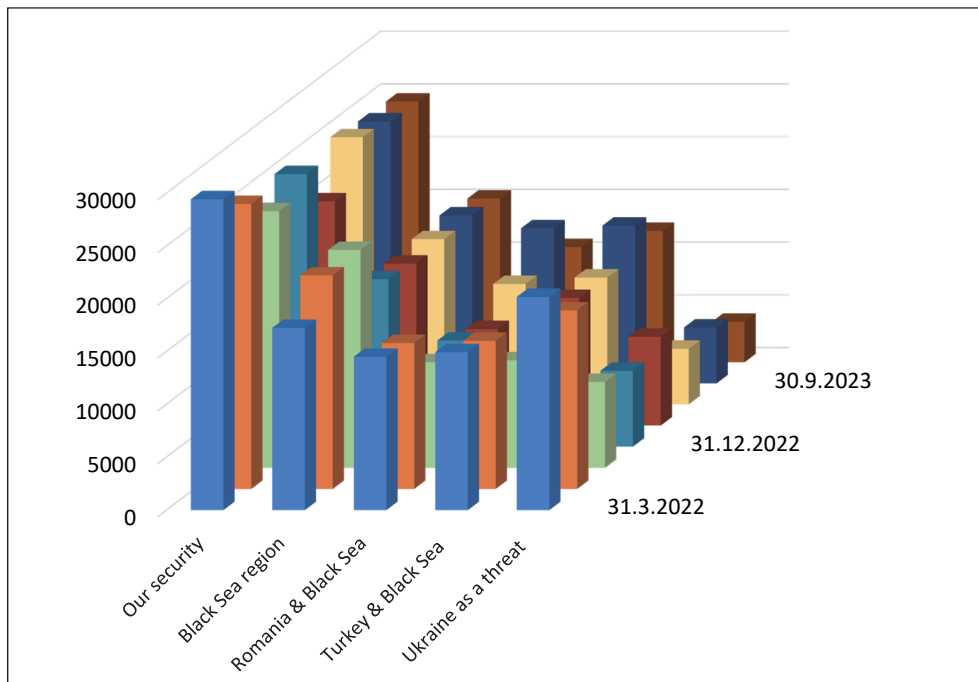


Figure 3. The frequency with which *issues narratives*

have occurred in Russian mass media from 1.1.2022 to 1.1.2024

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Russia's invasion of Ukraine serves as a crucible for Russia's strategic ambitions, with the interplay between historical context and contemporary maneuvering palpable, shaping narratives that frame its actions. Since the

inception of his presidency, Vladimir Putin has aimed not only to rebuild Russia's great power status by controlling energy resources, ensuring economic dominance, and integrating the former Soviet space, but also to institutionalize the idea of the Russian World as the foundation of the Russian state.

To consolidate the Russian identity and assert state control, Putin strategically acquired or reaffirmed state ownership of key segments of the media sector. The government asserted control over major TV networks and news agencies, and developed media-clientelism relations within Russia's media system. In this context, Russian mass media often echoes Putin's speeches and communications, along with those of other state officials. The narratives thus created are disseminated from national media to regional editions.

Since his 2007 Munich speech, Putin has rejected the post-Cold War system and accused the US of creating a unipolar world. In the subsequent years, Putin's strategic message aimed to promote a multipolar world, create a strong state, and unite the multinational and multiethnic population of the country. Russian mass media actively promotes the narrative of the end of the World Order, advocating for the establishment of a New World Order – a multipolar world with a strong Russia and a strong leader, Putin. In this context, national narratives and Russian national identity, qualities, and values are employed in shaping the image of a strong state and leader.

Putin's rewriting of history was adopted by the mass media to justify the invasion of Ukraine, claiming that Russia was forced by the West to ensure its security. The issue narratives emphasize that Russia's security is endangered by the threat posed by NATO and the West's aggressive forces. The Russian media alleges that NATO is present in Ukraine, framing the military operation as a defensive measure against external aggressive NATO forces jeopardizing Russia's safety and stability.

A key factor in the invasion is to enhance Russia's physical position and control of the Black Sea. The real interest in the Russian occupation of Crimea lies in increasing the country's access to the Black Sea's shores and limiting Ukraine's geostrategic and trade access to the shores, particularly to the warm water port of Sevastopol.

Strategical narratives are created to promote a socially constructed discourse, shaping political identity, creating ideology, and proposing responses to developing events. However, so far as January 10th, 2024, the strategic narratives created by the Russian media have not proven effective in shaping the worldview of the people of Ukraine, as they actively defend their independence, sovereignty, national identity, culture, and values. The success of these constructed strategic narratives in Russia is yet to be ascertained, with history as the ultimate judge.

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