



RUSSIA'S PUBLIC FOREIGN POLICY NARRATIVES

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Projecting Power: Understanding Russian Strategic Narrative

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Abstract

A key way to understand and decode Russian propaganda is to examine how and why Russians develop and maintain strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are the way in which countries construct and project their preferred image and destiny in the world order. For Russia, strategic narratives have both reflected and justified their recent military activity, including in Ukraine and Syria. This article decodes Russian strategic narrative by explaining the development and projection of two key storylines that fit within the “West against Russia” strategic narrative: Russophobia and an ironic response to the British statement that it was “highly likely” the Russian government was behind the Skripal poisoning in England in March 2018. While Russian strategic narrative can be seen to have roots in Soviet propaganda, contemporary Russian global propaganda is more organic and dynamic. The analysis of Russian strategic narrative allows us to understand more clearly the logic in Russian propaganda found on English-language outlets such as RT and more effectively deter Russian information aggression.

Defining Strategic Narratives

At its most basic, a narrative is a story, i.e. an account of collected events. How can a state construct a narrative? The stories that states weave about themselves are embedded within “master” narratives or a “transhistorical narrative that is deeply imbedded in a particular culture” (Halverson et al. 2011, page 14). Halverson et al. define narrative as “a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations” (page 14). They call for defining narrative as a “system of stories” and delineating between a narrative and a master narrative by defining a master narrative as something that “is deeply embedded in a culture, provides a pattern for cultural life and social structure, and creates a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations” (page 7). Master narratives have components that include story forms and archetype characters (page 7).

In terms of international relations, we are interested in finding how master narratives become strategic narratives, what Miskimmon et al. (2017) have called the intersection of communication and power. Miskimmon et al. define strategic narratives as “tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment” (preface). For Russia, strategic narratives have both reflected and justified their military incursions, including in Ukraine (Szostek 2017, Hinck et al. 2018).

The History of Soviet and Russian Strategic Narratives

All countries strive to project an image of themselves onto the international sphere. Russia’s history in the

Cold War has created a powerful legacy of information warfare with the West in general and the United States in particular. In the Soviet era, the avowed goal of the Soviet Union was to create a worldwide communist state run by and for the workers of the world. As such, both domestic and international propaganda narratives portrayed capitalism as the enemy of the people and the Soviet system as the champion of humanity. Key elements of the Soviet narrative including the superiority of Soviet technology, the better life of Soviet workers, the evils of capitalism such as racism or class divides, as well as the military might of the Soviets. This was countered by U.S. strategic narrative, including through Russian-language outlets such as Radio Liberty and Voice of America, although both U.S. media norms and law prevented the presentation of propaganda as news.

In the chaotic period after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the young Russian state struggled with its identity in the world order. Under Putin, who took over as Russian leader in 2000, the Russian state has become progressively more nationalistic and antagonistic toward the West, particularly NATO. Russia also has matched deeds to words in terms of anti-Western movements, including by invading Georgia, seizing the Crimean Peninsula, invading Eastern Ukraine in the wake of the Euromaidan democratic movement, and fighting against Western forces in Syria. Russian strategic narrative has been the subject of many studies, including Hinck et al. (2018), Orttung and Nelson (2018), Oates (2014), Ramsay and Robertshaw (forthcoming), Roselle (2017), Schafer (2018), and Szostek (2017). A strong common thread in the study of Russian narratives, particularly in English-language content (Ramsay and Robertshaw, Orttung and Nelson), is the portrayal of NATO as the American-led enemy of the Russian state as well as the

collapse of democratic institutions worldwide. In particular, the concept of “West Against Russia” provides a powerful narrative for contemporary Russia and a useful foil for the “Russia Resurgent as a Great Nation” narrative pushed by the Kremlin.

Genesis of Russian Strategic Narratives

Modern Russian strategic narrative reflects aspects of Soviet-era narrative strategies, but has evolved with communication technology and globalization. Comparing the KGB disinformation campaign Operation Infektion with modern Russian narrative displays a degree of continuity between eras: Operation Infektion started with an anonymous letter published in 1983 in *Patriot*, an English-language newspaper in India, which claimed that U.S. biological warfare scientists created the HIV/AIDS virus and were planning to continue research in laboratories in Pakistan (Boghardt 2009). Using that planted letter as an anchor, Soviet sources and others could then amplify the story for it to gain credibility. The contemporary media ecology allows a very useful global, immediate intensification of this type of plant-and-disinform activity. The Infektion ‘campaign’ was successful because it amplified concerns about biological warfare already present in the U.S. and elsewhere (Boghardt, 2009, 3). Levering existing concerns through disinformation is a key way to bolster a strategic narrative.

Soviet propaganda for foreign markets was created through a structured, hierarchical system, institutionalized under the term “active measures” as KGB officers worked with other government agencies to produce and disseminate disinformation and strategic narratives through a well-established process (Boghardt, 2009, 3). Evidence that modern Russian strategic narrative construction occurs in the same vertical, structured process is not as clear-cut, but in many ways the details of information production are not critical to understanding the nature of the messages. Instead, it is useful to consider an organic construction framework by which public-facing actors on many levels of the Russian government and Russian media construct narratives along strategic goals and in response to environmental developments. This framework explains the Russian narrative effort as a “coordinated campaign” rather than “an orchestrated operation” and better reflects the dynamic nature of contemporary Russian narrative construction (Vilmer et al. 2018, 21). In practice, this may present as Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova repeating a narrative from a Putin interview during

her weekly press briefing or as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov quoting an RT story about Syria during a press conference.

Examples of Stories that Echo Russian Strategic Narratives

A range of work has established key Russian narratives, especially the strategic narrative that the West fails to respect Russia as a strong state and global player in the international sphere. Our study of Russian strategic narrative has focused on identifying key recurrent words or phrases in online news content that can be strongly linked to specific stories within the “West Against Russia” narrative.

A. Russophobia

The case of “Russophobia” emphasizes the link between historical discourse and modern Russian strategic narrative. Russophobia is not an invention of Putin’s government or even the Soviet state before it: The term was first used by a Tsarist diplomat in the nineteenth century to reflect a classic Russian narrative that the West will exclude and marginalize Russia at every opportunity (Darczewska and Zochowski, 2015, 9). The Russophobia story allows Russian leaders to easily designate enemies by equating acts against the state to crimes against Russian nationality. Darczewska and Zochowski argue that Russophobia has reached new maturity under Putin in its salience and utility for questioning Western criticism (page 17). Thus, Russophobia, which fits within the strategic narrative that the West will always oppose Russia, allows Putin to cast doubt on virtually any Western accusations by implying they are motivated by “Russophobic” prejudice rather than fact.

Analysis of the use of Russophobia by Russian sources illustrates the dynamic way these narratives are constructed in the information sphere. Our research shows that Putin and other Russian elites often employ derivatives of the word Russophobia in speeches and interviews, as do lower-level government officials. Russophobia is also a hashtag on Twitter and receives frequent contributions from Russian Embassy accounts and state media. RT and Sputnik provide the most consistent promotion of the Russophobia story through regular “Russophobia Digest” articles and opinion pieces. RT also displays Russophobia’s modern utility for enemy designation in articles ranking the “top Russophobes” of the year. These articles demonize Putin critics such as former U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul.¹ Russian state media also has operationalized Russophobia to call for the

1 “Russophobia: RT Rates the Top 10 Kremlin Critics & Their Hilarious Hate Campaigns.” RT International. September 28, 2017. Accessed November 29, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/uk/404930-russophobia-kremlin-critics-paranoia/>.

release of alleged spy Maria Butina, claiming she was jailed in the United States “on charges which basically amount to being a Russian.”² As of December 1, 2018, the phrase Russophobia appeared 790 times on the RT website and 855 times on the Sputnik news website.³

B. “Highly Likely”

While the use of Russophobia reflects the historic roots of Russian narrative, the “highly likely” verbal meme demonstrates how Russia’s flexibility in projecting narrative has evolved. In particular, the focus on these two words shows how Russian communication strategy can reflect and distort statements from Western governments into its key strategic narrative of the “West against Russia.” One noteworthy example is Russia’s response to British Prime Minister Theresa May’s assertion that “it is highly likely that Russia is responsible” for the Skripal poisonings.⁴ Russia quickly identified and mocked the phrase. For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov described “highly likely as a new invention of the British diplomacy to describe why they punish people—because these people are highly likely guilty, like in *Alice in Wonderland*.”⁵ Lavrov’s allusion to the Queen of Hearts’ “sentence first—verdict afterwards” justice foreshadowed how Russia could use the phrase to paint a sarcastic picture of an international Wonderland, where the West will always find Russia guilty. Unsurprisingly, RT and Sputnik champion the phrase, which one RT article defines as “one of those familiar Russophobic tropes which means there’s no proof but we’ll say it anyway.”⁶

Official Russian Twitter accounts have also popularized “highly likely” as a hashtag and use it to sarcastically question Western critics. One example from the Russian Embassy in South Africa shows characters from the show *Breaking Bad* in a laboratory as “highly likely” being the Skripal suspects.⁷ Another tweet from the official Russian language Ministry of Foreign Affairs account Russified the phrase itself to sarcastically imply that the West would find Russia “Хайли Лайкли” responsible for the July 2017 lunar eclipse.⁸ This twist on May’s

words has even made it to unlikely corners of the government: Rossotrudnichestvo, the state agency responsible for Russians living abroad, began a campaign titled “Highly Likely Welcome Back” to invite Russian students studying in foreign universities home to Russia to protect them from “the negative influence of Russophobic attitudes.”⁹

The Russians present “highly likely” as a natural symptom of Russophobia. Both of these concepts help to create doubt in Western leaders and ideas within the “West Against Russia” narrative. Identifying these storylines and narratives and recognizing the way they are organically constructed and dynamically distributed is crucial to understanding contemporary Russian information strategy. The deployment of Russophobia and “highly likely” demonstrate how Russia uses concepts both old and updated to pursue the broader strategic narrative of the West against Russia.

Do Strategic Narratives Matter?

There is value in understanding Russian communication strategy through the lens of strategic narrative. On the one hand, it shows how events, quotes, individuals, and other newsworthy items are organized—and at times distorted—into narratives that support Russia’s view of its role in the world. This usefully moves the discussion beyond fake news or even classic ideas of propaganda, because it’s about visibility rather than verification in the modern media ecology. If we can understand and identify Russian strategic narratives, then we can find and counter those narratives more effectively rather than engaging in a war of verification that can even inadvertently amplify disinformation.

If these narratives are “strategic” in a war of global influence, how effective are they as rhetorical weapons? Research by Ramsay and Robertshaw shows how distinctive phrases and text from Russian sites such as RT and Sputnik appear in British tabloid news (forthcoming). So we know that at least elements of Russian-led narrative are appearing, often divorced from the source

2 “Russophobia Digest Part 9: Spy Sex, No Evidence, and the Manafort Trial Charade Goes on.” RT International. September 14, 2018. Accessed November 29, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/438477-russophobia-manafort-butina-cuba/>.

3 Google search within the domains <https://www.rt.com/> and <https://sputniknews.com/> conducted on December 1, 2018.

4 Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer who was a double agent for the British, and his daughter were poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent in Salisbury, England, in March 2018. See: “Theresa May: ‘Highly Likely’ Russia Responsible for Spy’s Poisoning by Nerve Agent.” *The Washington Post*. March 12, 2018. Accessed November 29, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/theresa-may-says-highly-likely-russia-is-responsible-for-spys-poisoning/2018/03/12/7baa6d22-25f4-11e8-a227-fd2b009466bc_story.html?utm_term=.e2de80d4354b..

5 Lavrov, Sergey. 2018. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with BBC HardTalk on April 4, 2018, see a transcript here: <http://rusisworld.com/en/interview/transcript-sergey-lavrovs-interview-bbc-hardtalk/>

6 See <https://www.rt.com/news/439064-russophobia-digest-part-10-scouts/>

7 <https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1037635323889680384>

8 https://twitter.com/MID_RF/status/1023570165122908160

9 <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-tells-its-study-abroad-students-it-s-time-to-come-home/29173184.html>

as foreign disinformation, in Western media content. Fears about the Russian ability to influence American hearts and minds is probably at the highest point since before the end of the Cold War, with immense attention on Russian meddling in the 2016 elections on social media in particular. One could argue that this amplifies Russia's ambitions to be seen as a powerful world player, but on the other hand it has spawned negative reaction and sanctions against the Russian state. In the war of political capital, it is still hard to say that aggressive Russian strategic narratives are 'winning' any particular war. The most compelling case that Russian strategic narrative forms of actual warfare is in Ukraine, where the effort to counter Russian disinformation both within

and about Ukraine has been a significant challenge for the Ukrainian state.

Finally, this discussion of Russian strategic narratives cannot offer any evidence of the audience reception of these messages. While we can observe the nature of Russian strategic narrative, trace its flow through the media ecosystem through key words and even computational linguistics (Oates, Barrow, and Foster 2018), we need audience studies to determine the degree to which these narratives have a direct effect on citizens in the West. That being said, this article takes the step of identifying the concept and showing how Russian government and media outlets attempt to shape events, crises, individuals, and even single quotes, into its desired view of the world.

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China and the United States on Russian TV: “Russia First”

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Abstract

Russian television remains the most trusted source of international news for most Russians and, since it is state-controlled, provides insight into the Kremlin’s priorities. While there is some criticism of China, reporting on that country has been generally positive since the 2004 resolution of their border dispute. Positive stories about the US ended with the invasion of Iraq in 2004 and then turned hostile as Obama imposed sanctions for the invasion of Crimea.

Television is Still King

How Russian hackers did or did not influence American voters during the 2016 US presidential election campaign is subject to continual media speculation and to on-going official investigation. But what the Russian government tells its domestic voters about the United States and other major global powers receives less attention.

The shutdown or takeover of Russia’s major broadcasters by Kremlin-friendly elements at the start of Vladimir Putin’s presidency renders Russian television today little more than a government mouthpiece. Although access to social media and online news sites is growing rapidly in Russia, television remains Russian audiences’ primary and most trusted source of national and world news. An August 2018 survey by the Levada Center found that 73 percent of Russians consult television news more than any other information source. Television news is trusted by 49 percent of Russians, while only 24 percent trust online publications, and 15 percent social media. How Russian television presents the domestic politics and foreign policies of other states influences public perceptions. Given that Russian newsrooms take their direction from the Kremlin, television reporting on overseas events and actors provides insights into Russia’s changing priorities in its relations with its international allies and adversaries.

What narratives do Russian broadcasters use to frame domestic perceptions of the United States and China? The answers to this question are complex and change over time. Media representations of the US and China mirror the ups and downs of their diplomatic relations with Russia. But as well as fulfilling a propaganda function, Russian political programming also follows a commercial logic, as broadcasters’ seek to retain audiences in a crowded media market. In line with global trends, competition from the constant stream of sex, scandal and conspiracy theories available online is pushing Russia’s news broadcasters to embrace a more sensationalist style. In particular, Russia’s Sunday evening political round-up shows offer an infotainment-style, opinion-driven analysis of the week’s news that simul-

taneously serves their channel’s commercial interests and the propaganda goals of the Kremlin. Weekly programs such as Channel One’s *Voskrenoye Vremya* and Rossiya’s *Vesti Nedeli* focus almost exclusively on international news, perhaps to distract audiences’ attention from political problems closer to home.

Representations of China

Russian television representations of China and the US are currently in flux. For the past decade, Russia’s media have emphasized the growing political and economic cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, playing down areas of diplomatic discord. Positive framing of bilateral relations, however, is being undermined by Beijing’s multibillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): an infrastructure and investment plan connecting Asia, Africa and Europe that will extend Chinese influence over participating countries, which together represent half the world’s population and a quarter of global GDP. Moscow’s concern over China’s growing dominance in Central Asia, and in other places of strategic importance to Russia, is reflected in the Russian media. In August, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported on mounting hostility to Chinese influence, investment and immigrants across Central Asia. The report claimed that Chinese projects are breeding corruption and destroying the environment. And, as a consequence, anti-China protests are erupting across the region. In July, the newspaper ran a series of stories about China’s domestic social problems, including corruption in its state-run industries. In contrast to reporting in the press, Russian television continues to portray China as Russia’s closest ally. But even on TV, strains in bilateral relations are visible. The Russian government’s influence over multiple media outlets allows it to send nuanced messages to its international counterparts and to address different audiences simultaneously. Against the backdrop of generally positive coverage of bilateral relations on Russian television, Moscow is using the minor media under its control to signal its concerns to Beijing over some elements of China’s foreign policy.

Russian television builds a narrative of friendship and collaboration between China and Russia with frequent references to bilateral summits, official visits, joint economic projects, cultural exchanges and to united action within international institutions such as the UN Security Council—often to counter what is presented as the destructive dominance of the US. In recent weeks, for example, Channel One news reported on the joint development of a long-haul passenger plane; booming bilateral trade that this year hit \$100 billion; Chinese military participation in Russia's largest ever post-Soviet war games in Vladivostok; and Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping cooking pancakes on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum, where the pair signed a record number of economic deals. China's vocal support for Russia at the UN during a British-initiated debate on the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal was also featured on Channel One. This is a far cry from the Russian media's framing of China in the early 2000s. Back then, China-themed stories mainly focused on illegal Chinese immigration as a territorial, economic and cultural threat to Russia's declining population. The media fanned fears that illegal Chinese immigrants were the first wave of China's expansion into Russia's Far East. Similarly, Chinese traders in Moscow's markets were accused of undermining local businesses by trading in counterfeit and contraband goods.

The change in tone of Russian media reporting on China coincided with the two states settling the last of their border disputes in 2004. To avoid provoking a nationalist backlash against President Putin, Russian television kept quiet about the territorial deal, which saw Russia transfer a portion of two disputed islands and a number of islets to China. Settling their border disputes, which caused a brief conflict between China and Russia in 1969, has allowed the duo to deepen their economic and political cooperation. The media's reframing of Sino-Russian relations appears to have influenced Russian public opinion of China. A 2006 survey for the Public Opinion Foundation found that 41 percent of Russians thought China was a threat to Russia's interests, while 36 percent believed it was not a threat. But by 2014, only 19 percent saw China as a threat, while a majority 57 percent felt the opposite. In a June 2017 survey, 62 percent of Russians named China as Russia's closest ally.

The medals of friendship and mutual admiration exchanged between Presidents Xi and Putin, however, cannot disguise that Russia and China's current partnership is a marriage of convenience. Forged to counter growing pressure from the US and its allies on both countries, the Sino-Russian strategic alliance has failed to dispel all enmity between these former foes. In October, Russian state television reported on China's detention of Interpol chief Meng Hongwei. Playing

up the sensationalism of the story, the program's presenter noted Meng had sent his wife an emoji of a knife before he disappeared, as a warning that he was in trouble. The decision by news editors to cover the story was probably motivated by ratings as much as by politics, but it would not have been included without Kremlin approval. In September, Russian television reported on Donald Trump's CBS interview, in which the American president accused China of interfering in the 2016 US election, citing Beijing as a "bigger problem than Moscow." Russia frequently uses China's tensions with the US to its own advantage. Russian television, for example, is devoting considerable airtime to the current US-China trade war. By equating the US-imposed tariffs on Chinese imports with US sanctions on Russia over its annexing of Crimea, Russian broadcasters aim to undermine the legitimacy of both policies, framing them as efforts to weaken Washington's rivals.

Shifting Views of the US

The election of President Trump began a new chapter in Russian television coverage of the United States. Reporting on the US during Putin's presidency can be divided into several phases. Putin came to office believing Russia's international status would be best enhanced through integration with the US and its Western allies. To pursue his strategy, Putin successfully wooed US President George W. Bush, who famously claimed to have looked into his Russian counterpart's soul and found him "straightforward and trustworthy." At home, Kremlin propagandists used his bromance with Bush to herald Putin's growing global stature and his restoration of Russia's international prestige. This message clearly hit its mark. By March 2003, Russian voters considered foreign policy the area in which Putin had made the most progress as president, adding to his high approval ratings that averaged around 70 percent.

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, however, soured Putin's budding relationship with Bush. Russia's media no longer presented the US president as a potential partner, but as an aggressive militarist with scant regard for international law or national sovereignty. The 'colour revolutions' that brought to power pro-American governments in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004)—the latter with assistance from US NGOs—further convinced Putin that Russia would not be accepted into the Western club on equal terms. His cautious optimism regarding Western relations turned to suspicion and later hostility—changes replicated in Russian television framing of the US.

Although from the beginning of the Iraq war onwards, Russian television often took a hostile view of Washington's actions—for example, the deployment

of American missiles in Eastern Europe in 2007—the majority of reporting on the US was surprisingly matter-of-fact. Negative framing of the US ebbed and flowed as the context of bilateral relations was shaped by events. Anti-US rhetoric only became a persistent feature of Russian news after Washington led efforts to sanction Russia over Crimea in March 2014. Since then, US–Russia relations have been framed as an existential battle for survival. This main narrative has been constructed with frequent reference to several sub-narratives. These include: a pervasive anti-Russia attitude among US government and media institutions; US efforts to contain Russia’s influence, especially in the Middle East; American hypocrisy regarding interference in other countries’ political processes; growing political divisions within the US and between America and its Western allies; and, consequently, America’s declining global power. Personal attacks against President Obama and other prominent US policymakers also became more common in Russia’s print and electronic media. In some quarters, anti-Obama propaganda included racist slurs, conduct not usually seen outside wartime.

The media’s intensifying onslaught against the US is motivated by Putin’s domestic political needs as well as by tensions with Washington over Ukraine, Syria and other issues. Anti-US propaganda is an important component of Putin’s efforts to mobilize domestic support for his leadership against a backdrop of economic crisis caused by Western sanctions, falling oil prices and rampant corruption. In these precarious circumstances, Putin has based his appeal on promises to vanquish Russia’s foreign foes, chief among them, the United States.

A Special Place for Trump

It was in the context of deteriorating US–Russian relations that Donald Trump emerged as the Republican presidential candidate in 2016. Trump’s campaign rhetoric echoed many of the Kremlin’s criticisms of Obama’s policies, especially in the Middle East. This, along with his praise for President Putin, guaranteed Trump frequent favorable coverage on Russian TV. His unconventional candidacy and colorful language further added to Trump’s media appeal in an information culture that prioritizes sensationalism. At the same time, Trump’s opponent, Hillary Clinton, was presented negatively by Russia’s media, especially in relation to her accusations of state-sanctioned Russian interference in the presidential campaign.

Trump’s surprise victory, however, presented a conundrum for Russia’s media. Coverage of the president-elect

immediately became more negative, as Kremlin propagandists tried to lower high expectations of the improved bilateral relations that they had encouraged during the campaign. Russian television began to cover anti-Trump protests that it had previously ignored. Attention also focused on Trump’s business failures, political inexperience and sexism, all downplayed during the campaign. Trump’s intention to “get along with Russia”, stated during the presidential debates, was always going to be tempered by his pledges to uphold US military and economic supremacy. His “America First” approach has brought President Trump into conflict with Moscow over Syria, Iran and trade tariffs. In April, US airstrikes on Damascus, in response to chemical attacks by forces loyal to the Syrian government, were widely condemned on Russian television. In a two-hour special broadcast of *Rossiya’s 60 Minutes*, the US and its allies were accused of faking news of the chemical attack. Trump, however, was spared personal reproach. Criticism instead focused on British Prime Minister Theresa May, perhaps motivated by her condemnation of Moscow over the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal the previous month.

The Russian media have continued to praise Trump when his pronouncements align with Kremlin interests. Trump’s declaration at his Helsinki summit with Putin in July that he saw “no reason” why Moscow would meddle in an American election, despite his own intelligence agencies’ contrary conclusions, received repeated coverage in Russia. Claims that the US president had told other world leaders that Crimea is part of Russia at a G7 meeting in June were also widely reported. Increasingly, Trump is portrayed separately from the country he leads. Agencies he commands are accused of undermining the president. *60 Minutes*, for example, framed the January 2017 CIA report on Russian election meddling as an attempt to delegitimize Trump’s presidency. But even this accusation is instrumental. Kremlin propagandists have long emphasized internal political division and polarization as a cause of US global decline.

As president, Trump has attempted to defend US hegemony and has adopted many traditional American positions on foreign policy matters. Substantial rapprochement with Russia thus seems unlikely, a reality recognized in Moscow. Analysis of Russian television framing of Moscow’s international relations confirms that Russia is unlikely to renege on its partnership with Beijing in favor of closer alignment with Washington any time soon.

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How Russian Media Represent the Sanctions Imposed on Russia by the West in Relation to Wider International Relations Issues

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Abstract

The sanctions regime imposed on Russia is at the top of the agenda for Russian media of all political persuasions. Although government and opposition media follow the same structural patterns in their coverage, they construct contrasting views of the issue and its implications for Russia's role in international affairs and the nature of the contemporary international order.

The sanctions imposed on Russia as punitive measures by key Western states have become a fact of Russia's political and economic life, as well as an issue that has been widely discussed in both domestic and foreign media. Taking a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, this article considers these media debates on the sanctions as being instrumental in constructing international relations (IR). Mass media are not able to construct IR discourse in its proper form, because journalists and editors do not formulate foreign policy and are not decision-makers in this social sphere. Yet, media produce what can be labeled an 'ancillary discourse of IR', offering ideologically-laden representations of IR. And, thus, media discourse contributes to the construction of IR. The media debate on the sanctions is an important component of Russia's 'ancillary discourse of IR'.

Before this article analyzes how Russian media represent the sanctions imposed on Russia, it briefly outlines the background context in which this takes place and which guides the diverging interpretations offered by government and opposition media.

Background to the Sanctions

Massive international sanctions against Russia were first introduced in 2014, in response to the crisis in Ukraine. This crisis had two principal aspects. The first concerned Crimea, which after the referendum in 2014 was proclaimed to be a federal subject of the Russian Federation. This event was represented very differently within Russian and Western political environments. While the West referred to the event as an 'annexation' and underlined its illegitimacy, Russian politicians and media used the term 'reunification', which sought to emphasize that Crimea had been a part of Russia until 1954, when it was 'presented' to Ukraine by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. The metaphor of the unexpected 'territorial gift' has been widely used by both Russian citizens and media since then.¹

Official Russian political discourse also stresses that Crimea was reunited with Russia as a result of the decision taken by its citizens at the All-Crimea referendum, held in March 2014. In his March 2014 address to the Federal Council and Duma, the lower chamber of the Russian Parliament, Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged Russia's involvement in the Crimean referendum, depicting this as security measures to guarantee peaceful voting in the referendum.² According to Russian media, 82% of the electorate voted, and the pro-Russian option (that is the option to join Russia) received 96% support.³ The EU extended its economic sanctions until 31 January 2019.

Representing the Sanctions: Government vs Opposition Perspectives

To critically assess how Russian media depict the sanctions regime imposed on Russia across the spectrum of politically-divergent publications, this article draws on data retrieved from a few sources, which offer ideologically distinct perspectives on the issue. *Russia Today (RT)*, a Russian international television network funded by the Russian government, and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta (RG)*, the official newspaper of the government, are government-funded media sources. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (NezG)*, a Russian independent newspaper, and *Novaya Gazeta (NovG)*, which has a long-established reputation of being an opposition newspaper, are analyzed as alternative perspectives to government media. All the materials cited in this article were drawn from the electronic versions of these outlets; the quotations from RG, NezG and NovG in Russian were translated into English by the author.

A general structural pattern in the way the sanctions are represented across all four media sources can be identified. This pattern is comprised of a few principal components: a news hook (a recent event or fact is reported); historical background (a reference is made

1 Some explanations of 'the gift of Crimea' metaphor are discussed in the material on the website of National Public Radio.

2 The quote was taken as an example from The New Yorker magazine's archive.

3 A detailed description of the EU's sanctions on Russia is available from the European Council website.

to why the sanctions have been imposed); assessments of the impact of the sanctions; references to the supporters and opponents of the sanctions and their positions; comments on the influence of the sanctions on various actors; descriptions of Russia's reaction to the sanctions; and the recontextualization of the sanctions as a wider issue. Not every publication contains all of these elements; therefore, the article only discusses the generalized image from the sum total of the publications.

In both government and opposition media, news hooks are often articulated through rather straightforward, but neutral statements that concisely report the news and provide factual information, for instance on the duration of a new round of the sanctions (*EU leaders have extended economic penalties against Russia for six months until the end of January* (RT 29.06.2018); *The EU extended economic sanctions against Russia till 31 January 2019. This is claimed in the decision by the EU Council* (NovG 05.07.2018)). However, RG also resorts to negatively charged titles that promote the official position of the Russian state on the issue (*Participants in the 'Eurasia' Forum condemned anti-Russian sanctions* (RG 07.09.2018)).

Accounts of why the sanctions are being imposed are more typical of RT. Apparently, it happens because the channel's English language version targets a foreign audience, who are less familiar with the Russian foreign policy context. However, reporting on the reasons behind the sanctions also functions to boost the presence of official Russian state ideology in the international arena, through the usage of specific linguistic forms. The statement *'The penalties were initially introduced in 2014 over Moscow's alleged involvement in the Ukraine crisis and its reunification with Crimea'* represents Russia's involvement in Ukraine as unproven (*alleged*). Furthermore, the word 'reunification' has a distinct political connotation, as it is explicitly opposed to the term 'annexation' used in Western discourse, and implies the rejoining of parts of something, specifically a country that was divided. Thus, not only are the sanctions depicted as unlawful, but an argument about the legitimacy of Russia's actions in Crimea is constructed.

When describing the punitive measures taken against Russia, both government and opposition outlets offer rather detailed lists of the spheres and persons being sanctioned, including banking and financial institutions, energy projects, Russia's defense sector, some government officials, businessmen and public figures. However, it is important to note that the outlets choose contrasting perspectives on the same events. The opposition press conveys the idea that Russian companies find themselves in a disadvantageous position (*...The companies under sanctions cannot receive loans from European*

banks and have a limited access to European technologies (NovG 05.07.2018)). While government outlets portray the negative impact of the sanctions as felt by Western businesses, which are prevented from collaborating with Russia (*The decision prolongs the ban on doing business with Russian banking and financial institutions and new energy projects* (RT 29.08.2018)). Consequently, different linguistic attributions of agency ascribe the quality of power to either Western actors or Russia, and two contrasting pictures of the world order are shaped.

The decision to implement sanctions is taken and enacted by officials in governments and institutions; therefore, how these actors are conceptualized in media is essential for understanding how the sanctions are represented in the international context. In general, Russian media use collective terms to denote the advocates of the sanctions, such as 'EU leaders', 'the EU' or 'Brussels'. In some instances, however, this vagueness is partially eliminated through further references that contain particular names, as in *'According to the source, the move was triggered by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who reportedly urged the leaders to prolong sanctions against Moscow <...>'* (RT 29.06.2018). In this excerpt from RT, the situation is modeled as hypothetical, by reference to undefined sources (*according to the source, reportedly*). Yet, the representation suggests that the German and French leaders are active and powerful actors, who are able to exert pressure on other, less influential, European actors. Thus, the issue of the sanctions triggers an account of the wider international context, specifically the unequal relations within the EU.

The representations of the advocates are complemented (and balanced in some way) with the representations of the opponents of the sanctions. This role is often ascribed to Italy and Italian politicians, both in government and opposition media, although they frame this in different ways. While RT and RG construct the Italian view on the sanctions as consistent and enduring (*Italy has repeatedly voiced concerns over the sanctions* (RT 20.06.2018)), opposition media focus on Italy's lack of influence in Europe and its fruitless attempts to lift the sanctions. The analysis shows that three major features characterize the representation of Italy in the two opposition newspapers. First, Italy is depicted as a weak actor that is heavily dependent on the EU and the USA, and may itself fall prey to punitive European and American policies (*...if Rome unilaterally proclaimed lifting anti-Russian sanctions, many Italian companies would become exposed to secondary sanctions from the USA and the EU* (NovG 16.07.2018)). Second, an emphasis is placed on Italy's loneliness in its pro-Russian position. Third, opposition media outlets tend to discredit the Ital-

ian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, as a political figure. He is referred to as a character that has no political weight and is suspected of being Russia's puppet, as well as of receiving Russian financial support. In sum, Salvini is portrayed as a political figure who is trying to please Russia, but only verbally, because it is impossible for him to actually change the situation.

When discussing the influence of the sanctions on various actors, government outlets reduce their accounts to describing the negative effect on European countries. An article on RT, entitled '*Germany biggest loser from EU sanctions against Russia*' (RT 14.12.2017), puts the accent on Germany's economic losses. To demonstrate the critical consequences of the sanctions for Germany, the author refers to German statistical sources and includes a lot of statistical data that serve as arguments to prove the claim: '*According to the institute's estimates, German exports are currently €618 million lower than they could be if the sanctions were not imposed. The analysts highlight that overall export losses due to the mutual trade restrictions have totaled €37.5 billion since the penalties were introduced. EU losses reportedly comprise 90 percent of that figure*' (RT 14.12.2017). The strategy of using statistical data is also maintained through the extensive use of vocabulary based on semantics of reduction (*losses, dropped, declined, decreased, lower*). All of these units apply to European actors, while the representation of the effects on Russia is left out. Opposition media, on the contrary, accentuate the losses incurred by Russia, while the impact of the sanctions on other actors is discussed only superficially. Quantitative argumentation is intensively deployed by the opposition press too, but for a completely different purpose: to provide negative interpretations of the economic situation in Russia. For instance, NezG dismisses statements about the limited effects of the sanctions on Russia as 'stories', that is as something implausible. NezG sets out gloomy figures on foreign investment in Russia: '*Over the first half-year, direct foreign investment into the Russian non-financial sector reduced to 7.3 bln dollars. This figure is almost 2.5 times smaller than a year ago*' (NezG 12.07.2018).

Government media accounts of Russia's reaction to the sanctions present Russia not as a victim, but as a strong international actor that can react with countermeasures to pressure from outside: '*The Kremlin responded by imposing an embargo on agricultural produce, food and raw materials on countries that imposed sanctions on Russia*' (RT 29.06.2018). By contrast, opposition media representations of Russia's reaction to the sanctions do not concentrate on the countermeasures taken by Russia in the international arena; the focus

is shifted to the unfavorable domestic economic situation and activities aimed at improving it. They also commonly highlight the complexity of the maneuvers being undertaken to curb the negative trends in the Russian economy.

Recontextualization is the final characteristic of how Russian media construct the sanctions issue. As the sanctions are directly related to the international relations between Russia and other actors (Europe and the US), media accounts of the issue often trigger other discourses that discuss and construct relations between other international actors. In government media, the focus is moved to European actors and the issue of disagreement within the EU. For instance, RG widens the international context through the discussion of how London is 'playing the Russian card' in its foreign policy. The newspaper refers to London's relations with other European actors and employs the metaphor of '*the painful European divorce*' (RG 06.09.2018). Unlike the government press, opposition media recontextualize the sanctions issue from a different perspective. The sanctions are mentioned as only one of the numerous negative issues that are causing controversy in Russia's international relations, including in relations with the USA. A wider view of the sanctions, including a historical perspective, is often taken and even generates references to the 'cold war' concept.

Conclusion

The sanctions imposed on Russia are at the top of the agenda for Russian media of all political persuasions. However, the coverage of the sanctions differs according to how politically-distinct Russia media outlets construct the issue, along non-neutral and ideologically charged lines of representations, in terms of both this specific issue and, more generally, of the role of Russia in the international arena. Although government and opposition media follow the same structural pattern in how they represent the sanctions, each fills this pattern with content based on contrasting ideas, thus constructing dissimilar views on the configuration of international actors. This article's analysis assumes that the sanctions exist not only as a phenomenon of reality, but also as a discursive construct. As Holzscheiter (2014: 144) notes, 'facts do not speak for themselves', and 'facts have to be represented... to become socially real'. The debate on the sanctions in Russian media exemplifies how ideologically opposed forces make sense of the facts and attach different meanings to them, at the same time as contributing to the construction of Russia's international relations as a whole.

See overleaf for information about the author and further reading.

About the Author

Tatiana Dubrovskaya is Dr. hab. in Language Theory and the Head of the English Language Department at Penza State University, Russia. Her main sphere of expertise is critical discourse analysis. She has published extensively on political, media and legal discourse.

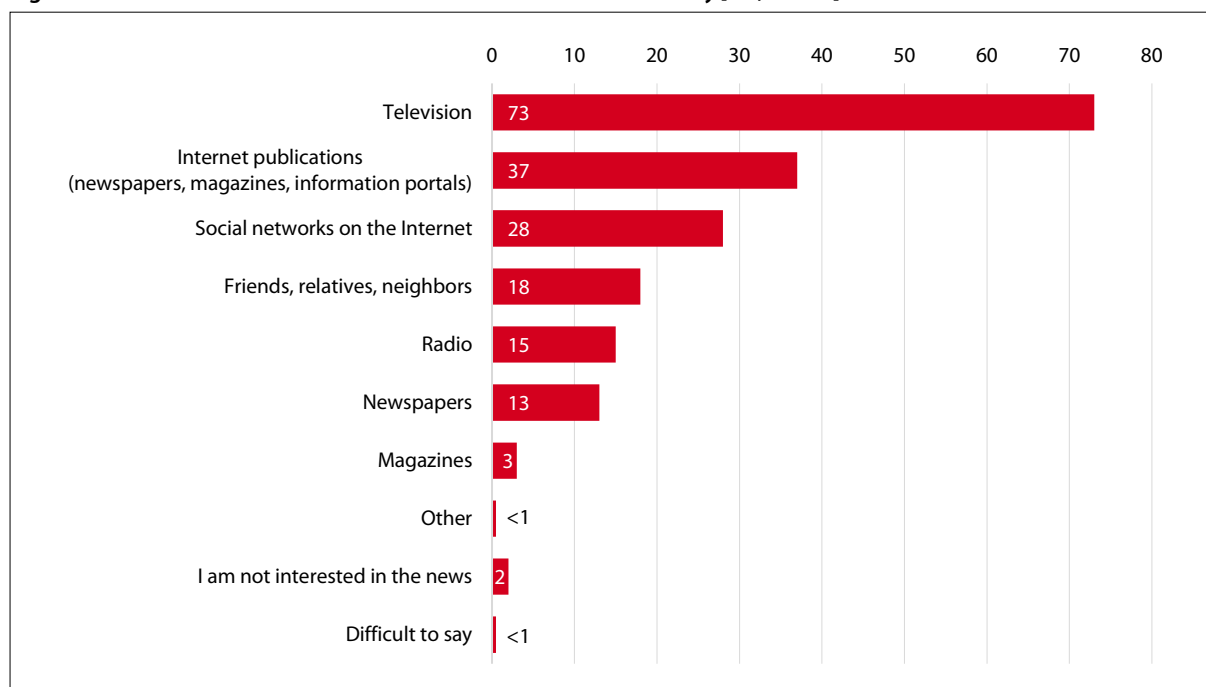
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OPINION POLL

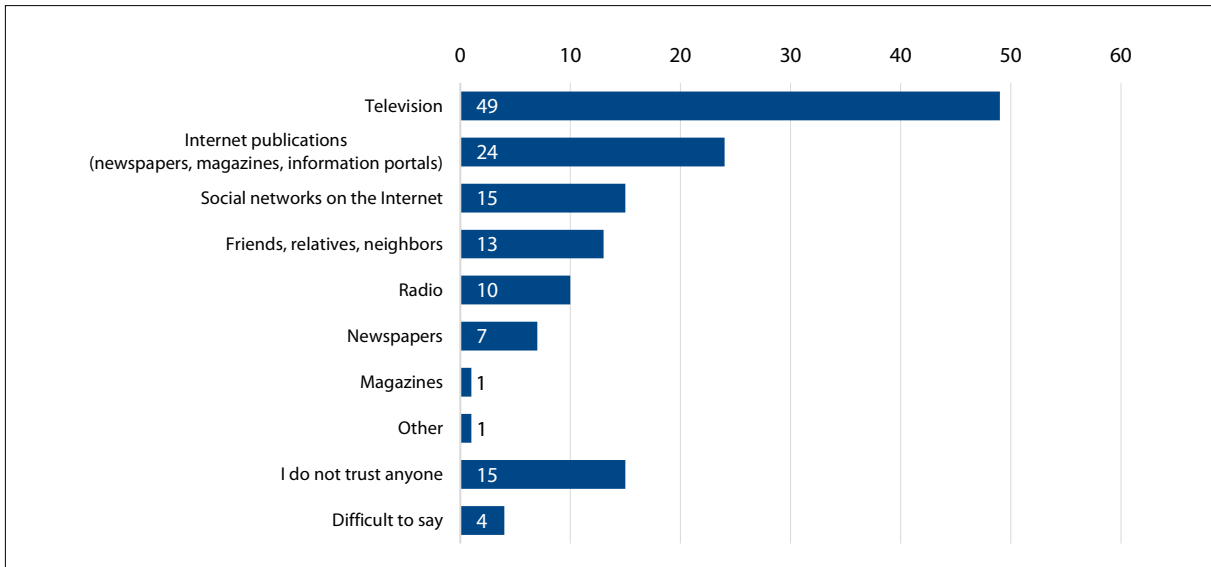
The Importance of Television in Russia

Figure 1: What Are Your Main Sources for News about the Country [i.e., Russia] and the World?



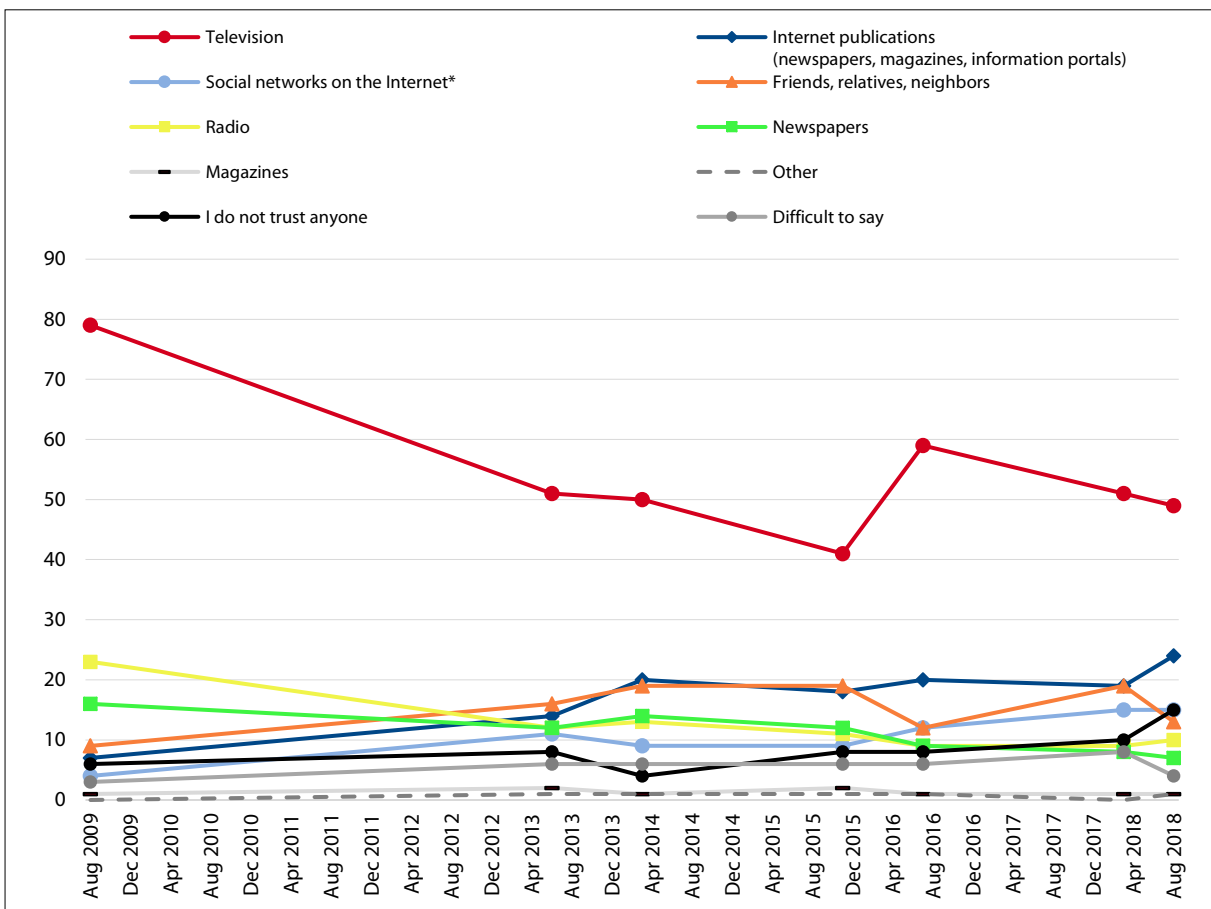
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 23–30 August 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/>, published on 13 September 2018

Figure 2: Which Sources Do You Trust Most of All to Cover News about the Country and the World?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 23–30 August 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/>, published on 13 September 2018

Figure 3: Which Sources Do You Trust Most of All to Cover News about the Country and the World? (August 2009 – August 2018)



* In August 2009, this question was formulated as follows: "Other Internet sources".

Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, August 2009 to 23–30 August 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/>, published on 13 September 2018

Table 1: Which Sources Do You Trust Most of All to Cover News about the Country and the World? (August 2009 – August 2018)

	August 2009	June 2013	March 2014	November 2015	July 2016	March 2018	August 2018
Television	79	51	50	41	59	51	49
Internet publications (newspapers, magazines, information portals)	7	14	20	18	20	19	24
Social networks on the Internet*	4	11	9	9	12	15	15
Friends, relatives, neighbors	9	16	19	19	12	19	13
Radio	23	12	13	11	9	9	10
Newspapers	16	12	14	12	9	8	7
Magazines	1	2	1	2	1	1	1
Other	<1	1	1	1	1	<1	1
I do not trust anyone	6	8	4	8	8	10	15
Difficult to say	3	6	6	6	6	8	4

* In August 2009, this question was formulated as follows: "Other Internet sources".

Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, August 2009 to 23–30 August 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/>, published on 13 September 2018

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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