



Russian Strategic Narratives, 2022–2023

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Abstract: Russia, in its competition with the liberal world for establishing the dominant discourse—alongside hard power military means—deploys soft power, leveraging the allure of illiberal values to forge foreign policy alliances, undermine the credibility of international institutions, and reshape the global order. Russian strategic narratives delineate the political objectives of the Russian government. In a contest for discursive authority with other global actors, Russia presents its vision of a new world order—a world partitioned among major powers—where Moscow holds the authority to determine the fate of peoples in the “Greater Eurasia” region, including Europe.

The failure of the Russian blitzkrieg plan in the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine heightened official Russian rhetoric to such an extent that narratives surfaced clearly—devoid of ambiguity. This condition made it possible to integrate these narratives into a cohesive framework that can elucidate the primary objectives of the Russian government, particularly in the realm of international politics.

Russian strategic narratives are systematized (Figure 1) according to Queen’s University Belfast Professor Alister Miskimmon’s classification of strategic narratives into three levels: 1) international system narratives

¹ This article is based on research that is confined to the February 21, 2022–March 2023 timeframe. It relies on the analysis of sixty-three texts, attributed to President Vladimir Putin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov and three prominent Russian scholars affiliated with the Russian International Affairs Council: Dmitry Trenin, Sergey Karaganov, and Andrey Kortunov.

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(describing how the world is structured, who the major players are, and how it operates), 2) national narratives (outlining a state or nation’s story, values, and goals), and 3) issue narratives (explaining the necessity and desirability of a policy, along with its successful implementation).²

Figure 1

Strategic Narratives							
	International System Narratives			National Narratives		Issue Narratives	
	The international order is changing, and the West (the liberal world) is trying to preserve its hegemony			Russia is a sovereign, self-sustained, original civilization, based on traditional values, a center of Russian World / a leader of regional integration (sphere of influence, Big Eurasia)		The new world order requires conceptual, systemic and structural changes	
I-level Sub-narratives	Subjection of Europe (European states)	Conflict of values	Russia is the leader of the illiberal world		Multipolarity / Regionalism based on spheres of "legitimate interests"	Rights of illiberal regimes / Supremacy of the state sovereignty over the human rights	New system of international institutions and new international financial system based on national currencies
	Russia is a victim of the West						
II-level Sub-narratives	Denial of sovereignty and identity of Ukraine	Protection of people who belong to Russian World	War with heirs of Nazis				

Therefore, the Russian strategic international system narrative is “The international order is changing and the West (the liberal world) is trying to maintain its hegemony”; the national narrative is “Russia is a sovereign and self-sustained, original civilization, based on traditional values, a center of the Russian world / leader of regional integration (Big

² Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Taylor & Francis, 2013), p. 7.

Eurasia)”; and the issue narrative is that “The new world order requires conceptual, systemic and structural changes.”

Within this framework, Russian strategic narratives encompass sub-narratives that elaborate and support the main narrative. Key sub-narratives at the international system narrative level include:

- Denial of sovereignty of Europe (European states)
- Conflict of values
- Russia as the leader of a non-liberal world
- Russia as a victim of the West

Quantitatively, the sub-narrative “Russia as a victim of the West” stands out as hegemonic among all other narratives. It receives the most extensive coverage and is explored in great detail. This sub-narrative forms the foundational framework for Russia’s narrative concerning the war with Ukraine.

The strategic national narrative, “Russia is a sovereign and self-sustained, original civilization, based on traditional values, a center of the Russian world / leader of regional integration (Big Eurasia),” is the least represented in the analyzed texts. It is complemented by the sub-narrative “Russia is the leader of a non-liberal world,” which also belongs to the international system narratives.

The strategic issue narrative, “A new world order requires conceptual, systemic, and structural changes,” is conveyed through the following sub-narratives:

- Multipolarity / regionalism
- Rights of illiberal regimes/supremacy of state sovereignty over human rights
- A new system of international institutions and a new international financial system based on national currencies.

The context of the war significantly impacted the dominance of the sub-narrative that “Russia is a victim of the West” within the system of Russian strategic narratives today. It is an integral part of the Russian international system strategic narrative, “The international order is changing, and the West (the liberal world) is trying to maintain its

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hegemony,” which interprets contemporary international developments as a shift from a unipolar world, dominated by the West, to an emerging multipolar order that the West “is attempting to obstruct.” These changes are presented in Russian narratives as inevitable, and various conflicts, including Russia’s war with Ukraine, are seen as byproducts and consequences of the transformation of the international system.

According to the Russian international system narrative, the current unipolar world order embodies an unfair system of material goods distribution, stemming from modern Western neocolonialism and a continuation of the colonial policies of Western nations from previous centuries. Furthermore, this narrative asserts that the unjust system is upheld by a set of international legal norms imposed by the West and is enforced through existing international financial institutions.

As Vladimir Putin declared at the signing of treaties on the accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia on September 30, 2022,

The West is ready to cross every line to preserve the neo-colonial system which allows it to live off the world, to plunder it thanks to the domination of the dollar and technology, to collect an actual tribute from humanity, to extract its primary source of unearned prosperity, the rent paid to the hegemon. The preservation of this annuity is their main, real and absolutely self-serving motivation. This is why total de-sovereignisation is in their interest.”³

According to the Russian narrative, the ultimate objective of the Western powers is to establish complete dominion over the world and supplant the existing “UN-based” system of international relations and international law with a “rule-based order.” President Putin underscores that Russia acknowledges only one guiding principle in international affairs—international public law. During his address to the 10th St. Petersburg International Legal Forum on June 30, 2022,

There is only one rule that must be observed, and that is public international law. These are agreements between countries that are some kind of compromise, and which are signed by the respective

³ Vladimir Putin, Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia, Sept. 30, 2022.

states. And if someone came up with these rules for themselves in order to impose them on other countries, then they will never work...”⁴

The Russian narrative asserts that genuine sovereignty within the collective West is concentrated solely in the United States. Consequently, the liberal world order is fundamentally framed as “the American liberal world order.” Under the guise of the so-called rule-based order and other dubious concepts, they (the Western countries) are trying to control and direct global processes at their own discretion and are pursuing a course towards creating closed blocs and coalitions that make decisions that are beneficial only to one country, the United States.

Russian authorities contend that the West, in its pursuit of global dominance, leverages the framework of the liberal democratic order to curtail the progress of “other civilizations” while advancing its own economic interests. This perspective posits that the West exhibits a lack of tolerance for the sovereignty of other nations and peoples and categorizes the world into “authoritarian” and “democratic” regimes—imposing a specific form of liberal democracy while denying other states the autonomy to make their own choices. Russian authorities label this imposition of liberal values as an expression of Western self-assuredness, characterized as having a racist and neo-colonial underpinning.

The Russian authorities assert that the West, in its pursuit of preserving its influence and upholding the global liberal order, employs a range of tools including the imposition of sanctions, the destabilization of international markets and the global financial system, the incitement of color revolutions, and the orchestration of coups, among others. The texts under examination provide instances of these tactics, such as the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, the escalation of tensions regarding Taiwan, and disruptions in global food and energy markets.

The Russian narratives depict liberal democratic values, coupled with the West’s technological advantage and the mechanisms of “global interdependence,” such as standardization and unification, as instruments employed by the West to assert control over the rest of the world. These

⁴ Vladimir Putin’s Address to participants of 10th St Petersburg International Legal Forum, June 30, 2022.

narratives accentuate the presence of double standards within the West. They suggest that while the West proclaims universal rules for all, it simultaneously nullifies favorable globalization rules for countries that reap benefits from globalization. Furthermore, the West employs sanctions as a means of deterrence against those who oppose Western dominance. This approach is framed as a violation of the fundamental principles of a market economy. As examples, the Russian narratives point to the policies of Western countries concerning Serbia and Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya.

The sub-narrative of “The conflict of values” within the Russian narrative characterizes the conflict between Russia and the West as having an irreconcilable and existential nature. In this narrative, Western liberal values are pitted against traditional (illiberal) values, which, according to Marlène Laruelle, George Washington University professor, have become the cornerstone of Russia’s strategic narrative. Laruelle identifies the value system promoted by Russia as conservative, noting that “The meaning of this conservatism remains blurry not only by default but by design.”⁵

Russian authorities and ideologues define Russian traditional values as spiritual and moral values that encompass traditional Christian values and the cultural heritage of Russian society. However, significantly, the term “conservative” is not explicitly used in the texts of Russian officials and political scientists. Instead, the term “traditional” is widely employed. This choice of terminology may reflect the Russian political elite’s alignment with the ideas of the Traditionalist or Perennialist School.⁶ It could also be

⁵ Marlène Laruelle, “Russia’s Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets and Channels of Influence,” *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 122, French Institute of International Relations, Apr. 2021, p. 6, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieneivisions/russias-niche-soft-power-sources-targets-and-channels>.

⁶ Traditionalism was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century and has a complex doctrine which is briefly, but quite comprehensively, described by Benjamin Teitelbaum, an associate professor at the University of Colorado Boulder: “At its core, traditionalism rejects modernity and its ideals: faith in the ability of human ingenuity to advance living standards and justice; an emphasis on the management of the economy; the coveting of individual liberty; the existence of universal truths equally valid for, and thereby equalising of, all. Repudiating the Enlightenment, traditionalists instead celebrate, what they regard as, timeless values. They honour precedence rather than progress, emphasize the spiritual over the material, and advocate surrender to the fundamental disparities—as opposed to equality—between humans and human destinies.”

an effort to make the term “traditional values” more accessible and adaptable for a broader audience of international actors. Consequently, this term doesn’t categorize values as part of an ideology but rather indicates their belonging to a particular society.

According to the Russian narrative, a war of values exists between the liberal-democratic West and traditional societies, where both parties aim to expand their sphere of influence while limiting the influence of the other. This framework contends that liberal democratic values, through the Western concept of human rights and freedoms, erode societies with traditional values and destabilize their state systems.

In President Putin’s signing of treaties on the accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia in September 2022, he said

the dictatorship of the Western elites targets all societies, including the citizens of Western countries themselves. This is a challenge to all. This complete renunciation of what it means to be human, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom are coming to resemble a “religion in reverse”—pure Satanism.⁷

Furthermore, it is asserted by Putin⁸ that Western elites perceive Russian traditional values as a threat to its interests, leading to sanctions against Russian media and cultural figures. Simultaneously, Russian authorities argue that Western liberal values serve as a mere instrument to achieve the “true goal of the West”: imposing Western standards and consumer stereotypes to create favorable market conditions for Western companies. Globalization, underpinned by liberal values, is depicted as a process of “homogenization,” primarily centered on protecting the rights of women and sexual minorities. The West’s refusal to recognize the right of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes to restrict the rights and freedoms of

Benjamin Teitelbaum, “The Rise of the Traditionalists: How a Mystical Doctrine Is Reshaping the Right,” *The New Statesman*, Oct. 8, 2020, updated Aug. 22, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2020/10/rise-traditionalists-how-mystical-doctrine-reshaping-right>.

⁷ President Putin’s signing of treaties on the accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia in September 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

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their citizens is interpreted in this Russian narrative as a policy of “homogenization and denial of differences.”

The Russian narrative defines traditional or illiberal values as reflections of the traditions and cultural-historical experiences of distinct peoples and proposes that the protection of these values (or the protection of regimes that claim adherence to them) should be pursued through the principle of sovereignty. Russia aims to expand the concept of sovereignty to encompass the equality of political regimes, irrespective of their record on human rights, and thus to strip the principle of human rights protection of its universal character while endowing the principle of sovereignty with universality. This is justified as the “principle of democracy” in international relations, drawing upon the principle of sovereign equality of states enshrined in the UN Charter.

The Russian interpretation of democracy plays a crucial role in its strategic narratives. It conceives of democracy as the rule of the people (people’s governance or democracy with specific characteristics), but without key elements such as human rights and freedoms, democratic institutions, and procedures.

According to the Russian narrative, alternative forms of popular governance exist alongside liberal democracy. However, the West does not recognize their sovereign rights and attempts to restrain states that have opted for these alternative socio-political systems—including autocracy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov defines autocracy as a centralized state with a strong vertical structure capable of making swift and efficient decisions—a perceived advantage within the expected “horizon.”

Ultimately, the Russian view of the conflict of values sees it as developing into a struggle against the hegemony of liberalism, or an anti-colonial liberation movement against unipolar US hegemony. Russia is presented as a leading power in this “anti-colonial movement.”

The sub-narrative that “Russia is the leader of a non-liberal world” plays a dual role within both international systemic and national narratives. It portrays the challenge posed by the West and its dominance as a mission for Russia—to safeguard its interests and establish a “just world order.” The Russian authorities identify the following as Russian national interests: preserving genuine strategic sovereignty (economic, technological, etc.); conducting international transactions in rubles; creating a comprehensive European security system based on consensus with Russia’s right to veto; establishing a new international order organized into regional zones of

responsibility for major powers; developing Russian society within the framework of its traditional values; and rebuilding the system of international law and international institutions based on the equality of political regimes regardless of their human rights records (sovereign equality of states).

Russia actively seeks allies in its “crusade against Western hegemony” and the reconfiguration of the international order. It tries to secure the support of as many states as possible—particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Russia appeals to these countries’ historical memories of colonialism, asserting that the West, through its neo-colonial policies, seeks to hinder their development today.

Russian narratives contend that the difficult socio-economic situations in Global South countries are due to the influence of the unfair global economic order imposed by the West and the unjust modern system of international mechanisms and institutions. These narratives underscore that the West has itself triggered global food crises (due to US macroeconomic policies and anti-Russian sanctions) and energy crises (due to restrictions on oil and gas prices) and does not address the issues of inequality and injustice, which stem from its policies.

Another argument Russia advances to convince potential allies of its position is by asserting that most Global South countries do not share the liberal democratic values of the West but instead align with Russia’s understanding of traditional values, similar to those upheld by the Russian Federation.

In this context, Russian authorities strategically employ the narrative of a conflict of values as a means of discourse power to garner support from various actors. They consistently seek to win the support of citizens in European countries by highlighting that Russia is unable to forge a partnership with a Europe grounded in liberal-democratic values. Instead, they emphasize the potential for partnership with a Europe rooted in traditional Christian values, pointing to Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orbán as an example. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov emphasizes that Russia maintains strong ties with European communities that share its values and its interpretation of sovereignty principles.

The Russian authorities try to create the perception of extensive international support, asserting that African, Latin American, and Asian states are eager to dismantle the unipolar system dominated by the West and are backing Russia in its confrontation with the West. However, according

to the Russian narrative, those states often find it challenging to openly express their stance due to Western pressure. The Kremlin's leadership is confident that Global South nations share Russia's objectives, which include: advocating for unrestricted access to technologies; establishing alternative mechanisms for international transactions; and adopting national currencies in international settlements. Russia identifies the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries as its primary partners within the Global South.

In contrast to the Global South countries, which, according to the Russian narrative, aim to enhance their sovereignty and uphold traditional values and diversity, the Russian authorities contend that European nations are subservient to the United States. This perspective portrays European countries as lacking sovereignty and agency due to their alignment with the United States.

When Sergei Lavrov was interviewed for the film *Nazism Under Investigation* on November 26, 2022, he said,

Europe is “playing” together with the US. The EU has almost no independence left—Washington has crushed Brussels under itself. There are almost no independent voices left in the European Union. French President E. Macron occasionally, but less and less often, tries to recall the “strategic autonomy” of the EU. No one will allow them to create any kind of autonomy, especially a strategic one.⁹

The sub-narrative about non-independence and Europe's subjection to the United States emphasizes Russia's role as the leader of the resistance movement against US dominance and as the head of the “sovereignty movement.” The denial of sovereignty and independence to European countries also aligns with the narrative of denying the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, which the Russian authorities have used—and continue to use—to legitimize their aggression against Ukraine. Thus, the concept of sovereignty in the Russian narrative is closely linked to the legitimacy of states. By denying the sovereignty of a particular state, the Russian government essentially questions that country's legitimacy, thereby providing ample justification for its actions.

⁹ Interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergei Lavrov for the film *Nazism Under Investigation*, Moscow, Nov. 26, 2022.

To support their arguments for non-independence and Europe's subjection to the United States, the Russian authorities point out Europe's reliance on the United States for military security and the European Union's inability to develop its own military capabilities, often referred to as "strategic autonomy." By highlighting Europe's dependence on the United States for security, the Russian authorities explain European countries' positions on cooperation with Russia in the security realm. For instance, they cite Europe's rejection of Russia's proposals for a new Treaty on European Security in 2009 and 2021. Additional arguments put forth to support the idea of the EU's subjugation include the EU's perceived failure as a "guarantor of the agreements signed in 2014 between the President of Ukraine and the opposition, as well as the Minsk agreements of 2015." The same failure is also applied to the EU's handling of the agreement on the creation of the Community of Serbian municipalities in Kosovo.

The Russian authorities further claim that the United States is exploiting the Russian-Ukrainian war as a means to compel the European Union to fully relinquish its reliance on affordable Russian energy sources. According to this narrative, such a move "should lead to the deindustrialization of Europe, even greater dependence on the US, and the eventual severing of all ties with Russia." As part of this alleged strategy, the Russian narrative attributes the explosions on the "Nord Stream" pipelines to the interests of the "direct beneficiaries" of the destruction of this gas pipeline, namely the United States, Poland, and Ukraine.

During Putin's signing of treaties on the accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia on September 30, 2022, he stated,

The United States, pushing through the EU's complete rejection of Russian energy carriers and other resources, is practically leading to the de-industrialization of Europe, to completely taking over the European market—they understand everything, these European elites, they understand everything, but they prefer to serve other people's interests.¹⁰

In parallel, Russian authorities argue that the European Union is genuinely interested in facilitating negotiations between Ukraine and

¹⁰ Putin, Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia.

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Russia, aiming for a ceasefire and cooperation with Russia to “build a security architecture.”¹¹ They contend that Washington and London are constraining the EU and Ukraine from pursuing these measures. The Russian narrative asserts that it is solely the influence of the United States that compels Europeans to declare their objective of aiding Ukraine in defeating Russia on the battlefield.

By negating Europe’s agency and portraying it as a victim of US dominance, the Russian narrative insists that European countries still aspire to emancipate themselves from American tutelage and influence, aspiring to join the Greater Eurasia project—“a unified geopolitical space stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok in all aspects.”¹²

In an October 27, 2022, speech, Vladimir Putin stated,

Helmut Kohl once told me that the United States would someday take care of their own affairs, including in Latin America. Asia would develop powerfully in its own way. If European civilization wants to be preserved as some kind of world center, then, of course, you need to be with Russia.¹³

The Russian authorities position themselves as leaders opposing Western dominance and insist that the West is attempting to restrain, weaken, and stifle Russia’s development opportunities. The Russian explanation for the war with Ukraine is articulated in the sub-narrative “Russia is a victim of the West,” comprising three second-level sub-narratives: “War with heirs of Nazis,” “Denial of sovereignty and identity of Ukraine,” and “Protection of people who belong to the Russian World.”

The Russian authorities assert that the West has long pursued an anti-Russian policy, exemplified by supporting “terrorists” in the North Caucasus, transforming Ukraine into an anti-Russia entity, fostering anti-Russian sentiments in Moldova and Georgia, and attempting to undermine Russia’s relations with other Global South countries. They cite the constant

¹¹ Sergei Lavrov, Interview with NTV channel, St. Petersburg, June 16, 2022.

¹² Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club meeting on October 27, 2022.

¹³ Ibid.

expansion of NATO, specific efforts to draw Ukraine into NATO, and the disregard of Russian demands in European security matters as evidence of this anti-Russian policy. The United States, Great Britain, and most Central European countries (except Hungary) are portrayed as leaders among Russia's adversaries.

According to the Russian narrative, the primary dimension of the Russia-West confrontation is a clash of values. The Russian authorities expand this narrative by intertwining it with the construct of historical memory related to the myth of the Soviet Union's Great Victory over Nazism in World War II, known as the Great Patriotic War. The second-level sub-narrative regarding the "war with the heirs of the Nazis" attributes to Western powers, as well as the Ukrainian authorities, an association with neo-Nazism. Ukrainians are accused of collaboration with the Third Reich, while Russian arguments about the resurgence of European neo-Nazism include condemnation of European states in falsification of historical memory of the World War II and equalizing the "politics of Russophobia" in Europe and the Nazi policy towards other nationalities.

When Sergei Lavrov was interviewed on *60 Minutes* in October 2022, he said,

Under German Nazism, A. Hitler united most of the countries of Europe under his flag in order to attack and destroy the Soviet Union. Now approximately the same group of countries, with some variations, supports V.A. Zelensky.¹⁴

The Russian narratives attribute the political evolution of Ukrainian society over the past three decades to deliberate malign influence from the West. This influence was allegedly aimed at instilling neo-Nazism in Ukraine and using it as an instrument of war against Russia. The Russian authorities insist that Ukraine is under complete Western governance, justifying its own intervention to protect individuals whom it considers part of the "Russian World," a cultural and ideological space shared with Russia. This was voiced as the rationale behind Russia's occupation of part of

¹⁴ Sergei Lavrov, Interview for *60 Minutes* program, CBS, New York, Oct. 11, 2022.

SNIGYR

Ukrainian territory in 2014. The narrative also suggests that Russia launched a “preemptive strike” in 2022 due to the constant perceived threat from Ukraine and the West, drawing parallels with the unexpected attack of Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union in June 1941. Therefore, the Russian narrative frames the war with Ukraine solely as a part of the broader transformation of the global world order, asserting that the collective West, led by the United States is waging a war against Russia on Ukrainian territory. Ukrainian people are depicted as part of the Russian world and as victims of Western influence. Russia’s mission is portrayed as one of liberating Ukrainians from Western (US) control.

A significant element of the sub-narrative “Russia is a victim of the West” is the second-level sub-narrative: “The denial of the identity and sovereignty of Ukraine.” According to this narrative, the Ukrainian people lack a distinct identity that separates them from the Russian people, along with their own state tradition, history, or culture. Even the Ukrainian language is deemed artificial. The idea of Ukrainian identity and an independent state is portrayed as an anti-Russian project of the West that lacks legitimacy. By denying Ukraine’s sovereignty, the Russian government effectively denies its legitimacy and justifies any actions it takes as the protection of people affiliated with the Russian world.

The concept of the Russian world encompasses the entire Ukrainian population, categorizing them as part of the Russian people and “compatriots.” The concept of compatriots and the “policy of the Russian Federation towards compatriots” is defined in the Federal Law titled “On the State Policy of the Russian Federation towards Compatriots Abroad.” According to this law, individuals who were born in the USSR and their descendants, as well as the descendants of those born on the territory of the Russian state, which effectively includes the Russian Empire, are categorized as “compatriots.” The law grants the Russian Federation the authority to protect the rights of these individuals (Article 1, Clause 3) (Federal’nyy Zakon [Federal Law] №99-Φ3 1999).

Additionally, Russian authorities mention that the population of Ukraine is divided by values and, therefore, they argue that it cannot coexist in a single state.

The Russian narrative about protecting compatriots is intertwined with Russia’s interpretation of the right to self-determination. The Russian government claims that its actions are aimed at upholding justice by ensuring the population of Ukraine’s right to freely determine its own future,

exercising the right to self-determination. In justifying its actions, Russia refers not only to domestic Russian norms but also to Article 51 of the UN Charter (the right to self-defense) and to provisions outlining the right of peoples to self-determination.

In a newspaper interview in October 2022, Lavrov stated,

The question of the relationship between the right to self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity, after many years of debate, was resolved in the 1970 UN Declaration on Principles of International Law. It confirms the inviolability of the territorial integrity or political unity of states, provided that they have governments representing all the people living in a given territory. We know what severe oppression the Kiev regime subjected the Russian and Russian-speaking population to after the 2014 coup. It is obvious that the authorities in Kiev do not represent the residents of the Donbass, Zaporozhye and Kherson regions. The question of the conformity of referendums with the Constitution and the legislation of Ukraine does not affect their qualification under international law.¹⁵

The system of Russian national strategic narratives also encompasses a narrative that portrays “Russia as a sovereign and self-sustained original civilization, rooted in traditional values, and serving as a center of the Russian World” or a leader in regional integration, often referred to as the sphere of influence or Big Eurasia.

The modern interpretation of the “Russian idea” emphasizes that Russia is a civilized state with a European heritage, encompassing elements of Byzantine Christianity, political culture, and a Slavic written and linguistic heritage. While acknowledging the colonial aspects of Russia’s historical past, the Russian narrative also affirms and justifies policies of coercion and assimilation against various peoples and ethnic groups in Eurasia as essential for preserving the Russian state today.¹⁶ While the core of Russian civilization is often associated with the Russian ethnos, it’s important to note that contemporary belonging to Russian civilization is defined not solely by ethnic characteristics but also by shared values. Within

¹⁵ Sergei Lavrov, Interview with *Arguments and Facts*, Oct. 8, 2022.

¹⁶ Dmitry Trenin, “Who We Are, Where We Are, What We Are For,” and Ahy, *Rossiia v global’noy politike*, vol, 20, no. 3 (2022), pp. 32–42, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/kto-my-gde-my/>.

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this value framework, Russians are expected to serve the state based on principles of self-denial. “The Russian idea” is conceptualized as “the Russian Truth,” representing the foundational worldview and a synthesis of fundamental principles, rooted in the imperative of justice and equality.

In the Russian worldview, the concept of justice is regarded as superior to the concept of legality, and it is considered the foundation that lends legitimacy to any actions undertaken by the state. This perspective places a strong emphasis on the moral and ethical dimensions of governance, suggesting that the pursuit of justice, even if it means bending or challenging established legal norms, is a fundamental aspect of Russian identity and statecraft.¹⁷

While some Russian political scientists may suggest an isolationist approach in Russia’s global positioning, a comprehensive analysis of the national strategic narrative, along with narratives at the international and issue levels, suggests that a desire for expansion and influence on the global stage persists.¹⁸ The declared emphasis on internal state and societal reform, as well as the protection and promotion of the principle of sovereignty in international politics, can be viewed as necessary measures aimed at restoring resources lost during the war. These measures often include the reorganization of society with the goal of mobilizing it for military purposes and the removal of external restrictions, such as sanctions.

The Russian national strategic narrative encompasses both internal and external dimensions. The internal dimension focuses on the restructuring of society and the state to achieve self-sufficiency and maximum independence from the outside world. This includes a push for the militarization of the Russian economy, seen as necessary for survival in an increasingly chaotic global environment. The strategy also involves a continued “turn to the East,” which should evolve into a more pronounced “turn to Siberia,” while the western regions of Russia are considered less important and are viewed as a buffer zone.

In terms of foreign policy, there is a call for a more isolationist stance with selective cooperation. Russia seeks to collaborate primarily with international actors that support its interests—particularly countries in the

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sergey Karaganov, “Unacceptable Preservation of Ukrainian Statehood Based on a Mixture of Russophobia and Monstrous Comprador Behavior of its Elites,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Mar. 1, 2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/03/01/ukraina-i-sibir.html>.

Global South or the so-called World Majority. The overarching goal is for Eurasian Russia to shed Western influences, especially Western values and ideas.

The external dimension of this narrative posits that Russia should emerge as the focal point of Eurasian regional integration in a prospective world divided into spheres of influence among major global players. The concept of Eurasianism is by no means novel, as it holds deep historical roots within Russian political thought. Presently, Russian political scholars are endeavoring to establish it as the cornerstone of a revitalized Russian state ideology.

Integration within Greater Eurasia is envisaged upon the foundations of extant projects and frameworks, supplemented by implementing novel intergovernmental financial mechanisms and institutions designed as alternatives to their Western counterparts. It is imperative to underscore that Russian authorities attach great significance to the notion of Greater Eurasia including Europe. This facet has been repeatedly underscored in official statements, with an emphatic insistence that such inclusion can only materialize if Europe attains full sovereignty. This would, in effect, necessitate a severance of allied relations with the United States.

Relatedly, in his October 2022 speech, Putin said,

A natural part of Greater Eurasia could be its western tip—Europe. But many of its leaders are hampered by the conviction that Europeans are better than others, that it is not appropriate for them to participate in some undertakings on an equal footing with the rest.¹⁹

The vision of the world order that Russia aspires to and seeks to promote to other countries is encapsulated within the Strategic Issue Narrative titled “The new world order requires conceptual, systemic, and structural changes.” This narrative comprises three sub-narratives that effectively outline Russia’s foreign policy objectives, which have been articulated by Russian authorities since at least 2007. The contemporary interpretation includes a recognition of a values-based conflict and the absence of potential compromise with the liberal-democratic elites of the West.

¹⁹ Putin, Speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club meeting.

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The Russian strategic issue narrative is notably characterized by its vague formulation. While it asserts that existing international processes and institutions are inherently unfair and advocates for their elimination and replacement, it does not offer a clear description of the new processes and institutions that should replace them. Instead, it articulates guiding principles such as justice, sovereign equality, balance of interests, respect for all, and inclusiveness, among others.

The Russian narrative of the new multipolar order envisions a world divided into zones of responsibility and special interests of major global powers (regional leaders). This concept, referred to as *regionalization*, stands in contrast to globalization. According to this narrative, regionalization entails the creation of large integration blocs around regional leaders, who represent new and emerging centers of power. Within these blocs, Russia proposes the development of alternative international instruments and institutions to replace existing ones. The Russian authorities argue that this structure of international relations will afford greater sovereignty to international actors, better serve their interests, and result in a more balanced international order. However, the Russian narrative introduces a degree of ambiguity and contradiction. It combines the concept of sovereignty with the idea of dividing the world into areas of responsibility and special interests of Great Powers, which may entail restrictions on the sovereignty of smaller states. To address this gap, Russian authorities suggest that states unable to exercise full sovereignty within these limits should interpret sovereignty as an opportunity to shape their socio-political systems in accordance with their own traditional values.

The Russian narrative posits that the foundation of the new world order should rest upon a balance of interests, which will be regulated by the balance of power rather than by existing international legal norms. Additionally, it emphasizes the principle of democratization of international relations, which entails the equality of political regimes, regardless of their adherence to human rights. As an exemplar of an international institution that upholds the sovereignty of all regimes, regardless of their form of government (besides the UN), the Russian authorities frequently cite the Non-Aligned Movement.

In August 2022, while being interviewed for a documentary, Lavrov commented,

. . . there are also represented what are called democracies, and electoral autocracies, monarchies and many other forms of

government, each of which, in accordance with the UN Charter, has sovereign equality . . .²⁰

The Russian narrative also underscores the principle of justice as a pivotal element of the new multipolar system. This entails several key components:

- Creation of a new global financial system, which would be built upon the financial frameworks of influential world states, although the specific details of its operation and the process of creating new institutions and mechanisms remain undisclosed in Russian strategic narratives.
- Introduction of a mechanism for free exchange of technology and education in international relations.

It is important to note that while these principles are articulated within the Russian narrative, the concrete steps, structures, and timelines for realizing these goals are not detailed. However, the initial step in the pursuit of this vision involves moving away from reliance on the US dollar and the euro in international settlements and transitioning toward the use of national currencies.

Conclusion

The Russian strategic narratives discussed in this article collectively form a comprehensive storyline that can be characterized as the Russian Grand Narrative. In this overarching narrative, Russia positions itself as a staunch adversary of the liberal world, represented by the West. It portrays Russia both as a victim of Western actions and as a leader spearheading a global movement against Western hegemony. The war in Ukraine is framed as an integral part of this broader global confrontation. Consequently, the antagonistic posture of the Russian government toward Western countries is likely to persist beyond the conclusion of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as long as the current Russian political regime remains in place.

²⁰ Sergei Lavrov, Interview to the Zvezda TV channel for a documentary film dedicated to the Non-Aligned Movement, Aug. 28, 2022.

SNIGYR

To legitimize its actions and policies, the Russian strategic narratives imbue Russia's conduct with a higher purpose—defending traditional values. Another component of this legitimization strategy is the narrative that questions the subjectivity and identity of the target of Russian aggression. This narrative, initially applied to Ukraine, is gradually being extended to European states. By denying subjectivity and identity, Russian strategic narratives lay the groundwork for framing Russia's actions as protective, not only of those within the Russian world, but also of those who might seek refuge from perceived threats of liberal neo-colonialism by turning to Russia for protection.

These strategic narratives outline Russian foreign policy objectives, all guided by the overarching goal of reshaping the global order. This envisioned order involves the division of the world into spheres of influence or regional integration led by major global powers. Russia positions itself as the future hub of Eurasian regional integration, including Europe as part of Greater Eurasia. This perspective underscores Russia's view that Europe should regain its sovereignty, paving the way for its eventual integration into the Greater Eurasian space.

In challenging the existing world order, Russia claims that two pillars of the new world order should be:

- the principle of “balance of interests” that will be regulated by the balance of power, and not by existing international legal norms. Therefore, the global system of international law and international institutions is to be reset to zero point and the new system is to be established.
- the principle of democratization of international relations, which provides for the equality and impunity of political regimes regardless of the observance of human rights.

If Russia and its allies succeed in this normative confrontation with the West, it could result in the erosion of the international legal system and international institutions, including financial ones. The potential consequences for Europe and liberal democracies worldwide might include the rise of radical political forces, economic and political instability, heightened internal conflicts, increased corruption, decisions at odds with liberal democratic norms, the weakening of European and transatlantic unity, and heightened security threats to European states.

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