

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Russian Foreign Policy Narratives By Dmitry Gorenburg

Executive Summary

- This Marshall Center *Security Insight* provides a summary of a project that examined Russian foreign policy positions by analyzing statements made and interviews given by Russian government officials. The analysis found a set of ten narratives frequently used by officials discussing Russian foreign policy. In this policy brief, we describe each of the narratives and provide some recent examples of their use.
- The narratives described in this brief include Russia as the center of a distinct Eurasian civilization, Russia as a bastion of traditional values, Russophobia, whataboutism, fraternalism with Russia's near abroad, ties with Soviet-era allies, outside intervention in sovereign affairs, Russia as a proponent of stability in the world, Russia as a proponent of multipolarity in the world, and the promotion of international structures in which Russia plays a leading role.
- The most frequently used narratives included outside intervention in sovereign affairs, whataboutism, the promotion of international structures in which Russia plays a leading role, and Russophobia.
- Although the foreign policy narratives of Russian officials are designed to twist reality in ways that promote and justify foreign policy decisions to both domestic and foreign audiences, one common thread tying these narratives together is that all of them have an element of truth at their core.

Introduction

This policy brief provides a summary of results of a project that examined Russian foreign policy positions using statements made and interviews given by Russian government officials. The research team monitored Russian and Western media over a ten-month period, from September 2018 to June 2019, collecting both Russian- and English-language statements.¹ We found a set of

¹ Materials were collected through a variety of sources, including Opensource.gov, the Eastview database of Russian newspapers, and direct access to the TASS news agency and the websites of major Russian and Western newspapers. The bulk of the materials came from newswire reports, such as TASS in Russian and Interfax in English. Russian-language sources also included all major central newspapers. English-language sources also included Western English-language newspapers and media sites of record, such as the *New York Times* and the

ten narratives frequently used by officials discussing Russian foreign policy. In this policy brief, we describe each of the narratives and provide some recent examples of their use. We conclude with some preliminary frequency analysis and trends of use over time during the study period.

Eurasia Versus Europe

This narrative tends to portray Russia as the center of a distinct Eurasian civilization with its own sovereign path that is separate from the rest of Europe. According to this argument, Russia is separate and different from the rest of Europe and should not be expected to integrate with it on purely European terms. This argument reflects a long tradition of Eurasianist discourse among Russian intellectuals that goes back to the early twentieth century and also harkens back to an even older debate about Russian identity between Slavophiles and Westernizers that goes back to the Tsarist era.

Officials focusing on this narrative discussed the need to form a greater Eurasia to safeguard the region's distinct path, often in contrast to decadent European values. For example, in April 2019, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov stated, "We believe that there is the need to aspire for Greater Eurasia, which includes the European Union, our Eurasian Union and various Chinese initiatives."² This statement highlights the significance placed by Russian officials on deepening Russia's relationship with China and especially highlights Russia's role as a conduit for Chinese trade with Europe.

Russia as a Bastion of Traditional Values

According to this narrative, Russia possesses a distinct civilization that embodies and promotes "traditional" religious, societal, and other values in contrast with the more liberal, "decadent" West. This has been a common trope for Vladimir Putin. For example, in November 2018, he stated, "There is one thing I do not doubt: the voice of Russia will be dignified and confident in the future world, which is predetermined by our tradition, domestic spiritual culture, self-awareness, and, finally, the very history of our country as a distinctive civilization that is unique but does not make self-confident and loudish claims of exclusiveness."³ This narrative has been particularly favored by senior leaders in the Russian Orthodox Church, such as Patriarch Kirill, who said the following in November 2018:

The narrow paradigm of the New Time speaks of globalization as an inevitable process. Hidden underneath the word "inevitability" is the western principle of global development which features liberal secularism and modern forms of colonialism. . . . This mistake is a departure from tradition, the system of passing values from generation to generation which forms the civilizational code of peoples with its cultural, spiritual and religious paradigms, relying on God-given

BBC. All materials were hand-coded by one of the two team members. Our analysis assumes that statements in Russian-language sources are aimed primarily at a domestic audience, while statements in English-language sources are aimed primarily at an international audience.

² "Russia Calls for Creating Greater Eurasia Uniting Integration Initiatives – Kremlin Aide," TASS, April 28, 2019, <http://tass.com/economy/1056228>.

³ "Russia to Retain Unique Role Without Claiming to Be Exclusive – Putin," Interfax, November 1, 2018.

and thus invariable moral values which have accompanied the humankind throughout history. Experience shows that the trampling of these values has led to tragedies and cataclysms in personal, societal and international relations.⁴

Russian leaders have focused on traditional values, particularly in their domestic messaging, as a way of contrasting Russia with the supposedly immoral member states of the European Union. This narrative helps Russian leaders justify their caution about developing close ties with Western Europe and their policies aimed at curtailing Western influence in Russia.

Russophobia

Russophobia refers to the narrative that the policies and actions of Russia's opponents are motivated by an unjustified prejudice against Russia, rather than legitimate disagreement over policy or differences in geopolitical interests. Russian officials frequently highlight the role of Russophobia in accusations by U.S. politicians and media commentators of Russian interference in U.S. elections. For example, in April 2019, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov commented on the publication of the Mueller Report, "Unfortunately, there is no sign that US political circles, particularly those who seek to score political points in the Congress from Russophobia, are ready for dialogue. The document is most likely to have no effect from the standpoint of improving relations." He added that Washington "continues to bombard the public with anti-Russian allegations."⁵ Russian officials often argue that Russophobia makes it easy for Western politicians to blame Russia for all of their problems, rather than dealing with the actual causes.

Whataboutism

Whataboutism is the narrative that other powers are engaging in the same activities that they accuse Russia of engaging in. During the study period, Russian officials resorted to whataboutism frequently, including when criticizing the United States and its allies for interfering in Russian elections. In May 2019, the Federation Council released a statement noting that "Washington, its allies, and its partners are using available instruments, including information, political, administrative, diplomatic, organizational, technical, and financial ones, for illegally intervening in Russia's sovereign affairs, including in the period of preparation for and holding of electoral campaigns of various levels in Russia."⁶ This statement was clearly designed to highlight the equivalence between U.S. activities in 2019 and accusations of Russia's efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. election.

Russian officials also highlighted violations of freedom of the press in Western Europe and compared Russian police actions against protesters with French police actions against Yellow Vest protesters to show that Russian actions are no different than those of the countries that regularly accuse Russia of violating human rights and international norms. For example, Vladimir Putin highlighted restrictions placed on RT broadcasting in France by noting, "We hear from our Western colleagues that the free dissemination of information . . . is one of the most

⁴ "Patriarch Kirill Speaks Out Against Western-Style Globalization," Interfax, November 1, 2018, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?y=2018&m=11&d=1&id=867933>.

⁵ "Senior Diplomat Expects Mueller Report to Have No Effect on Russia-US Relations," TASS, April 19, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1054580>.

⁶ "U.S. May Try to Interfere in Sept Elections in Russia – Federation Council Member," Interfax, May 30, 2019.

important principles of democracy. . . . States should not hinder information spread through administrative routes, but rather put forward their perspective and let the people decide for themselves where the truth is and where its falsification is.”⁷ Commenting on European government actions against domestic protesters, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said, “Unlike France and Germany, Russia never uses water cannons, tear gas or rubber pellets to disperse protesters.”⁸

Whataboutism is also used to reject criticism regarding Russian military and political influence activities abroad. In April 2019, referring to Russian support for the Venezuelan government, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, “What do they mean by insolent remarks that the countries [outside] the Western Hemisphere are not allowed to have any interests there? But what is the United States doing? Take a look at the map of the US military bases: the entire world is dotted with red spots and each of them poses rather serious risks.”⁹ Overall, the whataboutism narrative is used to suggest that Russia is no different from the Western states that regularly condemn Russian behavior both domestically and on the world stage.

Fraternalism with Russia’s Near Abroad

The Near Abroad is Russia’s preferred term for the countries of the former Soviet Union, with the arguable exception of the Baltic States. The term is associated with fraternalist narratives concerning brotherly links, paternalistic relationships, and special historical and cultural commonalities with these countries.

Officials using this narrative during the study period made references to the continuing fraternal relationship with Belarus during a period of intense discussion of potential closer integration of the two states. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov highlighted the special fraternal relationship, noting, “I don’t think anyone in Moscow or Minsk would dispute the existence of de facto and de jure special and allied relations between the two countries.”¹⁰ Officials also lamented the destruction of brotherly ties with Ukraine by fascists and nationalists bent on tearing Ukraine away from Russia. For example, in reference to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, Vladimir Putin said, “As for the long term, no matter what happens, no matter who is in power in Kyiv today, the Russian and Ukrainian peoples have always been and will forever be fraternal and very close This political scum will go away, recede.”¹¹ Similarly, Peskov stated in May 2019 that “[Putin] has always stated that the relations between the countries’ leadership should not in any way be projected to the long-standing close and brotherly relations

⁷ “Это не имеет ничего общего с демократией»: Путин о ситуации с RT во Франции,” RT, November 11, 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/world/video/572421-putin-interview-rt>.

⁸ Alice Scarsi, “Putin’s Fury: Russia Rages This Is ‘Unacceptable’ as Macron and Merkel Issue War Demands,” Daily Express, December 30, 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1064703/vladimir-putin-russia-news-emmanuel-macron-angela-merkel-ukraine-crisis-sea-of-azov>.

⁹ “Russia’s Lavrov Labels US Demands for Russia to Get Out of Western Hemisphere as Insolent,” TASS, April 3, 2019, <http://tass.com/world/1051990>.

¹⁰ “Hardly Anyone in Moscow, Minsk Can Dispute Special, Allied Relations Between the 2 Countries – Peskov,” Interfax, December 25, 2018.

¹¹ “Russian, Ukrainian Peoples to Remain Fraternal, Political ‘Scum’ to Recede – Putin,” Interfax, November 28, 2018.

of the peoples of the two countries.”¹² These statements highlight Russian leaders’ tendency to continue to consider former Soviet states, especially Ukraine and Belarus, as “naturally” belonging to Russia’s cultural and political sphere of influence.

Relations with Soviet-Era Allies

This category refers to the set of Russian narratives that relate to “traditional relations” with partners that have maintained close ties with Russia since the Soviet Era, such as Vietnam and Syria. When discussing new initiatives with foreign states that fit this category, Russian leaders commonly refer to the history of bilateral ties in the Soviet period. During the study period, Vladimir Putin mentioned such ties during official meetings with leaders of Vietnam and Serbia, and Sergey Lavrov highlighted the history of close relations between Russia and Latin American countries.¹³ This emphasis is especially common in situations in which the two sides are discussing military assistance. For example, in April 2019, Russian Presidential Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov noted “Sudan’s willingness and readiness to develop cooperation with Russia on the basis of traditionally friendly relations spanning since 1950s.”¹⁴ Although this is not a frequent narrative, it does play an important role when Russian officials seek to further links with states with which Russia had ties during the Cold War.

Outside Intervention in Sovereign Affairs

This category describes the narrative that certain domestic policies and developments in a given country are the result of meddling from outside powers, most often the United States, rather than the outcome of internal factors. Russian leaders frequently express vehement opposition to such activities, although many countries accuse Russia of employing similar tactics abroad. During the study period, Russian officials made strong statements against U.S. intervention in Venezuela, citing the principle of noninterference in sovereign affairs. For example, in May 2019, Sergey Lavrov stated, “Mike Pompeo called me, urged [Russia] not to support [Venezuelan President Nicolás] Maduro, and urged us and Cuba not to interfere in Venezuela's internal affairs. This whole story sounds quite surrealistic. I answered him, based on our principled position, that we never interfere in somebody else's affairs and call on others to act the same way.”¹⁵

Russian officials have made similar statements about how U.S. military operations in Syria and support for specific political groups in Ukraine were instances of interference in sovereign affairs. In the context of the Syria operation, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin condemned the “United States of America, which continues using terrorists and extremists as a

¹² “Putin Sends Greetings to Ukrainians on Victory Day, Urges to Counter Revival of Fascism,” TASS, May 8, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1057554>.

¹³ “Россия заинтересована в тесной внешнеполитической координации с Вьетнамом,” TASS, September 6, 2018, <https://tass.ru/politika/5531260>; “Kremlin Says Serbia Protests Are ‘Internal Affair,’” Interfax, March 18, 2019; “Top Diplomat Reiterates Russia’s Respect for Sovereignty of Latin American Countries,” TASS, March 11, 2019, <http://tass.com/world/1048180>.

¹⁴ “New Sudanese Government Willing to Forge Ties with Moscow, Says Diplomat,” TASS, April 17, 2019, <http://tass.com/world/1054244>.

¹⁵ “Pompeo’s Call on Russia Not to Support Maduro Sounds ‘Surrealistic’ – Lavrov,” Interfax May 2, 2019.

tool of pressure and direct inference in the affairs of sovereign states.”¹⁶ Regarding Ukraine, Russian officials accused the United States of getting involved in the conflict over the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and condemned its influence on Ukrainian elections.¹⁷ Sergey Lavrov’s assessment was that, “The current leadership in Kyiv is guided not so much by the interests of their country but by the ambitions and 'recommendations' and often direct orders from other capitals.”¹⁸ When asked about similar Russian activities, Russian leaders argue that unlike the United States Russia only acts when invited by a country’s official government.

Russia as a Proponent of Stability in the World

Russian leaders frequently argue that Russia’s activities at home and abroad are justified by the need to maintain stability, while portraying opponents’ actions as attempts to destabilize a given situation. For example, in April 2019, Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov criticized Western humanitarian operations around the world in the following terms: “Frequently, the so-called humanitarian interference is done under the pretext of promoting democracy, thus provoking intra-state instability. For Western countries, unilateral actions towards other states carried out with disregard for the opinion of their legitimate governments and not authorized by the UN [United Nations] have already become the norm.”¹⁹ Around the same time, General Alexander Levin, one of the commanders of the Russian military base in Tajikistan, highlighted the beneficial nature of the humanitarian operation there, saying, “The joint actions by the Russian base, units of the Defense Ministry and other security structures of Tajikistan are becoming a guarantor of peace and stability in the region.”²⁰ This pair of statements highlights the Russian trope that Russian interventions promote stability in the world, while interventions by Western countries, especially by the United States, sow chaos.

Russia as a Proponent of Multipolarity in the World

Russian officials often describe the current world order as being unfairly dominated by a single power—specifically, the United States. In response, they promote the idea that the international community should welcome multiple arbiters, including and especially Russia and China. In the meantime, they highlight how most of the world’s problems are caused by the United States trying to resist the natural development of a polycentric world order. In late May 2019, Lavrov noted, “As we can see, security problems have been piling up in the Asia Pacific region and the world at large because Western countries are trying to stall or even reverse the objective

¹⁶ “U.S. Continues Using Terrorists as Tool of Direct Interference in Sovereign States’ Affairs – Volodin,” Interfax, December 10, 2018.

¹⁷ “Russian Orthodox Church Accuses Patriarch Bartholomew of Fulfilling U.S. Order in Ukraine,” Interfax, December 27, 2018, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=878639>; “Putin: Kyiv Being Paid to Keep Russian, Ukrainian People Apart,” Interfax, December 20, 2018.

¹⁸ “Russian FM Criticises US, Ukraine in End of Year Interview,” RIA Novosti, December 24, 2018.

¹⁹ “West Provoking Instability Through ‘Humanitarian Interference’ – Russia’s General Staff,” TASS, April 24, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1055336>.

²⁰ “Russia Views Military Base in Tajikistan as Stability Factor in Region,” TASS, April 18, 2019, <http://tass.com/defense/1054440>.

formation of a polycentric world order.”²¹ Also that month, Vladimir Putin called for the establishment of an efficient security system that would be equal for all states, arguing that only through a collective response can radical extremist ideas be defeated.²²

Russian officials generally argue that the U.S. effort to maintain its unilateral dominance is a fruitless battle, and one that the United States will eventually lose. For example, in April 2019, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu argued that “[o]ur Western colleagues cannot accept the fact that the era of the unipolar world order is nearing an inevitable end so they are trying to protract this natural process.”²³ These statements highlight the key idea of this narrative: that multipolarity is inevitable, and that efforts by Western states to resist it are both futile and counterproductive.

Promotion of International Structures in Which Russia Plays a Leading Role

This narrative refers to Russian leaders’ tendency to promote the involvement in international negotiations of organizational entities in which Russia has a dominant or equal voice as compared with Western powers. Such organizations include, most prominently, the Organization for the Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN Security Council. Conversely, Russian leaders frequently criticize structures in which their country is less empowered, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Council of Europe.

During the study period, Russian officials frequently argued that international crises could only be solved through the UN. This was particularly noticeable during the peak of the effort by the Venezuelan opposition to replace Nicolás Maduro with Juan Guaidó. Sergey Lavrov stated, “We with our Venezuelan partners share the opinion that any use of force in circumvention of the [UN] Security Council is fraught with disastrous consequences for modern international security as a whole.”²⁴ Similarly, Vyacheslav Volodin argued that the Kosovo conflict can only be solved under the auspices of the UN: “A solution to the Kosovo problem can definitely only be sought via dialogue based on decisions made in the UN. Primarily, UN Security Council Resolution 1244.”²⁵

Russian officials also sought to use other international organizations, especially the OSCE. The OSCE was used to promote Russian interests in Ukraine, as highlighted in the following statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry: “Regardless of this fact, Russia will utilize its right to monitor the elections within an international mission in another OSCE member state, in this case in Ukraine. Our steps are based on the mutual obligations of all OSCE members to provide reciprocal, and unimpeded access by observers to one another’s elections. This measure needs to ensure that electoral processes are transparent and democratic.”²⁶ These statements show that

²¹ “Lavrov Accuses West of Stalling Formation of Polycentric World Order,” Interfax, May 30, 2019.

²² “Putin Supports Establishment of Security System Equal for All Countries (Part 2),” Interfax, May 9, 2019.

²³ “Western Countries Seek to Delay End of Unipolar World Order, Says Russian Minister,” TASS, April 29, 2019, <http://tass.com/defense/1056430>.

²⁴ “Any Use of Force in Venezuela Bypassing UN Security Council Fraught with Disastrous Consequences – Lavrov,” Interfax, May 6, 2019.

²⁵ “Kosovo Problem Can Be Settled only Based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244 – Volodin,” Interfax, June 3, 2019.

²⁶ “Russia to Send Short-Term Observers to Ukraine as Part of OSCE Mission” TASS, February 13, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1044490>.

Russian officials prefer to promote their country’s interests through international organizations in which Russia plays a prominent role, while avoiding or denigrating organizations from which Russia is excluded (such as NATO).

Frequency Analysis

As shown in Table 1, the frequency with which these narratives were used by Russian officials during the period of analysis can be divided into three groups. The most frequently used included outside intervention in sovereign affairs, whataboutism, the promotion of international structures in which Russia plays a leading role, and Russophobia. A second set of narratives was used somewhat less frequently, including references to Russia’s near abroad, Russia’s focus on multipolarity versus Western unilateralism, and Russia’s role as a promoter of stability as compared with the Western tendency toward destabilizing interventions. The least frequently used narratives included references to Soviet-era allies, the importance of Russia’s Eurasian identity, and Russia’s role as a bastion of traditional values.

| Narrative | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Outside Intervention in “Sovereign” Affairs | 95 |
| “Whataboutism” | 86 |
| Promotion of International Structures in Which Russia Plays an Equal or Leading Role | 69 |
| Russophobia | 59 |
| Near Abroad | 38 |
| Unilateralism vs. Multipolarity | 33 |
| Stability vs. Destabilization | 31 |
| Soviet-Era Allies | 8 |
| European vs. Eurasian Russia | 2 |
| Russia as Bastion of Traditional Values | 2 |

Table 1. “Frequency of Narratives Used by Russian Officials”

In terms of trends over time, most of the narratives were relatively evenly spread out over the entire ten-month period of observation. In particular, Russophobia, whataboutism, and references to the near abroad occurred at a fairly constant rate throughout the period. Figure 1 shows that some narratives have noticeable peaks and valleys over time, especially sovereign affairs and the promotion of international structures. The February peak in the sovereign affairs narrative is related to the peak of the crisis in Venezuela and concurrent Russian fears of a U.S. military intervention there. However, the smaller April peak in that narrative and the February peak in the promotion of international structures both include mentions of a wide variety of topics. For the former, these include discussion of Western intervention in Libya and Venezuela and discussion related to Brexit and cyberattacks. For the latter, Russian officials refer to a wide variety of crises

that they say should all be dealt with either in the UN Security Council or the OSCE, including Ukraine, Syria, Macedonia, Kosovo, and the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.



Figure 1. “Trends in Key Narratives”

Conclusion

Although Russian official foreign policy narratives are designed to twist reality in ways that promote and justify foreign policy decisions to both domestic and foreign audiences, one common thread tying these narratives together is that all of them have an element of truth at their core. These narratives all connect with prevalent perceptions of the world and of the role of Russia and the United States in it. By starting with a core element of truth, Russian officials are able to create narratives that resonate with the dominant frames through which their audiences view the world.

Thus, they tend to highlight Russophobia and traditional values to domestic audiences. They also highlight the tendency of the United States to intervene in other countries and connect this tendency to increased instability in regions such as the Middle East in order to create the narrative of the United States as a destabilizing actor in world affairs. Whataboutism is used with both domestic and international audiences to highlight instances in which Western actors fall short of their stated principles, making the argument that Western leaders have no standing to criticize Russian actions. The end result is a relatively coherent picture of the world as a chaotic place and of Russia as a stabilizing agent within it.

About the Author

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