SENTIMENT SHIFTS AND A NEW APPROACH TO STRATEGIC NARRATIVES ANALYSIS: RUSSIAN RHETORIC ON UKRAINE

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Abstract: How do countries' strategic narratives (SNs) evolve during conflicts? Are changes in sentiment in diplomatic communication related to kinetic developments? This paper assesses Russian rhetoric toward Ukraine from 2004 to 2019 by qualitatively and quantitively analyzing nearly 3,000 statements by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During this time, Russian identity narratives changed from projecting an identity of a good neighbor and hegemon to an enemy of the Ukrainian regime—while portrayals of Ukraine evolved from that of a strategic partner to a violator of international law and aggressor. Changes in sentiment either follow policy changes, pinpoint important kinetic developments, or indicate political openings.

The heart of international relations is a dynamic negotiation process in which countries use a combination of hard and soft power to attempt

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to achieve their objectives and preferences. A common tool in these inter-actions is diplomatic communication, in which countries strive to frame issues, their objectives, and the rationale for their actions. In this process, states create strategic narratives (SNs) to persuade each other and both domestic and international publics. Successful SNs can become binding, both shaping and constraining countries' actions.

SNs can evolve over the course of interactions or conflict. Sometimes these changes are obvious, while at other times they consist of discreet shifts in diplomatic tone and sentiment. To analyze these discreet shifts, we introduce sentiment analysis to the study of SNs thereby providing a quantifiable and time-variant measure of a country's sentiment (i.e., tone) regarding key topics, phrases, and language used to create SNs. We investigate how strategic narratives evolve during conflict and whether changes in sentiment are linked to kinetic developments in interstate relations or international affairs. Specifically, in this paper, we assess Russian diplomatic messaging regarding Ukraine by analyzing a new dataset of Russian diplomatic communication.

The main goal of this paper is to develop an innovative analytical approach that integrates sentiment analysis into the study of SNs. The secondary goal is to apply this method to the study of Russian narratives toward Ukraine. Combining these objectives in one paper makes it possible to make both methodological and empirical contributions.

In contrast to prior SNs analyses, we look at Russian narratives over a 16-year time frame by qualitatively and quantitatively analyzing all relevant diplomatic statements. By taking a longitudinal approach, we identify important changes within a conflict—as opposed to treating the conflict as a single unit. In our case, as expected, Russian diplomatic sentiment deteriorated significantly after the eruption of conflict in Ukraine in 2014. However, analyses that take the onset of conflict as the pivotal moment for analyzing Russian rhetoric miss many important nuances before and during the conflict.

We show the utility of analyzing Russian rhetoric towards Ukraine by breaking up the period before and after the 2014 watershed into several subperiods (for more on this, see Appendix A).[1] This allows us to identify quick and dramatic variations in sentiment during the conflict and to outline how such changes in sentiment are linked to important political or military developments. We trace how Russian narratives of self and Ukraine change over time—while outlining the main problems in each of the subperiods, which goals were promoted, and which resolutions were sought. This analysis elaborates on how Russian narratives changed between 2004 and 2019 from projecting an identity of a good neighbor and regional hegemon to that of an enemy of the Ukrainian regime, while

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[1] All appendices are available online at https://demokratizatsiya.pub/journalplus.php.

portrayals of Ukraine evolved from a strategic partner to an egregious violator of international law and aggressor. Indeed, a major original contribution of this research is showing that SNs are not static, and that analyzing the given narrative by breaking it up in subperiods makes it possible to identify significant heterogeneity.

We also show that SNs may sometimes remain the same even as sentiment changes. Changes in tone tend to signal diplomatic openings and willingness to consider policy changes, while changes in rhetoric happen after either a policy change or significant new kinetic developments. Such rhetorical shifts may foreshadow political shifts and can indicate potential opportunities to shape foreign policy. While a change in tone does not guarantee a policy change, it does indicate a political opening. Such openings could be utilized by rivals and adversaries if they are able to identify them. We first conduct quantitative sentiment analysis of the data to identify such sentiment shifts, then proceed with qualitative SNs analysis to identify continuity and change in the stories that Russia tells in its diplomatic language.

We begin by discussing SNs frameworks and how this qualitative approach is used to interpret diplomatic language and official state communication. Next, we elaborate on sentiment analysis and how it is used to quantitatively analyze language, with a specific focus on the utility of this approach in analyzing formal government communications. We then introduce our novel mixed-methods approach, which integrates large-N quantitative sentiment analysis of 2,864 Russian diplomatic statements discussing Ukraine from June 1, 2004 to December 31, 2019, and qualitative SNs analysis of a subset of 664 documents with "Ukrain" in the title. We present the results and identify important trends, shifts, and statistically significant variations in sentiment and evolution of Russian identity narratives of self and Ukraine. After that, we present supportive corollary evidence using 11,748 news articles about Ukraine published by the state-controlled *Russia Today*, before concluding with a discussion of how this study's mixed-methods approach and longitudinal analysis can improve research in strategic communication, regional studies, and global politics.

Strategic Narratives

The rapidly growing literature on SNs bridges the fields of international relations and communications by analyzing the rhetoric and intentions of different actors as they "construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future…to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors… [and] attempt to give determined meanings" to achieve political goals.[2]

[2] Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Laughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communications Power & the New World Order.* London and New York: Routledge, 2–5. SNs

Political actors develop and use narratives to try to persuade each other and the public. SNs use framing to advance a country's political agenda; this may or may not involve disinformation and falsehoods. When successful narratives are created, they can become binding, either shaping or constraining countries' actions at home and abroad.

While some researchers perceive SNs as a form of soft power,[3] we see SNs as a distinct alternative to soft power.[4] Soft power predominantly focuses on how a country's culture, values, institutions, and policies benefiting the broader global community can help it to get what it wants from others by means of attraction and persuasion.[5] But because SNs can employ deception and extreme framing, which Nye sees as a tool of hard power,[6] SNs are important to war and conflict studies as well. They provide the story of why a given state is involved in a conflict, its position on the conflict, and its proposed resolution to the situation—which may involve the creation of a slightly different order.[7] This builds on Nye's argument that in the contemporary environment, "victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins."[8] Next, we will elaborate how SN analyses have been used to study the conflicts in Ukraine.

Russian Strategic Narratives on Ukraine

Analyses of Russia's SNs regarding Ukraine since 2014 have investigated nuances, impact, and perception thereof in Russia, in Ukraine, and by the international community.[9] As a whole, studies tend to be critical of Russian narratives, highlighting their inconsistencies and instrumental use.[10] For

can include system narratives, identity narratives, or issue-specific narratives (Miskimmon, O'Laughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*, 102; Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon & Ben O'Laughlin 2014. "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power." *Media, War & Conflict* 7(1): 70-84.

[3] See, for example, Valentina Feklyunina. 2016. "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian World(s).'" *European Journal of International Relations* 22: 4: 773–796.

[4] See, for example, Joanna Szostek. 2017. "The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine: The Role of Linkage." *Perspectives on Politics* 15: 2: 379–395, 380.

[5] Joseph S. Nye. 2014. "The Information Revolution and Soft Power." *Current History* 113 (759): 19–22.

[6] Joseph S. Nye. 2021. "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept." *Journal of Political Power* 14: 1: 196–208, 203.

[7] Miskimmon, O'Laughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*, 5, 182.

[8] Nye, "The Information Revolution and Soft Power," 20.

[9] Irina Khaldarova and Mervi Pantti. 2016. "Fake News: The Narrative Battle over the Ukrainian Conflict." *Journalism Practice* 10: 7: 891–901; Anastasiya Pshenychnykh. 2019. "Ukrainian Perspectives on the Self, the EU and Russia: An Intersemiotic Analysis of Ukrainian Newspapers." European Security 28: 3: 341–359; Szostek, "The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine."

[10] Juris Pupcenoks and Eric Seltzer. 2021. "Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the 'Near Abroad.'" *Nationalities Papers* 49: 4: 757–775; Laura Roselle. 2017. "Strategic Narratives and Alliances: The Cases of Intervention in Libya (2011) and Economic Sanctions against Russia (2014)." *Politics and Governance* 5: 3: 99–110; Oliver Schmitt. 2018. "When Are

example, Russia's claims that the Ukrainian government was planning genocide was a textbook example of how a strategic narrative can be used to both create public support for conflict and promote group cohesion at home.[11] Additionally, it is important to situate Russian SNs focusing on Ukraine within broader Russian narratives regarding the international system and Russia's own identity.[12]

Deception and disinformation played a major role in Russian SNs toward Ukraine during the early years of the conflict. Russia denied its involvement in Eastern Ukraine, camouflaged the annexation of Crimea and then justified it as a case of self-determination, equated anti-Russian groups with fascism, and purposefully exaggerated the seriousness of the humanitarian situation on the ground.[13]

Indeed, in conceptualizing Russian SNs, it is important not to overlook the role of information warfare, as Russia has a history of deception, disinformation, and propaganda. In fact, Krieg argues that "Russia provides the most sophisticated case study for how states weaponize narratives in an effort to subvert the opponent's information-psychological stability."[14] During the Cold War, Russians spread fake news and even forged U.S. governmental documents in attempts to discredit the US.[15] Information warfare continues to play an important role in contemporary Russian foreign policy: the Russian Information Security Doctrine calls for information aggression against geopolitical opponents, among them the West, the US, and NATO.[16] Several Russian sources spread wildly deceptive, distorted, and fake information and images about Ukraine after 2014,[17] while Russian information and propaganda campaigns during the Ukraine crisis of 2013-14 aimed to foster sympathy for Russia globally, distract the attention of the perceived adversaries, and delay an effective reaction by both the Ukrainian government and NATO.[18]

Strategic Narratives Effective? The Shaping of Political Discourse through the Interaction between Political Myths and Strategic Narratives." *Contemporary Security Policy* 39: 4: 487–511.

[11] Douglas Irvin-Erickson. 2017. "Genocide Discourse: American and Russian Strategic Narratives of Conflict in Iraq and Ukraine." *Politics and Governance* 5: 3: 130–145, 136.

[12] Miskimmon, O'Laughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, eds. 2017. *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

[13] Pupcenoks and Seltzer, "Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the 'Near Abroad,'" 12.

[14] Andreas Krieg. 2023. *Subversion: The Strategic Weaponization of Narratives.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 120.

[15] Herbert Romerstein. 2001. "Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War." *Journal of Intelligence History* 1: 1: 54–67.

[16] Russian Federation. 2016. "Doctrine of Information Security."

[17] Khaldarova and Pantti, "Fake News: The Narrative Battle over the Ukrainian Conflict."

[18] Chang Zhang and Ting Zhou. 2023. "Russia's Strategic Communication during the Ukraine Crisis (2013-2014): Victims, Hypocrites, and Radicals." *Discourse & Communication* 17: 6: 784–810.

But there are limits to the extent that individuals in one country will accept another country's SNs.[19] Identity politics are a conduit for foreign SNs to take hold or manifest skepticism and disdain. In the Russia-Ukraine context, which has a colorful ethnic and national history, identity politics limited Russia's influence in Ukraine. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, prior to the outbreak of violence, Russia's SNs focused on promoting the so-called "Russian World," but these SNs struggled to improve Russia's relationship with Kyiv, as the project was increasingly incompatible with the leading identity narratives in Ukraine. Russia's SNs were predominantly internalized by those Ukrainians who regularly consumed Russian media and had personal ties to Russia and Russian culture.[20] Meanwhile, the Ukrainian media typically portrayed Russia either as "a participant in a geopolitical game or as a threatening, destructive force."[21] At the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Russia (unsuccessfully) attempted to use SNs to undermine European cohesion by articulating its own fears of entrapment in order to prevent the imposition of sanctions.[22] As a whole, the existing studies aim to assess the influence of Russian SNs in and on Ukraine—and they come to the shared conclusion that their impact has been rather limited.

Russia has rather successfully convinced its domestic public to accept and internalize Russian SNs about international relations through the use of state TV, as well as the covert spreading of these narratives using bots and paid internet trolls.[23] But because it is widely acknowledged that Russia "operates a 'troll army' of cyber professionals paid to promote the Russian worldview on message boards and below-the-line spaces in different online spaces,"[24] these tools may be less successful when directed at international audiences. Using such methods could also make it easier for foreign media to portray Russia's efforts as nefarious and Machiavellian, potentially limiting Russia's ability to shape the narrative, signal to international audiences, and influence international relations and conflict processes.

At home, Russian media successfully utilized emotive coverage to portray Ukraine in an antagonistic light following the latter's negotiation of visa-free travel to the European Union in 2008[25] and later consistently geopolitically "othered" Europe as it insisted that Ukraine had to choose

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[19] Szostek, "The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine."

[20] Ibid.

[21] Pshenychnykh, "Ukrainian Perspectives on the Self, the EU and Russia," 355.

[22] Roselle, "Strategic Narratives and Alliances," 108.

[23] Marlene Laruelle. 2014. "The 'Russian Idea' on the Small Screen: Staging National Identity on Russia's TV." *Demokratizatsiya* 22: 2: 313–333.

[24] Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, Forging the World, 11.

[25] Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska, and Michele Knodt. 2023. "What Makes Strategic Narrative Efficient: Ukraine on Russian E-News Platforms." *Cooperation and Conflict* 58: 4: 419–440.

between Europe and Russia.[26] Following the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian attempts to project a similar strategic narrative justifying the invasion of Ukraine at home and in the West initially failed to win over Western audiences,[27] although some other recent studies show that Russian messaging regarding Ukraine has had effects in the West.[28]

Several studies show that Western countries' perception of Russia notably worsened following the latter's aggression toward Ukraine. With regard to the conflict in the Crimean Peninsula, the Polish media portrayed Russia as a self-interested, Machiavellian, aggressive, manipulative yet effective player.[29] Bjørge and Kalnes illustrate that Norwegian newspapers took an increasingly harsh view of Russia during March 2014, portraying Russia as choosing to evolve from a rival to an enemy of the West and Norway.[30]

To gain a better understanding of the given instance or situation analyzed, SN analyses should aim to see how the interplay between three kinds of narratives unfolds. *System* narratives concern the past, present, and future of the international system; *identity* narratives concern the identity of actors in this system; and *policy* narratives refer to specific issues, such as diplomatic relations with another country or a conflict.[31] Previous studies identify the main Russian system narrative as outlining the emergence of a multipolar world order.[32] Others include Russia's desire to gain greater recognition from the West and achieve greater cooperation with Europe.[33] Snigyr argues that following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia's system narrative projected a vision of a world partitioned among the major powers—in which world Russia should be able to determine

[26] Eva Claessen. 2023. "The Making of a Narrative: The Use of Geopolitical Othering in Russian Strategic Narratives during the Ukraine Crisis." *Media, War & Conflict* 16: 1: 82–99; Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun. 2022. "Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalized Narratives." *Contemporary Security Policy* 43: 3: 482–497.

[27] Katerina Fridrichova. 2023. "Mugged by Reality: Russia's Strategic Narratives and the War in Ukraine." *Defense & Security Analysis* 39: 3: 28–295.

[28] Irina Khaldarova. 2021. "Brother or 'Other'? Transformation of Strategic Narratives in Russian Television news During the Ukrainian Crisis." *Media, War & Conflict* 14: 1: 3–20.

[29] Tomasz Gackowski and Karolina Brylska. 2020. "'Machiavellian Russia' in the Crimean Conflict: Clarification of Strategic Narratives Analysis Method." *Journalism* 23: 4: 773–788, 781.

[30] Nina Bjørge and Øyvind Kalnes. 2021. "Culture of Anarchy: Images of Russia in the Narrative of Norwegian Mainstream News Media during the Ukraine Crisis 2014." *Media, War & Conflict* 14: 2: 150–173.

[31] Miskimmon, O'Laughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World.*

[32] Schmitt, "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?" 495; Sten Hansson, Mari-Liis Maddison, and Andreas Ventsel. 2022. "Discourses of Blame in Strategic Narratives: The Case of Russia's 5G Stories." *European Security* 32: 1: 62–84; Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Laughlin. 2017. "Russia's Narratives of Global Order: Great Poer Legacies in a Polycentric World." *Politics and Governance* 5: 3: 111–120, 112.

[33] Miskimmon and O'Laughlin, "Russia's Narratives of Global Order," 112.

the faith of people in Eurasia.[34] Russian identity narratives emphasize Russian humiliation by the West after the Cold War,[35] as well as the image of Russia as an exceptional country and the Russian World as a separate civilization championed by Russia.[36] Such Russian identity narratives help to build cohesion at home while fending off Western critiques.[37] The qualitative analysis in this paper shows how examining the evolution of Russian identity narratives of Self and Other improves our understanding of Russian-Ukrainian relations over time.

Overall, we analyze how Russian rhetoric toward Ukraine evolved during a 16-year timeframe (June 1, 2004-December 31, 2019) that included strategic partnership efforts, political watersheds, and the onset of conflict. To capture the nuances of SNs, we break up the larger conflict into shorter subperiods and add to our analysis an additional layer of quantifiable sentiment used in diplomatic language through which narratives are conveyed.

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis quantifies linguistic elements such as tone, emotion, opinion, and subjectivity.[38] The key difference between analysis of emotions and sentiment analysis is that the former focuses on evaluating psychological state while the latter focuses on assessing polarity. Using sentiment analysis, words, sentences, paragraphs, and/or the entire content of data sources can be analyzed in terms of polarity, typically expressed across a Likert-scale positive-neutral-negative range, thereby providing a quantitative tool for assessing and comparing several—or millions of—documents.

The existing research primarily focuses on the methodological aspects of conducting such inquiries and remains largely atheoretical, with researchers harnessing sentiment to analyze popular narratives on political, financial, and other events. For example, an analysis of all social media messages used in Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) influence campaign during the 2016 U.S. elections identified an evolution from "nuisance into high-stakes information war," with the surprise finding that Black Americans were the most-targeted demographic.[39] Sentiment

[34] Olena Snigyr. 2023. "Russian Strategic Narratives, 2022-2023." Orbis 68: 1: 3–23.

[35] Schmitt, "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?" 495.

[36] Hansson, Maddison, and Ventsel, "Discourses of Blame in Strategic Narratives," 26.

[37] Robert S. Hinck, Randolph Kluver, and Skye Cooley. 2018. "Russia Re-Envisions the World: Strategic Narratives in Russian Broadcast and News Media during 2015." *Russian Journal of Communication* 10: 1: 21-37.

[38] Bing Liu. 2011. *Web Data Mining: Exploring Hyperlinks, Contents, and Usage Data*, 2nd ed. Heidelberg and New York: Springer; Bo Pang and Lillian Lee. 2008. "Opinion Mining and Sentiment Analysis." Foundations and Trends in Information Retrieval 1: 2: 1–135; Kumar Ravi and Vadlamani Ravi. 2015. "A Survey on Opinion Mining and Sentiment Analysis: Tasks, Approaches and Applications." *Knowledge-Based Systems* 89: 14–46.

[39] Renee DiResta et al. 2018. The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency, At https://

analysis is also used to gain a better understanding of public or consumer moods for the purposes of improving marketing or election campaigns, targeting specific audiences, and forecasting consumer behavior.[40]

When sentiment analysis is applied to government documents, it becomes a study of official state opinion.[41] While government records are ripe for big data analysis, applying methods such as sentiment analysis to questions of international relations is relatively new.[42] We investigate whether changes in sentiment mirror important kinetic or diplomatic developments on the ground—and could therefore signal diplomatic openings and shifts. In our approach, we illustrate the utility of dividing dyadic relations into subperiods to improve the granularity with which researchers can analyze official state opinion. We expect that big data analysis of sentiment will allow researchers to identify key kinetic developments in each conflict just by analyzing sentiment. Doing so makes it possible to link kinetic developments on the ground to changes in sentiment—and, as we also show, SNs.

Data

SNs can be disseminated using many tools and methods, depending on the audience to which the government is speaking. We focus on Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) English-language statements. By analyzing official English-language Russian commentary, we gain a tool for assessing government narratives—including those focused on specific topics or events—designed to signal and disseminate Russia's SNs to the world. Furthermore, unlike covert or semi-covert methods governments may harness (e.g., using bots or trolls to influence online narratives), official MOFA postings are messages the government clearly intends to articulate. This intention of global consumption is particularly clear in instances where a government of a non-English-speaking country issues statements in English.

We utilize the data from the FOCUSdata Project's Russian MOFA dataset, consisting of English-language material scraped from the MOFA website accompanied by sentiment scores (i.e., polarity) per document/

digitalcommons.unl.edu/senatedocs/2/

[40] Yogev Matalon, Ofir Magadaci, Asam Almozlinom and Dan Yamin. 2021. "Using Sentiment Analysis to Predict Opinion Inversion in Tweets of Political Communication." *Scientific Reports* 11 (7250): 1–9; Chuan Zhang et al. 2020. "Product Sales Forecasting Using Macroeconomic Indicators and Online Reviews: A Method Combining Prospect Theory and Sentiment Analysis." *Soft Computing* 24: 6213-6226.

[41] Ravi and Ravi, "A Survey on Opinion Mining and Sentiment Analysis"; Liu, *Web Data Mining.*

[42] Jonathan Grossman and Ami Pedahzur. 2020. "Political Science and Big Data: Structured Data, Unstructured Data, and How to Use Them." *Political Science Quarterly* 135 (Summer 2020): 225–257.

article.[43] The MOFA dataset contains 21,372 English-language docu-
ments—including press releases, statements, comments and speeches
by key Russian leaders, transcripts of government officials' remarks to
media questions, and minutes of official meetings from May 20, 2004 to
January 15, 2020—with sentiment identified as very positive, positive,
neutral, negative, or very negative.[44] It is important to note that this is not
a sample of information; to the best of our knowledge, it represents all
English-language articles available on the MOFA website at the time that
the article scrapes were conducted in January 2020. Perhaps unsurprisingly
for a diplomatic organization, articles expressing positive sentiment are
the most common.

The MOFA plays a critical role in constructing and broadcasting
Russia's SNs to the international community, even though the Kremlin is
the central decision-maker and agenda setter. By concentrating our analysis
on documents MOFA translated and released in English, we are specifi-
cally focusing on SNs Russia directs toward the international community.

Information, such as these narratives, is a critical foreign policy
tool.[45] The buildup to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022
demonstrates the importance of information in foreign policy. Russia
framed its troop movements as training exercises until unleashing a barrage
of propaganda describing Ukraine as a genocidal Nazi-extremist country
in need of a Russian intervention. In parallel, the US adopted a strategy
of sharing declassified intelligence outlining Russia's playbook, disinfor-
mation campaigns, and propaganda tactics. But these themes are not new
to the current stage of conflict. Our analyses demonstrate that Russian
accusations of Ukrainian far-right extremism and Nazi sympathy, as well
as its allegations of the need for humanitarian operations, were part of the
SNs propagated by the MOFA as early as 2008.

Methodology and Exploratory Statistical Analysis

We utilize a mixed-methods approach consisting of quantitative sentiment
analysis and qualitative SNs analysis toward Ukraine over a 16-year period
(June 1, 2004 – December 31, 2019). First, we conduct a series of statistical

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[43] Scott Fisher and Graig R. Klein. 2020. *Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1st Edition)*, At
https://focusdataproject.com/russia/russian-ministry-of-foreign-affairs/, accessed February
3, 2024; Scott Fisher, Graig R. Klein, and Juste Codjo. 2022. "FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy
Through Language & Sentiment." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18: 2 (April): 1–15.
[44] We restrict our analysis to a time period containing complete months so as not to misrepre-
sent or undercount the frequency, sentiment, or rhetoric in the dataset. Sentiment was coded
using MeaningCloud software. Some documents had no sentiment detected and were coded as
"none." For more, please see: https://www.meaningcloud.com/developer/sentiment-analysis.
[45] Joseph Nye. 1990. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Pub-
lic Affairs; Fisher, Klein, and Codjo, "FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy Through Language &
Sentiment."

tests to look for significant variation in MOFA sentiment across the period. This allows us to identify policy shifts and political openings. While the statements analyzed discuss many different issues, actors, and developments related to Ukraine, statistical tests using the quantified sentiment analysis identify trends, shifts, changes, and patterns in overall tone that are statistically significant and not random, thus enabling us to make confident observations and conclusions about Russian SNs toward Ukraine.[46] We then dig into issues, actors, and developments through a qualitative analysis of continuity and change in these narratives. This enables us to better understand how Russia framed its story of relations with Ukraine over time—with a specific emphasis on how it articulated the changing identity of self and Ukraine.
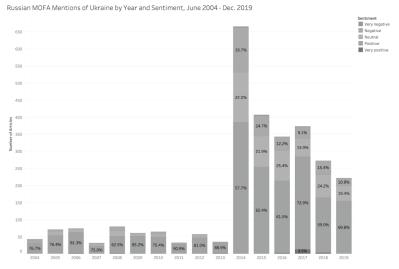
We created two subsets of MOFA data for these analyses. Subset 1 consists of 2,864 MOFA articles referencing Ukraine (i.e., containing the word "Ukraine" in the article) and is used for the quantitative sentiment analysis. Subset 2 consists of 664 statements that include "Ukrain" in the headline and is used for the qualitative SNs analysis.

Exploratory descriptive statistical analysis can help to identify unusual patterns of diplomatic communication, potentially indicating a kinetic change. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the sentiment and frequency of Russian MOFA commentary on Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, the frequency of Russian MOFA statements regarding Ukraine dramatically increased in 2014 as armed conflict erupted. Figure 1 demonstrates sentiment analysis' utility in capturing real-world changes: anyone unaware of the outbreak of Ukraine-Russia fighting can clearly see a change in both number and negativity in 2014. More importantly, in the year prior to the outbreak of armed conflict (2013), MOFA reduced both mentions of and negativity toward Ukraine compared to previous years (no negative or very negative articles). This is an interesting and counterintuitive finding that warrants further research.

Subset 2 statements largely mirror the broader Subset 1, though with two notable exceptions (see Figure 2). First, from 2014 through 2019, the statements with "Ukrain*" in the headline showed higher negativity and lower positivity compared to the article-level data in Subset 1. Second, the only appearance of a very positive article in Subset 2 from 2011 through 2019 occurred in November 2013, three months before the outbreak of fighting. Additional research is warranted to see if meaning can be attributed to this outlier.

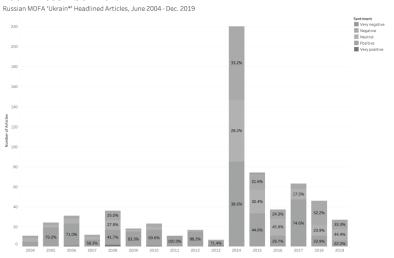[46] It would be rather difficult to untangle in greater detail sentiment towards the different actors, such as the Ukrainian government, the general Ukrainian population, and the separatists. The statements analyzed frequently refer to more than one of these actors simultaneously.

Figure 1. Russian MOFA Mentions of Ukraine, June 2004–December 2019

Russian MOFA Mentions of Ukraine by Year and Sentiment, June 2004 - Dec. 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

Figure 2. Russian MOFA Statements Headlined with 'Ukrain*', June 2004–December 2019

Russian MOFA 'Ukrain*' Headlined Articles, June 2004 - Dec. 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

A foreign ministry discussing a nearby country at a higher rate once a conflict begins or mentioning that country less positively (or

more negatively) during a conflict is not surprising. But thinking about differences or changes only in terms of "Pre-Conflict" and "Conflict" can obfuscate how kinetic operations, negotiations, or international interventions influence a country's rhetoric, sentiment, and SNs over the course of a conflict. Political and kinetic events can change the bargaining range and alter the course of a conflict, and we suspect they also influence conflict actors' rhetoric and sentiment. These suspected changes cannot be observed or measured if the "Pre-Conflict" and "Conflict" periods are treated in an aggregated or static manner aligned only with the onset of armed conflict. As such, our analyses leverage several turning points in the armed conflict and Ukrainian politics to create six important subperiods (for more about subperiod classifications, see Appendix A):

Table 1. Subperiods

1	Pre-Euromaidan	Jun. 1, 2004 – Nov. 20, 2013
2	Euromaidan	Nov. 21, 2013 – Feb. 21, 2014
3	Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol	Feb. 22, 2014 – Sep. 5, 2014
4	Minsk 1-Minsk 2 Protocol	Sep. 6, 2014 – Feb. 12, 2015
5	Post-Minsk 2 Protocol	Feb. 13, 2015 – Apr. 20, 2019
6	Post-Zelensky Election	Apr. 21, 2019 – December 31, 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

Analysis and Discussion

We employ these subperiods in the statistical tests of sentiment analysis scores and SNs analysis to identify the evolution of Russian rhetoric. The statistical analyses focus on measurable sentiment, while the SNs analysis describes what changed in MOFA language (and how), with a specific focus on identity narratives of self and interlocutor. It shows that changes in tone tend to indicate political openings, while more general rhetorical shifts come due to either policy changes or important developments on the ground. Such a mixed-methods approach validates that quantitative sentiment analysis can add value to qualitative SNs analysis.

Statistical Analyses

We test for significant variation in the frequency of MOFA sentiment and average sentiment across the six subperiods. Doing so highlights that political events influence diplomatic processes and language. To analyze variation in a sentiment's frequency, we collapse the original Likert-scale sentiment measure into a trichotomous measure, *Sentiment Type*, recording the number of Negative, Neutral, and Positive statements per subperiod. As Very Negative and Very Positive are extremely rare, we count them as

Negative and Positive, respectively; 26 observations are dropped because of missing sentiment scores. Table 2 shows the distribution by subperiod.

Table 2. Sentiment Type by Subperiod

Subperiod	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total
Pre-Euromaidan	44	68	430	542
Euromaidan	3	3	27	33
Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol	99	107	260	466
Minsk 1-Minsk 2 Protocol	50	59	157	266
Post-Minsk 2 Protocol	175	281	908	1,364
Post-Zelensky Election	14	34	119	167
Total	385	552	1,901	2,838

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

We conduct a Chi-Square (bivariate, i.e., tabular) test to identify whether sentiment varies between the different subperiods.[47] If there is no relationship between subperiods and sentiment, then we would expect an equivalent distribution of (or at least no discernable variation in) sentiment types across subperiods. That is, each sentiment type would be observed 33.33% of the time in each subperiod. This functions as our *expected count* for the Chi-Square test. The test compares the *observed count* of sentiment type (number of cases per cell in Table 1) with the expected count. The Chi-square test produces a statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$) Pearson's Chi-square value of 87.04, indicating that there are definite—and statistically significant—changes in sentiment by subperiod.

The data show that sentiment largely mirrored developments on the ground—and somebody without prior knowledge of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict could likely have identified general points of growing tensions and improving relations simply by looking at shifts in sentiment across the different subperiods. Positive shifts in tone tend to be associated with political openings, but, as we show in the qualitative strategic narratives analysis below, broader rhetorical shifts are caused by policy changes or important developments. Within-cell Pearson's Chi-square values[48] show that during the Pre-Euromaidan period, *positive* sentiment is observed much more than would be expected if there were no relationship, and *neutral* and *negative* sentiment less than expected if there were no

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[47] See Paul M. Kellstedt and Guy D. Whitten. 2009. *The Fundamentals of Political Science Research.* New York: Cambridge University Press.
[48] See Appendix B. All appendices are available online at https://demokratizatsiya.pub/journalplus.php.

relationship. During the Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol sub-period, the opposite is true; *negative* sentiment is observed much more and *positive* sentiment is observed much less than expected. In all other subperiods, the observed frequency is reasonably aligned with the expected frequency of each type of sentiment, with only *negative* sentiment in the Minsk 1–Minsk 2 Protocol subperiod slightly higher than expected.

These findings intuitively make sense. As Russia was pursuing a strategic partnership with Ukraine prior to the Euromaidan, its diplomatic language was notably more positive. During the most intense period of fighting, which came prior to the Minsk 1 Protocol, the frequency of negative language increased. Thus, policy changes and the escalation of fighting resulted in rhetorical shifts.

Next, to analyze changes in average sentiment to see if they correspond to developments on the ground, we transform the sentiment categories into numerical values of −1.0, -0.5, 0, 0.5, and 1.0, corresponding to N+ to P+, and calculate the mean sentiment per subperiod—reported in Table 3. We apply two-sample t-tests with unequal variance to assess whether the variations are statistically significant.[49] We perform two robustness checks—a one-way ANOVA test (F=16.85, p≤0.000) and a Tukey post-hoc test—to verify that the difference in mean sentiment is statistically significant.[50] The findings indicate that sentiment largely mirrored developments on the ground: it worsened as the fighting intensified, and then improved following the negotiation of the Minsk Protocols—particularly Minsk 2, which favored Russia's preferences—and as the level of violence in Donbas decreased. Chronologically, statistically significant changes occurred during Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 and Post-Minsk 2. Although mean sentiment became more positive during the Post-Zelensky Election subperiod, it was not statistically significant compared to Post-Minsk 2. At the same time, that positive shift likely indicated a political opening and willingness to reconsider policies defining Russian-Ukrainian relations.

Mean sentiment by subperiod provides an informative snapshot but cannot alone tell the entire story. To further investigate how sentiment changed, we calculate mean sentiment lines of best fit to show the directional trend during each subperiod. The lines of best fit function as regressions of mean sentiment on time (the date of MOFA statement). We graph the lines of best fit in Figure 3, which shows important trends we could not capture in the two-sample t-tests.

For example, an interesting finding from the two-sample t-tests is that there is no statistically significant difference between Pre-Euromaidan and Euromaidan. Yet when accounting for directional trend, Figure 3 shows a slight but steady improvement in sentiment leading up to Euromaidan, with

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[49] For complete empirical results, see Appendix B.
[50] For complete empirical results, see Appendix B.

Table 3. Mean Sentiment by Subperiod

Subperiod	N	Mean Sentiment	Standard Deviation	Statistically Different from Next Subperiod
Pre-Euromaidan	542	0.364	0.314	No
Euromaidan	33	0.364	0.313	Yes**
Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol	466	0.172	0.406	No
Minsk 1-Minsk 2 Protocol	266	0.197	0.409	Yes**
Post-Minsk 2 Protocol	1364	0.275	0.370	No
Post-Zelensky Election	167	0.314	0.318	--

Notes:*** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$
Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

a dramatic increase as protests erupted—perhaps a strategic effort to convince Ukraine to steer away from the EU—and then a tremendous and rapid decline over the course of the protests. We come back to this in our SNs analysis, highlighting how combining these two methods of analysis strengthens our ability to understand the rhetorical, propaganda, and narrative elements of conflict.

Figure 3 buttresses the statistically different mean sentiment between Euromaidan and Conflict Pre-Minsk 1, highlighting an abrupt discontinuity in their respective lines of best fit. We see an immediate improvement in sentiment after the signing of the Minsk 1 Protocol, which then declines over the course of the subperiod, and then an immediate positive shift following Minsk 2 that leads to a gradual improvement in the run-up to Zelensky's election before declining again.

By using subperiods in our analysis, we demonstrate that a country's sentiment varies in accordance with shifts in conflict processes, negotiations, and on-the-ground events and changes, in conjunction with traditional measurements of conflict such as battle intensity. This variation could generate signals, and opportunities, to negotiate a resolution to the conflict or a reduction in violence.

Our findings illustrate that both reduced violence (Post-Minsk 2 Protocol) and the election of a new leader (Post-Zelensky Election) produced greater positive sentiment in official statements. Importantly, the statistically significant changes in mean sentiment corresponding to changes in conflict and political processes would have been obscured had the entire conflict period been treated as a single unit.
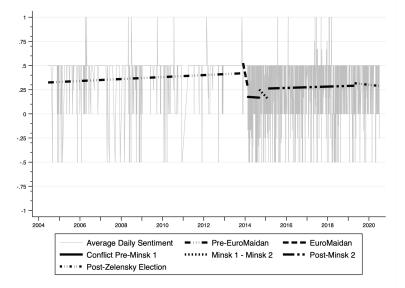
Figure 3. Trends in Mean Sentiment by Subperiod

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

Next, we conduct a qualitative analysis of SNs to unpack and understand the rich context that unfolded prior to and throughout the conflict. The SNs analysis complements the identified changes in sentiment by showing that prior to 2014, Russia coordinated a Ukraine-related messaging campaign that became the justification for hostilities and—with the benefit of hindsight—arguably foreshadowed both the significant decline in sentiment and the 2022 full-scale invasion.

Qualitative SNs Analysis

For the qualitative part of the paper, in order to systematically and reliably trace the narrative, we read all 664 statements with "Ukrain" in the headline to examine how Russia articulates the identity of self and Ukraine; how it portrays which are the most pressing issues, problems, and goals in the bilateral relationship; and—after 2014—how it portrays the nature of and potential solutions to the conflicts in southeast Ukraine. [51] Each of the relevant statements was read and analyzed first by a research assistant and then by one of the coauthors.

The formation of SNs is commonly assessed by analyzing select

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[51] Quantitative context analysis (e.g., looking at frequencies of keywords) could be another way to analyze these diplomatic statements. However, we selected a qualitative methodology as we aim to show nuances in continuity and change of Russian narratives—and because the N of statements was rather small.

presidential speeches and interviews,[52] as well as other major statements by the authorities and texts associated with public diplomacy and image management.[53] Our research does this systematically by looking at diplomatic postings on the website of the MOFA, which is tasked with disseminating Russia's image and SNs worldwide. We identify the evolutions of Russia's identity SNs, as well as its articulation of issues, priorities and goals, and show how changes in sentiment can help to identify transformations in both narratives and kinetic action.

We focus on the Russian identity narrative of self and Ukraine, arguing that identity narratives are context-specific. For example, Russian system narratives tend to be articulated differently depending on whether one analyzes Russian diplomatic communications focused on interactions with Europe or with the US.[54]

As Schmitt notes, it can be helpful to identify the subnarratives nested within broader narratives.[55] We analyze how Russia crafts identity narrative of self and Ukraine in the context of Russo-Ukrainian cooperation before 2014 and then see how it changes and evolves following the emergence of the 2014 conflict. We trace the development of such SNs across the same six subperiods.[56]

Our Russian identity subnarratives are nested under the broader SN of Russian humiliation by the West and a vision of Russia as an exceptional country and champion of the Russian World. In interactions with Ukraine, Russian narratives evolve from portraying Russia as a good neighbor to framing the country as an enemy of the Ukrainian regime. Meanwhile, the portrayal of Ukraine evolves from that of a strategic partner to a country increasingly dominated by Western-backed extremists, engulfed in a humanitarian crisis, and non-compliant with its obligations under international law (see Table 4).

We show that SNs evolve and change throughout a conflict, in contrast to the many previous SNs analyses that focus on the constancy of rhetorical concepts, story, and objectives during this conflict,[57] and explain how our earlier statistical observations using sentiment analysis can help to deepen SNs frameworks.[58]

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[52] Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World.*

[53] Feklyunina, "Soft Power and Identity," 780.

[54] See, for example, Schmitt, "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?"; Hansson, Maddison, and Ventsel, "Discourses of Blame in Strategic Narratives"; Miskimmon and O'Laughlin, "Russia's Narratives of Global Order."

[55] Schmitt, "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?"

[56] We replicated the statistical analyses on this restricted sample and found similar results—see Appendix D.

[57] See, for example, Gackowski and Brylska, "'Machiavellian Russia' in the Crimean Conflict"; Szostek, "The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine."

[58] In our analysis, the different statements are referenced using the posting date. Please see Appendix C for a chronological list of all statements cited.

Table 4. Russian Identity Narratives in Interactions with Ukraine: Self and Ukraine

Subperiod	Perception of Self	Perception of Ukraine
Pre-Euromaidan	Good neighbor and regional hegemon	Strategic partner
Euromaidan	Concerned neighbor	Increasingly dominated by Western-backed extremists
Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol	Humanitarian actor concerned with own security	Country engulfed in humanitarian crisis
Minsk 1-Minsk 2	Enemy of the Ukrainian regime	Egregious violator of international law and human rights
Post-Minsk 2	Enemy of the Ukrainian regime	Aggressor non-compliant with the Minsk Protocols
Post-Zelensky Election	Constructive actor in conflict resolution	Aggressor non-compliant with the Minsk Protocols

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.

Pre-Euromaidan: Strategic Partnership (June 1, 2004–November 20, 2013)

During this subperiod, Russia portrayed itself as a good neighbor and regional hegemon, while characterizing Ukraine as a strategic partner. As Russia was seeking a strategic partnership, its sentiment toward Ukraine was frequently, and increasingly, positive in the run-up to the Euromaidan protests (see Figure 3). From the Russian perspective, as articulated by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov and high-level foreign policy officials, the key issues during this subperiod included Ukrainian assistance with the implementation of the Transnistrian settlement that was to end hostilities in that region, and the future of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (which until the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was based in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol). Diplomatic relations were generally cordial: Russian officials consistently asserted that there was "a common striving to continue seeking to improve the atmosphere in Russian-Ukrainian relations in accordance with the directives made by the Presidents of the two states" (September 23, 2005). Yet great concern and opposition was expressed

regarding potential Ukrainian bids to join NATO, which Russia perceived to be contrary to Russian security interests (September 11, 2008).

A temporary exception to the strategic partnership narrative was noticeable in 2008-09, when Russia castigated Ukraine for the latter's perceived Western pivot and support for Georgia during the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. During this time, Russia started accusing Ukraine of Nazi sympathies, of placing unreasonable restrictions on the use of the Russian language, and of blacklisting Russian culture and foreign officials from its territory. Russia also condemned Ukraine for providing weapons to Georgia during the Russo-Georgian war. It accused Ukrainian radical nationalist groups of pro-Nazi celebrations and commemorations of the anniversary of a Ukrainian SS World War II Battalion, describing the moves as "deeply concerning," as threatening to "dismantle[e] Russian-Ukraine good neighborliness…[and] designed to play Ukraine and Russia against each other" (November 25, 2009). In another instance, the MOFA denounced the 65th-anniversary celebration of the SS Galicia Division as "unlawful actions…rudely insulting Russian Ivano-Frankovsk residents and Great Patriotic War veterans who paid with blood for Ukraine's liberation from the German fascist invaders" (June 23, 2008). Generally speaking, negative Russian sentiment clustered in 2008 (see Figure 3); similar accusations, harsher language, and tensions trailed off by 2010.

Euromaidan: The Rise of "Western-Backed Extremists" (November 21, 2013–February 21, 2014)

During the Euromaidan, Russia projected itself as a concerned neighbor while insisting that Ukraine was increasingly dominated by Western-backed extremists. Interestingly, average sentiment during this subperiod remained the same as during the pre-Euromaidan period (see Table 2), which further supports the image of Russia as a concerned neighbor aiming to help and attempting to influence developments in Ukraine (as opposed to an adversary). During this subperiod, Russia blamed the Western powers for enabling and encouraging the emergence of extremism in Ukraine (February 20, 2014) and consistently alleged that violence was being committed by ever-more-prominent Ukrainian extremists. Russia demanded that the leaders of the Maidan stop the alleged bloodshed and renew dialogue with the pro-Moscow authorities.

Our analyses suggest that during this subperiod, Russia may have tried to voice its grievances regarding unfavorable developments in Ukraine without alienating Ukrainian leaders and everyday people. Russia insisted that the Ukrainian media were being manipulated to portray Maidan events incorrectly and to promote anti-Russian views: "Mass media presents information in an extremely pervasive way, drumming easy

formulae into people's heads, such as the West appeals to the Government to leave Maidan alone" (February 20, 2014). Through such accusations, Russia attempted to promote mistrust of both the international and Ukrainian media and to delegitimize media sources unsympathetic to the Russian government.

Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol: Grave Humanitarian Crisis (February 22, 2014–September 12, 2015)

During this subperiod, Russia portrayed itself as a humanitarian actor concerned with its own security while seeing Ukraine as a country in grave humanitarian crisis. This rhetoric emphasized the alleged ethnic cleansing and political violence taking place in Ukraine. There was no more mention of a strategic partnership between Russia and Ukraine. Mirroring such rhetoric, this subperiod is characterized by a stark increase in the frequency of negative sentiment, which is not surprising as the conflict escalated in East Ukraine in 2014. As a result, while average sentiment remains positive, as is the standard for MOFA statements in general,[59] it is significantly less positive than before the onset of conflict. Key articulated Russian goals included calling for greater Western involvement in conflict areas of Ukraine and the de-escalation of tensions. Russia also threatened to retaliate if the violence along the Russian-Ukrainian border escalated. As the conflict intensified, Russia emphasized instances of extreme violence by perceived Ukrainian extremists, portraying them as anti-Semitic, often referring to them as neo-Nazis, and blaming them for outbreaks of contentious protest and violence in southeastern Ukraine. It continued to blame the West for the rise in violence and accuse non-Russian media of biased reporting.

Above all else, Russian rhetoric outlined the nature of the perceived humanitarian crisis in Donbas and accused Ukraine of aggression. For example, early in the conflict, Russia outlined that, "There have been armed confrontations between violent youths, extreme right nationalists' organizations and units of law enforcement agencies, who defended peaceful civilians and interests of the state" (February 24, 2014). It detailed the resulting humanitarian crisis that threatened the lives of civilians and journalists, and repeatedly emphasized the perceived unjust actions of Ukrainian forces in apparent violation of international law.

Russia continuously criticized the Western powers for their anti-Russian stance and role in escalating the conflict, as well as for the Western media's biased portrayal of the violence in Ukraine (September 3, 2014). In parallel, Russia consistently denounced reports by various observers—including NATO, the UN, the European Parliament, and UNICEF—who castigated Russia for annexing Crimea and for its role in escalating the

[59] Fisher, Klein, and Codjo, "FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy Through Language & Sentiment."

violence in Donbas.

Overall, the narrative reflected a concerted effort to portray the situation in Ukraine as a humanitarian tragedy and outline Ukraine's perceived aggression and violations of international law. References to extreme violence and human rights violations were present in nearly every MOFA statement. The sentiment analysis showed a significant turn to more negative sentiment during this period, while the SN analysis identifies key Russian grievances that—as we will show—continue throughout the periods to follow.

Minsk 1-Minsk 2 Protocol: Egregious International Law and Human Rights Violations (September 6, 2014–February 12, 2015)

During this subperiod, Russia saw itself as an enemy of the Ukrainian ruling regime, while portraying said government as an egregious violator of international law and human rights. Russian rhetoric about the conflict came to emphasize alleged atrocity crimes committed by the Ukrainian government. Sentiment slightly improved during this subperiod but remained significantly lower than before the eruption of conflicts in 2014. Here, we observe a disjuncture between SNs and sentiment. While there was a brief period of improved rhetoric and tone in Russia's SNs during the negotiations leading to the Minsk 2 Protocol, average sentiment declined throughout the period, with a noticeable increase in positive sentiment following the Minsk 2 Protocol. The disjuncture highlights the importance and benefits of integrating SNs and sentiment analyses to generate an improved understanding of the bargaining environment, countries' propaganda, and (perhaps) the sincerity of negotiations. With regard to articulated goals, Russia called for the cessation of violence and highlighted the importance of providing humanitarian aid.

The MOFA continued to highlight perceived human rights violations in Ukraine, at times going so far as to describe them as "massive deaths of civilians." For these it blamed "the growing spread of the radical, primarily ultranationalist, neo-Nazi ideology" (September 11, 2014). It consistently emphasized that neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic extremists were primarily to blame for the emergence of violence in Ukraine. These allegations expanded on assertions—made as early as 2008—that dangerous Nazi sympathy was permeating Ukraine.

That being said, a notable shift to cooperation occurred briefly while the Minsk 2 Protocol was being negotiated, which contextualizes the empirically identified slight increase in average sentiment but also a declining trend in sentiment during the subperiod. To some extent, MOFA statements concerning Ukraine in early to mid-January 2015 returned to the strategic partnership narrative observed in the Pre-Euromaidan

subperiod. During this time, even when the statements referred to ongoing violence in Ukraine, the criticism was comparatively muted. For example, in one instance, Russia called for an investigation of alleged mistreatment of prisoners by Ukrainian forces—as opposed to harshly denouncing alleged violent acts perpetrated by the Ukrainian government (January 15, 2015). This illustrates how important diplomatic activities, such as ceasefire negotiations, can cause a shift in sentiment in narratives, even if the narratives themselves do not change.

However, this shift did not last long. As the violence in southeastern Ukraine escalated, the MOFA abandoned its warmer narrative by late January 2015. Russian statements came to mirror those seen in the Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol subperiod, with a focus on alleged aggression and acts of war by Ukraine.

Post-Minsk 2: Ukrainian Aggression and Minsk Non-Compliance (February 13, 2015–April 20, 2019)

During this subperiod, Russia continued to view itself as an enemy of the Ukrainian regime, while stridently portraying Ukraine as an aggressor who was non-compliant with the Minsk Protocols. This subperiod is characterized by a significant breakdown of Russia-Ukraine relations, as each state blamed the other for the violence in Donbas. Sentiment was notably, and statistically significantly, more positive during this subperiod than during previous subperiods, which correlates to comparatively reduced fighting on the ground. At the same time, the more than 200 analyzed statements issued during the four years of conflict in this subperiod were remarkably similar in emphasizing perceived Ukrainian military aggression and non-compliance with the Minsk Protocols, delineating humanitarian suffering in Donbas, denouncing any criticism of Russian and East Ukrainian separatist actions, and highlighting the alleged mistreatment of (and violence against) journalists (May 22, 2017; February 19, 2019). Starting in 2017, Russia also became increasingly vocal in its opposition to the rollback of the use of Russian language in Ukraine. Although sentiment was nominally more positive than in previous conflict subperiods, the narrative toward Ukraine and the Western powers remained largely unchanged, while the narrative of perceived anti-Russian rhetoric, or "Russophobic campaigning," became even more prevalent. An overarching aim of Russia during this subperiod was to resolve the conflict by achieving Ukrainian compliance with the Minsk Protocols (January 18, 2018).

Starting in 2017, Russia increasingly criticized Ukraine for actions taken to reduce the use of Russian language in the country as well as calling for greater protections for minorities in Ukraine. The statements showed little sign of progress in the region, repeatedly mentioning an uptick in

violent incidents, the murder of Russian journalists, and human rights violations. Again and again, the MOFA expressed that if Ukraine were able to commit to and uphold the Protocols, Russia would again be willing to seek a strategic partnership of the kind seen during the Pre-Euromaidan subperiod. Overall, while becoming increasingly accusatory and inflammatory, Russia was nevertheless able to strike a more positive tone, in particular by encouraging compliance with the Protocols.

Post-Zelensky Election: Continued Ukrainian Aggression and Minsk Non-Compliance (April 21, 2019–December 31, 2019)

During the final subperiod analyzed, Russia portrayed itself as a constructive actor in conflict resolution, while emphasizing continued Ukrainian aggression and Minsk non-compliance. The higher average sentiment observed after Zelensky's election, while still statistically lower than pre-conflict, underscores Russia's attempts to be relatively more collaborative with the new administration and to potentially play a constructive role in the resolution of the conflict. Russia's narrative focused, above all else, on emphasizing the importance of Ukraine's compliance with the Protocols: for example, "Now is the moment of truth when Kyiv needs to show political will, stop imitating the fulfillment of its obligations, engage in implementing the Minsk Package of Measures, and start a dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk" (December 20, 2019). Similarly to the language used in prior conflict subperiods, Russia referred to the Minsk Protocols as "the only viable solution to sustainable and long-term peace" (November 18, 2019).

The MOFA statements continued to deny any Russian role in escalating the conflict, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. The MOFA consistently rebuffed accusations that it had provided material support for and been responsible for instigating violence in the Donbas (December 16, 2019; December 10, 2019). Importantly, the decline in sentiment as this subperiod unfolded (see Figure 3) might suggest Russian frustration with the lack of political breakthroughs with Ukraine and to some extent foreshadow the subsequent return to the inflammatory rhetoric of rising extremism, humanitarian atrocities, and rebirth of fascism that Putin would use to justify the full-scale invasion in 2022.

Corollary Evidence

In countries where the government strongly influences, controls, or has ownership of the media, there are additional opportunities—beyond the foreign ministry—for creating an official narrative. *Russia Today* (RT) is one prominent state-controlled media outlet that may play an important role in Russia's positioning toward the international community through its

English-language publications. The FOCUSdata Project collected RT articles and corresponding sentiment, allowing us to supplement our MOFA analyses.[60] The RT database contains 211,923 articles published from June 21, 2006, to January 9, 2020. Again, this is not a sample of information; to the best of our knowledge, this represents all English-language articles available on the RT website when scraped in January 2020. We generated a subset of the RT dataset containing all articles referencing Ukraine from July 1, 2006, to December 31, 2019 (so as not to under-count incomplete months in the dataset)—a total of 11,447 articles.

Although RT articulates more negative sentiment than MOFA, a similar pattern is observed across the six subperiods. RT sentiment becomes much less positive in the Pre-Minsk 1 subperiod but then quickly returns to pre-conflict mean sentiment following the Minsk 1 Protocol. We replicate the Chi-square test, two-sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA tests to analyze if changes in mean sentiment are statistically significant. The results show a similar pattern to the earlier MOFA analysis.[61] This identified similarity between state media and foreign ministry narratives and sentiment temporal flows help illuminate evolutions of Russian state SNs; Russian government articulation of issues, priorities and goals; and how changes in sentiment can help identify narrative and policy transformations.

Conclusion

The mixed-methods approach integrating sentiment analysis into strategic narratives research offers several advantages. It allows researchers to identify sentiment shifts and resulting policy changes or political openings—prior to outlining narratives that actors tell in attempts to win the story. We show that policy shifts and significant kinetic developments cause rhetorical shifts—and that sudden spikes of positive sentiment are likely to indicate political openings and openness to reconsidering policy changes. Breaking up strategic narratives into subperiods allows us to understand nuances that would be lost if the narrative were to be analyzed as, for example, just one or two time periods (e.g., in this case, as Russian-Ukrainian relations before and since the conflict(s) in Ukraine). Finally, quantitative analysis of diplomatic communication also allows us to identify potentially interesting patterns of communication, such as strategic silence leading up to the 2014 hostilities in Ukraine.

Indeed, international relations increasingly recognizes that nation-states are not "black boxes" and that leaders' actions and choices are important. Even in enduring rivalries, leadership change can have

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[60] Scott Fisher and Graig R. Klein. 2020. *Russia Today (1st Edition)*, At https://focusdataproject.com/russia/russia-today/, accessed February 3, 2024.

[61] For complete empirical results, see Appendix B.

tremendous effects on cooperation and bargaining.[62] This is also true of SNs. While on the surface, a country's SNs may not noticeably change over time, the underlying sentiment and tone that builds the foundation for altering the bargaining space can shift. For example, while American SNs and grand strategy toward China did not noticeably change with the transition from the Trump Administration to the Biden Administration, their tone did. Biden's rhetoric has been less hostile toward China, making diplomatic breakthroughs possible even when SNs remain consistent.[63] Another example of the power of tone shift can be seen in Iran's evolving sentiment toward the US during the Obama-Trump transition period.[64]

Longitudinal statistical analysis and quantitative sentiment analysis allow us to make sense of large amounts of information and to analyze changes through time—which can help with identifying important nuances in SNs. We show how the Russian self-identity narrative evolved from that of a good neighbor and a regional hegemon into an enemy of the Ukrainian regime, while its portrayal of Ukraine changed from a strategic partner to an aggressor and violator of international law. Such analysis can also bring attention to minor yet important nuances of these narratives. For example, the allegations of the rebirth of fascism that would feature so prominently in the Russian case for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022[65] were present in Russian rhetoric long before the outbreak of the 2014 conflict.

Longitudinal analyses also help to illuminate that, counterintuitively, there may *not* be a change in sentiment when politics suggests there should be. In our case, average Russian MOFA sentiment did not change between the Pre-Euromaidan and Euromaidan periods. But by taking a longitudinal approach, we show there were drastic differences in trends—sentiment became steadily more positive before dramatically turning negative—in accordance with political shifts and in reaction to ongoing mass protests. Overall, contrary to what one might have expected, Russian sentiment remained positive during the Euromaidan in its references to Ukraine, despite the fact that the Russian narrative became more confrontational. This observation is likely a reflection of Russian policy at that time—the country was attempting to "win over" Ukraine during the Euromaidan

[62] Fiona McGillivray and Alastair Smith. 2008. *Punishing the Prince: Theory of Interstate Relations, Political Institutions, and Leadership Change.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[63] Nevine Schepers. 2020. "China and Nuclear Arms Control." *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 276 (December): 1–4, At https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/452190/CSSAnalyse276-EN.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y, accessed February 3, 2024.

[64] Fisher, Klein, and Codjo, "FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy Through Language & Sentiment."

[65] Juris Pupcenoks and Graig R. Klein. 2022. "First Georgia, then Russia: How Russian Propaganda Justifies Invasions." *Ethics & International Affairs*, At https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/online-exclusives/first-georgia-then-ukraine-how-russian-propaganda-justifies-invasions, accessed February 3, 2024.

period by utilizing positive sentiment. This positive sentiment further signaled that Russia was willing to engage, work with, and cooperate with Ukraine.

We also find that the MOFA and RT reduced mentions and negativity toward Ukraine—compared to previous years—from December 2012 to January 2014. Indeed, there was no negative mention of Ukraine in the MOFA's postings in 2013, the year prior to the onset of armed conflict. This represents an anomaly. While Russia was indeed pursuing a strategic partnership with Ukraine during that time, occasional negative remarks were common during other years. As academics, we find these possibly coordinated changes interesting. They may signal a government-run campaign to limit mentions of Ukraine a little over a year prior to the commencement of hostilities. This finding raises several questions and warrants further research regarding causes or incentives for such a reduction of coverage. Does Russia (and other countries) tend to reduce mentions of potential hotspots in the months leading up to an eruption of tensions? Alternatively, perhaps Russia largely avoids commenting on tense situations in nearby countries while such tensions are taking place? A similar examination of Russian state media and MOFA comments prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the 2008 conflict with Georgia, or the 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia would appear especially salient for determining whether changes in sentiment and frequency of mentions might indicate increased risk of conflict. Our findings clearly merit attention from defense policymakers and intelligence professionals tasked with monitoring Russia, especially those in countries bordering Russia that have Russian-speaking minorities.

In many instances, while SNs may remain largely the same, sentiment can change. We find that the commencement of diplomatic negotiations and a change of leadership can lead to brief shifts in sentiment. Positive sentiment increased during the negotiations of both the Minsk 1 and 2 Protocols and after the election of Zelensky. Thus, a spike in positive sentiment may signal a political opening to (re)consider a policy change. At the same time, they are not the causes of diplomatic progress. Further research should investigate whether changes in tone and increases in positive sentiment may more likely lead to positive diplomatic outcomes, and should investigate how changes in particular features of the narrative (e.g., problem definitions and the end-goals that are promoted) evolve and how they are linked to changes in sentiment.

Acknowledgments