

# **Strategic Identity Narratives Through Time**

**Russian Diplomatic Communication on  
Relations With Ukraine prior  
to the Invasion of 2022**

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# Imprint

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# Preface

“In the beginning was the Word...” This familiar phrase from the Bible highlights the importance of speech in human action. All human actions, and therefore all political ones, begin with speaking - at least that's what we learn from Hannah Arendt. She defines speaking as a form of action in her typology of human activities. When we talk about political speech, we are essentially talking about “narratives.”

Recently, the word “narrative” has enjoyed growing popularity in both academic and public discourse, almost becoming a “magical word”. It may occasionally seem that everyone is talking about narratives, but hardly anyone can precisely define what they actually are and how they work. There are other popular terms that are often used as interchangeable synonyms for “narrative”. A few years ago, political communication and election campaigns liked to talk about “spins,” today, “frames” and “narratives” are more common.

The well-understood task of scholars is not only to describe and analyze these concepts, but also to decipher and evaluate them. In the following article, AIA NRW Associate Fellow Juris Pupcenoks, Associate Professor of Political Science at Marist College, NY, USA, examines Russia's strategic narratives on Russian-Ukrainian relations and Russian interventions in Ukraine. Against the background of a comprehensive evaluation of government documents and official speeches over a long period of time, he examines how the narratives have evolved. In doing so, he makes an important contribution to a better understanding of the Russia-Ukraine war and prompts us to question why many in the West did not see some of the developments coming.

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**Abstract:** *This paper illustrates how studying the evolution of strategic narratives - stories that states tell in their diplomatic communication to convince publics at home and abroad to frame their views and actions - can provide valuable insights into diplomatic developments. Rhetorical shifts often precede political shifts and can help identify opportunities to influence foreign policy. By breaking down longitudinal strategic narratives into subperiods, it is possible to capture important nuances and identify patterns of continuity and change that might be overlooked if the narratives were analyzed as a single, continuous story. Empirically, this paper examines Russian rhetoric concerning its relations with Ukraine over a 16-year period (2004-2020) by qualitatively analyzing more than 600 diplomatic statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It argues that studying the evolution of identity narratives - how a state perceives itself and its interlocutors - enhances our understanding of the bilateral relationship between two actors in international relations. Over time, Russian identity narratives have shifted from portraying Russia as a good neighbor and regional hegemon to depicting it as an enemy of the Ukrainian regime, while Ukraine's portrayal has changed from a strategic partner to an international law violator and aggressor. This longitudinal approach allows for an analysis of how strategic narratives evolve over time, highlighting important nuances, continuity, and change.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on material published in the following article: Pucpenoks, Juris, Scott Fisher and Craig Klein, "Sentiment Shifts and a New Approach to Strategic Narratives Analysis: Russian Rhetoric on Ukraine," *Demokratizatsiya* 32:1 (Winter 2024): 85-112.

# 1. Introduction

In advancing their interests in global politics, countries often use a combination of hard and soft power to achieve their goals. One important soft power tool for states is diplomatic communication through which they seek to “win the story” as they frame issues, seek to advance their objectives and convince others of their rationale for actions in global affairs. In the process, countries often develop strategic narratives (SNs), or stories that are told through the speeches of key leaders and diplomatic communication more broadly. They aim to persuade other states as well as the public at home. Successful strategic narratives can become binding and can both shape and constrain countries’ actions. The ability to convince others and win the story is crucial to reach their objectives long-term on varied topics ranging from war to human rights to economics. However, such narratives of stories do not necessarily stay constant through time. Recognizing the subtle changes in narratives can help observers gain a better understanding of how a country’s position on an issue evolves. This awareness can also help identify political openings that present opportunities to influence policy.

During my six-month fellowship at the Academy of International Affairs NRW in 2023, I researched how Russian strategic narratives towards Ukraine evolved during a 16-year period between 2004 and 2020. My research suggests the utility of breaking up longitudinal SNs into smaller ones for purposes of identifying change in the narratives; this also enables identification of potential political openings that may show opportunities to shape policy.

This paper shows the utility of analyzing Russian rhetoric towards Ukraine by breaking up the pre- and post-2014 conflict onset watershed into several subperiods. It traces how Russian narratives of itself and Ukraine change through time—and outlines the main problems in each of the subperiods, what goals are promoted, and resolutions sought. This analysis elaborates on how Russian narratives change from projecting an identity of a good neighbor and regional hegemon to an enemy of the Ukrainian regime, while portrayals of Ukraine evolve from that of a strategic partner to an egregious international law violator and aggressor.

## 2. Strategic Narratives & Benefits of Breaking them Up into Subperiods

The rapidly growing literature on SNs bridges the fields of International Relations and communications by analyzing 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 (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 2-5). 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 and may or may not involve disinformation and falsehoods. When successful narratives are

created, they can become binding and either shape or put constraints on the actions of countries at home and abroad.

While some researchers (e.g., Feklyuina 2016) perceive SNs as a form of soft power, in this paper SNs are perceived to be a distinct, alternative approach from soft power (Stostek 2017: 380). Soft power predominately 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 (Nye 2014). But because SNs can employ deception and extreme framing, which Nye (2021: 203) sees as a tool of hard power, SNs are important for war and conflict studies, not just diplomatic or soft power research. SNs provide the story of why the given state is involved in the conflict, its position on the conflict, and the proposed resolution to the situation—which can involve the creation of a slightly different order (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 5: 182). 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" (Nye 2014: 20). The way a message is framed is often instrumental in determining its level of acceptance among audiences (Grillo & Pupcenoks 2017; Ji & Pupcenoks 2024).

Furthermore, breaking up larger narratives into subperiods allows for a better grasp of the evolution of such narratives. Schmitt (2018) argues that it can be helpful to identify sub-narratives nested into broader narratives. Sharp (2009) shows the utility of analyzing longitudinal US-China relations by breaking them up into critical junctions such as the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1979, the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, and China joining the WTO in 2001. Use of such subperiods allows a better understanding the dynamics of interactions among the actors involved, including their messaging.

### 3. Research into Russian Strategic Narratives on Ukraine

Analyses of Russia's SNs regarding Ukraine have investigated nuances, impact, and perception in Russia, Ukraine, and by the international community (Khaldarova & Pantti 2016; Pshenuchnykh 2019; Szostek 2017). As a whole, studies tend to be critical of Russian narratives and expose their inconsistencies and instrumental use (Pupcenoks & Seltzer 2021; Roselle 2017; Schmitt 2018). While Russia's SNs on Ukraine have been generally accepted at home, they have not been able to convince audiences abroad. Furthermore, deception and disinformation have played a major role in Russian SNs towards Ukraine following the eruption of the conflicts in 2014. It is also important to situate Russian SNs focusing on Ukraine within the broader Russian narratives regarding the international system and own identity (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017).

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 (2023: 120) 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." During the Cold War, Russian Federation's predecessor Soviet Union spread

fake news and even forged US governmental documents in an attempt to discredit the US. Information warfare continues to play an important role in contemporary Russian foreign policy as the Russian Information Security Doctrine calls for information aggression against geopolitical opponents—the West, the US, and NATO (Russian Federation 2016). For example, several Russian sources spread wildly deceptive, distorted, and fake information and images about Ukraine after 2014; and Russian information and propaganda campaigns during the Ukraine crisis of 2013-14 aimed to raise sympathy for Russia, distract attention, and delay effective reactions from both the Ukrainian government and NATO (Zhang & Zhou 2023).

Finally, to gain a better understanding of the given instance or situation analyzed, SN analyses should aim to see how interplay between the 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 identify narratives towards specific issues such as diplomatic relations with another country or a conflict (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 2017). Previous studies most prominently identify that the main Russian system narrative identifies an emergence of a multipolar world system (Schmitt 2018: 495; Hansson et al., 2021: 26; Miskimmon & O’Laughlin 2017: 112). Other narratives include Russian desire to receive greater recognition in the world by the West and greater cooperation with Europe (Miskimmon & O’Laughlin 2017: 112). Russian identity narratives emphasize Russian humiliation by the West after the Cold War (Schmitt 2018: 495), and an image of Russia as an exceptional country and that the Russian world is a separate civilization that Russia is championing (Hansson et al., 2021: 26). This paper shows how examining the evolution of Russian identity narratives of self and the other help with to gain a better understanding of Russian-Ukrainian relations through time.

## 4. Methods and Data

SNs can be disseminated through many tools and methods depending on the audience the government is speaking to. This analysis focuses on Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MOFA) English-language statements. This MOFA dataset (Fisher & Klein 2020) contains 21,372 English documents consisting of press releases, statements, comments and speeches by key Russian leaders, transcripts of government officials’ remarks to media’s questions, and minutes of official meetings. From this dataset, this research qualitatively analyzes 664 statements that include “Ukrain” in the headline. By analyzing official English-language Russian commentary this paper can assess government narratives, including those focused on specific topics or events, designed to signal and disseminate Russia’s SNs to the world.

Information, such as these narratives, is a critical foreign policy tool (Nye 2014). 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, while at the same time, the US adopted a

strategy of sharing declassified intelligence scripting Russia's playbook, disinformation campaign, and propaganda tactics. But these themes are not new to the current stage of conflict. Accusations of Ukrainian far-right extremism, Nazi sympathy and the need for humanitarian operations were part of the SNs propagated by MOFA as early as 2008.

## 5. Breaking up Longitudinal Narratives into Smaller Ones

To break up and study broader Russian strategic narratives, this research identifies several turning points or critical junctures in Russian-Ukrainian relations to create the sub-periods of the broader Russian-Ukrainian relationship (and the conflicts that erupted starting 2014; see Table 1 below). The formation of SNs is commonly assessed by analyzing select presidential speeches and interviews (Miskimmon et al., 2017), as well as other major statements by authorities, texts associated with public diplomacy and image management (Feklyunina 2016: 780). This research does this systematically by looking at diplomatic postings on the MOFA website as it is tasked with disseminating the Russian image and SNs globally. This paper looks into how Russia articulates the identity of self and Ukraine; how it portrays what are the most pressing issues, problems and goals in the bilateral relationship; and - after 2014 - how it portrays the nature and potential solutions of the conflicts in southeast Ukraine.

**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 – Dec. 31, 2019)

Russian identity sub-narratives (see Table 2) here 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 change from portraying itself as a good neighbor to 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 an aggressor who is non-compliant with its international law obligations.



**Table 2: Russian Identity Narratives in Interactions with Ukraine: Self & Ukraine**

Sub-Period	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 international law & human rights violator
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

***Pre-EuroMaidan: strategic partnership (June 1, 2004 – Nov. 20, 2013)***

During this subperiod, Russia portrayed itself as a good neighbor and regional hegemon, while characterizing Ukraine as a strategic partner. 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 Transnistria settlement ending hostilities in that region, and the future of the Russian Black Sea Fleet (which until the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol). Yet, great concern and opposition was expressed to potential Ukrainian bids to join NATO, which Russia perceived to be contrary to Russian security interests.

A temporary exception to the strategic partnership narrative was noticeable in 2008-09, when Russia castigated Ukraine due to 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 sympathy, of placing unreasonable restrictions on the use of Russian language, and of blacklisting Russian culture and foreign officials from its territory. Russia also castigated Ukraine for providing weapons to Georgia during the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. It accused Ukrainian radical nationalist groups of pro-Nazi celebrations and commemorations of the anniversary of a Ukrainian SS World War II Battalion. Similar accusations, harsher language, and tensions trailed off by 2010.

***EuroMaidan: the rise of Western-backed extremists (Nov. 21, 2013 – Feb 21, 2014)***

During EuroMaidan, Russia projected itself as a concerned neighbor while insisting that Ukraine was increasingly being dominated by Western-backed extremists. During this subperiod, Russia blamed the Western powers for enabling and encouraging the emergence of extremism in Ukraine, and consistently emphasized violence committed by allegedly 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.

During this subperiod, Russia tried to voice its grievances regarding unfavorable developments in Ukraine without alienating Ukrainian leaders and everyday people. Russia

insisted that Ukrainian media was being manipulated to portray Maidan events incorrectly and to promote anti-Russian views. Through such accusations, Russia was attempting to promote mistrust of both the international and Ukrainian media and trying to delegitimize media sources unsympathetic to the Russian government.

***Conflict Pre-Minsk 1 Protocol: grave humanitarian crisis (Feb. 22, 2014 – Sep. 12, 2015)***

During this subperiod, Russia portrayed itself as a humanitarian actor concerned with its own security while seeing Ukraine as a country undergoing a grave humanitarian crisis. Such rhetoric emphasized alleged ethnic cleansing and political violence taking place in Ukraine. There was no more mention of a strategic partnership between Russia and Ukraine.

Key articulated Russian goals included calls for greater Western involvement in conflict areas of Ukraine and de-escalation of tensions. Russia also threatened to retaliate if violence was to escalate by the Russian-Ukrainian border. As the conflict escalated, 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 protests and violence in south east Ukraine. It continued to blame the West for the rise in violence and non-Russian media for biased reporting. Above all else, Russian rhetoric outlined the nature of the perceived humanitarian crisis in Donbas and accused Ukraine of conducting atrocity crimes and aggression. Overall, the narrative showed a concentrated effort to portray the situation in Ukraine as a humanitarian tragedy and outline the perceived aggression and alleged international law violations of Ukraine.

***Minsk 1-Minsk 2 Protocol: egregious international law & human rights violations (Sep. 6, 2014 – Feb. 12, 2015)***

During this subperiod, Russia saw itself as an enemy of the Ukrainian ruling regime while portraying the said government to be an egregious international law and human rights violator. Russian rhetoric about the conflict now emphasized alleged atrocity crimes committed by the Ukrainian government. It consistently emphasized that neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic extremists are predominately to blame for the emergence of violence in Ukraine. These allegations expand on assertions already made in 2008 that dangerous Nazi sympathy was permeating Ukraine.

However, during the period Minsk 2 Protocol was negotiated, Russian messaging became more positive. During this time, even when the statements referred to ongoing violence in Ukraine, the criticism was comparatively muted. This illustrates how important diplomatic activities, such as ceasefire negotiations, can cause a shift in the language used in narratives even if the broader narratives themselves do not change. However, this shift did not last long. As the violence escalated in southeast Ukraine, MOFA abandoned its warmer rhetoric by late January 2015.

***Post-Minsk 2: Ukrainian aggression & Minsk non-compliance (Feb. 13, 2015 – Apr. 20, 2019)***

Russia continued to view itself as an enemy of the Ukrainian regime, while stridently portraying Ukraine as an aggressor who is non-compliant with the Minsk Protocols. This sub-period is characterized by a significant breakdown of Russia-Ukraine relations, as both nations blamed each other for the violence in Donbas.

At the same time, the over 200 statements analyzed from the during the four years of conflict in this subperiod were generally remarkably similar in emphasizing perceived Ukrainian military aggression and non-compliance with the Minsk Protocols, delineating humanitarian suffering in Donbas, denouncing critiques of Russian and East Ukrainian separatist actions, and highlighting the mistreatment of (and violence against) journalists. Starting in 2017, Russia was also increasingly vocal with its opposition to the rollback of the use of Russian language in Ukraine. Overall, the narrative towards Ukraine and Western powers remained largely unchanged and the narrative of perceived anti-Russian rhetoric, or “Russophobic campaigning”, became even more prevalent. An overarching aim of Russia during this subperiod was a resolution of the conflicts by achieving Ukrainian compliance with the Minsk Protocols.

***Post-Zelensky Election: Continued Ukrainian aggression & Minsk non-compliance (Apr. 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. At the same time, the tone of Russian messaging temporarily improved immediately after the Zelensky election—which may indicate political opening and Russia’s willingness to potentially be more collaborative with the new Ukrainian administration. Russia’s narrative above all else focused on emphasizing the importance of Ukraine’s compliance with the Protocols. MOFA statements continued to deny’s Russian role in escalating the conflict, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary. MOFA consistently denied accusations that it provided material support and was responsible for instigating violence in the Donbas.

## 6. Conclusion

Longitudinal SN analysis allows us to analyze changes through time. Breaking up longer narrative into subperiods can help with to identify important nuances in them. This paper shows how Russian self-identity narrative evolved from that of a good neighbor and a regional hegemon into an enemy of the Ukrainian regime—while the portrayal of Ukraine changed from a strategic partner to an international law violator and an aggressor. Such analysis also can bring attention to some minor, yet important, nuances of the narratives. For example, allegations of the rebirth of fascism, that later featured so prominently in Russian case for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Pupcenoks & Klein 2022), were present in Russia’s rhetoric long before the outbreak of the 2014 conflict.

Furthermore, international relations increasingly recognize that nation-states are not “black boxes”, and that leaders’ actions and choices are important. Even in enduring rivalries, leadership change can have tremendous effects on cooperation and bargaining (McGillivray & Smith 2008). This is also true of SNs. While on the surface, a country’s SNs may not noticeably change over time on the broad level rhetoric can improve during periods of leadership change (or during periods of negotiation). This can indicate political openings and willingness to reconsider policy. This dynamic can also be seen in other cases. For example, while American SNs and grand strategy towards China did not notably change from Trump to Biden administrations, the tone did. Biden’s rhetoric has been less hostile towards China, which makes diplomatic breakthroughs possible even when SNs remains consistent (Schepers 2020).

Finally, to successfully counter falsehoods in SNs, it is first important to understand how states develop and utilize information warfare strategies. During the Cold War, Western politicians commonly identified and addressed deception in Russian narratives and information operations abroad. Falsehoods in current Russian strategic narratives should be countered similarly to ensure that such stories are not taken at their face value and reported as objective facts in the media (also see Pupcenoks 2024).

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