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Department of Communication at Texas A&M University

GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS IN RUSSIAN MEDIA

Report to USEUCOM Strategic Multilayer Analysis

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Overview of Findings	7
Introduction	9
Methodological Approach	11
Study One: The Russian Economy—Analysis of Broadcast and Web-based News Presentations of the 2014-2015 Russian Economic Downturn.....	14
Study Two: Visions of Russian Geopolitical Engagement—Media Representations of Russian multilateral involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS Group, and Iranian Nuclear Negotiations	22
Study Three: Attitudes Towards NATO—An Analysis of Web-based News Presentations of NATO	29
Analysis of Russian Narratives on its Economy, Multilateral Engagement, and NATO	36
Conclusions and Recommendations	41
References	43

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Executive Summary

USEUCOM requested that the SMA team initiate an effort to provide the Command analytical capability to identify emerging Russian threats and opportunities in Eurasia. The study sought to examine future political, security, societal and economic trends to identify where U.S. interests are in cooperation or conflict with Russian interests, and in particular, identify leverage points when dealing with Russia in a “global context.” In order to provide insight into these questions, this report conducted a cross-platform media analysis of Russian language media to discover emerging geopolitical threats and opportunities. This joint study was completed by researchers at Texas A&M University, University of Alabama, and Mississippi State University using the Multi-media Monitoring System (M3S) at Texas A&M University.

Media, in numerous formats, has an inordinately large role in shaping and conditioning public opinion, as well as in social organization and mobilization. Recent media in Russia reflects a

deterioration of relations with the West, and seems to be contributing to a general distrust of the West among Russian citizens. This distrust is not just expressed in international politics, but in the everyday lives of many Russian citizens, leading to a palpable change in their relations with Westerners. This study sought to investigate the contours

of the Russian geopolitical worldview by a close analysis of a diverse array of media sources, to determine the key narratives driving perceptions of Russia’s current economic status, its role in geopolitical relations, and its rivalry with the West.



In order to better understand the dynamics of foreign policy decision-making by the leadership of Russia, this study analyzed Russian language media (broadcast and web) to understand key frames and cultural scripts that are likely to shape potential Russian political beliefs and attitudes. Three separate studies were conducted. The first focused on Russian media coverage of economic issues. The second examined Russian multilateral engagement. The third looked at Russian media portrayals of NATO. The studies covered several months of media reports from web-based news sites, journals, and commentary, as well as broadcasts from the state-owned broadcaster Rossiya 24. Altogether, the researchers monitored over 2,500 news items from fourteen different news sources.

Key Findings:

- Russian media narratives provide a glimpse into the contours of an emerging geopolitical worldview in Russia that could dramatically impact the international order.
- Overall, this worldview positions Russia as a rational and moderate geopolitical actor, standing against the corruption and recklessness of the “Euro-Atlantic” world; namely, the United States and the European Union.
- Russian policy is committed to deflecting the economic impact of Western isolation on the Russian economy.
- Russia is committed to the development of alternatives to global political and economic institutions that are dominated by the United States and the EU. Such alternatives include increased economic ties with China and other Central Asian nations, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the BRICS nations. Russia is actively attempting to cast doubt on the credibility and integrity of Western-dominated institutions.
- Russian propaganda comments, refutes, and covers an expansive range of issues, tracking U.S. policy, NATO and exploits dissension within U.S., EU, and NATO ranks, leaving the United States at a communication disadvantage.

Implications & Recommendations

- Although Russian media typically portrays the West as seeking to constrain Russian interests (as well as the interests of other developing nations), there are gaps within those narratives that provide openings for more meaningful engagement. Potential weaknesses within these narratives include the over-dependence on resource-based economics, discomfort among Russia's neighbors over Russian actions, and comparisons of contemporary Russian life with narratives of political openness.
- Blanket condemnation of Russian policy and Vladimir Putin are likely to fail, as they are interpreted primarily as indicative of an indiscriminate anti-Russia doctrine. U.S. messaging that seeks to strengthen groups within Russia that are seen as anti-Putin are unlikely.
- Within the Russian Federation itself, given the centralization of political discourse in Russian media, messages that merely critique or dismiss Russian messages are unlikely to break through dominant narratives anchored in historical and cultural experiences. Developing transcendent narratives that both acknowledge Russian concerns and perceptions but build upon common interests and aspirations are likely to have a greater impact than narratives that seek to isolate Putin from the Russian populace.
- Audiences exterior to the Russian Federation are more likely to be receptive to messages that highlight incoherence or lack of fidelity within Russian geopolitical narratives.
- Without clearly stated goals, U.S. involvement in countries surrounding Russia's borders allows for Russia to present U.S./NATO activity as a threat to their own national interests.



Overview of Findings

Study 1: Economic Analysis

- *Russian Power* - The narrative refers to the historical strength of Russia as a superpower, the strength of the Soviet Union, the natural and military resources of the nation, and the strength and resourcefulness of the Russian people. This narrative organizes information around the notion that Russia has always been an important global power and its people have always overcome adversity.
- *Global Crisis from ongoing Great Recession* - The narrative refers to the so-called Great Recession, a period of large-scale, global economic decline from late December 2007 until roughly June 2009. This narrative organizes information around the impacts of the Great Recession and the notion that its effects have presented problems that are still being felt across the globe. The narrative also reinforces the instability of the current global economic system.
- *Antagonist U.S.* - The narrative refers to the historical tensions and competitions between the United States and Russia, the United States as arrogant victors of the Cold War, and a nation with historical policies aimed at suppressing Russia and its people. The narrative reinforces that a central goal of the United States is to prevent Russia from being powerful and uses Cold War imagery of the United States as a nation willing to sacrifice morality in the name of capitalism.
- *Emerging Economies* - The narrative refers to the growing economic importance of nations of emerging economies such as China, India, Brazil, and others. The narrative organizes information around the rise in manufacturing, refinement, and economic growth of non-Western nations since the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- *Fragmentation of Europe* - The narrative refers to the historical difficulties of European nations in coming to collective agreement. The narrative organizes information around historical tensions within Europe, economic failures of the past, and the deference of Europe to the hegemonic United States in matters of global importance dating back to the Cold War.

Study 2: Russian Multilateral Engagement

- *Failing Russian Isolation* - Russian media depicts attempts to isolate Russia as not only failing, but also portraying Russia as driving the creation of new economic and political institutions that shift international power towards both the global South and Eurasia.
- *Strong Trade, Economic & Military Partnerships* - Russian media depicts a strong, independent Russia interested in developing itself into a Eurasian power partnering with China, its regional neighbors, and fellow BRICS nations, while eschewing the perceived hypocritical and weakening West.
- *Russia Drives Global Multipolarity* - Russian media suggests that we are in a multipolar world requiring new multipolar institutions which Russia has a fundamental role in shaping.

Study 3: Russian views of NATO

- *Aggressive NATO Advancement* - Russian media conducts close monitoring of large and miniscule NATO military movements and policy statements in the region enabling it to constantly and consistently label NATO actions in a negative light.
- *Exploitation of Dissension* - Russian media continually finds fissures within NATO by citing high-ranking officials and popular movements countering prevailing sentiment within the organization.
- *Turning the Tables* - Western attacks on Russia are complicated by Russian media regularly placing the blame on the West by labeling NATO and the United States as aggressors.
- *U.S. Dominance Leads to Chaos* - This predominant narrative argues that U.S. dominance has created chaos around the world. Whereas Russia is portrayed as a force seeking to bring peace and order but is regularly restricted by NATO.



Introduction

This study is designed to support the effort to understand the likely trajectory of political, economic, and military trends in the EUCOM's area of responsibility by closely examining a variety of sources in Russian media to determine the key geopolitical themes and narratives that influence Russian policy-making, as well as the assumptions and arguments that are largely taken for granted by large segments of Russian citizens. The analysis of media content is a recognized practice among numerous government agencies and private organizations for open source intelligence.

In the Russian case, the Russian regime has powerful tools at its disposal in order to craft narratives. Schenk (2012) claims the Russian state has long been heavy-handed with its distribution of media outlets, carefully crafting messages for public consumption as part of Putin's "vertical of power" project. Particularly important, and guarded by the state, are broadcast media, as most Russians get their news from television (Schenk, 2012). Simmons (2005) argues that the control of media by the Russian state, particularly television, is an aim by the Russian government to create a single, controlled, information space for citizens. Russia has also taken steps toward strengthening media laws preventing the spread of messages that might provoke social strife (CPJ, 2007), and consolidated the majority of broadcast and print media (roughly 90% of newspapers in Russia are subsidized by the government or owned by Putin loyalists) since 2005 (Schenk, 2012). Oates (2007) claims that all national TV channels are either directly or indirectly controlled by the state, and the major newspapers mainly reflect the views of the regime. Such control gives the regime the ability to reach virtually all of its citizenry with the narratives it creates. As such, this study engages a variety of media to determine trends and patterns that might provide a better understanding of key geopolitical themes and provide potential recommendations for messaging that enhances U.S. policy objectives.

This study uses the "narrative paradigm" as a theoretical framework for analysis of Russian controlled-media narratives. Within this framework, meaningful communication is a type of storytelling, and human beings experience and understand life as a series of ongoing narratives (Fisher, 1989). Effective narratives need to be coherent, that is, appear probable in comparison to other stories being told, and

possess fidelity by reflecting the audience's beliefs and experiences. Narrative analysis is a distinctive strategy for organizing data about the world and can help identify important geopolitical attitudes.

Although understanding today's news agenda will not predict Russia's policy over a two-decade timeline, media coverage, agendas, and priorities do reveal deeper components of Russian political culture, including assumptions, expectations, and worldviews. In addition, close analysis of media coverage can uncover cultural scripts (assumptions about values, priorities, and expectations) that impact foreign affairs. Although "policies" can change quite quickly, cultural scripts and political culture are more enduring. They can provide constraints on future behavior as we contextualize current policy positioning. Finally, media expresses "grand narratives" that capture the Russian national mood and or vision. An accurate assessment of such sentiments can help inform both the content and the manner in which EUCOM engages with the region.

Three studies were conducted by a joint team of researchers from Texas A&M University and Mississippi State University to address EUCOM's request to conduct analysis of open source Russian media to understand key frames and cultural scripts that are likely to frame potential geopolitical attitudes and narratives in the region. The first study looked at how the Russian broadcast and web media portrayed its recent economic downturn and Russia's future economic outlook. This topic was chosen because economic issues are highly sensitive, and can reveal fears, vulnerabilities, and a nation's sense of existential peace. In other words, it looks at Russian feelings regarding how they are doing at home. The second study compared Russian involvement in multilateral fora such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the association of BRICS nations, and the Iranian Nuclear Negotiations. These three topics were examined to uncover how Russian geopolitical engagement overall is discussed, and to determine the outlines of how Russia's geopolitical role is understood. Put in a different way, it looks at Russian sentiments regarding their international identify answering what role Russia, as a nation, is to play in the world. Finally, the third study analyzed the range of Russian attitudes on NATO, as NATO is often seen as the "other" or in competition with Russia. Analysis of language used to

portray NATO allows us to understand how Russian media depicts the pressures that NATO places on the Russian nation, answering questions regarding who is Russia’s rival. Taken together, the three studies reveal the contours of a geopolitical narrative of Russia and its role in the world. In examining these questions, researchers analyzed over 2,500 news items from fourteen different media sources.

Methodological Approach

A qualitative analysis of various Russian media sources was conducted using the Multi-media Monitoring System (M3S) at Texas A&M University. The M3S captures and translates broadcast and web stories into a searchable database. Researchers are able to parse through stories using search terms either in English or the native language of the media source. Texts for analysis are selected using the key terms to narrow the data set. Researchers are then able to categorically or thematically examine the data to the specific study’s research questions.

The M3S dataset contained broadcasts from the Russian news channel Rossiya 24, a state owned Russian-language news channel, as well as news content from numerous pro-government (including Izvestia, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Moskovskij Komsomolets, and Rossiyskaya Gazeta), oppositional (including Novaya Gazeta, Sobkorr, Kasparov, and Slon), and, stated, neutral (such as NEWSru, Moscow News, Kommersant, Chastny Korrespondent, and InoPressa) news websites.

For the first study examining media portrayals of the Russian economy, two key terms were identified (i.e. “Economic Crisis” and “Ruble Economy”) to narrow the contextual scope of the news stories analyzed. The terms were chosen because of their relevance to the goals of the project

Table 1. Media Sources

Broadcast News	Rossiya 24
Pro-government (Web)	Izvestia
	Komsomolskaya Pravda
	Moskovskij Komsomolets
	Rossiyskaya Gazeta
Oppositional (Web)	Novaya Gazeta
	Sobkorr
	Kasparov
	Slon
Neutral (Web)	NEWSru
	Moscow News
	Kommersant
	Chastny Korrespondent
	InoPressa

and the broad presence of those terms across the entirety of the archive. Using the key term “Economic Crisis,” 563 stories were analyzed from the broadcast database and 281 stories were analyzed from the web database. Using the key term “Ruble Economy,” 304 stories were analyzed from the broadcast database and 387 stories were analyzed from the web database. A total of 1,535 stories were analyzed for this project. Data from the broadcast was pulled over an entire year of the archives starting on April 7, 2014 and ending on April 15, 2015. Data from the web database was pulled from archives starting on February 13, 2015 and ending on May 22, 2015.

Table 2. Number of News Stories Analyzed

Study	Search Term/Idea	Russian Website Stories	Rossiya 24 Broadcast Clips	Total
Study 1. Russian Economy	<i>Economic Crisis</i>	281	563	844
	<i>Ruble Economy</i>	387	304	391
Study 2. Russian Multilateral Engagement	<i>Iran Nuclear</i>	241	120	361
	<i>SCO</i>	44	120	163
	<i>BRICS Bank</i>	73	223	296
Study 3. NATO	<i>NATO</i>	196	na	196

The second study compared Russian media descriptions of Moscow’s international engagement in multilateral organizations utilizing both Russian broadcast and web media. Three cases were chosen to highlight different aspects of Russian global relations. The BRICS Bank was selected to understand how Russia viewed its economic partnership with developing countries, specifically the global south. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was chosen to emphasize Russian security partnerships with its Asian neighbors, as well as to examine how the SCO is portrayed as a counterforce to NATO. The Iranian nuclear negotiations was selected to see how Russian media portrayed events where the United States and Russia were cooperating. Taken together, these three examples cover a range of regions and issues in which Russia has participated, and provide a strong sense of the key themes of Russian geopolitical narratives. Three key terms were used to narrow the scope of the analysis: (Iran nuclear, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and BRICS). Data was collected from April 24, 2015-July 24, 2015 for both the broadcast and web databases. A total of 358 web stories and 463 broadcast segments were analyzed.

The third study analyzing Russian attitudes towards NATO utilized the web database. One key term, “NATO,” was used to select stories for analysis containing NATO in the headline over a three-month period. In total, 196 stories from 13 different news outlets were analyzed. The publications with the largest amount of NATO coverage were Moskovskij Komsomolets (42 articles) and Rossiyskaya Gazeta (29 articles), two mainstream, pro-government sites.

Study One: The Russian Economy—Analysis of Broadcast and Web-based News Presentations of the 2014-2015 Russian Economic Downturn

Overview of Findings

The first study examined state-crafted public narratives concerning the Russian economy and the economic outlook of Russia during the 2014-2015 economic crisis. While certain indicators can be assessed with great accuracy (such as dramatic fluctuations in the ruble and overall contraction of the Russian economy), recognition of larger socio-political consequences of the Russian economic downturn remain a challenge. The need to understand how Russia controls narratives on its economy cannot be overstated, as economic crisis is one of the few issues that may motivate Russians toward political demonstration against the government. Analysis of the data revealed a larger ideological framework of economic resilience demonstrating how the Russian government is combating the current economic downturn and planning for the future. The resilience framework features various themes that are woven together by five dominant narratives found across story lines in Russian media. The dominant narratives found within these themes of coverage are:

- *Russian Power* - The narrative refers to the historical strength of Russia as a superpower, the strength of the Soviet Union, the natural and military resources of the nation, and the strength and resourcefulness of the Russian people. This narrative organizes information around the notion that Russia has always been an important global power and its people have always overcome adversity.
- *Global Crisis from ongoing Great Recession* - The narrative refers to the so-called Great Recession, a period of large-scale, global economic decline from late December 2007 until roughly June 2009. This narrative organizes information around the impacts of the Great Recession and the notion that its effects have presented problems that are still being felt across the globe. The narrative also reinforces the instability of the current global economic system.
- *Antagonist U.S.* - The narrative refers to the historical tensions and competitions between the United States and Russia, the United States as

arrogant victors of the Cold War, and a nation with historical policies aimed at suppressing Russia and its people. The narrative reinforces that a central goal of the United States is to prevent Russia from being powerful and uses Cold War imagery of the United States as a nation willing to sacrifice morality in the name of capitalism.

- *Emerging Economies* - The narrative refers to the growing economic importance of nations of emerging economies such as China, India, Brazil, and others. The narrative organizes information around the rise in manufacturing, refinement, and economic growth of non-Western nations since the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- *Fragmentation of Europe* - The narrative refers to the historical difficulties of European nations in coming to collective agreement. The narrative organizes information around historical tensions within Europe, economic failures of the past, and the deference of Europe to the hegemonic United States in matters of global importance dating back to the Cold War.

Description of Findings for Research Question 1: What are the dominant narratives created by Russian state-controlled media during the recent economic downturn?

The foremost theme associated with the first research question is that of a larger, global economic crisis that is impacting all economies (n=131). This theme weaves together dominant narratives to present Russia as but one of many actors struggling against a downturn in a larger, system-wide collapse. Russian economic hardships, in light of larger global economic crises, are shown as not nearly as catastrophic compared to other nations in the world. Russia, though experiencing an economic downturn, is not doing nearly as bad as others. Europe is portrayed as an actor that is particularly struggling to cope with contractions and disruptions to the larger global economic system.

The next prevalent theme is that of impacts and implications of U.S.-European sanctions and Russian economic downturn on businesses and general global financial system (n=104). This theme uses dominant narratives to present Russia as central to a functioning global economic system and the miscalculations of the West. While

Russia is shown as a nation with too strong a people and too many resources to fail, the immediate effects of Russia's economic downturn are shown as devastating to European businesses and economies. A Russian economic downturn means that other nations suffer, that global markets are threatened without Russia as a stabilizing force that European industries need Russian customers, and that Europeans need Russian investment and trade.

The third and final theme for the first research question is that of political impacts of the economic downturn (n=73). Dominant narratives

are used to present Russia as actively seeking new partnerships with other nations. Russia is shown advancing relations with Asia (especially China), BRICS, and strengthening trade agreements with Eurasian Economic Union nations. The Russian government is presented as proactively responding to the downturn by seeking new alliances with emerging economic powers. Russia is shown as energetically engaging with, and helping to shape, a new world economic power with emerging nations, particularly China, while the United States and Europe falter. The

“Russia is shown as energetically engaging with, and helping to shape, a new world economic power with emerging nations, particularly China, while the United States and Europe falter.”

political impacts of the economic downturn are shown as prompting Russia to initiate new political partnerships in regions that were traditionally secondary to Europe.

These new partnerships are presented as important, not because of Russia's desperation, but because these emerging economies will form a new world economic order. There is also a recurring mention that Russian public opinion has consolidated in favor of Vladimir Putin in the face of economic challenges.

Description of Findings for Research Question 2: What are the dominant narratives created by Russian state-controlled media surrounding its economic future and outlook?

A key theme pertaining to the second research question is that of the anti-crisis kick-start plan (n=107). The dominant narratives within this theme were used to draw focus on a very specific program aimed at directing the Russian economy through the

immediate downturn, toward prosperity. The stories regarding this program show the Russian government making huge investments into the nation's infrastructure in order to ensure Russia will overcome the economic downturn. The sheer monetary volume the Russian government is committing to move the country forward is mentioned frequently. Everything from protecting specific businesses and industries through government subsidies, altering pension program payouts, providing affordable credit lines to businesses and potential startups, and the need to expand existing industries into new markets are mentioned as components of the plan that the Russian government is enacting to better the economic prosperity of Russia in the future. The Anti-Crisis plan, valued at 2.6 trillion rubles, is highly touted.

An interesting, and frequently occurring, theme related to the second research question was that of the presentation of the United States and its allies (n=101). The dominant narratives within this theme were used in stories showing the United States as that of a warmonger determined to keep its position of hegemony at all costs. Europe is shown as a subservient actor to a demanding United States. Europe is also presented as caught in the middle of sanctions against Russia that most of its countries do not want, as having a weak currency, massive external debts, and as unwilling/unable to go against the authority of the United States. The United States is portrayed as a determined actor against Russia using NATO as a cover organization for war in the Middle East and aggression against Russia. The stories present U.S. attempts to turn Europe against Russia to gain leverage on energy supply. The United States is also shown as needing military conflict to bolster its weak economy, and attempting to force Russia into a spending war over Ukraine. Overall, stories argued that the United States wants to limit the economic power of Russia in the future and to save its own relevancy. The United States recognizes it has a bleak economic outlook, and is willing to drag Europe down with it in its attempt to stifle Russian growth and maintain the status quo.

The media coverage presents a strong and negative theme of Western involvement in the satellite regions of the former USSR (n=87). What differentiates the discussion between the presentation of the United States and its allies and Western involvement in former satellite areas is that the former is based on a desperate U.S. attempt to

maintain the status quo in the future world economy at the expense of Europe. The latter depicts the United States and Europe acting cooperatively in an attempt to expand their struggling economies. The news stories in this theme present the United States and Europe as requiring raw material and cheap labor to advance their economies. These nations act in concert to expand trade pacts with former Soviet satellite members. The West is shown as using false promises to lure in nations who were once strong trading partners with Russia. The United States and Europe then exploit these countries for raw materials and labor in order to prop up their own failing economic system.

The final recurring theme of the second research question is that of Russia's economic plans for the long term and immediate future (n=58). This discourse is similar to the political impacts of the economic downturn, addressed in the first research question. The dominant narratives within this categorical theme were used in stories presenting Russia as needing to maintain, and further develop, an open economic market with emerging economies. Russia is presented as an actor who, through partnerships with other emerging economic powers, can rise to control the global economy of the future. The main emphasis is on future economic development involving Russian participation in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the advancement of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and cooperation with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on free trade agreements and sharing of energy.

Discussion on Findings for Study 1

The results of the analysis show that Russian state-controlled media constructed narratives during the 2014-2015 economic crisis that helped to weave an ideological framework of resilience to its citizens, showing the causes for the downturn and future trajectory for the nation. The resilience framework created through these dominant narratives show citizens the adaptations of the Russian regime in the face of economic crisis. The resilience framework also allows Russian citizens to see paths of personal development despite difficult external conditions in protected industry and emerging markets. The Russian state is able to make a case for system resilience to its

population by the manufacturing of dominant narratives across various themes that go uncontested due to lack of oppositional media.

Taken together, these dominant narratives present a larger framework of a resilient Russian system to Russian citizens. A global economic crisis exists that has been caused both by U.S. and EU economic failures and by intentional policies by the United States to keep Russia marginalized. However, Russia is strong enough, has enough resources, and is proactive enough to overcome the economic obstacles placed in its way and can help create a new global economic order. The state-controlled media



relies on dominant narratives to make this framework work so that citizens understand economic actions taken by the state in a way that will prevent political mobilization. The framework leans on Russia's historical strength as a superpower nation, the lingering impacts of the Great Recession of 2008-2009, historical animosity with the United States, and a fractured, ineffective Europe. It also relies on the East as a place of

emerging economic dominance.

The immediate hardships facing Russian citizens are tied to the Great Recession and an antagonistic United States, giving citizens two justifications for the economic decline. The first, the Great Recession, is useful because it shows citizens that economic decline is widespread and completely out of the hands of the state. The second, the antagonistic United States, gives citizens a known rival that is both self-serving and dedicated to keeping Russia and its people down. Large amounts of news coverage show the continued ripples of the Great Recession and paint the United States as culpable in the recession.

Another key component in the ideological framework concerns Europe. By presenting Europe as broken, economically downtrodden, and subservient to the United States, Russian state media gives its citizens yet another essential element: an explanation as to why Europe is going along with the sanctions and not assisting Russia. The media coverage consistently portrays Europe as broken and compliant with the demands of the United States. Many Russian citizens have long desired a “European” identity and have built increasingly close relations to Europe, both economically and culturally, following the close of the Cold War. Thus, the media points to disunity among European nations about the sanctions against Russia, how the sanctions harm European nations, and the conundrum Europe finds itself in being tied to the United States and wedged against Russia.

The final components of the framework offer hope and give direction for the future. Crucial to showing Russia’s future economic trajectory and ability to adapt to change are the emerging economies of a new world economic order with which Russia is seeking alliance and trade. These alliances are tangible evidence of the Russian state’s commitment to bring back economic prosperity to the country, and even displace the United States in an economic revolution. Media narratives argue that the Russian state is flexible, and it too can link itself (and even lead in the case of the Eurasian Economic Union) with rising economic partnerships like BRICS as Europe and the United States fade. The final component to the framework is that of showing Russia’s strong history and ability to survive. This component of resilience is the one that links state resilience to citizen resilience, and ultimately gives faith in system resilience. Russian citizens, with their government, can and will overcome the economic decline because they have done it before. This piece of the framework allows citizens to place their faith in the government, and its plans, and unites the two moving forward. It is a deeply rooted narrative that evokes a sense of identity that stretches through tsars, world wars, and the expanses of the Soviet Empire. Citizens are reminded that Russia always will be a world power, and that its people know how to overcome crisis.

The ideological framework created through these dominant narratives, woven through the above-mentioned themes, serves to create an image of overall system resilience. The framework has also, thus far, served to secure public opinion around Vladimir

Putin and his regime, even during a time of severe economic contraction. The media present clear story lines of a Russian government attempting to overcome the crisis along with its people. The media give a clear enemy in the United States and explains their economic hardships in light of global ones. The media also offer hope, both in the historic power of Russian solidarity and in new actors with emerging economic influence that Russia can partner with. A dying model of power is shown as being replaced with a new one; one that Russia will actively help to structure and lead toward a prosperous future.

These resilience narratives serve as the foundation for a public dialogue around why the crisis is happening, who the actors are, what the Russian government is doing to overcome, and how the crisis will impact citizens gives a clear trajectory going forward. Irrespective of any truth involved in these narratives, the state allows for little competition from other sources, and thus manufactures narratives of a resilient system to its citizens.

However, it remains to be seen if this ideological framework, constructed from these narratives, can be maintained through a prolonged period of economic downturn. If the economic crisis wears on indefinitely, it is critically important to monitor whether the state ceases to be able to weave these narratives coherently across themes related to the economy, and where alternative narratives might come from that show the state as anything other than resilient. The increased crackdowns on oppositional media and political activists gives a sense that such control may well be on a knife's edge for the state. As recent history has shown, when authoritarian regimes lose control of the narrative, collapse can occur at devastating speed.

Study Two: Visions of Russian Geopolitical Engagement—Media Representations of Russian multilateral involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS Group, and Iranian Nuclear Negotiations

Overview of Findings

The second study examined Russian media presentations of its multilateral involvement. Preferences or disdain towards specific international organizations can help reveal a country's sense of its friends or foes and attitudes towards the current international order. Analysis revealed three overarching narratives portrayed within the Russian media in discussion of Russia's role working with multilateral organizations and negotiations. These narratives depict a world of weakening U.S. power and the moral decline of Western—backed institutions, whereas Russia is shown as a strong, active state that is helping to shape new fora for global cooperation. The dominant narratives found within these themes of coverage are:

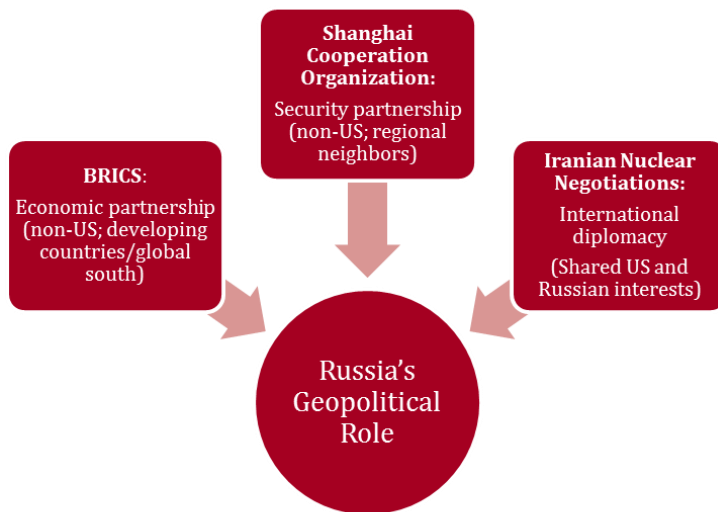
- *Failing Attempts to Isolate Russia*- Russian media depicts attempts to isolate Russia as not only failing, but also portray Russia as driving the creation of new economic and political institutions that shift international power towards both the global South and Eurasia.
- *Strong Trade, Economic & Military Partnerships* - Russian media depicts a strong, independent Russia interested in developing itself into a Eurasian power partnering with China, its regional neighbors, and fellow BRICS nations, while eschewing the perceived hypocritical and weakening West.
- *Russia Drives Global Multipolarity* - Russian media suggests that we are in a multipolar world requiring new multipolar institutions which Russia has a fundamental role in shaping.

Description of Findings

Three cases were chosen to highlight different aspects of Russian global relations. The BRICS Bank was selected to understand how Russia viewed its economic partnership with developing countries, specifically the global South. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was chosen to emphasize Russian security partnerships with its Asian neighbors, as well as to examine how the SCO is portrayed as a counterforce to NATO.

The Iranian nuclear negotiations were selected to see how Russian media portrayed events where the United States and Russia were cooperating.

Across the three cases was an emphasis on the growing capabilities of non-Western countries and the perceived corruption of Western institutions, and the emerging global order. For instance, during discussions of the BRICS bank, Western institutions such as the IMF and World Bank were criticized as blackmailing other countries,ⁱ



acting as loan sharks,ⁱⁱ and found to be overall inconsistent and holding double standardsⁱⁱⁱ. These institutions, in addition to the United Nations, were viewed as anachronistic due to their dominance by Western countries in in spite of other developing countries' recent economic growth (specifically BRICS nations). In a segment on Rossiya 24, one report stated that “[BRICS] has become a symbol [of the] shift[ing] balance

of power in the twenty-first century... that can deny [the West] even financial hegemony” by “the [BRICS] creat[ing] its own new bank [as a] response to the politicized IMF now literally blackmail[ing] all”^{iv}. An additional benefit of the BRICS Bank was its potential limitation of “the impact of the United States of America”^v. The U.S. led order was viewed as self-serving, therefore needing revision and inclusion of new voices such as the BRICS nations.

Within coverage of the SCO was a narrative which articulated the cooperation of members as one means to build a multipolar world order. Articles described SCO members as laying the groundwork for a new world order to prevent domination from a single country by bringing together the two largest continental powers (China and Russia) in creating a new geopolitical way and vision. Justification of the organization itself was premised on the need for multiple countries to coordinate their efforts in

preventing extremism, terrorism, black-markets, and corruption in addition to economic integration. Surrounding this discourse was the claim that today's problems can no longer be solved by one country. In addition to reaffirming the principals upon which the SCO was founded—cooperation against terrorism, separatism, and extremism—was a move to expand SCO integration into the economic realm. This included enhancing transportation infrastructure, energy, and financial security in working towards integrating projects within the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road initiative. The push for greater technical and economic integration was so significant it was repeated more often than worries about the traditional challenges the SCO was created to meet, those of terrorism, extremism, and separatism.

Within the context of the Iranian nuclear negotiations, the eclipse of a unipolar world is stressed primarily through criticism over U.S.—backed sanctions while diplomacy and multilateralism is celebrated. Overall, the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program were placed against a backdrop of multilateral cooperation and negotiation. While the United States was reported as the most active participant in the negotiations with Iran, news and broadcast reports frequently mentioned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's participation and usefulness throughout the process. The United States was central to reaching an agreement, but more so viewed as simply locked in a battle of concessions with Iran^{vi}. Russia's approach was portrayed as diplomatically superior, noting that Iran had met the "requirements of the world community" with the negotiation process being "compliant" with Russia's "Principles of reciprocity" and overall foreign policy concept^{vii}. When discussing how the nuclear deal would be verified, Russian authorities reported that "the Russian side will take an active part in all phases of the arrangements...and participate in the practical work". Specifically, Russia was cited as playing an important role in the disposal of Iran's enriched uranium supplies^{viii}.

In addition to Russia's role in the negotiations, news reports expressed support for multilateralism, while eschewing unilateral actions. Russian reports frequently cited Moscow's expectations for reciprocal treatment during negotiations suggesting greater emphasis on compromise. Further support for Russia's adulation towards multilateral diplomacy is evident by its rhetoric after the announcement of a deal; Russian media

praised the deal by hailing it as an “historic agreement”^{ix} where diplomacy was found to be “victorious” and reflecting an optimistic spirit of cooperation^x. While there was significant support of the negotiations during the lead up to an agreement, once it was clear that a deal would be made, the media began highlighting and criticizing the sanctions plan proposed by the United States. Russian attitudes towards international diplomacy stressed multilateralism over unilateralism.

Analysis of the SCO and BRICS emphasized non-Western countries as the source for the promotion of an alternative world order, while the Iranian nuclear negotiations data only indirectly supported this finding. Within the discussion of the BRICS bank, consistent emphasis was placed on the magnitudes of both the populations and economies of the BRICS countries. In this sense the BRICS nations were viewed as the drivers of future growth in the world. For instance, during the Ufa Summit, speakers boasted that the BRICS nations made up nearly one-third of the world’s GDP and trade flows—up 70 percent from 2009,^{xi} while others celebrated the growth in foreign direct investment from previous years^{xii}. Perhaps more tellingly was one speaker’s equating the BRICS’ combined GDP to that of the United States^{xiii}, suggesting the power and influence of the BRICS equaled that of the United States. With their increasing influence came calls for the BRICS nations to develop new institutions due to the current ones not only being corrupt and abusive, but also failing to consider their voices. Examples of these new institutions included the BRICS development bank and suggestions for an alternative rating system for countries’ finances^{xiv}. Rossiya 24 reported that this alternative financial rating system “would constitute a healthy competition [with] Moody’s standards”^{xv}.

“Perhaps more tellingly was one speaker’s equating the BRICS’ combined GDP to that of the United States, suggesting the power and influence of the BRICS equaled that of the United States.”

Interestingly, BRICS nations’ values extended beyond economics to the security realm with the BRICS countries also calling for greater security cooperation. For instance, as one article explained, the “[BRICS] countries are [a] very important force in the development [of] multipolarization...and [BRICS] are new to strengthen the spirit to

join together...to support the establishment of security”^{xvi}. Specific security issues one Russian leader listed were the “global nature of problems faced by all [BRICS countries such] as terrorism, international organized crime, drugs, and [the] threat of mass destruction”^{xvii}. The BRICS nations therefore represented not only an important and influential economic coalition, but also a group with the potential to support and strengthen their collective security inside and outside the confines of the current international fora.

Coverage of the SCO placed significant discussion on enlarging the SCO with countries such as Iran wanting to join in addition to Pakistan and India’s recent acceptance into the organization. The enlargement of the SCO demonstrated that not only was membership in the SCO desirable, but also provided a viable, alternative multilateral organization for non-Western countries to discuss and support each other’s economic and security related interests. With the additions of Pakistan and India into the SCO, broadcast and web reports boasted about the population and economic clout the SCO now included. For instance, the summit was framed as bringing together “the leaders of...a quarter of the world under one roof” designed to talk about the “historic vision and future of their nations and the entire world”^{xviii}. The value of SCO member cooperation and its emergence as a new force in the global order is depicted as arising from the political and economic integration that these population-dense, emerging economies bring to the table in creating a larger Eurasian economic bloc. Iran in particular was depicted as interested in joining the SCO because it provided a mechanism “to provide for their stability and security without interference by external [powers]”^{xix}. Thus, the SCO is seen as an alternative to the West as a forum for not just security related issues, but also major economic investment and trade.

While the Iranian nuclear negotiations do not directly discuss the formation of a new world order—in part because the negotiations took place within the current one—it still manages to criticize U.S. and EU influence representing unilateral action against others while celebrating the spirit of multilateralism. Despite the negotiations viewed as a success, the United States did not receive praise for their conclusion. In fact, U.S. presidential hopefuls were reported in the Russian media as advancing their own

narrow political purposes in criticism of the agreement and calling for continued sanctions. As discussed earlier, multilateral diplomacy was celebrated. Once the agreement was announced, discussion quickly turned to the economic impact of the lifting of sanctions and what that meant for the Russian economy, specifically the price of oil, military arms sales from Russia to Iran, and the promise of Russian economic growth as the result of trade with Iran. The United States and EU were chastised for considering further “illegal” sanctions which represented harmful, “unilateral” action. This discussion portrays Russia as the champion of multilateralism and the West as self-interested, imposing its will unilaterally for private gain.

A final pattern emerged whereby Russia was viewed as driving the creation of these new economic and political institutions thereby shifting power within the international community towards both the global South and Eurasia in support of a more multipolar world. This is evident with Russia hosting both the BRICS and SCO summit in Ufa. Russia’s hosting of this international fora stood in contrast to Western attempts to isolate it. Coverage of the summits included many Russian speakers advocating for greater integration of BRICS and SCO member nations as an alternative to integration with the West. In the background of these negotiations was the ongoing

“Russia was viewed as driving the creation of these new economic and political institutions thereby shifting power within the international community towards both the global South and Eurasia in support of a more multipolar world.”

deterioration of Russian-EU and Russian-U.S. relations, including the passage of sanctions against Russia for its activities in Ukraine. One speech explained that “the war being waged against us and historic West Russia [are] manifestations of...the sanctions policy. But I want to emphasize that the sanctions ... are doomed to failure. We are...dealing with the new reality...We are looking for alternative options for cooperation. [The] BRICS New Bank...are intended to help Russia and all other BRICS countries [to] confront the illegal, unlawful...pressure [from the West]”^{xx}.

Russian leaders were the primary speakers promoting the expansion of both economic and military ties among SCO and BRICS nations blurring the boundaries between economic and security partnerships in favor of broader, more integrated relations with non-Western nations. Within this was the emphasis of Russia's development and investment projects in the Eurasian region including hydroelectric projects with India^{xxi} and the broader goal of "facilitate[ing] trade with China"^{xxii}. Within this discussion was the determination to increase infrastructure and create a new Silk Road between Russia and China in particular, but more generally in support of developing a stronger, more integrated Eurasian region. The Silk Road initiative and Eurasian Economic Union were the two most frequently lauded mechanisms to jump start investment and integration in the region.

The Iranian nuclear negotiations portrayed an active Russia poised to prosper from the agreement. The success of the Iranian nuclear negotiations demonstrated two things: first, Russian diplomats demonstrated their worth as they actively participated and were vital to the "monitoring [of] the atomic industry"^{xxiii} in addition to handling Iran's enriched uranium; second, with the lifting of sanctions, Russia was poised to prosper economically through increased ties with Iran.

Taken together, Russian media depicts a strong, independent Russia interested in developing itself into a Eurasian power partnering with China, its regional neighbors, and fellow BRICS nations, while eschewing the perceived hypocritical and weakening West. Ultimately, Russian media suggests that we are in a multipolar world requiring new multipolar institutions which Russia has a fundamental role in shaping.

Study Three: Attitudes Towards NATO—An Analysis of Web-based News Presentations of NATO

Overview of Findings

The final study turned to Russian media's depiction of NATO. While the first study examined how Russians were doing at home and the second study focused on Russian preferences regarding international cooperation, the final study aimed to understand how Russia views its rival, NATO. Analysis of Russian media's NATO discourse revealed three thematic frames and one narrative. The three thematic frames function to cast doubt on U.S. and NATO actions while the narrative attributes the world's chaos as a symptom of U.S. dominance. These thematic frames and narrative are:

- *Aggressive NATO Advancement* - Russian media conducts close monitoring of large and miniscule NATO military movements and policy statements in the region enabling it to constantly and consistently label NATO actions in a negative light.
- *Exploitation of Dissension* - Russian media continually finds fissures within NATO by citing high-ranking officials and popular movements countering prevailing sentiment within the organization.
- *Turning the Tables* - Western attacks on Russia are complicated by Russian media regularly placing the blame on the West by labeling NATO and the United States as aggressors.
- *U.S. Dominance Leads to Chaos* - This predominant narrative argues that U.S. dominance has created chaos around the world. Whereas Russia is portrayed as a force seeking to bring peace and order, it is regularly restricted by NATO.

Description of Findings

Russian media has complicated Western narratives about Russia by placing the West as the true transgressor in each of the charges laid at Russia's door. By challenging (in detail) any claim made by the West, Russian media diminished the clarity of Western messaging within the Russian media environment and placed themselves in stark contrast to NATO and the United States on each point. Russian media described the United States and NATO as increasing in overt aggressive action, waging an extensive

propaganda war against the Russian Federation, and of violating international law in acts of power projection in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

In the realm of aggression, Russian media consistently described NATO and the United States as the primary aggressors in both historic and present-day geopolitics. Editorials noted hypocrisy in Western claims of Russian aggression by pointing out instances in history and in the present-day in which NATO displayed considerable aggression, even describing NATO leadership as “warlords”^{xxiv}. Russian media frequently pointed out hypocrisy in Western perspectives, noting that while American media described Russia’s exercises in the Ukraine as provocative, large-scale NATO exercises in the Black Sea were not deemed so. They also described NATO as having a history of aggression across the region inspired by U.S. leadership. The United States was repeatedly named as a force of aggression in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East.

Russian media consistently described NATO and the United States as prime offenders in an information war waged against Russia. The war was characterized as primarily focused on the Russian intervention in Syria, and was increasing: “other influential leaders in some media and the blogosphere had recently increased slanderous attacks”^{xxv}. Russian media alleged the “Anglophone media” consistently made “flagrant allegations” concerning Russian activity in resisting ISIL^{xxvi}. Some Russian entities, such as “[t]he Ministry of Defense...demanded from several NATO countries explanations [on] publications in the Western media of the Russian Aviation attacks on the Syrian military” requesting “formal justification [of] substantive statements”^{xxvii}. Russia was consistently portrayed as noble and capable in its pursuit of stability in Syria, and the



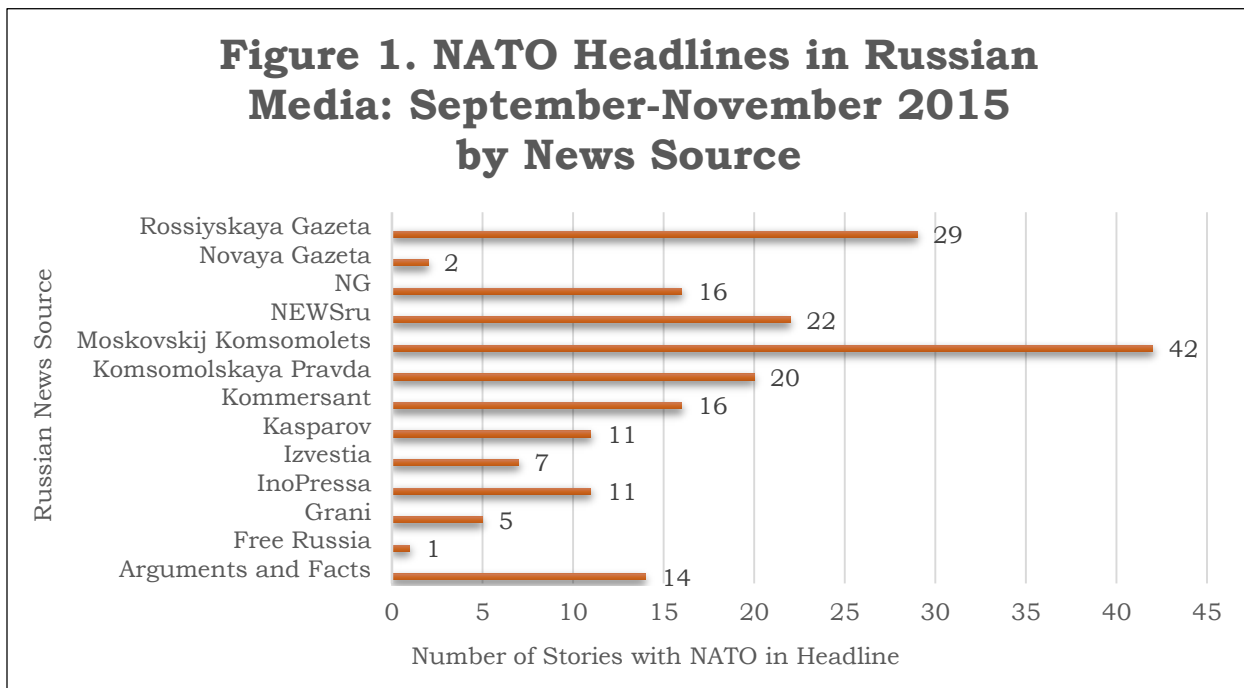
victim of suspicion and skepticism in Western media. Russian media closely monitored all discussions of the U.S. response to Russia in Congress and the Pentagon and viewed Senate hearings on strengthening response to Russia as proof of the origins of false Western media narratives against Russia. Throughout Russia maintained a narrative of victimhood denying any action taken “resulted in the loss of civilian” lives and expressed frustration that the “information war” continued “without the slightest evidence” proving Russian guilt^{xxviii}.

Russian media countered the charge of state violation of international law by citing examples of Russia’s upholding international law. At the same time, they also pointed out various NATO indiscretions and alleged violations of international law. In the area of air defense zones, Russian media highlighted “that all flights by air force Russia met on neutral waters in strict accordance with international rules of air”^{xxix}. Articles expressed frustration at NATO member countries’ assumptions of Russian aggression when Russia conducts flights over undisputed zones that are not “threatening or destabilizing”^{xxx}. Russia also noted hypocrisy that NATO bombing in Libya had not been investigated by the International Criminal Court: “Russia in UN requires investigate the IG and NATO in Libya...Criminal Court should deal with all committed during the conflict in including fighters terrorist groups and also not forget the impact bombing NATO”^{xxxi}.

Russian media conducted close monitoring of NATO military movements and policy statements in the region. Over the course of 90 days of sampling, 49 headlines from 10 news outlets described specific movements¹ within NATO, ranging from opening of NATO offices in Eastern Europe, to the admission of new states into NATO, field exercises, and even the delivery of military equipment. The level of specificity and detail given to NATO activities throughout Eastern Europe and on the border of Russia indicate that this is an issue with which the Russian media apparatus is deeply focused. In particular, NATO activity in Ukraine was closely chronicled and criticized as aggressive. In addition, the admission of Montenegro into NATO was a move strongly opposed by Russia and closely followed in Russian media. NATO expansion in

¹ “Specific movements” were defined as news coverage about specific NATO activities, not general editorials or opinion pieces about NATO policy.

Poland and Hungary was also followed closely. Russian media argued that expansion in these spaces and along the border of Russia was unwanted both by residents within these countries as well as by Russia. As a result, various outlets argued that corresponding acts of strengthening Russian military defenses in those areas should not be portrayed as the acts of a regional aggressor. Within the total dataset, pro-government outlets (Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Moskovskij Komsomolets) spent considerably more time monitoring NATO than other Russian media outlets (see Figure 1 Below).



Russian media continually attempted to create fissures within NATO and other Western entities by citing high-ranking officials and popular movements that countered prevailing sentiment within the organization. Articles consistently quoted influential members of the NATO establishment, the U.S. military or Congressional establishment, thinkers in academe or other professions who questioned NATO activity and global sentiment of Russia as the aggressor against the benevolent West. Whether NATO’s general policy towards Russia was being criticized, or specific exercises, Russian media found disagreement within the establishment and revealed division in the leadership and direction of the entity. For example, statements from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg that portrayed a desire for softening

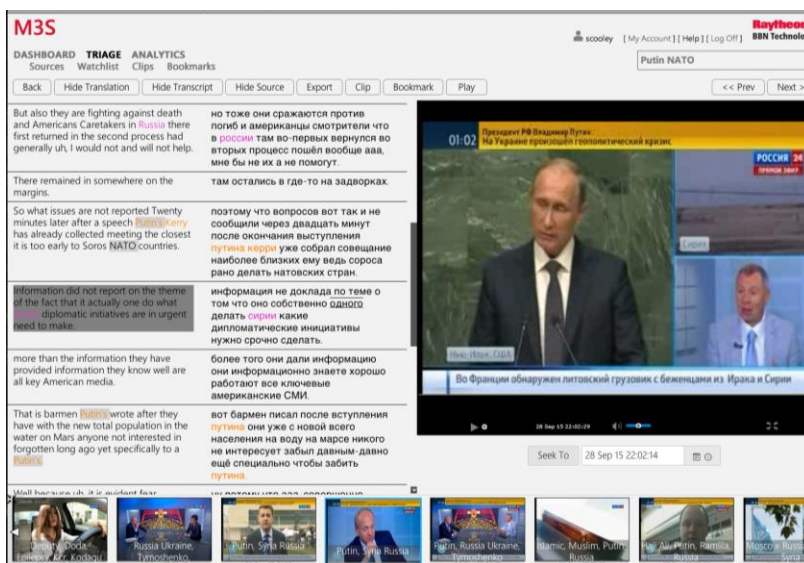
relations with Russia were often featured in articles, such as his statement that “NATO [is] not interested in a new Cold War” with Russia^{xxxii}. Other NATO officials were also quoted, such as NATO Deputy Secretary General Vershbow, who did “not want unnecessary deterioration” in relations with Russian Federation^{xxxiii}. In countries in which NATO is increasing military exercises or presence, Russian media outlets covered movements within those populations to push NATO out, such as Spanish protesters decrying NATO exercises^{xxxiv} or citizens of Finland who overwhelmingly rejected membership in the military unit of NATO^{xxxv}. Other state officials that were perceived to resist the influence of NATO were also quoted, such as Armenian Speaker of the Federation Council Valentina Matvienko: “time-tested relations [with] Russia and Armenia [will] not be influenced....time-tested age-old ties of brotherhood and mutual understanding between the Russian and Armenian peoples cannot be...influenced by external...they remain the same”^{xxxvi}.

Despite inherent worry about NATO, Russian media still described Russian military capability as superior to U.S. and NATO capabilities. This was likely to help support the narrative of a strong Russia. Articles quoted concerns from military commanders of rising Russian military capacity, such as NATO Lieutenant General Hans Domrose’s concerns about the “rising proficiency of the Russian army”^{xxxvii}. Articles described in specific terms how NATO armor and equipment is “behind us”, including descriptions of automatic weaponry and guided missiles on Russian armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles compared to 12.7 mm machine guns on NATO vehicles^{xxxviii}. Articles also consistently lauded Russia’s approach to combating ISIL as superior to European and American attempts at solving the crisis.

Another predominant narrative was the argument that U.S. dominance has created chaos around the world. Various editorials and articles argued that U.S. leadership of NATO and in other regions have fostered intractable conflicts that various parts of the globe are still seeking to emerge from. The Russian stance on Ukraine is that it is a European and Western attempt to “wrest Ukraine from” Moscow’s “orbit...and turn it into a [Western] stronghold”. Russian media held that the other goal was to increase EU and NATO presence in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Multiple articles held that the United States should refrain from attempts at domination, a policy that was adopted

after September 11th, when “ruling elites in Washington believed...the best way to protect [the United States was] dominance...[T]hey had relied on the military and other instruments diplomacy to overthrow unfriendly regimes...[and] this strategy has led to chain disasters and [is] the main reason [for] growing instability in the Middle East”^{xxxix}.

Finally, Russia was portrayed as a force seeking to bring peace and order but was consistently restricted by NATO. In their approach to bringing regional stability, Russian media held that they lacked support from the organizations that mattered, including both NATO and the Arab League: “Russia call[ed] for a unified front against [ISIL but] ... NATO and the League of Arab” did not support it. They go on to criticize U.S. insistence on Assad’s removal and simultaneous failure to acknowledge Russia’s approach to combating terrorism as “they do not want Russia [to be] see[n as] a major world” power^{xl}. Articles sampled also described Russian desire to provide humanitarian assistance in Syria hindered by undue restrictions as a result of NATO’s influence. For example, Bulgaria’s denial of Russian civilian aircrafts on humanitarian trips to Syria was framed as influenced by pressure from Washington and NATO^{xli}.



Overall, these findings indicate a Russian state worried about growing NATO presence in Eastern Europe. The framing of NATO and Western institutions as militarily aggressive, engaged in a propaganda war against Russia, and in violation of multiple international laws indicates

a Russian leadership unlikely to seek cooperation with NATO in coming years, despite growing austerity in the Russian economic environment. At the same time, NATO-related discourse in Russian media continues to portray an image of Russian military and diplomatic strength, and invincibility. Pro-government Russian media outlets

spent significant time comparing Russian military capabilities with U.S. and NATO forces, emphasizing instances of Russian superiority. In addition to extensive discussion on resumption of arms trade between Iran and Russia following the Iranian nuclear deal, these patterns and narratives within Russian media indicate a likely increase in aggression as Russian military capabilities continue to improve. As a mechanism used to influence domestic audiences in the long and short-term, this type of media coverage indicates that cooperation with NATO is unlikely even as Russia declines.

Analysis of Russian Narratives on its Economy, Multilateral Engagement, and NATO

In order to better understand the power of the geopolitical narratives in Russian media, it is helpful to systematically analyze the narratives strategic actors employ over time. Narratives about international actors structure expectations and behavior in international systems. According to Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), "strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (p. 2). The "Narrative Paradigm," articulated by communication scholar Walter Fisher, is a well-known and helpful model for analyzing the "good reasons" inherent in narratives, and anticipating the motive power of communicative narratives (1989). The paradigm proposes evaluation of narratives according to two key criteria: narrative fidelity (or the extent to which a narrative matches the experiences of the audience) and narrative coherence (the extent to which the narrative remains internally consistent and logical). Using these criteria allows for commenting on the geopolitical narratives in Russian media, and enables the development of messaging that may help to counter these narratives.

This analysis has identified several key elements of a dominant Russian narrative about the nation's role, policies, and rivals. These elements include:

- Russia has achieved significant strength, largely recovering from the economic, cultural, political and social setbacks that occurred with the breakup of the Soviet Union.
- Vladimir Putin is largely (and primarily) the political figure who has driven this achievement, and under his leadership, Russia is gaining geopolitical respect.
- The "Euro-Atlantic" alliance, namely the United States and the nations of the European Union, have consistently followed policies that seek to undermine Russian strength and have engineered the contemporary world order to benefit themselves, rather than the world as a whole.
- Western nations have largely abandoned their spiritual heritage, and have become morally adrift, concerned solely with financial and political advantage.
- Existing multi-lateral institutions, particularly NATO, the IMF, and the World Bank, are controlled by Western countries, and effectively serve to mask the ways

that Western nations manipulate global economics and politics, for the benefit of the West.

- Internal Russian critics of Putin or the political order are primarily tools used by outsiders to weaken the Russian state itself, rather than to establish a more open society.
- Russian policy seeks to establish a new poly-centric, multipolar world in order to address global political and economic inequity. The Russian state, however, is grounded in moral and spiritual values, and thus presents a "moral" alternative to the existing global order.
- Russia's activities of the past year, notably the takeover of the Crimea and the intervention of Syria, are intended to offset the malicious activity of the Western nations to undermine Russian influence.

Applying the narrative paradigm criteria to this overarching geopolitical narrative, some areas of opportunity and of limitations for Western nations become apparent. First, because of centralization and the influence of the state in Russian media, it is difficult for effective counter-narratives to arise within Russia itself. Even when internal critics arise, such as Garry Kasparov, it is fairly easy to paint them as suspicious characters, paid off by Western interests to undermine Russian power. Second, as a number of commentators have noted (such as Pomerantsev), the goal of contemporary Russian propaganda is not to induce belief in the "truth," but rather to create compliance with the interests and policies of the state. In other words, there is more concern with undermining Western narratives and policies than there is in creating a compelling and unified national story. When the credibility and motives of the West are assumed to be suspect, then that is all that is necessary to gain compliance with the policies of Russia itself, and to discourage political activism within Russia.

In terms of fidelity, then, the narrative of Russian resurgence is largely (but not completely) confirmed by the experience of many Russians. Russian citizens enjoyed significant economic growth in recent years, especially the first two terms of Putin. Once that growth became apparent, however, Western nations sought to limit that growth by a series of confrontations, including sanctions against Russia. Thus, it

becomes difficult to counter this narrative by appealing to the experiences of Russian citizens themselves. Unlike during the Soviet period, when it was possible to undermine Soviet propaganda by appealing to the economic and political stagnation of decades, there remains enough social, cultural, and economic openness to keep Russian citizens largely content with the trajectory of development.



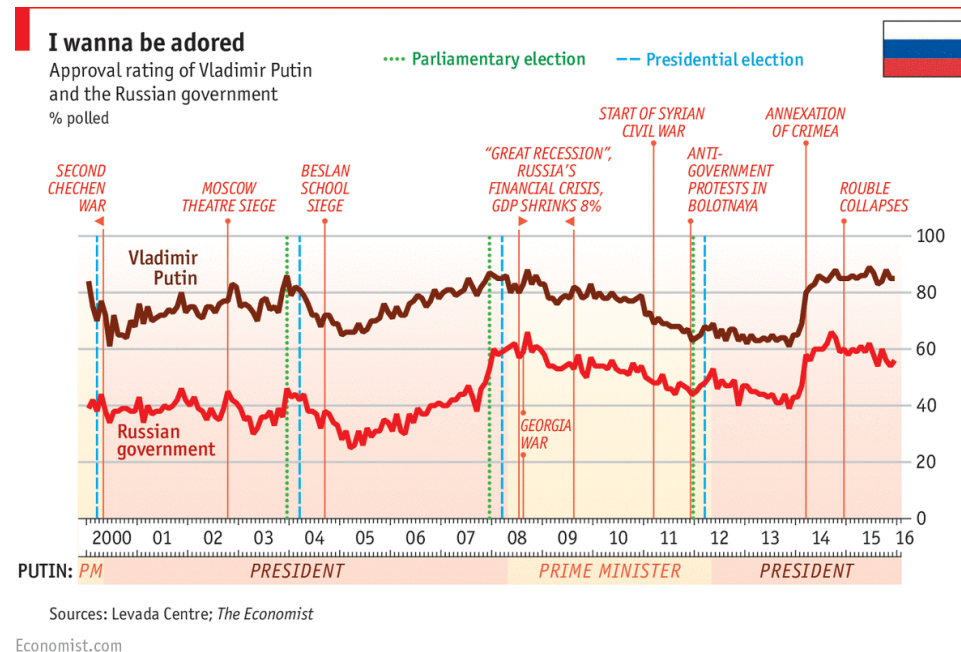
In terms of narrative coherence, there is overall, a consistent narrative of Russian resurgence and Western hypocrisy. Russian media, especially those under the control of the state, consistently interprets events, statements by Western leaders, and geopolitical trends as

engineered by the West to undermine Russia. Even when Russia is not the subject of news or comment by Western leaders their statements are then presented as evidence of anti-Russian bias, and even conspiracy. There are multiple details of this narrative that are inconsistent with one another, but overall, the narrative remains quite consistent and coherent. More importantly, the co-identification of interests between Putin and the Russian people (i.e., Putin is Russia and Russia is Putin) is a powerful rhetorical device that makes criticism of Russia, while in support of the Russian people, a difficult narrative to take root. There are multiple and complex reasons for the rising tension between Russia and the West. The media included in this study both reflects this growing mistrust and reinforces it. State-controlled and crafted narratives play a large role in the increasingly negative perceptions of the West by Russian citizens. These narratives, taken together, create a geopolitical worldview for its citizens that have powerful effects on the population over time. For instance, in 2000, Dilligensky & Chugrov concluded optimistically that Russian society was more

positive towards the West and its values than during the Cold-War period, and that this openness, especially among younger audiences, would likely have a “visible impact” on the consciousness of a wider Russian audience.

Unfortunately, that openness has been largely lost. Any Westerner who has traveled to Russia consistently over the past decade can attest to a growing negative perception of Westerners among Russian citizens. Levada-Center surveys across Russia over the past five years have noted a rise in perceptions of the United States as “bad,” from 23 percent to 37 percent between 2011-2013. In that same time span, perceptions of the EU as “bad” rose from 14 to 29 percent. An October 15, 2015 poll by the Levada-Center showed 71% of those sampled across Russia viewed the role of the United States as negative in the world, with 64% rating Russian-US relations as tense or hostile and 54% rating the same for Russian-EU relations (Levada-Center, International Relations, 2015). Further in an August 2015 poll, 62% of Russians polled across the country claimed relations between the West and Russia will always be rooted in mistrust (Levada-Center, Russia & the West, 2015).

Understanding these narratives is critical in explicating not only how the Russian citizen sees and processes the world, but also in understanding how to effectively engage Russia and its population. Analyzing these narratives allows us to see how



Russians see the world around them, how they tell their history, and how they understand their friends and enemies. Once those narratives are understood, points of common interest, potential

conflict and mutual interests can be discovered that might help to avoid actual conflict.

For populations outside of Russia, of course, it is much easier to counter these narratives. The role of Russia in the Ukraine, for example, caused many throughout Europe to be deeply suspicious of Russian motives and policies. In both narrative fidelity and coherence, the Russian narrative fails for non-Russian peoples. When this narrative is successful (such as within Eastern Ukraine), it is largely because of Russian speaking populations in those regions. The Russian narrative doesn't travel well outside of Russian language media, and thus non-Russian speaking populations are much more dismissive of Russian policy. The Russian state is actively testing new narratives that might have greater persuasive power outside of Russia (such as the "NovoRossiya" move and the "Third Rome" discourse) but so far, these are having limited impact.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to contribute to the overall EUCOM strategic analysis effort by identifying key geopolitical narratives in Russian media and analyzing them through the narrative paradigm. Out of this analysis, there are several potential U.S. messaging strategies.

- First, Western messaging that seeks to de-link the interests of Putin and the Russian people are likely to be ineffective. Recent stories including accusations of corruption, assassination of political opponents, or manipulation of the Orthodox Church do not seem to have an impact within Russia itself. Of course, because of state control of media organizations, these narratives are rarely, if ever, presented to the Russian people, and when they are, they are shown as examples of Western lies, hypocrisy, and corruption.
- From our analysis, the most effective messaging strategies are likely to be transcendent, rather than counter-narrative. While counter-narratives attempt to blunt a narrative, transcendent narratives seek to create new narratives that incorporate Russian concerns and beliefs in a larger narrative of joint interests and cooperation. For example, the U.S. embassy in Moscow recently published a picture of the U.S. ambassador honoring the Russian war dead from the



A transcendent narrative: this picture of US Ambassador John Tefft honoring Russian war dead from World War II was released by the US embassy, but republished in Russian media

Second World War, a message intended to demonstrate U.S. and Russian cooperation during the war and the United States' continued acknowledgement of the sacrifices made by the Russian people. This story was widely published, and provides an effective example of a transcendent message.

- In contrast, counter-messaging strategies become equivalent to a "he said, she said" dispute, and are dismissed as futile propaganda. In the Ukraine, for example, Russian media portrays the current regime as "fascist" and illegitimate, put in place by the West to undermine the nation's solidarity with Russia. Western counter-narratives that argue that the government is democratically elected, and represents the interests of the Ukrainians are most likely going to be dismissed out of hand.
- There are times when there is no alternative but to simply and straightforwardly dispute Russian media narratives, as this example illustrates. But even when these outright disputes are the only option, U.S. and Western policymakers should attempt to seek to ground them in more transcendent messaging strategies. It will not be easy to find many instances of the convergence of U.S. and Russian interests, but finding those moments of convergence are essential to develop the credibility of Western nations, and thereby to have some influence on Russian geopolitical narratives.
- The criteria of narrative coherence and fidelity also are key elements for effective messaging strategies. Western policymakers can, and should, point out both inconsistencies in Russian narratives and the limits of those narratives in explaining current Russian difficulties. Pointing out the very limited role of Western sanctions against Russia, for example, creates the potential to undermine the "sanctions" story in the experience of Russians.

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- ⁱ Rossiya24 2015-07-08T21:04:36.670000_00
 - ⁱⁱ Rossiya24 2015-07-08T16:05:56.430000_00
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Izvestia, 6/8/2015
 - ^{iv} Rossiya24 2015-07-10T10:58:46.330000_00
 - ^v Arguments and Facts, 6/7/2015
 - ^{vi} Rossiya24 2015-07-13T19:00:11.610000_00
 - ^{vii} Rossiya24 2015-07-14T09:59:33.890000_00
 - ^{viii} Rossiya24 2015-07-14T09:59:33.890000_00
 - ^{ix} Rossiya24 2015-07-14T07:00:24.450000_00
 - ^x Rossiya24 2015-07-13T20:01:34.510000_00
 - ^{xi} Rossiya24 2015-07-09T13:01:00.900000_00
 - ^{xii} Rossiya24 2015-07-09T13:01:00.900000_00
 - ^{xiii} Rossiya24 2015-07-10T01:41:42.670000_00
 - ^{xiv} Arguments and Facts, 6/7/2015
 - ^{xv} Rossiya24 2015-07-09T00:44:29.550000_00
 - ^{xvi} Izvestia, 6/8/15
 - ^{xvii} Rossiya24 2015-05-28T02:38:10.860000_00
 - ^{xviii} NG, June 29, 2015
 - ^{xix} NG, June 29, 2015
 - ^{xx} Rossiya24 2015-05-27T13:40:44.410000_00
 - ^{xxi} Rossiya24 2015-07-08T07:26:53.560000_00
 - ^{xxii} Gazeta, 6/16/15
 - ^{xxiii} Rossiya24 2015-07-14T11:19:26.790000_00
 - ^{xxiv} Kasparov, 9/18/2015
 - ^{xxv} NG, 11/9/15
 - ^{xxvi} Slon, October 27, 2015
 - ^{xxvii} Slon, 10/27/15
 - ^{xxviii} Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 10/24/15
 - ^{xxix} NG, 9/21/15
 - ^{xxx} Moskovskij Komsomolets, 10/31/15
 - ^{xxxi} Moskovskij Komsomolets, 11/6/15
 - ^{xxxii} Kasparov, 9/24/15
 - ^{xxxiii} Moskovskij Komsomolets, 10/29/15
 - ^{xxxiv} Kommersant, 10/25/15
 - ^{xxxv} Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 10/28/15
 - ^{xxxvi} Izvestia, 11/3/15
 - ^{xxxvii} NG, 11/9/15
 - ^{xxxviii} Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 9/8/15
 - ^{xxxix} Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 9/10/15
 - ^{xl} Komsomolskaya Pravda, 9/15/15
 - ^{xli} Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 9/10/2015

