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(Dis)arming rhetoric with the past: the Kremlin's use of historical narratives to legitimate its arms control policies (2000-2020)

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Abstract

While expanding literature on memory has greatly contributed to our understanding of how the concept influences our world, we need to deepen our understanding of memory as a strategic tool on the international stage. This paper explores the instrumentalization of memory in foreign policy discourse through the concept of memory diplomacy. Pulling Russian memory politics out of the domestic and into the international sphere, it delves into role of historical narratives as justification of Russian arms control policies and aims. Drawing upon the Strategic Narratives framework (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle), the paper identifies diverging and contradictory historical narratives on arms control issues in presidential discourse. Through a combination of emotionality and temporality, these are used to justify specific Russian short- or long-term policy goals and stances in arms control. The paper concludes that historical narratives are indeed used as a rhetoric diplomacy tool, varying across policy issue, temperature of international relations, target audience and actor.

1. Introduction

Building on the Strategic Narratives Approach (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle), this study seeks to address how Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev, in their capacity as respective president of the Russian Federation, strategically use historical narratives in their arms control discourse. The paper argues that the Russian presidents strategically use historical narratives by actively highlighting and framing contradictory interpretations of the past to fit the stance on the policy issue and the international system view. They do so through a combination of emotionality and temporal analogies. Tapping into emotions, Russian presidents frame arms control dynamics by using positively or negatively coloured narratives on the same historical episodes. By way of example, the Cold War is portrayed as a long period of post-WWII peace or rather decades of conflict-ridden instability, depending on the message the political actor wants to convey. The political actors then engage these narratives as temporal analogies by framing them as either historical ruptures or continuities. The combination of these strategies allows them to depict both the Russian Federation and the other countries involved in a way that benefits the Russian rational aims at that point.

By showing that the Russian presidents strategically use historical narratives to frame arms control policies, I pull memory politics out of the domestic and into the international sphere. I also move from a sociology-inspired view on the meaning and dynamics of collective memory to a politically inspired instrumentalist view. Research on (collective) memory generally departs from the meaning and dynamics of memory. The instrumentalist view, or how (political actors within) states ‘do’ politics with memory to achieve their goals, has not been in the limelight so much. Scholars have focused on the link between memory and identity, the representation and transmission of memory, and the political and social consolidation and contestation. Research on the use of memory as a political tool of power largely focuses on the domestic sphere (Klumbyte, 2010; Marples, 2012; Norris, 2012; Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk, 2017; Zajda & Zajda, 2003). Considering studies on the influence of memory in international relations, researchers focus on how memory influences states’ behaviour. Until recently, the instrumentalization of memory on the international arena has received far less attention (Bachleitner, 2019; Liu & Hilton, 2005; McGlynn, 2020; Müller, 2004; Parpei & Sazonov, 2021; Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017).

It is no new information that Russian political actors actively enlist the past. President Putin has actively instrumentalised the past to create a national narrative that promotes patriotism and conservatism towards Russian citizens, and legitimates Russia’s international great power status. However, scholars have mainly focussed on the domestic use of history in Putin’s Russia. Russia scholars have looked into strategic memory propagation in education (Pearce, 2019; Zajda, 2013), the public space (Forest & Johnson, 2011; Gaufman, 2015; Norris, 2012) and state-owned and -sponsored discourse (Liñán, 2010; McGlynn, 2020). The international angle thus remains understudied (McGlynn, 2020; Pearce, 2018)

This exploratory study’s goal is twofold. First, it builds upon the Strategic Narratives approach (Miskimmon et al., 2014, 2017) to present a theoretical framework with which one can explore the use of historical narratives as a memory diplomacy tool in foreign policy

making. Secondly, it contributes to empirical scholarship on Russian memory politics and arms control by applying this framework on Russian arms control discourse. It connects both fields through a detailed narrative analysis of Russian presidential discourse on arms control policies and goals between 2000 and 2020. The article starts with the outline of the theoretical framework. It then proceeds to provide a brief overview of what arms control means to Russia. The third part of the paper focuses on the application of the theoretical framework on the Russian case of historical narratives in arms control policy discourse.

2. Historical narratives in the Strategic Narratives Approach: concepts & theory

The question of the active enlisting of historical references to justify policies steers us towards 'memory diplomacy'. This concept falls within the broader scope of public diplomacy, which is for its part a means of soft power.¹ Berridge (2015) equates public diplomacy with 'white propaganda'. This means that, contrary to 'black propaganda', it unveils its source. It fits within the broader array of ways through which states can manage their relations with other states and actors, and can achieve their foreign policy goals without resorting to 'force, propaganda or law' (Berridge, 2015, p. 1). Rather than being aimed exclusively at political actors, however, it also encompasses broader international audiences.

Memory diplomacy, or diplomacy with memory, 'manifests itself as an official, diplomatic team performance that aims at conveying a certain historic image for the purpose of achieving rational aims on the international stage' (Bachleitner, 2019). This can happen through a variety of material and rhetoric means (Asen, 2010). Russian material methods drawing upon history and memory range from inviting foreign officials to Victory parades to the funding of cultural-historically oriented programs abroad, such as the Centres for Russian Studies. On the flip side, rhetoric may be used to create historic images to further bilateral relations, or rather legitimate a more conflictual approach. In this context, historical narratives are a very useful tool.

Historical narratives can be used diplomatically by being dispersed in different ways. They are present in rhetoric ranging from state-owned media and government-funded cultural institutions to governmental speeches and interviews. This exploratory study focuses on the use of historical narratives in presidential discourse. Importantly, the focus does not lie on how the past influences states' foreign policy behaviour, either through its collective memory or the domestic memory narrative. Rather, it lies with how states 'make foreign policy with memory' (Bachleitner, 2019, p. 494). That is, Russian political actors create a narrative of the past that portrays the Russian Federation and other parties involved in a way supportive to their strategic goals. In this project, Putin and Medvedev craft selective historical narratives to justify their arms control policy stances and aims. Memory is thus 'forged' for foreign policy purposes, with the Russian presidents as blacksmiths.

¹ Famously defined by Nye (1998), it consists of 'the ability to get preferred outcomes through the co-optive means of agenda-setting, persuasion and attraction' (Nye, 2012). It accounts for the impact of ideas, norms and culture. Rhetoric provides an important vessel to reveal those ideas.

In this research, historical narratives are analysed within a larger framework of strategic narratives. Introducing the term to international relations, Freedman (2006, p. 22) has defined strategic narratives as ‘compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn’. As purposefully constructed sense-making instruments, they allow us to create an understanding of our identities and the world we live in by connecting seemingly unconnected elements (Freedman, 2006; Krebs & Jackson, 2007; O’Tuathail, 2002; Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011; Subotic, 2018) . A narrative encompasses actors; events, plots, and time; and setting and space (Miskimmon et al., 2014). ‘Because meaning-making is essential [...] and because legitimation is the life blood of politics’ (Krebs, 2015, p. 813), these characteristics have made narratives central to politics. Political actors constantly use them to create a compelling story of the political past, present and future.

But how to connect memory, narratives and policy into a coherent theoretical framework? To do so, I draw upon the Strategic Narratives approach (Miskimmon et al., 2014, 2017), which I adapt to include historical narratives. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle (MOR) define strategic narratives (SN) as ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors’ (2014, p. 2). In this context, they subdivide strategic narratives in three types, namely system, identity and policy narratives. Drawing on MOR’s definitions of these types, I define them as follows (2017, p. 8). System narratives focus on the nature of international relations. They identify the main players on the international stage, how the actor structures the world and how it interprets the inner workings of the system. In this paper, the identified system views consist of two elements. First, visions on the international system refer to, for example, the international rule-based order or American unilateralism. Second, the temperature of international relations refers to how cooperative or tense Russia perceives its relationship with other countries, either bilaterally or multilaterally. Identity narratives are about the identity of the actor. They chart the story of a political actor, its values and its goals. In this case, the political actor under scrutiny is Russia. Identity narratives thus refer to how Russia views itself on the domestic and international scene. For example, does it portray itself as democratic country, an economic partner or a great power? Policy narratives, lastly, seek to shape policy discussions. They set out why a specific policy is necessary or desirable, and how it should be implemented or accomplished. In the context of this research, policy narratives describe arms control issues, ranging from the ratification of START II to the use of arms control in order to achieve strategic stability.

Bringing in memory, I add historical narratives to MOR’s framework. In this format, political actors can connect them to policy, identity and system narratives. Broadly speaking, historical narratives encompass all storylines within discourse that refer to historical occurrences. More specifically, I follow Sverdrup-Thygeson in defining historical narratives as ‘references to historical occurrences framing contemporary policies in a wider temporal narrative, using the past to give meaning to the present’ (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017, p. 75).

They are connected to memory in the sense that they convey a specific interpretation of the past. In this context, historical narratives are inherently subjective and in no way represent a universal or individual ‘truth’. In their strategic use, they are also disconnected from any type of ‘collective’ or ‘public’ memory the political actor has.

Lastly, it serves to outline how strategy in narrative formation can be identified in this framework. Strategy concerns the pursuit and creation of power (Freedman, 2006). Broadly speaking, I define it as ‘using specific means with the intent to achieve certain political goals’. In this sense, the extent to which the desired policies are effectively enacted, is unimportant (although obviously not irrelevant in the grand scheme of discursive power and narrative reception). In general strategy theory, the strategy system encompasses the strategy triangle, namely (political or policy) ends, (strategic) ways and means. Applied to this project, memory (mean) is narratively enlisted (way) to support policy stances (ends). The core of this study lies with the means and the ways. Politicians always seek to shape their discourse in a way that will get them as broad a support base as possible for their governmental policies. In the context of this research, political actors may thus vary their historical narratives in three ways.

- 1) Depending on the target audience;
- 2) Depending on the policy issue;
- 3) Depending on the system view.

But how do these historical narratives have influence? I argue that historical narratives are used to give meaning through historical analogies (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017). Historical analogies simplify policy matters, functioning as ‘a set of archetypical situations [that] provides rules or guidelines for acting in the present’ (Buckley, 1989, p. 184). This mnemonic mean contains two key elements that resonate with the target audience, namely emotionality and temporality. First, in line with the ‘emotional turn’, Hall (2015) argues that states can use the projection of emotions as a strategic tool to achieve policy aims. Historical references, by their very nature, are the ideal vessels to do so. Political actors colour historical narratives emotionally in a positive or negative way. Second, in this format, using them as a historical analogy provides a temporal character. In this sense, experiences of the past are used to present (a need for) a historical continuity/parallel, or rather (a need for) a historical rupture.

3. Russian arms control

Despite the tumultuous relationship between the USA and Russia, arms control has been one area which has required their constant communication in the past decades. It has allowed the international community to maintain strategic stability and avert nuclear catastrophes, even at the most critical times during the Cold War. Common economic interests have led to cooperation in this sphere as often as diverging threat perceptions and security doctrines lead to disagreement and confrontation. It is precisely this communicative continuity throughout conjunctural ‘temperatures’ of international relations that allow a study of evolutions in historical narratives in connection to system and policy narratives.

Apart from the economic and stability implications, arms control also has an important symbolic value for the Russian Federation (Williams, 2016). It is an essential ingredient to feed its great power narrative as it is a prime example of an area where Russia has a seat at the ‘adult table’. This is especially true regarding Russia’s nuclear capability. Not only does the Kremlin see nuclear weapons as the last and ‘credible guarantor of Russia’s national security’ (Putin, 2000f), it is also an important symbol of continuity, forging a ‘powerful link between Russia’s historical great power status and what remain the world’s most powerful military weapons’ (Moran & Williams, 2013, p. 206).

Since the 2000s, Russia has worked both on levels of arms development and arms control. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the 90s were detrimental to Russian defence capabilities. Defence spending collapsed and, as a result, the nuclear arsenal declined and necessary modernization failed to materialise. When Putin assumed office, military modernization of conventional and nuclear forces slowly started up again, gaining in speed as the years went by. Putin’s third term was especially marked by increased defence spending and military assertiveness. His presentation of new missiles during his 2018 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly is indicative of Russia’s combination of defence capabilities as a means for both strategic stability and symbolic power (Putin, 2018b).

Despite its arms development, however, Russia has also portrayed itself as a proponent of arms control and staunch defender of compliance with international rules. Putin stated the importance of arms control early on in his presidency. During his address to the Millennium Summit in 2000, he emphasized how ‘the new century of the United Nations should prolong itself into a millennium of effective stability. It has to enter the annals of history as the period of real disarmament’ (Putin, 2000a). Russia’s 2013 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation states that the Russian Federation ‘fulfils in good faith its international obligations under international treaties on arms control and takes confidence-building measures in the military sphere encouraging its partners to do the same’ and ‘reaffirms its unwavering policy towards developing multilateral political and legal frameworks for a universal and stable regime of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction and means of their delivery’ (*Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, 2013).

In the context of this research, ‘arms control’ is defined very broadly. While academics debate the relationship between concepts like arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, I will use the former as an umbrella term for all things related to reducing the number of arms and limiting technologies and types. Next, references to the West as either loosely NATO and EU member states, or as the conception of ‘The West’ in the mind of the Russian Federation.

4. (Re)arming the past: defending arms control policies through the Cold War narrative

The instrumentalization of the past to support policy aims is not new in Russia. The Soviet Union’s entire society was organised in light of its communist ideology and its fight against Western capitalism. Memory was actively enlisted in this ‘battle plan’. The Soviet regime

presented a teleological and linear history of the world, with the USSR and the victory of communism over capitalism as logical endpoint. The 1917 revolutions were one of the main founding myths and thus obtained a central place in collective memory, as did the Great Patriotic War. Stalin was first revered, then attempted to be removed from public memory. After the fall of the USSR, memory was on the backburner. Yeltsin propagated a future-oriented approach, and traumas of the past were too painful to be remembered and too complicated to deal with. This left the new *homo post-Sovieticus* in a mnemonic vacuum.

With Putin at the helm, memory regained its prominent place within the Russian Federation, albeit in a very polished version. The Great Patriotic War replaced the 1917 revolutions as founding myth. A historical narrative was created to inspire and fuel the patriotic fire, supporting Russia on its quest to regain its historically legitimated great power status. The narrative was not just unifying, it was *the* unifying feature of Russian identity. It created a space around which other nationalities could unite, while preserving a leadership role for ethnic Russians (McGlynn, 2020).

This domestically propagated narrative, however, differs from the international one on a fundamental level. While the domestic historical narrative serves to unify, the international one serves to support Russian interests through a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy. This crucial difference in aims shows in narrative content. While the domestic narrative is highly selective, it nevertheless is a streamlined story of the past. Historical contradictions and black pages are swept under the rug – albeit with varying degrees of success. This streamlined version of history is then exported through a variety of channels, ranging from education and state-owned media to Victory parades and youth military history camps. Depending on the context and target audiences, the actors may emphasize specific elements of the historical narrative at the expense of others, yet the uniformity of the narrative is rarely compromised. The international historical narrative, on the other hand, is equally selective yet lacks the streamlined component. Rather, it is diverse to the extent that it is contradictory in its selection of historical narratives. This thus goes further than selective highlighting of specific elements of the story. Rather, it is the strategic creation of fitting interpretations of the past depending on the target audience and the rational aim.

In the context of historical narratives on arms control policies, I identify the Cold War as the main historical narrative. This squarely fits with the military and political character of arms control issues. Yet, it is in clear contrast with the dominance of the Great Patriotic War narrative found elsewhere in Russian (domestic) memory politics.

Within the Cold War narrative, I identify two categories of sub-narratives. One category plays into negative emotionality and emphasizes parts of the Cold War generally seen as detrimental. The other category plays into positive emotionality and underlines elements of the Cold War that are seen as favourable. The narratives in both categories constitute two sides of the same story. Two sides of the same coin, if you will. These are then linked to present policy aims and system views by adding a temporal element.

Out of the 578 times Putin and Medvedev talked arms control between 2000 and 2020, they involved historical references on this topic in 98 of those cases, or roughly 17% of the time.² This is certainly not a negligible percentage. By way of example, discourse on terrorism, which traditionally has a strong historical narrative component due to its linkages with Nazism, has a rough 22% of historical references in its overall discourse. Interestingly, the historical narratives are clustered around specific periods. Historical narratives supporting arms control are mostly found in 2000-2001, 2006-2010 and 2017-2020. These periods largely coincide with increased attention to the topic in Russian presidential discourse more generally.

Five sub-narratives surfaced repeatedly and were used to promote messages conducive to Russian arms control aims.

Historical event 1: Cold War (military) confrontation between East and West

Negative narrative: The Cold War era was a conflict-ridden period, where consecutive crises brought humanity to the brink of annihilation on a number of times.

Positive narrative: The Cold War era was a long period of post-WWII peace and stability, as its systemic characteristics led to international stability.

Historical event 2: Cold War arms development

Negative narrative: The Cold War arms race, which was instigated by the United States, was a politically dangerous and economically destructive phenomenon.

Positive narrative: The threat of mutual assured destruction created a tradition of disarmament which contributed to the creation of international stability.

Historical event 3: Ideological confrontation during the Cold War

Negative narrative: The Cold War created opposing ideological blocs, leading to mistrust which negatively impacted international stability.

Positive narrative: /

As historical analogies, the temporality through which Putin and Medvedev link these narratives to policy aims and system views are two-fold. On the one hand, the historical references are used to indicate (the need for) a rupture with the past. On the other hand, they are enlisted to underline historical continuity or to draw a historical parallel.

I will now discuss the use of the outlined historical narratives based on the strategic categories identified in the theoretical framework, namely their divergence and evolutions throughout arms control policies ('policy narratives'), system views ('system narratives') and target audiences. I will also add a new category of divergence that the framework did not account for, namely political actors.

² These are the sources saved in the archive of the official website of the President of Russia (en.kremlin.ru). While not exhaustive, they nevertheless encompass a large and representative group of source material on presidential arms control discourse.

Arms control policies

Regarding arms control policies, two ‘coins’ of historical narratives dominate. The focus lies with the Cold War as a (military) confrontation, and Cold War arms development. Generally speaking, the positive and negative sides of both coins are used in two ways. Arms policies of the Russian Federation, such as the ratification of START II, are framed in a positive way. This is done through a combination of a positive narrative with historical continuity, or rather a negative narrative with a historical rupture. International arms control stances linked to historical narratives are perceived more unfavourably. The historical narratives are thus dominantly negative narratives linked to historical continuity, or positive narratives linked to a historical rupture.

Narrative 1: tradition of disarmament vs. arms race

The focus lies predominantly with the Cold War arms development narrative. The early 2000s shows a bigger diversity in use of both sides of the story than the post-Munich period, which focuses on the negative narrative. On the positive side, Putin and Medvedev emphasize the ‘tradition of disarmament’ inherited from the Cold War era. It is used to portray Russia, the legal successor of the USSR and inheritor of its nuclear arsenal, as a responsible player and key figure in maintaining international stability and security. It is also used to enforce a narrative of cooperation, especially with the United States. In this context, the story tells that the arms control initiatives of the Cold War learn politicians the values of pragmatism and mutual understanding to ensure international stability.

On the negative side, the ‘arms race’ narrative is seen as a politically and militarily dangerous and economically costly endeavour, a legacy from the Cold War which should not be repeated. It is in essence the negative pole of the previous narrative and a threat to strategic stability. It is accompanied by an assertion that Russia does not account itself responsible for the instigation of a new arms race but rather points to US behaviour as the culprit.

Pre-2006/7, the negative and positive sides generally are tied to discussions on the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction (START) II. The ABM Treaty was signed in 1972 and has repeatedly been called the ‘cornerstone of international security’. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and perceived missile threats from Iran, the United States announced its withdrawal in December 2001. However, talk of a possible withdrawal originated earlier already. In the context of the ABM treaty, Putin refers to the positive tradition of disarmament that has been built during the Cold War. He links this to (a treat of) a historical rupture. In 2000, for example, he warned that ‘the positive trends in the disarmament field, which were growing for decades, have recently begun to slow down. There is a real danger of a collapse of the ABM treaty’ (Putin, 2000d).

Equally, the tradition of disarmament narrative is used upon the Russian ratification of START II. Internationally, Putin frames the ratification as a logical and positive continuation of Russia’s leading role in disarmament. The public statement following the ratification, for example, said that ‘As a great nuclear power, Russia demonstrates its responsible attitude by

advancing consistently along the road of armaments reduction and disarmament’ (Putin, 2000g), a sentiment reiterated on other occasions as well (Putin, 2000e). Domestically, the focus lies with the negative ‘arms race’ narrative as economically costly to support the ratification. During his speech at a State Duma meeting in 2000, he contradicts critics’ arguments saying Russia would benefit from preserving its nuclear forces at the START I level. ‘[This] has some serious political implications that can (...) initiate an unacceptable and, I want to stress, an absolutely unnecessary arms race for Russia. Something that has already once been imposed on Russia. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into one for the second time, the consequences will be worse than the first time.’ (Putin, 2000f).

Around 2006-2007, the positive narrative fades into the background while the negative narrative remains standing. If anyone was wondering in 2006 whether this was a coincidence or a trend, Putin’s 2007 Munich speech took away any of those doubts. Not ‘speak[ing] in roundabout, pleasant but empty diplomatic terms’, he condemned (US) attempts to reinstate a unipolar world and disregard international laws (Putin, 2007b). Advocating for multilateral diplomacy and the use of military force as but a last resort, Putin puts the United Nations and its Charter forward as the pillar of international relations. The US’s aggressive unilateralist policies and abundant use of military force around the globe has instigated arms development in numerous states. At the same time, Putin says, disarmament initiatives have stagnated. He puts these developments in arms control and military confrontation in a Cold War perspective, underlining how Russia continues to be at the right side of history, first by supporting the reunification of the European continent and now by being a proponent of arms control who fulfils its treaty obligations.

The main policy around which the arms race narrative is centred, is the construction of NATO’s missile defence shield. By way of example, during a press conference with the Greek President Papoulias, Putin draws ‘attention to the fact that it is not [Russia] who [is] starting a new arms race. We have signed and ratified the Adapted Conventional Armed Forces Treaty. We are fully implementing it. What are [our partners] doing? They are filling eastern Europe with new weapons. (...) Our American partners withdrew from the antiballistic missile treaty.’ (Putin, 2007a).

The arms race narrative also supports Russia’s policy of arms development. Hand in hand with this increasingly assertive stance, the Russian Federation also embraced a change in its defence doctrine towards asymmetrical warfare. Already in 2001, Putin warned that, should the US withdraw from the ABM Treaty and build its missile defence system, Russia would ‘proceed from one well-known principle, which can be summed up as follows: efficiency plus minimum costs’ (Putin, 2001a). Russia defends this position by pointing to the huge economic costs of the Cold War arms race, which it identifies as one of the causes for the collapse of the USSR. As Putin put it in 2008: ‘We will not let ourselves be exhausted the way the Soviet Union did, but at the same time we will of course take all necessary measures to strengthen our defence capability’ (Putin, 2008).

Narrative 2: The Cold War as peaceful vs. as conflict-ridden

A second historical narrative that presents two sides of the same coin are the different propagations of the Cold War era as a peaceful and stable or rather conflict-ridden and volatile period. While used less frequently than the arms development narratives, its use is nevertheless clearly strategically motivated. When arguing in favour of arms control treaties, Putin and Medvedev frame the Cold War as a post-WWII peaceful period without any major conflicts. The presidents pinpoint the balance of forces as the main reason for this stability, an argument that comes across in most of the aforementioned policies.

Throughout the years, Putin emphasizes how nuclear weapons played a vital part in the Cold War balance of forces, and how Russia should thus maintain these capabilities. Apart from the military and political importance, this emphasis on nuclear weapons also stems from its symbolic value to the Russian Federation. After all, it were Russia's nuclear capabilities that continued to allow it a seat at the negotiation table after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

When Putin discusses the possible US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty during an interview with CNN, for example, he recalls that they were the ones inventing the first nuclear arms, and that scientists secretly 'transferred those secrets to the Soviet Union because they wanted to restore the balance. And it is thanks to that balance the humankind has survived without major conflicts, large-scale wars, for about since 1945'. (Putin, 2000b). The same message is repeated in later years (eg. Putin, 2001b).

Another instance is found during his famous Munich speech. In the discussion after his speech, Putin gets asked a number of questions on Russia's stance on arms control and its international interests. He says that, contrary to today, the Cold War was a long period of peace, albeit fragile. He ascribes this to the balance of forces, which led to an equilibrium and constant dialogue between the Soviet Union and the US. Putin indicated that this balance, through either symmetry or asymmetry, is imperative for international stability.

The narrative comes forward again after Putin's Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. During this speech, he presented a number of new 'invincible' intercontinental missiles. In an interview with TASS in 2020, he refers to these missiles as helping to 'maintain strategic stability and strategic balance', just like during the Cold War years, when this balance allowed the world to '[avoid] major military conflicts after World War II' (Putin, 2020).

On other occasions, especially when Russia blames the 'West' for its uncooperative stance, it brands the Cold War as an era of confrontation 'that pushed humanity to the brink of annihilation on more than one occasion' (Putin, 2001d). During an interview with Al-Jazeera, for example, Putin emphasizes that, despite bumps in the road, US-Russian cooperation in the nuclear domain is imperative, because 'the minute problems start in this area, all of humankind starts worrying about what will happen tomorrow, just like it already happened in recent history, suffice it to remember the Cuban missile crisis' (Putin, 2003). Fourteen years later, the same sentiment still comes forward. During the yearly meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, Putin asserted that it the American actions on arms control, or the lack thereof, risk pushing the world back to the confrontational 1950s (Putin, 2017).

System views

Russian presidents often link the importance of their arms control stances to the characteristics of and players within the international order. They also use their framing of the international system to support or oppose arms control policy stances. In this context, the Cold War narrative once again prevails.

Russia's relations with the West have fluctuated over the past two decades, both in general and regarding arms control. Despite the diversity and evolution in historical narratives to support arms control policies and stances, the system narratives remain remarkably stable. The only change is the framing. From 2000 onwards, Russia has been clear that it wants a multipolar world based on an international rule-based order. The UN should be the key player in this system. Within this constellation, Russia occupies a historically and destiny legitimated great power status, a message Putin and Medvedev constantly assert. As said earlier, this view also comes forward on the Russian Foreign Policy concept.

Hand in hand with increasing levels of confrontation, the framing of the system changed. In this context, I focus on the presence of the 'Cold War bloc mentality' narrative and the historical framing of Western hypocrisy. As the hypocrisy narrative grows stronger, the combination of negatively perceived historical periods and historical continuation/parallels becomes more frequent. The same is true for the combination of positively perceived periods and their ruptures.

In the early 2000s, the image is dual. Regarding Europe, Putin emphasizes the need to move on from Cold War narratives and argues that this is going well. This message also prevails regarding the US, albeit not as constant due to the ABM issue. The same is true for NATO, due to its territorial expansion and missile defence shield. Whereas 2000, Putin stated that he is 'not referring to ideological barriers – thank god we have left those behind in the 20th century' (Putin, 2000c). Later, in a meeting with the Moscow Bureau Chiefs of leading US media in 2001, Putin emphasizes the need to think in new terms rather than Cold War terms to be able to tackle new threats, such as arms control and terrorism (Putin, 2001e). By 2006 he states that 'far from everyone in the world has abandoned old bloc mentality' (Putin, 2006a). Things take a turn for the worst with Putin's Munich speech, as shown above.

A critical juncture takes place in 2009, with the 'reset' of US-Russia relations instigated by the Obama administration. In March 2009, Medvedev publishes an article in the Washington Post, stating that 'Russia and the United States can offer much to the world while maintaining our special responsibility in (...) issues of strategic stability and nuclear security. The need to restart our cooperation is prompted in part by the history of our relations, which includes a number of highly emotional moments – diplomatic support provided by Russia to the United States at critical points of America's development, our joint fight against fascism and the era of détente'. During a speech at Helsinki University, he states that 'the era of inflexible ideological confrontation has disappeared' (Medvedev, 2009a).

However, this reset is short-lived, and tables turn fully after Russia's annexation of Crimea. By 2014, Putin has moved on to saying that 'it does not matter who takes the place of the centre of evil in American propaganda, the USSR's old place as the main adversary. It

could be Iran, as a country seeking to acquire nuclear technology, China, as the world's biggest economy, or Russia, as a nuclear superpower.' (Putin, 2014). In a 2015 interview with the Swiss media, Putin is back at the 'US instigated the arms race the moment it unilaterally withdrew from the ABM treaty' narrative. He emphasizes once again how a strategic balance of power in the Cold War era 'allowed peace throughout the planet and prevented major military conflicts in Europe and throughout the world' (Putin, 2015a). The next Valdai speech started off with a full discussion of the history of war and peace (Putin, 2015b). Once again referring to the historical importance of the balance of forces, Putin this time moves beyond the Cold War, reaching back to the Peace of Westphalia, the Vienna Congress and the Yalta Conference. He emphasizes the importance of a framework of fixed political, legal and moral norms and rules. A lack of this can lead to a 'downfall of the system of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which, in turn, would result in a new spiral of the arms race'. Putin then moves on to the American anti-missile defence system, which the US continues to develop despite 'the thing [the nuclear threat of Iran] that seemed to have led our American partners to build an anti-missile defence system is gone'.

An important component of this hypocrisy narrative is 'whataboutism'. A popular narrative, for example, is the fact that it was the United States who first developed and used a nuclear weapon. In doing so, they instigated the arms race and the Soviet Union, fearing its own survival and international stability, had no choice but to follow their example. That Soviet scientists had also been researching the weaponization of nuclear power is conveniently forgotten in this narrative (Putin, 2006b, 2019a, 2020). Another example is the subtle reminder that it was Churchill who kicked off the start of the Cold War with his 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton (Putin, 2019b), or how the Americans complained that the new Russian intercontinental missiles were non-compliant with the INF Treaty, the same treaty that in Soviet times had led to a unilateral disarmament on the side of the Soviet Union (Putin, 2018a). As the treaty focused on land-based missiles, sea- and air-based ones were not included. The latter two were owned but by the US, and not by the USSR.

The combination of system narrative continuity but change in historical framing is interesting because it implies that there is an actual strategy behind the use of historical narratives. As the policy and system goals stay the same, this means that there must be a reason why historical narratives differ. Based on earlier explanations, I argue that this is based on how Putin views the temperature of international relations at the time of his speech.

Target audiences

The sources were not numerous enough to fully prove or disprove a variation of narratives throughout different target audiences. Nevertheless, I wish to mention three observations that seem to support this hypothesis.

First, the use of historical narratives to justify arms control policies seems to be mainly aimed towards an international target audience, rather than a domestic one. When presidential actors do talk to the domestic audience, this is only in public. More 'internal' discourse, such as Defence Ministry Board meetings, is almost completely devoid of historical

narratives. This once again points towards the strategic use of the past, rather than being an inherently identarian conviction. Publicly, they emphasize three narratives. First, they reference the historical role of the Soviet Union in creating a more stable world, and how the Russian Federation is continuing this mission. Second, they draw upon historical references to strengthen the ‘Western hypocrisy’ narrative. Third, the arms race narrative is enlisted. The emphasis here lies with the economic consequences of an arms race. This is different from how it is enlisted towards an international audience, where the political and military concepts such as predictability of actions and balance of forces are emphasized as well. By way of example, short after signing New START, Medvedev gives an interview to the Izvestia newspaper, which has close ties to the Russian government. During this interview, he emphasizes the need to leave the Cold War logic behind, reject a bloc-based system and put the shoulders behind a multipolar world. He then warns for a bloc-based logic by ‘turning the CSTO into a new Warsaw Pact, pumping it up with weapons and forces and endlessly competing with NATO. (...) We know what effect this kind of competition had on the Soviet Union. We know how the arms race bled our country dry and we know the results it brought: an ineffective economy, endless arms race, and finally, the state’s collapse’ (Medvedev, 2010). Rather, the signing of New Start allows to on the one hand protect Russian interests and strategic capacities, while also adding to a safe and multipolar world.

Regarding Western target audiences, discourse towards European countries is arguably more positive than towards the United States and NATO. Historical narratives are used more often to emphasize good relationships between Russia and the target country, upon which should be built to create a stable world. This is especially clear in discourse targeting the EU, France and Germany.

Lastly, Russia has emphasized seeing eye to eye on arms control issues with the Middle East. While also employing the Western hypocrisy narrative there, the Cold War references lack. Rather, the emphasis lies with historical narratives on bilateral relations. During a speech at the Meeting of the Permanent Representatives of the League of Arab Nations, for example, Medvedev emphasized the Soviet Union’s anticolonial character and how the country helped their ‘friends in the Middle East’ during the decolonisation period, ‘laying the foundations for building a fairer and more modern world order’. These historical ties leads to a cooperation between ‘Russia and the Arab world’, as their positions are similar ‘on the most serious issues, [such as] nuclear non-proliferation’ (Medvedev, 2009b).

Political actors

Putin’s switch from president to prime minister in 2008 was, to say the least, a controversial one. His presidential seat was kept warm by Medvedev until 2012, when the duo switched places after the elections. Medvedev’s term has generally been interpreted as a more liberal one, especially compared to Putin’s second and third presidential turns.

This also comes forward in the discourse. The ‘us versus them’ and ‘Western hypocrisy’ narratives are strikingly more present under Putin’s presidency, who refers to ‘new Berlin walls’ and the US wanting to obtain a right to unilateral leadership, a diktat, than under

Medvedev's. While the latter touches upon largely the same policy themes and Cold War sub-narratives remain constant, the focus lies with inclusivity. He states that nobody benefits from a return to the Cold War, that all political actors should learn from the past by looking at its shortfalls, and that every nation should focus on common goals and values. For example, Medvedev emphasizes the period in history during which the US and Russia cooperated, such as the fight against Nazism, and how this benefitted the world.

Naturally, the question poses itself to what extent the increased positivity during the Medvedev period depends solely on the actor. After all, the international circumstances also changed in 2009, when the Obama administration pressed 'reset' on US-Russia relations. Similarly, Medvedev's discourse was heated during the 2008 Five Day Georgian War. Medvedev also clearly stated Russia's role as a great power and its interests in the post-Soviet sphere (de Haas, 2010). We should thus certainly not stereotype Medvedev's term as a period of cooperation compared to Putin's confrontational approach, but at the same time be mindful of this difference.

To shed light on this matter, it would serve to expand the view beyond merely presidential discourse. Lavrov, for example, assumed the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2004. It would thus be useful to map his use of historical narratives and see if the decrease in negativity and assertiveness between 2008 and 2012 surfaces in his discourse as well.

5. Conclusion

As this is an exploratory study, I will refrain from any strong conclusions. Yet, it is clear that Russian presidential actors do indeed resort to narratives as an element of memory diplomacy. Diverging, and sometimes opposing, historical narratives are used to create a specific historic image of Russia, the world in order and its players to further Russia's rational aims. These narratives justify Russian policy stances and fit the international climate. Opposing interpretations of the past are used across target audiences as a way to either tighten the relationship with this audience or rather assert a more confrontational stance. However, the reasoning behind the choice of historical narratives remains unclear. This study did not go further than suggesting triggers and possible patterns. As such, it would be useful to broaden the scope of this study to encompass more political actors and/or policy domains.

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