

## THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN INFORMATION WARFARE\*

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**Abstract.** *The article sets out to examine the role that constitutive strategic narratives play in defensive information warfare. Coined by Igor Panarin, the concept of defensive information warfare refers to campaigns of strategic influence waged by the Russian Federation against its own citizens, especially during general elections, with the purpose of insulating voters against foreign information flows. The article demonstrates that strategic narratives and, thus, information warfare draw massively on informal strategic culture, that has retained its imperial traits in the case of the Russian Federation. In its first part, the article discusses the concept of strategic narrative, and then it brings under scrutiny the relation between security culture and information warfare with a focus on the Russian Federation.*

**Keywords:** *information warfare, strategic narratives, security culture, the Russian Federation.*

Official foreign policy discourses or texts related to national defense strategy represent typical examples of strategic narratives defined as formal expressions of a particular security culture. One important requirement of formal strategic narratives is to resonate with the security culture's informal set of values, so that the securitization narrative becomes legitimate.

This article discusses the nexus between strategic narratives, security culture and information warfare. It starts from the assumption that every polity uses grand strategy-type discourses in order to re-create a minimum social cohesion, in the absence of which different policies can hardly be conceived and implemented<sup>1</sup>. But strategic narratives are not employed just to reinforce the “we, the people” feeling and, thus, to legitimate public institutions. One role of strategic narratives

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<sup>1</sup> Nathalie Tocci, *Framing the EU Global Strategy. A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

is also to define the international order. Given that, the so-called normative or constitutive strategic narratives could be considered by certain states, who share a different vision of the international order, as a form of information warfare. Thus, in its first part the article brings to the fore the issue of strategic narratives, which are approached as an exercise in power. Then, the article seeks to make clear the nexus between strategic narratives and security culture with a focus on the Russian Federation. And in its final section, the article argues that strategic narratives could be employed against a certain state's citizens as part of what Igor Panarin deems preventive or defensive information warfare.

### *Strategic narratives*

Have you ever thought that the national defense strategy could be construed as a story about “we, the people,” a story that “we” need to understand and to identify with? Therefore, the national defense strategy should also be a discourse that resonates with what Durkheim termed the “non-contractual part of the contract.” This is the reason why certain discourses turn into strategic narratives. Once such narratives are elaborated and disseminated in the public space, they aim at mustering certain attitudes with respect to ongoing events. And this is what normally happens if the strategic narratives are filled with ideas that touch upon already internalized values or taken-for-granted, daily benchmarks. In other words, the effectiveness of strategic narratives, understood as part of the formal security culture, is heavily reliant on the informal security culture, namely, everyday geopolitics, which is a set of social representations about who “our” enemies are, how do they threaten “us”, how should “we” defend ourselves against such enemies, how our allies expect “us” to react to certain geopolitical circumstances. Thus, strategic narratives play an important role in defining and reproducing collective identities<sup>2</sup>. Both the formal and informal strategic culture refers to the social meaning attached to statecraft, defined as the citizens’ general perception about the stature or relative power of their state in the world politics. If we work from the assumption that the objective of propaganda is to stimulate everyday value systems and we also accept that important ideas do not come out of nowhere, but rather such ideas stem from the political experience of certain states, an underlying assumption for the study of information warfare should be an institutional one. For strategic narratives never seek to produce effects in an identity vacuum.

Considering that strategic narratives draw heavily on a particular security culture, they mean more than empty rhetoric. First of all, one needs to look at strategic narratives as a power exercise that helps construct and reproduce systematically a collective meaning about the present, past and future of world politics, with the purpose of influencing the conduct of internal and international actors. When they are inward-oriented, strategic narratives aim at constructing and reproducing the “we, the people” feeling, which means that nation-building

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<sup>2</sup> David Campbell, *Writing Security. United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Manchester, University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

processes are chiefly strategic processes, especially in the case of imagined nations *par excellence*, which need to constantly define and reproduce an *external otherness* for their internal cohesion. There are at least two types of strategic narratives. The first version capitalizes on a Weberian, classic idea, according to which strategic narratives represent a pattern of behavioural power. Thus, following a particular strategic projection, A forces B to behave in a certain way the latter wouldn't have chosen. For instance, B will continue a certain external policy undertaking or allotting resources to a common political effort. This perspective, a slightly inchoate one, is enriched with the post-structuralist vision, which argues that strategic narratives represent a constitutive or ontological exercise of power.<sup>3</sup> In this particular case, strategic narratives define the very international system, its pivotal values and procedures, and also the strategic identity of the actors within the system. Briefly put, in this case strategic narratives define the order and institutionalize a particular meaning of world politics. I argue that a power centre turns into a true hegemon when its constitutive strategic narrative about the international system has been internalized, and thus has already become the norm, accepted by all the other political actors. Therefore, the ability to impose meaning, and to define the sense of order and otherness is a genuine form of power. A truly powerful international actor has the ability to cover up power relations, and turn them into everyday values that generate attitudes, which cannot be brought rationally under scrutiny. A state turns into a genuine hegemon only when its political values become universal and undisputed, a situation in which the difference between allies and enemies is barely clear. John Ikenberry equates the Weberian, behavioural strategic narrative to the *positional grand strategy* that is used by the hegemon to counter the attempt of emerging powers that are willing to challenge the former's preeminent position in the international system. Ikenberry argues that the constitutive strategic narrative is tantamount to an *environmental-type grand strategy*. The latter creates both the soft and the hard structures of international cooperation. In other words, the environmental-type grand strategy not only that defines the international order. In times of crisis, such a grand strategy also imposes the international order. Thus, every power centre that has hegemonic ambitions needs to develop both *behavioral and constitutive strategic narratives*, that is, a positional grand strategy doubled by an environmental-type one.

Considering that strategic narratives are used in order to alter the strategic conduct of certain states, what would be the difference between strategic narratives and *soft power*? And why could strategic narratives turn into information warfare? Soft power could be defined also as an effort of the civil society. Or an effort made especially by the civil society. In the case of the Russian Federation, the soft power strategy is based only on state involvement. Regarding the alleged synonymy between strategic narratives and information warfare, a short presentation of Manuel Castells's theory of communication power<sup>4</sup> might be helpful. Castells

<sup>3</sup> Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives. Communication Power and the New World Order*, London, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

works from a classic assumption, according to which communication leaves its mark on the effectiveness of power. Castells does not dispute the realist theories that lay emphasis on a version of power that depends on material factors and institutions. The novelty brought by Castells consists in the fact that classic power centres are nowadays deeply enmeshed in countless communication networks. On one hand, the abovementioned aspect ratchets up these power centres' ability to project power and influence behaviours, but on the other hand it enhances their vulnerability, because, thanks to these communication networks, they can be contested in a more effective manner. Thus, in the age of internet, "our" narratives collide more frequently with "their" narratives, because the latter can be heard or seen more easily. Consequently, the countless communication networks undercut systematically the difference between soft power, public diplomacy and information warfare. Therefore, the battle of strategic narratives should be analysed rather like a long haul competition – let's not forget the assumption of containment – and not as a competition that ends like classic warfare, with winners and losers. Of course, one needs to have the *techne*, i.e., technology, of strategic thinking, in order to scrutinize information warfare as a long term confrontation. All in all, strategic narratives mean more than soft power. For strategic narratives are frequently used to reproduce otherness, namely, for strengthening the difference between "us" and "them" – which is a process that involves the usage of classic binary attributes. Additionally, for strategic narratives alleviates the process of labeling the enemy, they can be considered as part of information warfare.

### *Security culture of the Russian Federation*

According to George Friedman, the last European continental power, namely, the Soviet Union, collapsed in 1992. By the time it collapsed, the Soviet Union was a profoundly illegitimate and unilateral power, whose political domination was guaranteed only by its nuclear arsenal. What is worth stressing is that in the early '90s, after more than five centuries, the boundaries of Russia stopped moving outward. This time, the boundaries started moving inward, and, therefore, the classic joke according to which the Soviet Union can get whoever it desires as neighbour remained without a point. In practice, the dismantling of the Soviet Union caused an unprecedented identity crisis, which, at least theoretically, could have been solved easily. The Kremlin could have started the transition from an imperial identity to a national one. But such an identity upheaval would have forced the Russian Federation to give up on its constitutive strategic narratives, the ones that had defined the identity of the international system and of the actors within the system throughout the Cold War era. The trouble was that once the Russian Federation had got divested of the civilizational identity of the its predecessor, the former strategic culture would have collapsed, since both the elite and the population had been shaped by an imperial value system, which turned the Soviet Union into the "big brother" of its neighbor states. Strategic culture and strategic narratives cannot be changed overnight. The reason is that

strategic narratives create “discursive structures”<sup>5</sup> which breed a path dependency that does not resonate perfectly with any new securitization discourse. In other words, an abandoned strategic narrative leaves behind a certain doxa, which in one way or another needs to be part of the future strategic narrative. It is exactly what happened in the Russian Federation with the well-known Kozyrev Doctrine, which emerged in 1992 and started delegitimizing the public institutions. Moreover, the Kozyrev Doctrine argued that the Russian Federation needed to get rid of its imperial past and get a national identity. For such a strategic narrative created a huge identity vacuum, an important part of the former Soviet elite experienced, one year later, a mysterious religious resurrection. This unexpected religious reawakening, that most of the former KBG officers went through, seemed to be part of a strategic plan. The plan was about forging a conservative strategic narrative, that was supposed to reinvent and relegitimate the former power elite in a rather erratic internal context. At the same time, such a conservative strategic narrative was meant to counter the Western states’ constitutive strategic narrative, which drew upon the norms and values of liberal democracy. In other words, Orthodox Christianity was to replace communism with the consequence of turning the Russian Orthodox Church into a neoimperial vector of the Russian Federation. This is how an important strategic change occurred that few people had thought about. As a consequence of this apparently new strategic narrative, and following the classic, Manichean logic of disinformation, the Russian Federation legitimized itself as the protector of traditional values, a moral power that was supposed to stave off the immoral onslaught of human rights disseminated by the Western world. Thus, nearly a century after the October Revolution, the Russian Federation launched a new civilizing mission: to re-Christianize the Western world. And this is how the traditional exceptionalism of the Russian Federation was supposed to counter the postmodern exceptionalism of the European Union.

The Russian Orthodox Church has played an important role within this civilizational fight. Its role has been to endorse the Kremlin’s foreign policy, through an asymmetric Byzantine Symphony that compromised the “internal goods” of the Church but strengthened the “external ones”. Regarding the latter, Patriarch Kirill’s Rolex might be a revealing example.

But more important are the echoes that the Byzantine Symphony has produced in the realm of foreign policy. In 2007, the Russkiy Mir was set up, a foundation that aimed at promoting the Russian language and culture at an international level, with support from both the Foreign Ministry and the Education and Science Ministry. Two years later, the collaboration between the Russkiy Mir and the Russian Orthodox Church was formalized, a fact that reveals the close cooperation between the church and the state in foreign policy matters. In 2008, Kirill, the future Patriarch, who fulfilled then his duties of General Manager of the Foreign Department of the Russian Orthodox Church, savaged the Soviet elite who had signed the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. It is also worth noting that in 2008, the

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<sup>5</sup> Lene Hansen, Ole Wæver (eds.), *European Integration and National Identity. The Challenge of the Nordic States*, London, Routledge, 2003.

year when the war in Georgia broke out, the future Patriarch forged a conservative narrative, that was included in an official document of the Russian Orthodox Church, namely, “The Basic Learnings of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the Dignity, Freedom, and Human Rights”, whose objective was to fend off the Western narrative of human rights. In short, the abovementioned document established the superiority of traditional values over human rights. The trouble with such an approach was that it reproduced a classic propaganda principle, namely, a hermetic Manichaeism, which made the dialogue between human rights and traditional values impossible. To a certain extent, the conservative narrative forged by the future Patriarch Kirill draws on the strategic narratives that had been used by the Soviet Union to define both its identity and the international order. In essence, the strategic culture of the Soviet Union had been characterized by two types of strategic narratives. The first one, a rather flexible ideological line, was elaborated by Lenin and developed by Bukharin, Litvinov and Khrushchev, and then turned by Gorbachev into the well-known Sinatra Doctrine. This strategic narrative emphasized the value of peaceful coexistence, but at the same time worked from the assumption that the socialist system was superior politically and socially in comparison to the capitalist one. In other words, this strategic narrative rested on the assumption that the Soviet Union had a civilizing mission to fulfill, but the assumption was flexible enough to allow the Soviet elite to engage with its Western counterpart in negotiations about nuclear disarmament. The other strategic narrative, a rather bellicose one, was constructed under Stalin. Then, it was taken over by Brejnev, under whose rule Jdanov codified the two blocs’ doctrine. This strategic narrative rejected any collaboration with the Western bloc. On closer examination, one can notice that the conservative strategic narrative forged by the Russian Orthodox Church resembles, to a certain extent, the bellicose strategic narrative used by the Soviet elite under Stalin and Brejnev. In line with the latter strategic narrative are President Putin’s statements about the symbiotic relation between the nuclear shield and the orthodox shield, a necessary condition for the sovereignty and security of the Russian Federation. In 2009, on the occasion of a visit made to the Severodvinsk shipyard, Patriarch Kirill expanded on the abovementioned statements of President Putin. Patriarch Kirill pointed out, while onboard of a nuclear submarine, that nuclear missiles could be used for defending the orthodox values. Of course, such a statement could be assessed as either dangerous or funny. But what matters for this article is that such statements are in line with a specific strategic culture, and that they draw on normalised or internalized values. And, as it’s been already stated, the real objective of propaganda is to strengthen and capitalize on internalized values systems. Moreover, one could say that such statements are part of an information warfare waged by the Russian elite against the Russian citizens.

The strategic culture of the Russian Federation has been always characterized by both an inferiority feeling, which was triggered by the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent loss of the great power status, and a superiority feeling, the latter one being constantly nourished by the Russian messianism of the Third Rome. The Soviet doctrine of the “world revolution” drew heavily on this messianism, whilst nowadays the latter is employed by the conservative strategic

narrative which depicts the Russian Federation as a conservative pole, whose mission is to re-Christianize the European Union. The trouble with such a normative strategic narrative is that the Russian Federation's capabilities, especially the economic, social and military ones, are no match for its ideological prowess. The consequence of this cleavage between values and means is the emergence of collective resentment, that has been shrewdly directed by political elites against both the Western states and Soviet politicians, held responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union. With respect to the latter, Khrushchev and Gorbachev have been the usual suspects. This collective resentment has been employed and reproduced through tactics of strategic influence to legitimize, first of all, the idea that the Russian Federation should become a major player at a regional and global level, and, second of all, that the Russian Federation needs to become a military power. At the same time, conservative strategic narratives that systematically nourish this collective resentment have become an ideological shield that fends off effectively competing strategic narratives, the ones that disseminate the central values of liberal democracy. Instead, by legitimizing a "sovereign democracy," the conservative strategic narratives stress the need for a national path toward democracy. In a "paternal autocracy," as Charles Kupchan labeled the Russian Federation's political system, the so-called middle class consists mainly of individuals who work for the state. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that for most members of the middle class the values of civil society exert no attraction. Thus, Western strategic narratives, which revolve around the values of liberal democracy, have had a very narrow public to influence. The trouble with Western strategic narratives is that they have had convinced those few Russian citizens with liberal convictions not to protest against the "paternal autocracy"<sup>6</sup> in the Russian Federation, but to emigrate to Western countries. Therefore, Dmitri Trenin's conclusion is straightforward. "There are few illusions in the West that it can influence Russian domestic politics from outside."<sup>7</sup> According to Trenin, the only thing that the Western states can do is to counter the Russian Federation's strategic narratives directed toward ex-communist states, with a special focus on those states that still have a Russian minority. And this is what worries the political elite of most of the ex-communist states. The conservative strategic narrative, that constantly reproduces and legitimises the paternal autocracy of the Russian Federation, could turn itself into an export good. "The message to the post-Soviet elites is to be a ruthless survivor like Putin or Lukashenka, rather than a loser like Kuchma and Shevardnadze. The message to local masses is pride in not being lectured by the hypocritical West."<sup>8</sup> Trenin adds fuel to the fire and argues that conservative strategic narratives exported by the Kremlin could become effective especially in the "near abroad" countries, "which are disillusioned with globalization and the European project. A more successful Russia and smarter Russian policy could in the future capitalize more in these

<sup>6</sup> Charles Kupchan, *No One's World. The West, The Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitrios Triantaphyllou (ed.), *The Security Context in the Black Sea Region*, New York, Routledge, 2010, kindle edition, location 2694.

areas.<sup>9</sup> The following section addresses the strategic influence that the Kremlin has been wielding against its own citizens, whose perceptions of the Russian Federation as a fortress under siege by the Western world are constantly reinforced.

*The Russian Federation wages information  
warfare against its own citizens*

The experts of the abovementioned undertaking are Igor Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin. The former is Professor at the Diplomatic Academy of the Foreign Ministry and constantly reinforces conspiracy theories regarding the collapse of the USSR. Igor Panarin purveys the so-called “geopolitics of distrust,” which is another term for the well-known concept of the politics of fear. It’s already a common place in the realm of social sciences that in societies dominated by distrust conspiracy theories are embraced by both the educated and the less educated public. Distrust has been part and parcel of the Russian Federation’s strategic culture, a trait that George Kennan had noticed in the 1940s. The propensity for hard power, the doctrine of power verticality, the preeminence of statist visions, the desire to make diplomatic relations among states rest on the political principles of the 1950s and 1960s, when lack of intrusion into one state’s internal affairs ruled, but also the contempt for civil society’s mechanisms, reveal not only an administrative vulnerability, such as low infrastructural capacity, but also a deep culture of distrust, which has become a normal or daily value in the Russian Federation’s strategic culture. According to Bobo Lo<sup>10</sup>, the Russian Federation’s culture of distrust represents an unhealed trauma caused by the Mongol invasions, Napoleon Bonaparte’s expeditions and, last but not least, the Barbarossa Operation. When a strategic narrative stems from a culture of distrust, it is easy to explain why normative discourses tend to be overdimensioned and aggressive. Turning back to Igor Panarin, he has written some successful books about information warfare. One of them, entitled *The First Global Information Warfare. The Collapse of the Soviet Union*, argues that the information warfare against the Soviet Union was launched in 1943 at the initiative of Winston Churchill, whose plans were fended off successfully under Stalin.<sup>11</sup> According to Panarin, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was organized by Western secret services, which managed to promote globalist trotskyists, such as Khrushchev and Gorbachev, as leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Beside the contentious content, Panarin’s book seeks to demonstrate that the Soviet Union’s enemy was not a particular state, but rather a civilization, namely, Western civilization. Undoubtedly, Panarin’s vision is on the same page as the 19<sup>th</sup> century perspectives shared by panslavists, such as Konstantin Leontiev and Nikolay Danilevsky, who also drew massively on a civilizational narrative. According to Leontiev and Danilevsky, Russia represented a civilizational matrix that was completely different from its Western counterpart, the latter one being

<sup>9</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, London, Chatham House, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine. Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015.

perceived not only as different but mainly as hostile. In another book, entitled *Information Warfare, PR, and World Politics*, Panarin addressed the information warfare launched by the Western world against the Soviet Union in the early '90s. Panarin is confident that the Russian Federation is able to stave off such an attack and that, by 2020, it will prevail. The book stands out because the author suggests there is a difference between defensive and offensive information warfare. The former aims at insulating the citizens' conscience against pernicious information flows particularly when general elections are organized in the Russian Federation. The latter is waged against the citizens of other countries.

The "civilizational vision" Panarin has come up with is enhanced by Aleksandr Dugin, a geopolitician who claims in his books that the KGB was penetrated during the Cold War era by "Atlanticists," of whom the most important representatives were Khrushchev and Gorbachev. Dugin has capitalized massively on the ideas of classic "Eurasianists," such as Saviṭki, Trubeṭkoi, and Vernadski, but ends up advancing, exactly like Panarin, a civilizational popular geopolitics, which presents the Eurasian space, which is organized politically as a neoconservative order, colliding with the Atlantic space, so that the former preserves tradition, conservative values and true freedom. The consistency, or, better stated, the lack of academic consistency, of Dugin's geopolitical vision is debatable. What matters in this case is rather the form. For the geopolitical discourse, with its apparent scientific objectivity, which is endorsed by different maps, turns itself into a strategic culture enhancer. Better stated, such a geopolitical approach reinforces an imperial collective identity. To that end, Dugin employs essentialist visions that depicts civilizations as shapeless structures, that do not admit contestation from within. Moreover, such a "geopolitical" perspective securitizes. In other words, it makes civilizations look monolithic – in reality, they are not such structures, separated by hermetic boundaries written in stone. In short, Dugin's geopolitical discourse is replete with the clichés of classic realism, a paradigm that likens nation-states to billiard balls. The difference is that, this time, whole civilizations have been turned into billiard balls, in the same way that Samuel Huntington did. By capitalizing on the tricks of symbolic geography, such a geopolitical discourse is devoid of any academic value. In turn, Dugin's geopolitical narrative securitizes world politics and constantly reproduces, by drawing on the classic friend/enemy antinomy of Carl Schmitt, the general perception of the Russian Federation as a "besieged fortress". Thus, the Russian Federation's citizens are constantly reminded who the enemy is, how this enemy has treated the Russian people throughout the centuries, and how such an enemy needs to be handled. Simultaneously, Dugin's discourse legitimizes the verticality of power or, as Charles Kupchan has put it, the "paternalist autocracy" of the Russian Federation. Such a perspective also legitimizes statist visions that endorse important military outlays. At the same time, an apparent academic discourse, which is accepted by the political elite, constantly shapes the informal security imaginary. The following example is revealing in this sense. Aleksandr Dugin has organized a network of Eurasianist intellectuals who aim at competing academically with its Atlanticist counterpart through dictionaries, encyclopedias,

participations at international conferences. The intellectual benchmark of this Eurasianist network seems to be the so-called “fourth political theory.” Coined by Dugin himself, this theory works from the assumption that the major ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are not available anymore. Therefore, the fourth theory stresses the need for a postliberal and neoconservative state. Of course, the institutional embodiment of such a state is the Russian Federation, a revolutionary force that advocates a multipolar and just world, but also supports conservative values and “genuine” freedom. On closer look, though, Dugin’s “fourth political theory” disseminates the pivotal ideas included in the Russian Federation’s foreign policy concept, which was launched in 2013. This foreign policy concept revolves around two main ideas: the decline of the Western world and the “Rising Rest.” According to Dugin, the “Rising Rest” will corrode the hegemony of the U.S. with the consequence of the emergence of regional hegemons, namely, power centres that will project civilizational identities anchored in traditional values, that sharply contrast with post-national strategic narratives forged by both the European Union and the U. S. The trouble with Panarin and Dugin’s perspectives is that they securitize. In other words, such perspectives tend to turn a rather porous civilizational border between “us” and “them” into a hermetic one. Thus, public perceptions are altered, and a symbolic border is transformed into a real divide. Normally, the grammar of securitization is closely followed by the discourse of de-securitization. The latter, though, is barely credible – in the case it emerges – in societies dominated by the culture of distrust and also by strategic narratives that promote closed collective identities specific rather to pre-modern polities. This popular geopolitics endorsed by Panarin and Dugin is then sprinkled with Patriarch Kirill’s discourses that emphasize the preeminence of traditional values over human rights and project a distorted image of Western civilization, that is systematically depicted by *Russia Today* as dominated by deep social inequality and massive unemployment, replete with homeless people, and still affected by the 2008 financial crisis. These conservative narratives that have been shaping the informal security culture in the Russian Federation are doubled by foreign policy discourses. Thus, such a propaganda ends up creating classic civilizational differences along the axis good vs. evil. All this effort, that is also projected onto neighbouring countries that host Russian minorities, is part of what Panarin deems preventive or defensive information warfare, that seeks to insulate the Russian citizens, especially during general elections, against Western propaganda flows. Under such circumstances, it is no surprise that the Ukrainian crisis has been construed through such normative narratives, which have presented the annexation of Crimea as a civilizational victory of the Kremlin.

### *In lieu of conclusion*

Civilizational strategic narratives can be easily contested from an academic perspective. Or they could be labeled as populism. Nevertheless, once such strategic grammars have been elaborated and projected, they endow a political actor with *strategic individuality*, namely, the ability to alter other actors’

identity and, at the same time, the capacity to fend off competing civilizational narratives. The reason is that strategic individuality allows a state to either define the international order or to have a minimum autonomy in the process of defining it. In internet connected societies, for they play simultaneously a role of legitimation and contestation, strategic narratives constantly collide and thus they breed a war for the heart and minds of individuals.

A question that one needs to pose is how a state surrounded by adversaries that project competing strategic narratives should respond. Such a state could respond in many ways. First of all, by elaborating a credible strategic narrative, which is in line with both its informal and formal security culture, reinforced by a gradual increase in the wealth of its own citizens. Second of all, a state could respond through a strategy of de-politization that could have dire effects in the long run. Social demoralization and the strengthening of a fatalist political culture, that projects the image that nothing can be done, could be some pernicious effects of de-politization. The trouble with de-politization is that it hampers the emergence of collective action. Third of all, a state could win the competition with unfriendly strategic narratives by reforming the social institutions that the grammar of an adversary capitalizes on. For, as I have already mentioned, strategic narratives don't produce effects into an identity vacuum. Given that, a competition with a threatening strategic narrative could be won not necessarily by blocking or condemning it. The process of silent penetration of the frontiers is difficult to stop in open polities. Therefore, such polities need to defend their security by constantly reforming the constituents of the institutional environment a competing strategic narrative draws on. All in all, the realm of international relations could bring information warfare under scrutiny through a combination of constructivism and post-structuralism. From a methodological perspective, information warfare could be explored through a mixture of institutional analysis, history of security ideas and discourse analysis.

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