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Conceptualization of Russia's Strategic Narratives in the Full-Scale Russo-Ukrainian War

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Russia's strategic communication in the 2022's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has relied on specific strategic narratives as well as features of strategic culture. And while there are several publications on both strategic narratives and strategic culture of Russia, these two compatible concepts are not always integrated for effective strategic communication analysis. And as argued in this study, there is also a lack of more generalized and structured outline of Russia's strategic narratives. The objective of this research is to provide comprehensive conceptualization of Russia's strategic narratives in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war by bridging strategic narratives with strategic culture concept and by critical synthesis of the existing theoretical knowledge. Firstly, the study provides critical review of the relevant scholarly literature on the Russian strategic narrative/culture in the context of the full-scale war. Consequently, perspectives of strategic narratives and strategic culture are aligned for the purposes of the research. Secondly, relying on a combination of inductive and deductive text analysis with thematic coding, theoretical synthesis is conducted. Findings indicate that Russia's strategic narratives are divided into the two general categories: "great power" narrative and "external threat, versus West" narrative. Both strategic narratives include three levels of sub-narratives and serve as a base for Russia's strategic communication in the war.

Keywords: strategic narratives; strategic culture; strategic communication; framing; Russo-Ukrainian war

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Концептуалізація російських стратегічних наративів у повномасштабній російсько-українській війні

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Стратегічна комунікація Росії у повномасштабному вторгненні в Україну 2022 року покладалася на специфічні стратегічні наративи, а також особливості стратегічної культури. Хоча існує низка публікацій як на тему стратегічних наративів, так і стратегічної культури, ці два сумісні концепти не завжди інтегруються для ефективного аналізу стратегічної комунікації. Як стверджується в цьому дослідженні, існує також і нестача більш узагальненого та структурованого викладу стратегічних наративів Росії. Завдання цього дослідження – запропонувати комплексну концептуалізацію стратегічних наративів Росії у повномасштабній Російсько-українській війні через поєднання стратегічних наративів із концепцією стратегічної культури та через критичний синтез наявних теоретичних відомостей. По-перше, у дослідженні проводиться критичний огляд релевантної наукової літератури, яка стосується російських стратегічних наративів/культури в контексті повномасштабної війни. У результаті для цілей дослідження поєднуються перспективи стратегічних наративів і стратегічної культури. По-друге, здійснюється теоретичний синтез, що базується на комбінації індуктивного й дедуктивного аналізу тексту з тематичним кодуванням. Знахідки вказують на те, що стратегічні наративи поділяються на дві загальні категорії: наратив «великої держави» і наратив «загроза ззовні, протистояння Заходу». Обидва стратегічні наративи включають у себе три рівні субнаративів і слугують як основа для стратегічної комунікації Росії у війні.

Ключові слова: стратегічні наративи; стратегічна культура; стратегічна комунікація; фреймінг; російсько-українська війна

Having launched the full-scale invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has been articulating certain strategic narratives to explain and to advocate the war to the Russian public as well as to other states' governments, diplomatic institutions, and international communities in general. It could be argued that Russia's wartime strategic communication, framing, and information warfare might rely upon some of its strategic narratives (Fridrichová, 2023; Pupcenoks, Fisher & Klein, 2024). Then, to understand Russia's strategic communications in the full-scale war, one might need to look at the strategic narratives of Russia.

The topic of Russia' strategic narratives and general communication-related standpoints were discussed in some of the recent scholarly publications within the media and communications field (Götz & Staun, 2022; Herd, 2022; Aspriadis, 2023; Shaheen, 2023; Bradshaw, Elswah, Haque, & Quelle, 2024). However, the knowledge base of Russia's strategic communication's standpoints includes two theoretical gaps. Firstly, Russia's messages, framing, reasoning in the context of the full-scale invasion is analyzed using two distinct concepts: strategic narratives (e. g. Aspriadis, 2023) and strategic culture (e. g. Herd, 2022). As argued in this paper, strategic culture and strategic narratives could provide rather common insights in the context of Russia's strategic communication. Therefore, it would be reasonable to re-align and combine theoretical knowledge on Russia's strategic culture and strategic narratives.

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Secondly, the set of strategic narratives (or features of strategic culture) that is attributed to Russia and their categorization somehow varies across publications. Respectively, the overall need for generalization emerges in terms of Russia's strategic narratives.

This article is aimed at comprehensive conceptualization of the strategic narratives which Russia has relied on in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. This goal is achieved by synthesis of the existing evidence. Firstly, the article suggests a critical review of the recent scholarly literature on the corresponding topic, where the key theoretical developments and gaps are highlighted. Secondly, with consideration of these developments and theoretical gaps, evidence on Russian strategic narratives in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war is synthesized into a unified model with an application of the qualitative inductive/deductive text analysis combination.

Theoretical background

Strategic narratives. Strategic narratives could be viewed as "compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn" Freedman (2006, p. 22). Another frequent definition of strategic narratives was coined by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle (2013, p. 2): "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" and "tools for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate." Thus, strategic narratives are viewed as a tool of contestation and soft power in international relations (see Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014). Furthermore, three levels of strategic narratives are defined (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014):

1. System narratives, or international system narratives – narratives which describe the structure of the world power, international relations, and its key actors.
2. Identity narratives, or national narratives – narratives that explain nations' origins, identities, values.
3. Issues narratives – narratives that promote certain policies, ways of achieving political goals.
4. Finally, building up on Burke's (1969) notions, Roselle et al. (2014) describe four core components of strategic narratives:

- character, actors,
- setting, environment, space,
- conflict, action,
- (suggested) resolution.

Strategic culture. Usually, three generations of strategic culture studies were mentioned (Johnston, 1995, 1998; Shaheen, 2023), though some recent developments describe the fourth generation (Hugh, 2023). *The first generation* started around late 1970s-1980s, and, according to Johnston (1995), it is represented foremost by Gray's (1971), Jones's (1990), and Snyder's (1977) works. Snyder's (1977, p. 8) classical definition of strategic culture views it as "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other."

Overall, the first generation "focused mostly on trying to explain why the Soviets and the Americans apparently thought differently about strategy in the nuclear age" and "attributed these differences to variations in deeply rooted historical experiences, political culture, and geography, among other variables" (Johnston, 1998, p. 5). Hency, state behavior is generally culturally defined.

The second generation of strategic cultures studies (a Gramscian or rather neo-Gramscian perspective that emerged in 1980's) shifted attention towards strategic culture's role as of a state's instrument (Johnston, 1995, 1998; Hugh, 2023; Klein, 1988). For this generation, Bradley

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S. Klein is one of the central scholars. Namely, Klein (1988, p. 136) put forward that strategic culture "refers to the way in which a modern hegemonic state relies upon internationally deployed force" and legitimizes violence. Apparently, strategic culture includes state's war-making style and relates to the state's geopolitical position as well as "political ideologies of public discourse that help define occasions as worthy of military involvement" (Klein, 1988, p. 136).

The third generation, which emerged in the 1990s, seemingly resembled some of the first generation's features and recognizes traceable effects of cultural precondition on the state's behavior, making more focus on the relations between dependent and independent variables in this context (Johnston, 1995, 1998; Hugh, 2023). Alastair Iain Johnston, for instance, is seen as a third-generation scholar (Shaheen, 2023; Hugh, 2023). Mirroring Clifford Geertz's (1973, p. 90) definition of religion as of a cultural system, Johnston (1995, p. 46) suggested that strategic culture is "an integrated 'system of symbols (e.g., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors) which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realistic and efficacious.'"

Finally, more recent strategic culture studies that are labeled as *the fourth generation* imply that strategic culture contrasts the idea of a single, stable culture or cultural narrative (Hugh, 2023). In contrast, it proposes that strategic culture "is composed of many subcultural narratives that are continually changing and adapting, meaning that the strategic culture narrative impacting contemporary action is often situationally determined" (Hugh, 2023, p. 42).

Götz & Staun (2022) build their own definition of strategic culture precisely on the fourth generation's works. Hence, strategic culture is viewed as "a set of discursive expressions and narratives related to security-military affairs, which are shared by a country's political leaders and elites" Götz & Staun (2022, p. 482). Götz & Staun (2022, p. 482) add that "these discursive expressions and narratives are rooted in socially constructed interpretations of history, geography, and domestic traditions."

Effectively, fourth-generation notions and specifically Götz & Staun's (2022) definition of strategic culture bridge the concepts of strategic culture and strategic narratives. Strategic culture thus includes narratives and might be expressed in a form of strategic narratives. Hence, this research's methodology relies on this notion.

Previous attempts of strategic narratives/culture listing. Some of the recent publications included descriptions and lists of Russia's strategic narratives/features of strategic communication in the context of the full-scale invasion. Moreover, it is suggested that Russia carried over some of its existing, years-lasting strategic narratives to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Fridrichová, 2023; Pupcenoks, et al., 2024; Oates & Ramsay, 2024). Hence, some Russian strategic narratives from previous years and decades might need to be reviewed. Nevertheless, descriptions of strategic narratives/strategic culture elements gravitate towards rather common characteristics of Russia's strategic communication, yet the labels, groupings, and contents of the strategic narratives differ.

It should be noted as well that there are virtually **three perspectives** (approaches) towards Russia's strategic standpoints that might have a relation to its strategic communication in the war. Within the first perspective, the researchers attempt to include both concepts. Götz & Staun (2022), for example, "identify two primary strands in Russian strategic culture" and view narratives within these strands. The second perspective deals with analyzing Russia's strategic narratives directly (e. g. Aspriadis, 2023). As for the third perspective, it tackles the issues of strategic culture and thus uses alternative concepts for what other researchers, hypothetically, might view as strategic narratives. For example, Herd's (2022) complex overview of Russia's strategic cul-

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ture tackles what they call «six major inter-enabling elements that demonstrate strong continuity to the present day» (p. 30).

Götz & Staun (2022), who *combine both perspectives*, categorize Russian strategic narratives into the two strands which characterize Russia's strategic culture. Firstly, the category of "vulnerability to external attack" (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 484) involves Russia's ideas of being constantly under threat from the enemies – specifically, the West, which, from Russia's standpoint, might even cause internal unrest in Russia. The second strand is the narrative of Russia essentially having "great power status and regional domination" (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 485).

Oates & Ramsay (2024) suggest that there are four *strategic narratives* that have been used by Russia for years and were used in the full-scale invasion as well. These four narratives are listed as (Oates & Ramsay, 2024, p. 69–70, relying on Oates and Steiner, 2018; Steiner and Oates, 2019):

- "Russia as a resurgent great nation,"
- "the West and NATO are out to destroy Russia,"
- "Russia protects Russians no matter where they live,"
- "Western democracy is flawed and failing."

Aspriadis (2023, p. 33), on the other hand, outlines three strategic narratives that "aim to justify and legitimize the actions taken against Ukraine", as deduced from Vladimir Putin's rhetoric:

1. "The (De-) Nazification of Ukraine and the terrorist threat posed in Russian Boarders."
2. "The "Empire of Lies" and the West's empty promise."
3. "The historical rehabilitation of the errors of the Soviet Union with Ukraine."

Bradshaw et al. (2024), Fridrichová (2023), and Snigyr (2023) appeal to the system/identity/issue strategic narratives model (see Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014) to categorize and analyze Russia's wartime strategic narratives. Particularly, Bradshaw et al. (2024) identify three general narratives (or rather categories of sub-narratives) in Russian state-related media's coverage of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war:

- the end of the west (system narratives) – sub-narratives that forecast the decline of the West's political leadership and breakdown of what Russia considers the Western hegemony as results of the war,
- "us-versus-West" (identity narratives) – sub-narratives that revolve around picturing Russia as the hero in the war, its care for civilians and world prosperity, as well as those that depict the West as villains (Ukrainians, specifically, as war criminals and nazis),
- the West's fault (issues narratives) – sub-narratives that blame the Western states for escalation of the war, claim that the West has interest in prolonged war and does not allow diplomatic solutions.

Then, like Oates & Ramsay (2024), Fridrichová (2023) states that Russia used some of its long-standing strategic narratives within the 2022's full-scale invasion of Ukraine without much adaptation, causing their ineffectiveness and failures in strategic communication. According to Fridrichová (2023), those are strategic narratives of three categories:

- System: "Russia communicates a multi-polar world where the influence of the West is waning, but its interventionism and human rights engagement prevents the natural multi-polar balance from occurring" (Fridrichová, 2023, p. 285, based on Kurowska, 2014 and Averre and Davies, 2015).
- National: narrative of Russia being a "great power responsible for European and global order as a positive feature of its past and as Russia's most distinguishing feature" (Clunan, 2009, p. 206-207, as cited in Fridrichová, 2023, p. 285).
- Issue: narratives of historical revisionism of Ukraine's independence status and portrayal of Ukrainians as nazis.

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Finally, Snigyr (2023) provides a comprehensive overview and generalization of Russian 2022-2023's strategic narratives since the start of the full-scale invasion based on statements by Vladimir Putin, Sergei Lavrov (Russia's Foreign Minister), and a few Russian state-affiliated researchers. Snigyr (2023) thus defines three general strategic narratives and two levels of sub-narratives. The three strategic narratives are (Snigyr, 2023, p. 4):

- System: "The international order is changing, and the West (the liberal world) is trying to preserve its hegemony."
- National: "Russia is a sovereign and self-sustained, original civilization, based on traditional values, a center of the Russian world / leader of regional integration (Big Eurasia)."
- Issue: "The new world order requires conceptual, systemic and structural changes".

Sub-narratives of the international system narrative involve notions of Russia standing against the West, being the West's victim, denying Ukraine's sovereignty, protecting Russian people and fighting back against "the Nazis" in Ukraine (Snigyr, 2023, p. 4). At the same time, issues narrative's sub-narratives revolve around legitimization of ideas about state sovereignty's dominance over human rights, high legitimacy of the state's interests and formation of the new world order.

Yet, Shaheen (2023) and Herd (2022) describe Russia's strategic behavior primarily from the *strategic culture standpoint*. Shaheen (2023) thus lists four features of Russia's strategic culture:

1. Logic of expanding Russia's territory (conducting external aggression) as a mean of securing its own territory.
2. Glorification of the history, past, and traditions.
3. "Great power" status of the state.
4. "Autocratic political culture" (p. 249).

In the introduction to the analysis of these features, it is induced that "Russian strategic culture is founded on a long history of wars that simultaneously instilled an enduring sense of insecurity and a glorious past to which Russia continues to cling" (Shaheen, 2023, p. 249). Shaheen (2023, p. 249) also comments that such narrative is "based on Russian identity as a "great power" and an autocratic political culture to which Russian leaders continue to belong."

In a common way, Herd (2022) describes six elements of Russia's strategic culture:

1. Ideas about being a "great power".
2. Belief that external actors will take advantage if Russia is weak internally.
3. Idea that "respect for Russian great power status ensures stability, and respect is ultimately generated through a healthy regard, even fear, of Russian power" (34).
4. "Threat perception and strategic psychology born to strategic vulnerability and anxiety" (35).
5. Contestation with the West.
6. Perception of Russia as of civilizational leader and Orthodox messiah-state.

Additionally, Herd (2022, p. 45-46) generalizes three "historical lessons" that summarize Russian strategic culture:

- "Russian weakness invites external attack,"
- "Great power eternal Russia,"
- "Russia on the right side of history – creator of history."

Overall, several theoretical gaps (challenges) might be deduced from the critical literature analysis. *Firstly*, despite the different perspectives (the perspective of strategic narratives and the perspective of strategic culture), some notions about Russia's strategic behavior are rather common. For example, Herd's (2022) and Götz & Staun's (2022) works both describe Russia's ideas of being a great-power state (even though the former relies on the strategic culture concepts, whereas the later involves strategic narratives). Yet, the evidence on Russia's strategic narratives from these two perspectives is not fully bridged and synthesized in one framework.

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Secondly, the reviewed works suggest slightly different combinations of strategic narratives. Therefore, there is a need to group the existing groupings of strategic narratives.

Thirdly, approaches to categorization of Russian strategic narratives and their elements differ. For instance, Bradshaw et al. (2024) treat the three key strategic narratives as categories and focus on several sub-narratives, whereas Götz & Staun (2022) define a few narratives that belong to the two larger categories (strands of strategic culture). At the same time, Aspriadis (2023) simply describes Russia's three key strategic narratives.

To continue with categorization issue, the distinction between system, identity, and issues strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014) might be a useful approach, yet some of the strategic narratives could be too complex for such strict differentiation. Furthermore, according to Roselle et al. (2014), strategic narratives on the three levels can be interrelated. For example, Russia's antagonistic relations with the West are mentioned both as system narratives (like narrative of Russia being the West's victim, as described by Snigyr, 2023) and identity narratives (like "us-versus-West" narrative mentioned by Bradshaw et al., 2024). Then, it is possible that this narrative overarches both levels of narratives. Moreover, Snigyr (2023, p. 5) mentions the case of "Russia is the leader of the illiberal world" sub-narrative, which belongs simultaneously to the category of international system narratives and the category of national narratives.

Overall, respectively, the approach to categorization of strategic narratives should be retackled. Perhaps, instead of placing narratives within the three-level system, there should be an alternative. One such approach could be viewing strategic narratives as such that overarch all three levels and placing each sub-narrative on a certain level within the overarching strategic narrative.

The *fifth* challenge is the vast number of items – categories, strategic narratives, and sub-narratives – that researchers might derive from the literature discussed above. In other words, scoping these items and providing a more general description of Russia's strategic narratives might become problematic if one wishes to encapsule the most of the mentioned works' content. In addition, it might be difficult to distinguish small-scale strategic narratives or sub-narratives from other concepts like stories, messages, frames, or ideas. For example, Bradshaw et al.'s (2024) research provides broad description of Russian strategic narratives' using terms like "stories" alongside "sub-narratives". Arguably, Russian propaganda's story of "Russia's intention to attend diplomatic meetings and summits" (Bradshaw et al.'s, 2024, p. 9) might seem more like an idea, view, or frame that Russian propagandists try to promote rather than strategic narrative – a compelling explanatory story (see Freedman, 2006). Therefore, an attempt of more generalized conceptualization of Russia's strategic narratives should be made.

Method

Existing evidence was refined into the generalized model of Russian strategic narratives using synthesis method. This process relied on the theoretical implications and gaps that had been previously highlighted in the critical literature review. Overall, 8 works were selected as a theoretical-empirical base for further synthesis: Götz & Staun (2022), Aspriadis (2023), Oates & Ramsay (2024), Bradshaw et al. (2024), Fridrichová (2023), Snigyr (2023), Shaheen (2023), and Herd (2022). These papers were selected with consideration of their relevance to the topic and having been published after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (since February 24, 2022).

While the mentioned papers suggested somewhat different listing and approaches to strategic narratives' categorizing, it was decided to structure the synthesis process with the combination of inductive and deductive qualitative text analysis. The analysis itself used rationale from

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the thematic coding technique (see Williams & Moser, 2019). This was helpful to standardize the strategic narratives lists and to induce their structure. Respectively, scholarly works were treated as analyzed texts from which themes were coded.

Firstly, following Williams & Moser's (2019) recommendations, strategic narratives were coded and unified into sub-narratives (categories, axial coding) and strategic narratives (themes, selective coding). A few rules were pre-established, namely:

- What the authors treated explicitly as narratives was approached as narratives.
- Shaheen's (2023) features of Russian strategic culture and Herd's (2022) inter-enabling elements of Russia's strategic cultures were treated as implied strategic narratives.
- Then, categorical labels, descriptions, generalizations like the ones that Götz & Staun (2022) call the two strands of Russian strategic culture, notions that Herd (2022) called historical lessons of Russian strategic culture, and stories/sub-narratives in Bradshaw et al.'s paper (2024) were treated as labeling hints during coding stages.

Secondly, deductive coding was applied: the sub-narratives were labeled as system, identity, or issue narrative, grounding on Miskimmon et al. (2013), Roselle et al. (2014) and in concordance with Bradshaw et al.'s (2024), Fridrichová's (2023), and Snigyr's (2023) approaches. The generalized strategic narratives (themes), however, were treated as overarching narratives that are not limited to only one narrative level.

Subsequently, the themes and categories were synthesized into the refined model of Russia's strategic narratives.

Results and discussion

Overall, 41 initial entries ("cases") had been derived from the literature for further coding. Then, based on the inductive/deductive text analysis and synthesis, two Russian strategic narratives that are related to the full-scale invasion were induced: the **"great power"** narrative and **"external threat, Russia versus the West"** narrative (Table 1).

Table 1.
Russia's strategic narratives and sub-narratives (by levels)

Level of narratives	**Great power**	**External threat, Russia versus the West**
	Sub-narratives	
System	Great power Russia and the new world order	Threat from the West
Identity	Great power Russia – the center of civilization and the nation of the glorious past	Us VS the West
Issue	Fixing historical errors to restore the great Russia and the right world order	Strength and expansion are needed to counter external threat and protect Russian people
Based on Götz & Staun (2022), Herd (2022), Shaheen (2023), Aspriadis (2023), Snigyr (2023), Fridrichová (2023), Bradshaw et al. (2024), Oates & Ramsay (2024); Miskimmon et al. (2013), Roselle et al. (2014)		

Both strategic narratives overarch the three levels of narratives. Hence, each strategic narrative contains 3 specific level-related sub-narratives. Although, a remark should be made that the two generalized strategic narratives seem to be closely connected, intertwined, and, quite possibly, mutually amplifying (Snigyr, 2023 implies on a common dynamic between narratives).

Great power. "Great power" strategic narrative is an umbrella strategic narrative that highlights Russia's perception of being the great-power state, center of the Russian/Orthodox civili-

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zation with its glorious history, and a key geopolitical player that fights for the justful new world order (Götz & Staun, 2022); Herd, 2022; Snigyr, 2023). It encompasses three sub-narratives:
1. Great power Russia and the new world order.
2. Great power Russia – the center of civilization and the nation of the glorious past.
3. Fixing historical errors to restore the great Russia and the right world order.

The first sub-narrative – *"great power state and the new world order"* – is a system narrative. From this perspective, Russia as a great power state provisions the breakdown of the old world order as Russia's war against Ukraine "was altering the structure, characteristics, and future of global governance away" from what Russia believes to be the "Western hegemony" (Bradshaw et al., 2024, p. 7-8). It is claimed that European states have no real sovereignty, being dependent on the US, and that the current world order as well as the Western democracy are doomed (Snigyr, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024; Oates & Ramsay, 2024). Accordingly, Russia positions itself as the as "the leader of the resistance movement against US dominance and as the head of the 'sovereignty movement'" (Snigyr, 2023, p. 12).

The second sub-narrative – *"great power Russia – the center of civilization and the nation of the glorious past"* is an identity (national) narrative. Firstly, it includes idea of Russia being the great power state on the international arena in addition to being a regional leader (Herd, 2022; Götz & Staun, 2022).

> Russia insists that it plays a primary role in international relations as a 'great power'. Russian contemporary national security decision-makers argue that a rules-based balance of power system, exemplifed by the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the Yalta–Potsdam conferences (1945), brought stability, predictability and peace to international relations, as Russia in the process twice saved Europe from itself (Herd, 2022, p. 30).

Secondly, Russia presents itself as the center of the great "Russian world"/Russian civilization, and the carrier of the Orthodox values with glorious past (Herd, 2022; Shaheen, 2023; Snigyr, 2023). The "glorious past" notion is a fundamental element in this sub-narrative while it links modern Russia's imperialist ambitions with imperialism of its past – essentially the Russian Empire and Soviet eras (Shaheen, 2023). This focus on historical glory also seems to relate to Russia's communicated vision of being a resurgent great nation which will find a way to re-establish its great status:

> The brief history of the Russian state […] underscores the core grievance of a once-powerful nation that suffered economic, political, and military collapse within the lifetime of most of its current leaders and many of its citizens. Just as powerful American traditions were forged in an 18th- century revolution, the twin convictions of past humiliation and desire for a return to world dominance are authoritative elements in Russian political life (Oates & Ramsay, 2024, p. 70).

In its turn, ideas of the national resurgence lead towards the third sub-narrative – *"fixing historical errors to restore the great Russia"*, an issue narrative. It refers to de-facto conquering Ukraine, returning it to Russia's geopolitical axis, and thus reconciling Russia with what it claims to be its historical territories.

Also, this sub-narrative implies that Russian invasion should be viewed not only as a matter of Russia trying to intimidate the West, NATO, or creating geopolitical power shifts. These issues work in combination with the Russian imperialism and its particular focus on restoring Russian Empire's/USSR's borders. Within this sub-narrative, Russia emphasizes that Ukraine is not a sovereign state and its distancing from Russia is partly the product of previous policy mistakes back in the Soviet era (Aspriadis, 2023; Fridrichová, 2023). As characterized by Aspriadis (2023), by using this sub-narrative:

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> [Vladimir Putin] legitimizes himself to restore this historical error and occupy the lands. In addition, according to this narrative, there is no Ukraine nation, thus, the occupation of Ukraine would not be an invasion of foreign territory and a sovereign country but a restoration of a historical right (35).

This sub-narrative, perhaps, is one of the most central for Russia's strategic communication because it indicates the dynamics between Russia's self-perception and perception of Ukraine. From Russia's perspective, Ukraine is a crucial element of their geopolitical identity, space, status, integrity, sovereignty, and the future of Russia (this issue is touched by Götz & Staun, 2022; Fridrichová, 2023; Snigyr, 2023). As concluded by Götz & Staun (2022), "from Russia's vantage point, no country in post-Soviet Eurasia is more important—or pivotal—than Ukraine" (487).

External threat, Russia versus the West. This strategic narrative encapsulates two general ideas: Russian long-term perception of being under constant external threats and the fear of being attacked, destabilized, or politically defeated by the West (Herd, 2022; Götz & Staun, 2022; Oates & Ramsay, 2024). It was decided to view these two notions as one strategic narrative due to the nature of Russia's ideas on external threats. It could be argued that for Russia, being under external threat essentially means being under threat from the Western enemies. As for Ukraine, Russia communicates that Ukraine is not a sovereign state, but a Nazi regime (Snigyr, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024) and "an anti-Russian project of the West that lacks legitimacy" (Snigyr, 2023, p. 16).

3 sub-narratives belong to the "external threat, Russia versus the West" strategic narrative:

1. Threat from the West.
2. Us VS the West.
3. Strength and expansion are needed to counter external threat and protect Russian people.

Firstly, the *"threat from the West"*, a system sub-narrative, emphasizes Russia's perception of the geopolitical dynamic between Russia and the West. Within this sub-narrative, Russia is viewed as being vulnerable to attacks and under constant threat of external aggression, specifically from the West (Götz & Staun, 2022; Oates & Ramsay, 2024).

> This is at least partly the result of historical lessons learned from the two wars of existence Russia fought in modern times—with Napoleonic France (1803–1815) and Nazi Germany (1941–1945). In both cases, the enemy came from the West. Moreover, during the decades-long Cold War with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the threat from the West was also the dominant one (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 484).

In this sub-narrative, the claim is that Russia is the victim of the West (Snigyr, 2023) and that continued war in Ukraine is basically the West's fault (Bradshaw et al., 2024). It highlights, for example, Russia's claims about the "Western aggression and refusal to work through diplomatic channels with Russia" (Bradshaw et al., 2024, p. 9)

On the other hand, the second sub-narrative – *"us VS the West"* – is an identity sub-narrative that emphasizes Russia's distance and "a contested relationship with the West, with Russia both being a part of Europe and apart from Europe" (Herd, 2022, p. 35). As summarized by Bradshaw et al. (2024):

> …through the incorporation of narratives centered on Russian heroism, the accentuation of Russophobia in Western media, and the depiction of Russia as a global savior, Russian authorities used the war as a window of opportunity to reconstitute their international image and reputation towards harnessing external legitimacy (p. 8).

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Furthermore, the sub-narrative includes the perception of "the conflict between Russia and the West as having an irreconcilable and existential nature" and being pre-conditioned by drastically different Russian (traditionalist) and Western (liberal) values (Snigyr, 2023, p. 8).

The third narrative, *"strength and expansion are needed to counter external threat and protect Russian people"* is an issue sub-narrative which Russia uses to legitimize its external aggression, invasion of Ukraine and use of military force. As argued by Herd (2022, p. 34), from Russia's standpoint, "respect for Russian great power status ensures stability, and respect is ultimately generated through a healthy regard, even fear, of Russian power". Herd (2022) also summarizes this position as "fear of not being feared" (p. 35).

Furthermore, this rationale includes the necessity to create buffer zones to secure its broad borders as well as the necessity to viciously protect all Russian people (Götz & Staun, 2022; Aspriadis, 2023). Russia thus positions its invasion as defense against "Ukrainian nazis" and saving Russian people in Ukraine (Aspriadis, 2023):

> This Strategic Narratives presents Ukraine as a failed state that cannot protect minorities or certain people living in its territory. What is worse, the Ukrainian government does not wish to protect those people. Therefore, Russia must do it (p. 33).

Generally, this sub-narrative suggests that Russia's military aggression is somehow a legitimate action and an extreme, forced measure of protection.

Conclusions

As argued in this paper, Russian strategic communication relies on strategic narratives as well as its neighbor concept – strategic culture. Critical review of the recent literature on Russia's strategic narratives/culture primarily suggested two outtakes. Firstly, the concepts of strategic narratives and strategic culture may be integrated for a more comprehensive analysis of Russia's strategic communication. Secondly, the current scope of Russia's strategic narratives/strategic culture is rather heterogenous and required to be re-approached for the purpose of more structured theoretical knowledge. In this paper, the goal of conceptualizing Russia's strategic narratives was achieved by bridging the concepts of strategic narratives/culture, inductive/deductive analysis, and synthesis of the relevant scholarly sources.

Overall, the synthesis highlighted that Russia's strategic communication in full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war relies on two major co-amplifying strategic narratives. The first one is the **"great power"** narrative, which focuses on glorifying Russia as resurgent glorious state/nation, returning Ukraine to Russia's axis, and achieving the new world order without Western hegemony (see Götz & Staun, 2022; Snigyr, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024; Oates & Ramsay, 2024). The second strategic narratives, **"external threat, Russia versus the West"** – revolves around Russia's antagonistic relations with the West and Russia's argumentation for its invasion (see Herd, 2022; Aspriadis, 2023; Snigyr, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2024; Oates & Ramsay, 2024 etc.). Both strategic narratives include sub-narratives that operate on three levels, described by Miskimmon et al. (2013) and Roselle et al. (2014): the international system level, the identity (national) level, and the issue level.

This study implies at four general outtakes regarding Russia's information warfare. Firstly, Russia imitates and claims deep-rooted, history-based reasoning behind its communication approaches and, more importantly, the invasion itself. Secondly, the strategic narratives operate as a system. While it is debatable whether Russia secures the maximum integrity and effectiveness of its communication, it is evident nevertheless that this system is massive and that those narratives serve common goals. Russia's system of narratives communicates numerous reasons for why Russia's invasion should be considered legitimate. Even if a hypothetical member of inter-

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national audience may not find Russia's great-power positioning a good reason for invading a sovereign state, possibly, they could find Russia's self-defense logic a more legitimate reason. This leads to the third conclusion: Russia's strategic narratives are built in a way to influence the audience to see the invasion and Russia's unlawful actions as necessary, morally right, somehow acceptable, or bearable at the very least. Hence, Russia tries to produce an image of massive undeniable overpowering reasoning. Therefore, the fourth outtake is that counteraction to Russia's strategic narratives requires a systematic approach. Debunking only one or two Russian sub-narratives might not be enough to undermine Russia's strategic communication drastically. A system of strategic narratives should be contested by a system of strategic counter-narratives and/or strategic debunking of political manipulation attempts.

This article was aimed at rather presenting a framework for the further analysis of Russia's wartime strategic communication. However, it also implies on broader perspectives for the research on Russia's strategic narratives. These include studying Russia's strategic narratives in relation to the event framing in the Russo-Ukrainian war, to various communicating actors (e. g., state officials, propagandists, media representatives), and generally to the issues of Russia's long-term propaganda efforts.

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Declaration on Generative Artificial Intelligence and Technologies Using Artificial Intelligence in the Writing Process.

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