

Geopolitical competition or a conflict of values? A comparison between the US, EU and Russian strategic narratives on the Ukraine war (2022-2023)

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Abstract: The beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reignited the study of strategic narratives employed by the main actors involved in the conflict. This article focuses on a three-way comparison between the strategic narratives employed to justify action in Ukraine by the European Union, the United States and the Russian Federation. It argues that, consistent with previous findings, the US and EU conceptualize the conflict as one between systems of government and values while Russia describes it as a geopolitical competition for power, disguised as a conflict of values. While the former focus on liberal values and the rules-based order, the latter emphasizes state sovereignty and multipolarity as the correct situation to be maintained. While expected, an increase of the value-based narratives in Russian discourse was not identified. However, when adopting value-based narratives, Russia focused on the traditional family and maintaining natural hierarchies.

Keywords: strategic narratives, geopolitics, democracy, rules-based order

Introduction

The research on the strategic use of narratives by international actors has considerably proliferated the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The twin conflicts of 2014 and 2022 were both conducted with weapons on the ground, as well as narrated differently by the international actors involved. The Russian Federation, on the one hand, and the European Union and the United States, on the other, attempted to persuade the international public opinion of the justness of their cause and to attract support for their action. Conversely, all actors aimed to diminish the support that the opponent obtained by communicating their interpretation of the conflict.

While the literature on strategic narratives on the Ukraine crisis proliferated after 2014, this article aims to expand on the topic and contribute to bringing the existing literature up-to-date by analysing the recent developments in the field. The

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wave of academic literature on the topic has subsided in the years after 2018. However, the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine generated a new interest in the topic, with authors such as Oates (2023) discussing the specificities of the Russian strategic narrative post-2022. This article aims to be a continuation of this new wave of research and to bring several novelties to the literature.

The first novelty that the article aims for is to elaborate on a distinction already present, but underdeveloped in the literature: that between value-based narratives and geopolitical narratives. While researching strategic narratives, Pamment (2014) identified a distinction between different self-representations of international actors: on the one hand, actors such as the European Union or the United States represent themselves as great powers who compete or cooperate with other actors while, on the other, they represent themselves as normative powers, entrusted with keeping or spreading universal values. The article elaborates on this distinction and also applies it as a lens to analyse the strategic narratives of the Russian Federation. The second novelty that the article brings is the comparison between the strategic narratives of the three actors (Russian Federation, European Union and the United States) in a single piece of academic work. Until now, only comparisons between two actors (the US and Russia, the EU and Russia) have been attempted (Miskimmon, 2018; Roselle, 2017a). Finally, the article employs MAXQDA 2022 and harnesses the program's ability to conduct several analyses which, until now, have been relatively little used, such as the co-occurrence of themes in the texts analysed.

The article aims to explore two inter-related research questions: 1. What are the main themes present in the discourses of political leaders and strategic documents from the European Union, United States and the Russian Federation after the invasion of Ukraine? 2. Are these strategic narratives primordially geopolitically-oriented or valued-based? First, the article conducts a literature review on the issue of strategic narratives as applied to the conflict in Ukraine, focusing on the changes in themes after the 2022 invasion. The methodology section discusses the selection of texts for analysis and the use of the MAXQDA software, while the analysis section presents the results of the research.

1. Strategic narratives and the war(s) in Ukraine

The standard definition of strategic narratives used in the literature was provided by Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 5), who argue that narratives represent “frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation”. Furthermore, a narrative becomes “strategic” to the extent that it is used by political elites with the aim of influencing the behavior of others. Thus, the authors argue that strategic narratives could be defined as “representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to the past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives” (Miskimmon

et al., 2013, p. 7) and amount to a way to generate “attraction” to the actor using them and to exercise “soft power” (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 72). They are, according to the authors, a “tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environments in which they operate” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 2) or, according to De Graaf et al. (2015) an instrument for “convincing one or more audiences of a particular understanding of reality”. The defining element of strategic narratives, which distinguishes them from framing is, according to Miskimmon et al. (2013), the fact that events unfold across time. In a narrative, actors and events are not static, but evolve through an international arena characterized by both competition and cooperation.

Strategic narratives, according to the authors, include aspects such as actors (who is doing the action?), setting (where is the action taking place?), a conflict (the reactions following the initial interactions) and a resolution (how the conflict ends) (Roselle et al., 2014). Moreover, the authors distinguish between System Narratives, which explain how the world is structured and the positions of the main actors, National Narratives, which describe an actor’s identity, by presenting its past and by elaborating a desirable future and Issue narratives, used to legitimize a particular policy in this specific time and place.

Further theoretical work on strategic narratives focused on their reception and on how they interact with the local environments in which they are projected. Both Freedman (2006) and Riessman (2008) argue that, in order to be effective, the strategic narrative must resonate with the national culture, values, interests and prejudices at a particular moment in the nation’s history. Schmitt (2018) argues that strategic narratives communicated by a particular actor are filtered through local political myths. The successful reception of strategic narratives within a target audience depends, according to Schmitt, on whether they find “fertile ground”: whether local political myths are conducive to their reception. Also, strategic narratives are transformed within this interaction. Schmitt (2018) employs Bottici’s distinction between myth and narrative. The former is, according to Bottici, a narrative “shared by a group and that affects the specifically political conditions in which this group operates” (Bottici, 2007 apud Schmitt, 2018). Schmitt analyses how Russian strategic narratives interact with four distinct French myths: “the golden age”, the French “grandeur”, the “American danger” and the “savior”. Hagström and Gustafsson (2021) also analysed narrative diffusion in the context of the Sino-American struggle over the correct interpretation of the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two authors argued that while the US and China issued competing narratives over how to assign blame and praise for the outbreak and handling of the early part of the pandemic, officials in Australia, India, South Korea and the United Kingdom largely ignored this. Only conservative politicians in the UK took up the US narrative on Chinese guilt for the spread of COVID. Chaban et al. (2017) also found that the reception of European strategic narratives in Asia differs considerably, noting the specific absence of narratives based on the idea of Europe as a “normative

power” (as outlined below) with the exception of Japan and the persistence of the view that the EU is a relatively weak geopolitical actor which cannot project power or provide security in other regions.

Moreover, strategic narratives, especially when addressing contested policy areas have been found to have both an “enabling” and a “constraining effect” on the actors presenting them. Thus, Ning (2013), O’Shea (2018) and Larkin (2024) found that once a particular situation (a specific interpretation of history, an interpretation of a technological change) is narrated in a certain way by an actor, this opens up some policy options but also eliminates others. For example, in the case of US bases in Okinawa, presented by O’Shea, the “deterrence” narrative limited the policy options of central authorities despite local opposition to the relocation of a US military base. Similarly, in the case of the Ukraine conflict, the narratives identified below might limit the options for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

While the literature on strategic narratives generally analyzes the communication of one or two actors and presents the themes that they employ, this article will group the themes encountered in the analysis in two large categories derived through an overview of the academic literature. “Geopolitical” narratives are understood as those which represent actors (both oneself and the others) as powers competing for resources, prestige and influence on the global “chessboard”. Within these meta-frameworks, the system narrative features a description of the international system as either unipolar or multipolar and of the self as a great power which should achieve certain objectives specific to this status: ensuring security and/or prosperity. Conversely, value-based narratives are those which represent the actor as a normative power, entrusted with keeping or spreading the “correct” type of values and which is challenged by actors spreading values opposite to those of the actor. Before proceeding, the article conducts a review of the analyses of strategic narratives for the three actors. Its goal is to understand how these narratives have evolved up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Pamment (2014) traces the development of the US strategic narrative since the beginning of the XIX century and shows how themes from both categories were intertwined in the US public discourse. For example, when arguing for the exclusion of European powers from the Western hemisphere, president Monroe claimed that Europe and the Eastern hemisphere was characterized by Westphalian inter-state politics while the Western hemisphere, led by the US, was “in the process of liberation, independence and enlightenment” (Pamment, 2014, p. 52). Furthermore, the US gave itself the right to act as a police power of last resort in the region, protecting the universal values of liberty and political equality, in the Western hemisphere as early as 1904. Fourteen years later, at the end of the First World War, US leaders extended this discursive self-authorization to Europe, through president Woodrow Wilson’s speeches *Peace without Victory* (1917) and *Fourteen Points* (1918).

The first part of the Cold War was, according to Pamment, characterized by a geopolitical narrative of containing the USSR, while the Reagan administration

looked to rollback communism in the name of democratic values. Finally, the post-Cold War, US strategic narrative was defined by democratic triumph and a new affirmation of the universality of liberalism. This continued after 9/11, when the US represented itself as the champion of democracy threatened by the new force of radical Islamism. However, according to Pamment, this was slightly toned down during the Obama administration, which also focused on “multilateralism and consensus building” (Pamment. 2014, p. 59). This was also evident in the way Obama justified the move from a unilateral intervention in Afghanistan to a more multilateral approach by switching from a narrative of US leadership and the defense of democracy to one of a responsible, great power working together with allies to ensure security (Miskimmon et al., 2015).

Strategic narratives addressed to domestic audiences in the US during the war in Afghanistan also followed similar patterns. On the one hand, the beginning of the war was characterized by a strong emphasis on the importance of defending freedom and democracy at a global level, which were threatened by the totalitarian-inspired ideology of the Taliban. As the war continued and withdrawal without victory in Afghanistan became a realistic possibility, those arguing for maintaining US troops in the country justified this by appealing to the negative impact on the local and global security the withdrawal might have. Conversely, those who supported a quick withdrawal focused on the human and financial costs that maintaining a military force in Afghanistan had for the US (Groeling & Baum, 2015).

No literature on the explicit shift in narratives in the US discourse after the invasion of Ukraine has been identified. This emphasizes the novelty of the research. As mentioned below, in the discussion section, the main US narrative is a value-based one, focusing on the defense of democracy and human rights.

Similarly, France and Great Britain justified the 2011 intervention in Libya through both geopolitical and value-based narratives. The latter argumentative strategy focused on the importance of the responsibility to protect: defending innocent Libyans rising for democracy from the crimes committed by the forces of a ruthless dictator. France, especially, took the lead, by relating to its own revolutionary past and the UK focused on the importance of human rights. In this particular case, the US rather followed than led, but also appealed to its multilateral commitments to global security and the need to support its allies when conducting a risky intervention (Burai, 2020; Miskimmon et al., 2015; Roselle, 2017b).

Several narratives have been articulated by the European Union in its strategic documents, beginning with the 2003 European Union Security Strategy, going through the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass, as well as in the public pronouncements of its officials. Academic literature has primordially identified value-based narratives, broadly summarized as Normative Power Europe (The EU as an example of peace-making, the EU as a model of democratic success). However, recent work has also uncovered the fact that, more and more, the EU narrates itself as a geopolitical actor, protecting the liberal global order but also using

instruments of hard power to achieve its goals. For example, the EU Global strategy of 2016 describes the EU far more as an actor in a competitive world, acting on the basis of “principled pragmatism”, with the aim of promoting stability in its neighborhood (through the European Neighborhood Policy) rather than promoting the reform of rules and norms in order to improve democracy (Miskimmon, 2018). Thus, the EUGS describes the world as one of “global power shifts and power diffusion”, where the EU aims to increase stability and resilience in its neighborhood, given that democratic values are not widely shared and attempting to spread them might do more harm than good. However, in its actions, the EU will promote international law and global norms, especially in the Ukraine crisis but will not go further than this (Miskimmon, 2018).

Chaban et al. (2017) also identified similar narratives that the EU projected in Asia with relatively little success. Focusing on the post-World War II peace in Europe, the EU described itself as the cause of peace on the continent, which was achieved through economic and political supra-national integration. Moreover, according to the authors, the EU sought to argue that it can provide peace and stability to the wider continent (not just to Member States) in the wake of the Kosovo conflict and in the context of the development of its own military capabilities. Finally, the EU also represented itself as a beacon of human rights and as an economic success ensuring prosperity to its citizens, something which Kaldor et al. (2007) argued for in their article on adopting human security as the main European narrative.

Muller (2019) and Chaban et al. (2019) analysed the projection and reception of the narrative of “normative power Europe” in Israel and Palestine in a special issue of *European Security*. The main characteristics of this narrative include the EU as a peacebuilder in other areas of the world, relying on its legacy of ensuring peace on the European continent. Multilateralism is also emphasized as, according to the EU, the key to protecting the liberal global order and upholding respect for international law. Similar to previous research, the authors show how the EUGS went from democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighborhood to aiming for stability and resilience. Regarding its external action, the EU aims to be a peacebuilder, arguing for the existence of a strong connection between peace and economic and social development. However, negative narratives of the EU have also been identified in Israel and Palestine (Chaban et al., 2019) as well as Asia (Chaban et al., 2017). These relate to the permanent crises which rock the EU, making the Union seem incapable of acting decisively and thus, an unreliable partner.

The Eurozone crisis of 2015 represented a crucial moment in which European unity was challenged and the measures adopted to combat the crisis were used as an example of European weakness. Miskimmon (2017, p. 96) identified several binaries (“austerity versus growth, discipline versus recklessness, and winners versus losers”) in the strategic narratives put forward by European leaders and addressed to their own constituency. Miskimmon (2017) analyzed the speeches of two important

European leaders (Mario Draghi- head of the European Central Bank and Angela Merkel- the German Chancellor) and identified a narrative of reform followed by renewed growth, put forward by the first and one of assuming responsibility by those who caused the crisis through overspending in the second case.

Baracani (2023) analyzed the speeches held by the EC President, Ursula von den Leyen, in the context of the Russian aggression and identified several strategic narratives employed. The first related to the EU's achievement of peace in Europe after the Second World War. This led von den Leyen, according to Baracani, to argue that the EU is an actor dedicated to respecting international law and the UN Charter, as well as democratic values. Finally, the Russian aggression was conceptualized not only as a breach of international law, but also as the attack of autocracy on democracy, part of a wider challenge of the contestation of democratic norms. This imposed a moral duty on the EU to defend democracy, support Ukraine financially and militarily, sanction Russia, as well as strengthen itself by eliminating energy dependence on Russia (Baracani, 2023, p. 1459).

Thus, the strategic narratives issued by the EU could be said to alternate between a self-representation of the EU as "normative power Europe", focused on defending human rights and democratic values and acting multilaterally in order to achieve this and a conception of Europe as a geopolitical actor. These sometimes competing narratives might create ambiguity for external partners, given that it might become unclear how to approach negotiations with the Union.

Russian strategic narratives have been the focus of an extensive body of research, especially after the 2013-14 events in Ukraine, culminating in the Russian annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbas. Given the fact that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has occurred relatively recently, the academic literature on the specificities of the Russian strategic narrative after the invasion is still relatively scarce. This article contributes to this literature, by focusing on the strategic narratives issued after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Several Russian strategic narratives, which could be circumscribed to both the geopolitical type of narrative and to value-based narratives, have been identified by the literature. Among geopolitical narratives, one can include a narrative discussing the nature of the international system (which is or should be multipolar with Russia as one of the poles rather than unipolar, centered around the United States), one based on the idea that Russia is legitimate to defend itself because of the Western aggression in its near neighborhood and the broken promise of not expanding NATO, while among value-based narratives, one can count that focusing on Russia as a defender of the "correct" values of the heterosexual family and traditional gender norms.

Schmitt (2018) identifies the strategic narrative contesting unipolarity in the Russian official discourse, coupled with that of Western aggression and European submissiveness to the US. Two identity-level sub-narratives are discussed: the idea that Russia was humiliated through the imposition of neoliberal reforms and that Russia is the defender of "true values", which are conservative and imply a strong

connection between the Orthodox church and the state. In the Russian discourse, Claessen (2023) identifies the practice of geopolitical othering, which is “characterized by the consistent comparison of self-representations to geographically external referents, to which identity, political and civilizational attributes are linked” (Claessen, 2023, p. 4). This is done through representing Russia as part of an elite group of states in a multipolar world. Conversely, according to the authors, the European Union presents a biased view of Russia, violates universal principles of non-interference in the affairs of others and is in the process of adopting undesirable values such as gender equality and the inclusion of the LGBT community. During and after the Euromaidan revolution and the annexation of Crimea, the narrative of a fascist government seizing power in Kyiv began to emerge. At the instigation of the EU, this government discriminated against Russians in Crimea, which justified intervention.

Conversely, Rogstad (2022) identifies a rhetorical strategy of stigmatization, which relies on value-based narratives, that Western countries pursued, albeit unsuccessfully, in regard to Russia after 2014. This was done by permanently pointing to Russia’s complete disregard for international law. The Russian Federation responded by an attempt to break this stigma and by counter-stigmatization (of which geopolitical othering can be seen as a part of). According to Rogstad (2022) and Oates et al. (2018), this strategy was, to some extent, successful, especially among BRICS countries.

Hinck et al. (2018) analyzed the way the Russian media framed some of the international organizations and political events in which Russia participated: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the BRICS group and the Iranian nuclear negotiations in the 2010s. All of these featured a geopolitical narrative in which Russia was an active player in a multipolar world, marked by geopolitical and moral decline of the West and characterized by a shift in international influence towards non-Western states. The BRICS and the SCO were seen as laying the groundwork for a new international order, while the coverage for the Iranian negotiations focused on Russia’s crucial role in obtaining an agreement despite US aggressiveness. This idea was also presented in connection to the Ukraine conflict, also seen as a geopolitical competition in which Russia was only defending itself.

The Russian strategic narratives dedicated to the Ukraine war evolved from the geopolitical ones, which saw Ukraine as a tool of Western aggression, to those arguing that the regime in Kyiv is a Nazi-inspired, Western supported junta, which forces the people of Ukraine down a path against its “natural” communion of traditional values with the Russians. By analyzing the news coverage from Russia’s Channel 1, before and after the Euromaidan crisis, Khadarova (2021) argued that there has been a transformation of how Ukraine is represented. If, before the Euromaidan, Ukraine was seen as a “little brother”, which needed to receive support and guidance from its older one (Russia), during the crisis, the representation shifted to that of a “treasonous brother”. Finally, after Ukraine made a decisive turn to the

West, the regime in Kyiv was repeatedly branded as fascist and as an oppressor to the Russian-speaking minority in Eastern Ukraine. Coverage focused considerably on the Odessa fire of May 2014 and its victims, as well as on the Ukrainian radical right, which was presented as indistinguishable from the Ukrainian authorities. Roselle (2017a) also identifies the topic of a shared history and spiritual and ethnic unity between the Russians and the people of Crimea (which was artificially broken up by Khrushchev's unilateral decision to assign Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR) when justifying the 2014 annexation. Chaban et al. (2023) discuss Russian narratives on Ukraine's accession to visa-free travel in the EU in 2017 and show how this was re-interpreted negatively as both useless for Ukrainians (who would prefer to be closely aligned to Russia) and as not being really true (due to the unjustified difficulties and discrimination against Ukrainians in the West).

The literature on the Russian strategic narratives since the beginning of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has identified both a stability (Fridrichova, 2023) and an increase in the importance of value-based narratives. These include those narratives associating the Ukrainian government with fascism and those relating to the defense of traditional values by Russia in an all-out civilizational war. Oates (2023), Gherasim (2022) and Drugă (2022) identified an increase in the prevalence of the topic of the historical unity between Russia and Ukraine, which has allegedly been violently broken by a neo-Nazi regime supported by the West, and thus requires a decisive war which should lead to "reunification". The practice of "reductio ad hitlerum" (claiming that anything you do not agree with is a form of Nazism) has been consistently increasing in the texts authored by the Russian president, coupled with the claim that "Ukraine has embarked on following the West's dubious morality grounded on secular modernization and steady progress. Since the Western creed is decadent and illusory, Russia's mission is to "achieve a pragmatic awakening by signaling the dangers of degradation and degeneracy of Ukrainian institutions and communitarian values" (Gherasim, 2022, p. 78). Oates (2023) attributes this practice to traditional Russian conspiratorial thinking, which represents all enemy forces as allied, under a single leadership, with a single aim (of destroying Russia), because of entrenched Russophobia. According to Oates (2023, p. 8), accusations of the Ukrainian leadership being Nazis "transcend the notion of disinformation, propaganda, or even *fake news*: Putin is simply writing about a world that does not exist".

Shevechenko and Yakovets (2022) conducted an analysis of the Russian media after the beginning of the full-scale invasion and identified the specific narratives which emerged in the context of the war. According to the authors, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric increased exponentially, especially in the context of the early failures of the Russian army to change the regime in Kyiv. Thus, consistent with the geopolitical approach identified above, Ukraine was branded more and more as either an aggressive state planning to invade Belarus or Crimea or as a failed state, due to its internal corruption, or as a "false" state due to its perceived historical „artificial creation". The Western delivery of weapons to Ukraine was seen as

„unnecessarily prolonging the war”, the behavior of Ukrainian refugees in the West was presented in negative terms, while the idea that Ukraine was preparing to use chemical or biological weapons was permanently brought up. Ukrainian attacks in the occupied territories were branded „acts of terrorism”, while the actions of the Russian administration are shown as bringing life back to destroyed areas.

Finally, nuclear rhetoric has also been a novelty in the Russian strategic discourse. Both Drugă (2022) and Oates (2023) identified an increasing number of references to potential nuclear accidents at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear plant (due to the irresponsible behaviour of Ukrainian forces, according to the Russians), the nuclear nature of depleted uranium tank shells (a blatant untruth), as well as direct threats of nuclear weapons use by the Russian Federation. According to this approach, which conflates any use of nuclear material with atomic weapons, Russia would be justified to use nuclear weapons if Ukrainians or their Western backers caused any nuclear-related incidents.

The Russian Federation has systematically increased its communication efforts, especially addressed to BRICS countries. Russia focused on the idea that the legitimate international order is a multipolar one, centered around several countries and that, under the guise of protecting values, the “collective West” is conducting an aggressive and illegitimate foreign policy in Russia’s vicinity. Furthermore, according this view, the West is undermining traditional values and supporting a Nazi regime in Kyiv, which separates Ukraine (or at least its eastern part) from its natural place – within the Russian world.

2. Methodology

This paper employs content analysis to identify the main themes employed by EU, US and Russian leaders. Qualitative content analysis relies on identifying recurring themes in the same or in different texts and comparing fragments identified as belonging to the same theme in order to establish the commonalities and differences between how different authors present the same topic. A code scheme can be created either inductively (by means of analysis of the texts under review) or deductively (based on the previous literature) or a combination of these approaches can be applied. The code scheme can be then applied on different fragments of texts (units of analysis) and the paragraphs under the same topic can be analysed together (Mills & Birks, 2014; Williams & Moser, 2019). The program employed for this work, MAXQDA 2022, allows for the analysis of code frequencies, code co-occurrences, and the creation of „visual maps” of either single documents, several documents or groups of documents.

A set of public speeches by the leaders of the European Union (Ursula von den Leyen and Josep Borrell), the US (Joe Biden) and the Russian Federation (Vladimir Putin) was created (see appendix 1). Speeches were selected by analyzing the websites of the Russian Presidential administration (kremlin.ru), White House

(whitehouse.gov), European Commission (ec.europa.eu) and European External Action Service (eeas.europa.eu) and by conducting a search on the topic of Ukraine. In order to select this corpus, several criteria were established: 1. The speech had to refer to the war in Ukraine 2. It had to be held between 21.02.2022 and September 2023 3. It had to outline a vision of the conflict and/or policies adopted to address it. The only document which is outside this time range is Vladimir Putin's article, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, published in 2021. This was included based on its high relevance for the issue and on indications from previous literature (Oates, 2023). When selecting the speeches, particular attention was paid to anniversary moments, such as the first anniversary of the invasion (24.02.2023), the day of Ukrainian independence (24.08), as well the celebration of the end of the Second World War (9.05 in Russia), which is the moment for an anniversary parade in the Red Square. This was done in order to ensure the inclusion of speeches featuring the actors' broader narrative, given that anniversary moments are crucial in outlining wider conceptions of political events and connecting them with an actor's identity narratives. One potential weakness of the research is that, by focusing on the English-language version of the speeches held by top leaders, localized narratives, addressed to Ukrainians or to Russian speakers in the occupied territories are excluded. Additionally, three strategic documents (one for each of the actors under study) were included (see Appendix 1), all of these were issued after the invasion.

Based on the analysis of the literature and a preliminary study of the material, a number of codes were created (Appendix 2). Given the previous work in the literature, it was considered best to rely on a conservative approach and utilize codes based on work already conducted. This streamlined analysis improved the connection with previous literature. The codes established were then grouped into "geopolitical narratives" and "value-based narratives", relying on a conceptual categorization. Thus, "geopolitical narratives" refer to an understanding of international relations, where states are the main actors, while "value-based" narratives address international relations as a competition between ways of living/systems of political values. No fixed unit of analysis was maintained, but fragments of texts that ranged from a phrase to a paragraph were coded. The limit was „based on the minimum amount of content to make a coding decision" (Oates 2023).

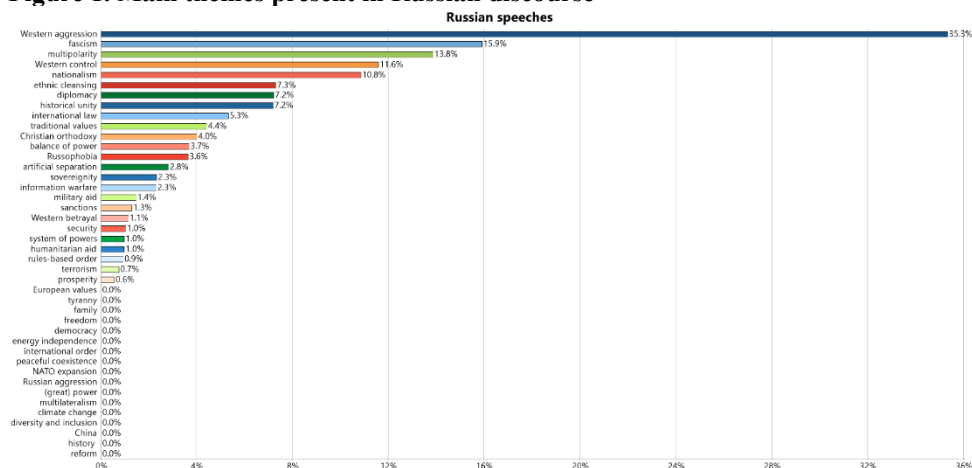
After coding the material, a set of analyses was performed using MAXQDA 2022 such as code frequencies, dissociated by actor, code co-occurrences and intersections and visual maps of possible discursive coalitions. The conclusions are presented below, while the data is part of the appendix.

3. Discussion

3.1. Two tales of the same conflict

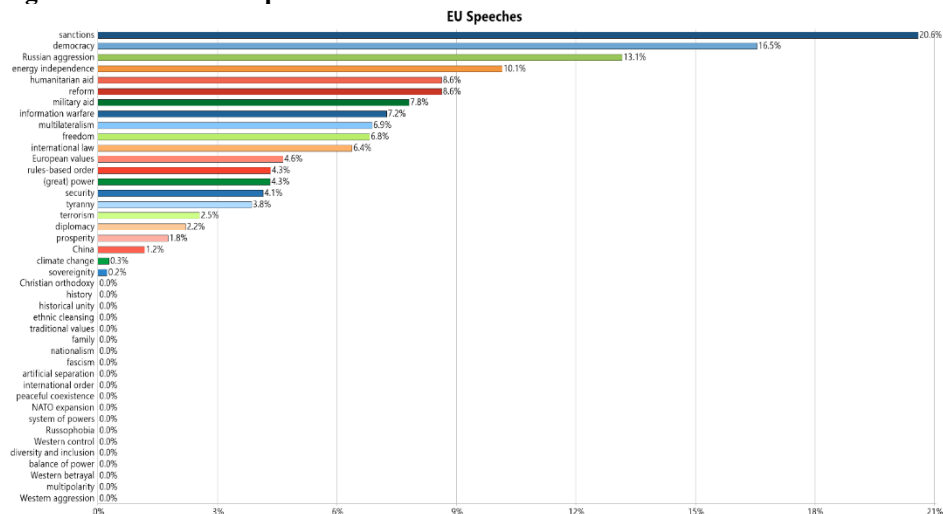
The Russian Federation conceptualizes the Ukraine conflict as one of self-defense in face of Western aggression, caused by geopolitical factors. The use of geopolitical narratives is prevalent (see Figure 1 below), while the main themes identified are those of Western aggression, which challenges the correct multipolar order. In this narrative, the interstate system is one of sovereign states and is based on several poles of power, out of which Russia is legitimately one. International law is conceptualized as being based on the primary value of state sovereignty with the corollary that no state has a right to interfere in the internal affairs of another. However, due to its aggressive nature, the “collective West” is bent on changing this order and imposing its hegemony under the guise of promoting universal values. The concept of “rules-based order” is chosen for particular vilification, as it is seen as nothing but a way of twisting the “correct” principles of international law, which consecrate the state as the only holder of legal rights. According to the Russian conception, international cooperation to combat common threats such as climate change, terrorism and pandemics is possible if the primacy of the state is respected and all states are treated as equal partners (see appendices 3, 4 and 5). The prevalence of geopolitical narratives in Vladimir Putin’s speeches is much higher than in that of any other leader, while the idea of Western aggression constantly emerges together with appeals for multipolarity and state sovereignty.

The conflict in Ukraine is caused, in the Russian narrative, by the Western aggression, disguised as democracy promotion. After breaking a promise to not expand NATO eastwards, the “collective West” has decided to enter the territory of the former Soviet Union and to establish a military presence in Ukraine. This is done in alliance with the local Ukrainian nationalists (who are descendants of fascist collaborators in the Second World War), who orchestrated a coup d’état in 2014 and who have been engaged in ethnic cleansing of the Russian speaking population in Eastern Ukraine ever since. The legitimate aspirations and cultural ties of the Ukrainian population with Russia are ignored or repressed, while traditional values are replaced by moral depravity. However, the battle of values is subsumed, in the Russian discourse, to the geopolitical conflict pitting the expansive West to the multipolarity and sovereignty-affirming Russia. The “voluntary accession” of Crimea to Russia in 2014 is seen as a natural move, given the cultural ties between the two populations, the artificiality of Ukraine’s existence and the free and open vote cast by the population of the peninsula. The current analysis has not found a particular increase in the use of value-based narratives, but confirmed the previous literature according to which Russia sees the international world as dominated by great power competition.

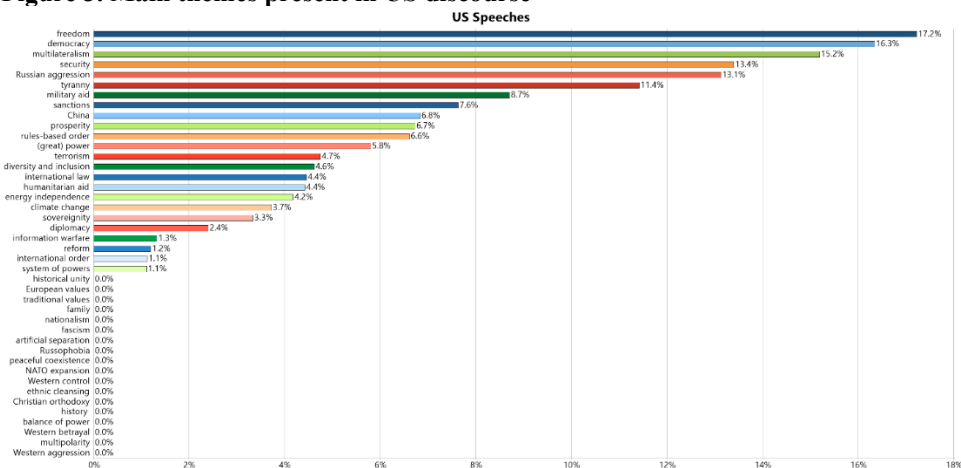
Figure 1. Main themes present in Russian discourse

Source: author's analysis with MAXQDA 2022

Both the EU and the US conceptualize the current conflict as one of values, pitting democratic states against an aggressive tyranny. In this view, popular aspirations for democracy are natural and the Ukrainian people's choices in 2004 and 2014 led to a functional though imperfect democracy. Democracy is key, in this view, not only to individual freedom but also to prosperity. The Russian invasion is an attempt not only to conquer Ukraine and remove a democratically elected president, but also to stamp out democracy as a principle and to replace the rules-based international order (understood as international norms reflecting universal humanitarian values and not just state unrestricted state sovereignty) with the rule of naked force. In addition to the aggression *per se*, Russian soldiers are violating *jus in bellum* through the atrocities in Bucha. In this context, sanctioning Russia and helping Ukraine, both with humanitarian and military aid is justified, as it protects the most cherished value of a freedom-loving people and also, the rest of democratic states. However, support for Ukraine should be approved through multilateral action and should be proportional to the aggression (see figures 2 and 3 below and appendices 3, 4, and 5). The prevalence of value-based narratives in EU and US discourses is much higher and the theme of democracy frequently comes out together with those of liberty and prosperity, while being contrasted to tyranny.

Figure 2. Main themes present in EU discourse

Source: author's analysis with MAXQDA 2022

Figure 3. Main themes present in US discourse

Source: author's analysis with MAXQDA 2022

A specific EU narrative identified is that of “European values”, which equate with democracy and human rights. The main tenets of normative power Europe are also present in the corpus of speeches under analysis: the EU is represented as the set of institutions which brought peace on the continent and which can also extend its example to the near abroad. However, the theme of reform was closely associated with the idea of European values: if Ukraine wishes to truly become part of the “European family”, it must undergo a rigorous process of internal reform, to bring it

closer to the standards of a contemporary democracy. Help is of course available, but Ukraine has to make a political choice to undertake these reforms.

The war is also an opportunity and a catalyst for reform according to European leaders. Given the threat of climate change, the war must act as a catalyst for European states to change their energy consumption patterns and to replace dependence on cheap Russian fossil fuels with energy independence based on green technologies. A similar topic can also be identified in US speeches but its prevalence is far less.

Diplomacy is something all three actors mention positively, in the sense that they claim to have made all possible attempts to diplomatically diffuse the conflict but that the other side posed unacceptable demands. The Russian side mentions the security guarantees it requested in early 2022, while the US and the EU refer to their attempts to negotiate and/or deter Putin right before the invasion.

The US narratives is strongly similar to that of the EU, focusing consistently on the protection of values such as democracy and human rights and conceptualizing the Russian aggression as one against these values. A specific focus on promoting diversity and inclusion as a way of overcoming the internal weaknesses of democracy appears in the US National Security Strategy, while, conversely, EU leaders define democracy and the rule of law as “European values”.

3.2. The two-headed European Union – geopolitical actor versus normative power

When studied as a unitary actor, the EU employed both “geopolitical” and “value-based” narratives in order to contest the legitimacy of the Russian attack on Ukraine. However, when dissociating based on the leader issuing the speech, a clear distinction can be observed. The “geopolitical” nature of the EU is better reflected in the speeches of Josep Borrell and the Strategic Compass issued by the High Representative, while Ursula von den Leyen remains the spearhead of the “normative power Europe” approach (see appendix 3 – geopolitical and value-based narratives).

The “geopolitical revival” narrative of the European Union envisions the world around the EU as one of strategic competition between great powers, whereby Russia and China are challenging the rules-based international order. In order to remain relevant, in addition to the partnership with the US, the EU must develop its strategic autonomy through the development of instruments of both hard and soft power, as well as of efficient decision-making procedures in foreign and security policy. The CSDP should be strengthened and its military missions should be used further as a power projection tool. Other instruments envisioned in this plan include a Rapid Deployment Capacity, an integrated military command and an improvement and increase of the intelligence capabilities of the Single Intelligence Analysis Capability. Military research and development should also be expanded, while

hybrid attacks in both the information and cyberspheres should be combated. According to this narrative, sanctions and economic leverage, as well as tailored cooperation can be used by the EU to uphold the rules-based international order and implement the principle of “effective multilateralism” (EU Strategic Compass). For example, in the February 2023 speech given before the Munich security conference, Josep Borell explicitly argued for a geopolitical Europe and for the need to speak the language of power, the need to procure ammunition for Ukraine and to increase defense spending and production. This was placed in the context of the so-called *Zeitenwende* (historical turning point) speech given by Chancellor Olaf Scholz and argued for making this turning point a European one (EEAS, 2023).

Conversely, the normative power of Europe, as well as issues of economic aid, were better represented in the speeches of Ursula von den Leyen. According to this conception, the EU should mostly be concerned with democracy promotion, especially through the leverage held by potential accession talks with Ukraine, should focus on helping Ukrainian refugees and on imposing sanctions against Russia due to its aggressive actions. Furthermore, given Ukraine’s European aspirations, the EU should foster internal reform in this country, by supporting democratization, the development of civil society, the implementation of market-oriented policies, and the struggle against corruption. Internally, the EU must transform itself and eliminate energy dependence on Russia as well as combat climate change, by investing in sources of renewable energy and by increasing its partnership with the US for the import of liquified natural gas. Reducing energy dependence on Russia is not only a geopolitical advantage in the narrative proposed by Ursula von den Leyen, but also a moral duty, given the need to eliminate all sources of support to the anti-democratic regime and its aggressive war. For example, in her October 2023 remarks before the Hudson Institute, von den Leyen compared the 7 October attack in Israel and the Russian aggression in Ukraine and placed them both under the shelter of totalitarian attacks against democracy (European Commission, 2023). The crimes of Bucha and Irpin were also discussed as a violation of international law and of basic human rights obligations even in times of war, further underscoring the moral imperative of sanctioning Russia.

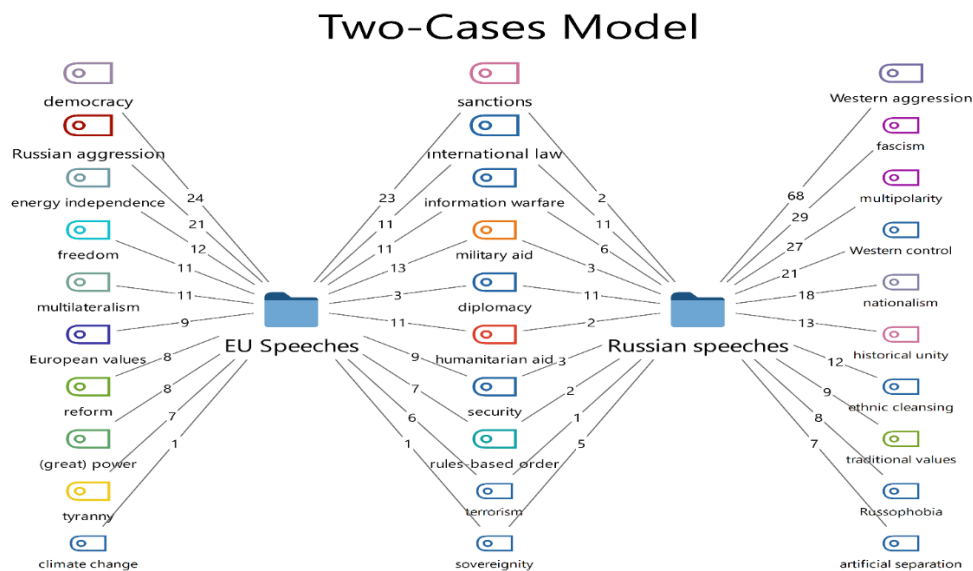
3.3. Discursive coalitions, discursive contestations

Figures 4, 5 and 6 present an analysis of the thematic intersections of the three actors chosen for the analysis. What can be observed from the figures is that, when comparing the topics addressed by the Russian leadership, on the one hand, and the EU and US leaders, on the other, many common topics emerge. However, a qualitative analysis of the way these issues are discussed reveals that the same aspect is treated differently in these speeches. For example, when discussing sanctions against Russia, the Russian leadership focuses on both their injustice and their inefficiency, while the EU and the US focus on their justice and relevance.

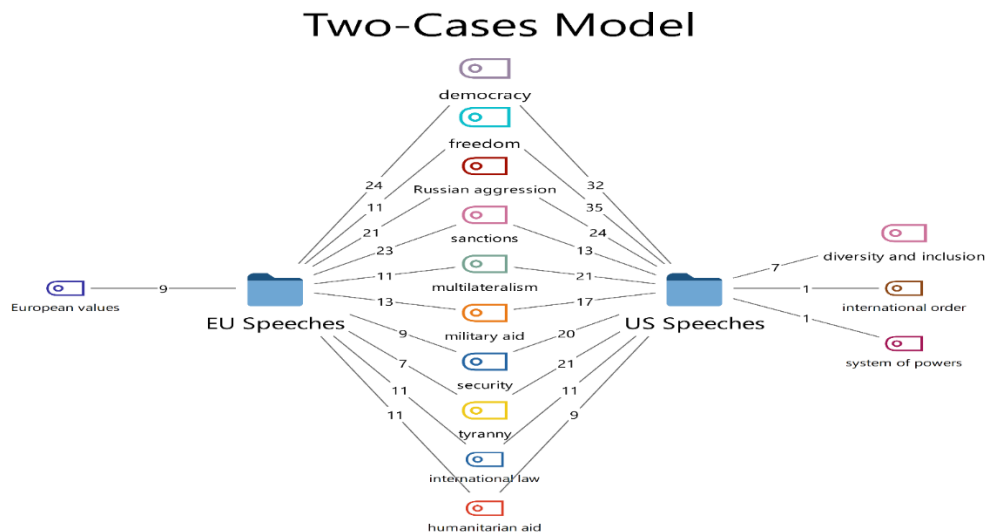
International law is another common topic found in Russian and western speeches. However, while in the first case, it is conceived as focusing on state sovereignty, in the second, the values of international humanitarian law are presented. The concept of rule-based order is common in the discourses of both actors; however, the way it is approached is radically different. Both the EU and the US approach the concept in a positive light and use it to signify the idea that international law should also include universal liberal values, at both the level of inter-state relations and of state-citizen interactions. Conversely, Russia contrasts the idea of rule-based order with the application of current international law (Allison, 2020), and argues that the former is nothing more than a guise for immediate Western geopolitical and economic interests.

Information warfare is another common topic between Russia, on the one hand, and the EU and US, on the other. Of course, each side accuses the other of waging information warfare against it. While Russia sees democracy and diversity promotion as a form of information warfare, the EU and US focus on the Russian-enabled discourses de-legitimizing democracy as such an exemplar.

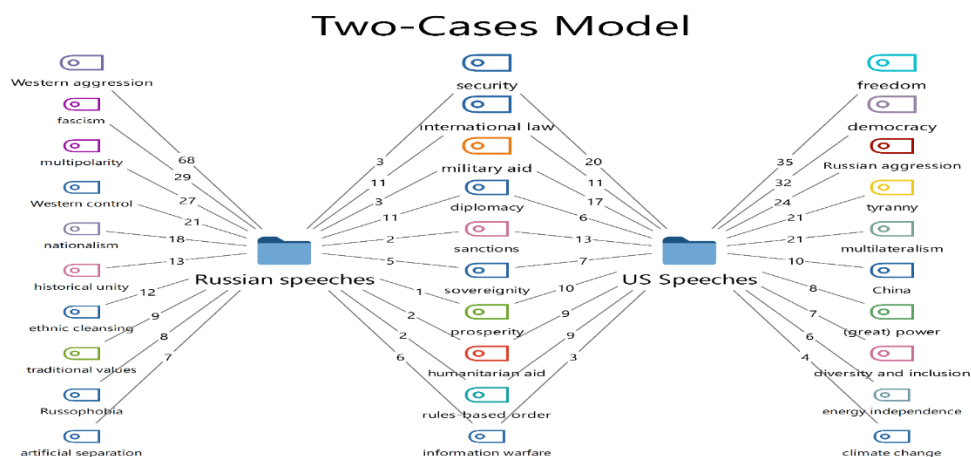
Figure 4. Two-cases model of Russian and EU speeches – common and different topics



Source: auhor's analysis with MAXQDA 2022

Figure 5. Two-cases model of US and EU speeches – common and different topics

Source: auhor's analysis – MAXQDA 2022

Figure 6. Two-cases model of Russian and US speeches – common and different topics

Source: auhor's analysis – MAXQDA 2022

A topic which was only identified in US speeches was that of diversity and inclusion. While the EU focused on democracy as a universal value, the US president, in several moments, referred to improving democracy through a better inclusion of minorities, especially women and sexual minorities. Furthermore, in one

segment, Joe Biden made explicit references to Volodymyr Zelensky's Jewish origins in order to emphasize the absurdity of the Russian claim of a Nazi regime taking over in Kyiv.

Thus, while the US and EU are approaching the same topics in a similar way, one can conclude that Russia is directly challenging some of the elements of these discourses. Rather than creating a different set of relevant signifiers, Russian discourses operate by directly contesting the meaning of the terms and concepts employed by the US and the EU and substituting them with their own preferred interpretation.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of this paper is that the full-scale war in Ukraine intensified the use of previous strategic narratives present in the discourse of the United States, the European Union and the Russian Federation. The data did not show any switch in the discursive strategies. While it might have been expected that Russia would change to a more value-based approach (relying on the traditional values of the heterosexual family and of gendered hierarchies), given the desire to justify its war not only to the world but also to the population it aims to rule over, this did not take place. Seemingly, Russia addresses the world as a whole when presenting its claims that the war is caused by Western aggression. The audience of the Russian strategic narratives seems to be other states such as China, the central Asian countries of the CIS or African states which emphasize state sovereignty in opposition to the global liberal values heralded by the US and EU. Moreover, the analysis has identified that the Russian Federation aims to subvert the "democracy versus tyranny" value-based narratives of the US and EU and to re-shape it into a geopolitical understanding of "Western aggression". This fits better with what Rogstad (2022) called the strategy of counter-stigmatization rather than with a strategy of gaining legitimacy in the occupied parts of Ukraine.

Conversely, the EU and US remain anchored in strategic narratives emphasizing the normative importance of democracy, freedom and human rights. The idea of a rule-based international order represents the main vehicle through which this idea is transferred to the systemic level. Finally, the EU is oscillating between a geopolitical interpretation and a normative interpretation of its own actions, being crucially aware of the importance of developing power-projection mechanisms but also aiming to act as a model of democracy and human rights.

This article contributes to wider debates on strategic narratives and soft power in the literature, by comparing the soft power attempts of two democratic powers and an authoritarian one. The strategy of presenting the international system as one composed only of amoral states is especially designed to rally authoritarian states to the Russian cause. Conversely, the focus on traditional values appeals to disenchanted members of the Western public, who could be made to support Russia

and pressure their own governments to accept a resolution to the war favorable to the Russian Federation. Thus, both camps employ narratives in favor of a strategic goal, but this also constrains their position in potential future peace negotiations – the US and the EU would find it difficult to withdraw their support for Ukraine, while Russia would find it difficult to stop the offensive until it achieves a considerable number of its declared objectives.

One limitation of the research is that, for the Russian Federation, it only included speeches held by the President, which are available in English on the official website of the Kremlin. This has missed narratives disseminated in the Russian media, especially in the occupied territories. Further research could compare messages issued at the level of the Russian presidency or government, as discussed in this paper, with local-level communication addressed to the population in the occupied areas. This would enable identifying any difference in the strategies of legitimating the occupation to the local population and would be able to ascertain whether value-based narratives are more prevalent in such discourse.

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