

**THE LEGITIMIZATION OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE  
THROUGH CONSTRUCTED EXTERNAL THREATS:  
RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS**

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**Abstract**

This article focuses on normative regime legitimization through the construction of external threats and reference to national identity. According to aspirational constructivism, domestically constructed national identity influences the country's relationship with its Others and hence its foreign policy. Political elites often transform these alien Others into external "evil", or enemies, through political propaganda in order to get support for the country's external policies and to strengthen the domestic legitimacy of the regime. During the Ukrainian crisis that started in November 2013, Russian political elites resorted to the use of aggressive propaganda and enemy-or-friend-thinking in order to promote their statist and civilizationist aspirations, while co-opting national sentiments amongst the Russian population. This helps Putin to garner additional domestic support for his authoritarian rule and jeopardizes the Westernist elements of Russia's national identity.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian crisis, Russia, evilization, propaganda, identity

**Introduction**

During the Ukrainian crisis that started in November 2013, politicians, journalists and the general public in the West perceived Russia as an aggressor and often personally demonized President Putin. At the same time, the popularity of Putin's regime at home increased significantly after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. This indicates a need to understand the way Russian political elites and the media have constructed the perception of the Ukrainian crisis on the domestic level.

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This article argues that Russian political elites intend to normatively legitimize Russia's actions during the crisis in Ukraine through the construction of a political propaganda based on enemy-or-friend-thinking. They do so in order to promote their statist and civilizationist aspirations while attempting to decrease the value of the Westernist elements of Russia's national identity. Identity<sup>1</sup> is conceptualized here as a non-instrumental mode of social and political action, which is governed by self-understanding rather than by self-interest (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p.6). In its simplest terms, identity refers to how the state's position in the world is understood. Political propaganda is defined here as the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell 2014, p.7).

In order to construct external threats for propagandist purposes the Russian media and political elites have utilized certain ideas, images, and concepts. Some of these concepts, like fascism, were real threats to Russia in the past, while others, like liberal thought, are presented as having allegedly been alien to the Russians and Russian culture since time began. Identifying certain international actors with these concepts and images, and thus constructing threats coming from the West, has helped political elites to garner additional domestic support for authoritarian rule and to propagandize their political aspirations. The choice of the political elites to promote statist and civilizationist elements of Russia's national identity is explained in the article through the lens of aspirational constructivism.

The article contributes to the bulk of literature that treats legitimization as one of the building blocks of autocratic stability. In particular, it focuses on normative legitimization through the construction of political propaganda promoting the common enemy. It also makes an important contribution to research on national identity while using the framework of aspirational constructivism to show how domestic processes influence the country's foreign policy.

The following section presents the theoretical framework and methodology used. It then goes on to give an account of appointing the Other as being evil in international relations theory, and in particular for propagandist purposes. Further, it examines the case of Russia's propaganda in the Ukrainian crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of identity is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. For instance, Brubaker and Cooper not only criticise the use of this "deeply burdened, highly ambiguous" term, but also suggest some alternative variants to replace it (2000, p.8).

Thus, it looks at three ideologies that have contributed to the formation of Russian national identity and the construction of Russia's Others, especially during the third term of Putin's presidency. Then, it deals with the question of how and why Russia's Others are maligned in Russian propaganda in relation to the Ukrainian crisis. Finally, it concludes that the evilization of Russia's Others can further weaken Russian identity in the long run.

### **Theoretical background and methodology**

The choice of the research topic reflects the recent trend in the transformation studies to analyze the process of regime dynamics from the perspective of autocratic stability. Thus, since 2000, instead of the transition towards democracy, transformation studies have started to explore the "transition from democracy" (Erdmann 2011, p.6). However, whereas the old autocratic research paid considerable attention to the concept of legitimization, especially through ideology and economic efficiency (Arendt 1951; O'Donnell 1979), there has been little discussion about the legitimization of the ruling elites in the new autocracies so far (Kailitz 2009, p.472). As Gerschewski (2013, p.18) noted "recent research efforts have gradually lost sight on the legitimization dimension". Therefore, the article contributes to the bulk of literature that treats legitimization as a tool to ensure autocratic stability (Burnell 2006; Gilley 2009; Holbig 2011; Schlumberger 2010; Sedgwick 2010; Gerschewski 2013). Legitimization is understood here as a process of gaining both diffuse and specific support among the general population. Specific or output legitimization includes socio-economic performance, which addresses the demands of society. Diffuse, or input, legitimization refers to the substance of the regime and rests upon national idea, ideology, religion, and protection against external threats (Gerschewski et al. 2012, pp.9-10). This article focuses on diffuse legitimization through the construction of political propaganda promoting the common enemy.

The construction of external threat lies at the core of the legitimization strategy used by Russian politicians and the mass media in the Ukrainian conflict. Therefore, the analysis of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, starting from November 2013, provides a useful up-to-date insight on how political propaganda through evilization works and what functions it fulfills. The research was carried out until August 2014, when Russia introduced a one-year ban on Western food imports. Therefore, certain subsequent significant events, like rounds of Minsk negotiations or the ongoing economic crisis in Russia, are not considered in the paper. In order to understand why Russian political elites opted to propagate a certain vision of national identity in the researched period, the article turns to the explanatory

power of aspirational constructivism. Hence, it also includes a brief historical perspective on the formation of Russian identity.

Aspirational constructivism, introduced by Clunan (2009, pp.22-52), draws on social identity theory (SIT) and explores the formation of multiple never-fixed identities within the state. These identities are changed by political elites and other opinion-makers on the basis of their human need for positive self-esteem. The core of the collective self-esteem lies in memories of the historical past and the aspirations they create for the future. In the process of identity formation political elites promote their preferred self-image, which is constructed according to their ideas about the political purpose and international status of the country. Domestically formed identities and aspirations then define the state's behavior in the international arena and its relations with the "casted" Others.

In this article, aspirational constructivism is used as the theoretical framework for several reasons. First, this approach allows exploring the construction of national identity by considering the relationship between domestic political processes and official foreign policy. Accordingly, in order to explain the construction of Russia's identity, both primary sources, like Russia's official state documents and speeches of major Russian politicians, as well as secondary sources, such as key scientific works on Russian identity, are analysed in the paper.

Second, aspirational constructivism helps to overcome the problem of hierarchies in the process of identity construction. Assuming the existence of multiple identities, it suggests that political elites and major opinion-makers wield authority to promote their vision of the national Self and engage in contestation to project this power. At the same time, in order to complement the focus made on elites and uncover another layer of the identification process, the article analyses Russian public attitudes on the basis of opinion poll data.

Third, aspirational constructivism sheds light on how elites promote their vision of national identity within political discourse and depict other countries as "similar or dissimilar to the national Self", creating orientations for the Self to behave with the Others (Clunan 2009, p.204). When promoting their version of the national Self, political elites often resort to propaganda tools. Political propaganda aims at the promotion of the preferred self-image of the ruling elites and changing perceptions, norms, and ideas that contradict the promoted version of the national identity. Therefore, the constructivist

approach is an appropriate tool for examining the vision of the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's national identity as presented by Russian politicians and the mass media. For that purpose, the article explores the Russian official discourse on the crisis in Ukraine manifested in Russian official documents, state media and on the pro-government demonstrations during the period under consideration.

### **Evil is the Other**

The rhetorical use of concepts pointing at the difference between the Self and the Other is not new in international relations (see International Relations 2004, International Politics 2014). Thus, the politics of resentment rests on "accusing outside forces of causing every problem that arises on the domestic front" (Smith 2012, p.53). Whole countries, political and religious groups, and political leaders have often been labelled as negatively deviant, with this label consequently shaping their identity and relationships with other international actors. Moreover, certain ideologies, structures, and concepts can also be "cast" as negative Others. The scale of this article does not allow a discussion of the concepts of evil or enemy from philosophical and historical perspectives. Therefore only the use of these concepts in political discourse and their relevance in international relations theory will be discussed here.

Derrida (1993, p.355) argues that "it is the political as such [...] that would no longer exist without the figure and without the determined possibility of the enemy". Thus, he addresses the figure of the enemy as something inalienable from the political – a notion he derived from the work of Carl Schmitt (1976). The idea of an enemy as an actor with opposite interests and values does indeed lie at the core of classic political concepts, such as war or competition. However the degree of enmity, the scale of hostile action, and the severity of consequences vary substantially in each particular case. Thus, an "evilized" enemy is so fundamentally opposed to another conflict party that no compromise or reconciliation is possible: "the evil is irredeemable" (Müller 2014, p.447). In order to provide a definition of evil, Casebeer (2004, p.445) connects evil with moral theory and brings into play three moral axes of evaluation: that of the agent, the action, and the outcome. Accordingly, for him:

evil starts with mal-ordered psychology, increases in magnitude as that psychology affects actions that ignore duty, and achieves its peak when the actions taken result in catastrophic consequences.

Thus, the appointing of evil presupposes the presence of bad intentions, horrible actions, and catastrophic consequences. The scale of offence normally does not allow evil actors to become reintegrated into the normative structure of international society. At the same time, another category of deviant actors – rogue states – can suffer punishment and then come back to the international arena. These states possess the following characteristics: they are usually underdeveloped, strive to obtain WMDs, and support international terrorism (Geis and Wunderlich 2014). The terms “evil” and “rogue state” are both widespread in contemporary political discourse. Political scientists also use the term “asymmetrical counter-concepts”, coined by Koselleck, to conceptualize certain ideas, images, and concepts that represent deviant Others (for the historical semantics of the asymmetrical counter-concepts see Koselleck 1979). Counter-concepts constitute conceptual pairs that “serve to stabilize a positive, universal self-conception while denying the other equal recognition by defining him or her through negation” (Geis and Wunderlich 2014, p.468). In contemporary international relations, counter-concepts are reflected in such dichotomies as “West/East”, “democracy/autocracy” or “international community/axis of evil”. Whereas asymmetrical counter-concepts are used primarily to conceptualize the inferiority of the negative actor to the “good” one, negative othering performs other functions as well.

According to Casebeer (2004, pp.447-448), the use of the term “evil” in international relations performs at least four functions. First, it is used to motivate people to take actions against the negative Other. Second, evil rhetoric can be adopted by an actor as a response to being labelled evil or an enemy itself. Third, actors can use demonization to draw divisions between the negative Others and themselves, thereby justifying the denial of mutual recognition and the confirmation of the superiority of the Self, and mobilizing the population against the Other. Fourth, the term “evil” can simply help to describe a state of affairs from a normative perspective. All these functions can be applied to the different categories of deviant actors described above. While appointing deviant Others contributes to the legitimization of the external policy of intervention and the mobilization of the population to protect the Self, constructing the Other, being it an evil or a counter-concept, has always been a part of political propaganda.

The creators of political propaganda predominantly appeal to a domestic audience. They use the process of othering to make the population think and act in a certain way and to legitimize specific state policies. In this process, the Other is constructed as both a threat and a target. For that purpose, evil is

conceptualized as non-Self; it is placed outside the Self and is made “extrinsic and separable from the self” (Abdel-Nour 2004, p.430). This externalization of the Other makes it possible and – as a consequence of successful propaganda – justifiable to take counteraction, if not extraordinary measures, against the deviant Other. However, total externalization of the Other is merely an illusion, because the very existence of the Self is impossible without the Other – its “mirror”, its alternative identity. Actions taken against the Other can lead to tangible consequences for the Self and the international community as a whole. Considering dramatic events in international politics, such as 9/11 or genocide in Rwanda, some political scientists argue against the externalization of deviant actors. For instance, Lu (2004, p.505) stresses the interconnectedness and interrelatedness between evil agents and the social structures in which they operate. The acknowledgement of the mutual constitution of agent and structure would not allow the construction of the negative Other as if he had appeared “out of nothing” and the misuse of this image for propagandistic purposes. On the contrary, the non-dichotomized agent-structure relationship implies the moral responsibility of the Self for the acts of the Other, as both of them contribute to the social structure, which in turn shapes their identities. Abdel-Nour (2004, p.433) points to the interconnection between the Self and the negative Other in conceptualizing evil as connected-to-self. According to this conception, even though the Self may distance itself from the negative Other and oppose it, the interconnection between the two makes room for historical self-reflection and a deeper understanding of the most negative sides of the Self.

In summary, though opposite of the Self, the deviant Other represents an integral part of identity. In international relations it can be conceptualized as an evil, a rogue state, or an asymmetrical counter-concept. The demonization of an alien Other is often used to mobilize the population against the Other as non-Self through political propaganda and can lead to dramatic consequences for the Self and the international community. The understanding of the Other as connected-to-self contributes to a more promising relationship between the identity composites. The next section sheds light on Russia’s main Others.

### **Others in Russian foreign policy**

Tsygankov and Tsygankov (2010, p.664) describe three of Russia’s ideological traditions – Westernist, statist, and civilizationist. They define ideology as a “systematic presentation of Self, Other, and their relationships” and therefore provide an enlightening explanation of the role played by Others in the construction of Russian identities since the 19th century. Thus, each ideology

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has emerged as a result of the historical interaction of Russia with the outside world and the Russian elite's worldview.

The Westernizers have seen Russia's Self as a part of the West: First, as one of the European monarchies, then as a part of the European socio-democratic world of ideas, and after the collapse of the USSR, as a country that shares Western values, such as democracy, human rights, and free markets. Westernizers, like Boris Yeltsin or Andrei Kozyrev, perceived the non-Western world as Russia's significant Other and aimed at an integration with Western liberal institutions as an opposite to moving towards the Eurasian vector.

Statists praise a strong state that is able to preserve social and political order. At different times they have valued monarchy, the supremacy of the Communist party, or strong presidential power. Statists are afraid of external threats and have demonized both Eastern and Western Others as threatening Russia's independence. On the way to Great Power status, statist, for instance, Yevgenii Primakov or Vladimir Putin, favored both accommodation with the West and balancing strategies.

Finally, for civilizationists the Self-Other dualism represents cultural oppositions. They view Russia as a "civilization in its own right" opposed to different threatening both Western and non-Western Others (Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010, p.669). Since the rule of Ivan the Terrible civilizationists have stressed Orthodox values, Pan-Slavic ideology, socialism, or Eurasianism as lying at the core of Russia's own special path. Some civilizationists, like Mikhail Gorbachev's followers, support cross-cultural dialogue, in which Russia's distinctiveness would be respected and promoted. However, there is also a visible, although radical, part of the civilizationists, which can be defined as hard-line nationalist opposition.

Hard-line nationalists consistently advocate the "restoration of a West-independent empire through international alliances against Western nations" (Tsygankov 2009, p.189). This group includes, among others, national communists, like Gennadii Zyuganov, who merge old communist and nationalist ideas, in particular to restore military and economic potential within the Soviet boundaries. The Eurasianists, or civilizational nationalists<sup>2</sup>, also represent the hard-line opposition. They adhere to conservative values and aim at a geopolitical expansion to resist the influence of America. One of the most famous neo-Eurasianists is Aleksandr Dugin, recently labeled as

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<sup>2</sup> On the term "civilizational nationalism" see March 2011.

“Putin’s brain” (Barbashin and Thoburn 2014) in the Western press. Being an adviser to the State Duma speaker, a leader of the International Eurasianist Movement and a university professor in the past, he has become a prominent public and political figure in Russia, even though he supports a radical conservative and profascist ideology (Umland 2009, p.78).

Until recently, hard-line nationalists were rather marginalized in domestic politics (Tsygankov 2009). At the same time, they became able to influence political discourse through parliamentary institutions to a large extent (March 2012, p.69). For instance, the nationalist State Duma members supported the autonomy claims of the eastern regions of Ukraine after the Orange revolution. Later on, they recommended supporting “all political movements aimed at decentralization and federalization of Ukraine” (Tsygankov 2009, p.198).

From the perspective of aspirational constructivism a single fixed national identity does not exist. Instead, multiple identities pave the way to the construction of national identity and hence the foreign policy of the country. These identities revive historical memories and represent the perceptions of the ruling elites, which have the power to promote their version of identity at home and abroad. In Russia each of the three ideologies described above has influenced the construction of national identity with varying intensities at different periods of time. The next chapter will examine the construction of the Russian identity during Putin’s third term.

### **The Russian identity and construction of Others during Putin’s third term**

According to aspirational constructivists, national identity and interests are constructed in accordance with what the political elites identify as the country’s political purpose and aspirations towards a certain international status (Clunan 2009, p.31). Russia’s identity appeared to be rather inconsistent and fluctuating in the Putin era. Russian politics in the 2000s, especially after 2006, did not prove the thesis about the imperial ambitions of Russia. Many experts see Russia’s identity as a pragmatic power (Tsygankov 2006; Jarosiewicz et al. 2010; Shapovalova and Zarembo 2010; Trenin 2011) rather than an autocracy promoter (see Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2009; Jackson 2010; Silitski 2010). Overall, during the first term of Putin’s presidency, mainly the statist, who are initially nationalistic because of their Soviet past, have constructed both domestic and foreign policy discourses. Gradually, fuelled by the hard-liners, anti-Western nationalism “moved from the margins to the mainstream of Russian discourse” (March 2012, p.63).

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Putin is widely known for co-opting liberal, communist, and nationalist ideas to legitimize his regime. Some experts even argue that the Kremlin's nationalism is simply "an attempt to co-opt ideas that have a popular resonance in the service of the regime goals" (March 2012, p.68; on Kremlin's instrumental use of conservatism see Rodkiewicz and Rogoza 2015). Thus, against the background of the uncontrolled flow of migration, nationalist sentiments in society, and growing political activity of the hard-line nationalist opposition and the overall nationalization of the elites, Putin introduced the idea of state-civilization, according to which Russia represents a "unique socio-cultural civilizational entity formed of the multi-people Russian nation" (Tsygankov 2013, p.6). Accordingly, since Putin has entered his third presidential term, elements of the civilizationist ideology also became visible in Russia's political discourse. The Kremlin has apparently started to strive for more than just recognition of its great power ambitions; it "seeks to offer the world its vision of moral values" (Shevtsova 2014a, p.76).

In September 2013, in his address to the Valdai club (an international discussion club which promotes dialogue between Russian and international intellectuals on Russia and its place in the world), Putin (2013a) declared that Russian policy would be based on Christian and conservative values, which should be protected from the liberal West:

We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. [...] Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values.

On the whole, Putin's third term in office confirms an assumption according to which "over the years the Kremlin has gradually developed an ideological meta-narrative [...] this meta-narrative crystallizes values identified as conservative" (Laruelle 2013, p.2). In his address to the Federal Assembly in December 2013, Putin (2013b) clearly articulated the Russian conservative position:

We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values [...]: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity. Of course, this is a conservative position. But speaking in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that

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it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state.

The promotion of this neo-conservative ideology has been carried further by some eccentric public figures, such as the political philosopher Igor Panarin and the political commentator Aleksandr Dugin, “academic teachers [...] of the young generations of geopoliticians” (Darczewska 2014, p.19), as well as Aleksandr Prokhanov, the editor-in-chief of the extreme right weekly *Zavtra* and the chairman of the Izborsk club of almost 30 nationalist or conservative ideologists and politicians. Some of the Club’s members managed to get high media visibility through personal contacts at Channel One, in particular with the conservative right-wing media commentator Mikhail Leontyev (Laruelle 2015, p.126).

At a meeting of the Valdai club in October 2014, Putin only briefly mentioned traditional values and focused more on security and world order issues. He resorted to rhetoric reminiscent of the realist school of international relations theory and characteristic of statist ideology (Tsygankov 2010, p.677). He stressed the unipolarity of the global order with the US being a “big brother” who had “declared itself the winner of the Cold War” and “decided to pressure events and reshape the world to suit their own needs and interests” (Putin 2014b). Thus, Putin referred to one of Russia’s significant Others as a challenge.

Since the end of the Cold war, the US has been recognized as Russia’s Other, its main threat and role model simultaneously and hence a part of Russian identity (Trenin 2009, pp.15-16). Paraphrasing Rene Descartes, this can be formulated in another way: “I am America’s equal rival, therefore I exist” (Piontkovsky 2006, p.5). The Concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation until now implies that the US is the counterweight of Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 2013). Russian politicians still present issues with the US, for instance, NATO enlargement, US missile defence deployments in Central Europe, or the official US policy of democracy promotion, as direct threats or serious problems (Trenin 2007, p.2). Moreover, strong anti-Western sentiments prevail in Russian society. During Putin’s third presidential term and against the background of the Ukrainian crisis, they increased sharply: in 2014 84% of Russians expressed confidence that today’s Russia has enemies, 43% of Russians evaluated the relations between Russia and the US as tense, and 39% as hostile (Levada Center 2014).

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The EU can be conceived as another important Other for Russia, even though it is widely believed to be subordinate to the US. 50% of the respondents in the above-mentioned opinion poll conducted by Levada Center (2014) stated that Russia's relations with the European Union were tense and 16% marked them as hostile. Even though the term of Yeltsin's presidency was characterized by the prevalence of Westernist ideology, the widespread perception among the ruling elites was that the relevant community (the EU, or the West) failed to recognize Russia's pro-Western intentions and its adherence to the norms of European identity. This was also one of the reasons why political circles in Russia were prompted to turn to nationalism and pragmatism in foreign policy (Splidsboel-Hansen 2002, pp.1-9). After the first color revolution, Russian politicians started to perceive the European Union and its enlargement as an increasing threat to Russia. This constructed threat has moved beyond security discourse and entered even the cultural sphere. Thus, in its draft document on the foundations of cultural politics, the Russian Ministry of Culture drew a clear line between Eastern and Western civilization and generated a widely discussed slogan "Russia is not Europe" (Queer Russia 2014).

In his above-mentioned speech at the meeting of the Valdai club in 2014, Putin (2014b) warned against possible global anarchy and urged to institutionalize these newly appeared political poles in the international environment. As a framework to lead a "battle of ideas" with the West to promote the legitimacy of its own way as an alternative to Western liberal democracy, the Russian governing elite has used its well-developed linkage with the former Soviet republics (Averre 2009, p.1696). Thus, already in 2011 Putin had initiated the creation of the Eurasian Union as a geopolitical counterforce to the EU. His Eurasian Union project implies the creation of common economic, political, and military space with Belarus and Kazakhstan and – as opportunity offers – with other post-Soviet countries, as an alternative to the European Union. The identity of the Eurasian Union is to be based on a "presumed special spiritual and civilizational community, referred to as the 'Russian world'" (Menkiszak 2014).

Nonetheless, the CIS countries have responded to Russian appeals to civilizational unity and common historical destiny with caution, as Russia often does not present itself as an equal partner nor does it behave as such, but as a superior state in the CIS region. In the absence of the power of attraction, Russia offers its neighbors "tough love" instead of love (Trenin 2009, p.26). Russia does not appear to be a "powerful magnet able to integrate the region around itself" (Torbakov 2011, p.11). As a result, some Russian neighbors, for

instance Belarus, have become the classical “balancers” between Russia and other significant actors. In Ukraine, society has become heavily polarized over the issue of “the preferred integration vector (to the West or to the East)” (Pogrebinskiy 2015, p.94). The Ukrainian crisis that followed Yanukovitch’s decision to delay the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013 has served as fertile soil for the further revival of the age-old issues of identity and nationalism in Russia and their instrumentalization by the country’s ruling elite.

In brief, since Putin entered his third presidential term the Russian elite has been promoting identities that reflect elements of both statist and civilizationist ideologies. They ascribe Russia the role of a conservative great power, which should defend its traditional values against the US and its Western allies, as well as promote its own principles of political organization and multipolarity worldwide. The Ukrainian crisis exemplifies how and why political elites promote their versions of Russia’s identity while demonizing Russia’s Others through official propaganda.

### **The Demonization of the Others**

During the third term of Putin’s presidency, the ruling elites have attempted to shape national identity in accordance with statist and civilizationist ideologies, which imply active resistance to the states perceived by the ruling elite as threats to Russia’s independence, or Western pressures. Thus, the current crisis in Ukraine began in November 2013, after President Viktor Yanukovych opted to reject an Association Agreement with the EU in favor of closer ties with Russia and the first protesters came to the Maidan. What seemed to be a domestic crisis of governance soon transformed into a confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, with the EU and the US taking a backseat. Russia first condemned the Euromaidan as another Western-backed revolution. Then, it seized the opportunity of the turmoil in Kiev and gradually took control of the Crimean peninsula. The annexation of Crimea was performed under the pretext of defending the rights of the ethnic Russian majority and subsequently “legitimized” by the results of the highly disputed unconstitutional referendum. Whereas from the politico-historical perspective, this turn can be considered “the most recent chapter in a much longer story” (Uehling 2015, p.71), for the international community the events were rather unexpected.

Thus, the EU and the US started to gradually introduce sanctions, including visa bans and asset freezes. As the crisis unfolded, Russia activated its support of pro-Russian separatists in southern and eastern Ukraine and some areas of

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Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts declared their independence as people's republics. In response, the US imposed economic sanctions in the financial and energy sectors. After a Malaysia Airlines passenger jet with 298 people on board was shot down over Ukraine in July 2014 and Russia was unwilling to contribute to the proper investigation of the accident, the EU expanded its sanctions (Rutland 2015, pp.137-138). Russia responded with a one-year ban on imports of certain food from Western countries. The questions about how far mutual sanctions can go and how far Russia is going to proceed with military intervention in Ukraine have given rise to rumors of (a new Cold) war. In their attempt to strengthen national identity, Russian elites see Russia's de facto direct military involvement in Ukraine as justified. In order to legitimize Russia's role in the Ukrainian crisis, Russian politicians and the media have resorted to the use of aggressive propaganda and enemy-or-friend-thinking.

How does the Self see its Other? Or, in other words, what vision of the West do Russian propagandists attempt to construct and how? In order to boost enemy-or-friend-thinking in society they utilize counter-concepts that characterize significant Others of Russia's identity as constructed and promoted by the ruling elites.

The West is in decline – this is the favorite assumption of Russian propaganda. Accordingly, certain values that Western countries actively promote are not comparable with traditionally Russian ones and can lead to “degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis” (Putin 2013a). These counter-concepts include liberalism, globalization, and democracy. Western liberalism is perceived as a threat to traditional Russian values, because this philosophical thought puts individual liberty against the pressure of social collectivism and incursions of the state. It implies that people possess individual rights and freedoms and the state serves mainly as a wealth maximizer for the citizens. Additionally, unlimited sexual and religious freedom and tolerance have a corrosive effect on traditional family and religious values, and the pursuit of wealth leads to materialism and consumerism. As a consequence, Western society is experiencing moral decay. As Putin (2013a) put it:

We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.

Therefore, Russian civilizationists strive to set up a “post-liberal ideological superstate” as an alternative to Western civilization (Darczewska 2014, p.19).

Globalization is seen as another threat to Russia. Russian intellectuals consider three postulates of globalization theory as highly controversial. These are the crisis of the state, modernization, and Westernization as a natural outcome of globalization and democratic unipolarity as a way for self-organization in the international system (Bogaturov 2005, p.297). Therefore, globalization is understood as an equivalent to a unipolar world with the economic, political, and cultural hegemony of the Western community, where the US plays a leading role and pursues a neocolonial policy through the controlled “color” revolutions and NGOs (or “foreign agents”), among other tools. In accordance with this way of thinking, Russia is doomed to remain on the margins of global politics if it does not actively exercise its potential to restore its political and economic dominance in the post-Soviet area in order to counteract Western influence and contribute to the creation of the new, just, multipolar world. Moreover, the principles of globalization and multiculturalism imply blurring borders and endanger the authentic culture of the Russian world. Thus, a draft report “Foundations of State Cultural Politics” presented to the public by the Russian Ministry of Culture in April 2014 underlines the ultimate rejection of multiculturalism: “Any reference to ‘creative freedom’ and ‘national identity’ cannot justify behavior which is considered unacceptable from the standpoint of traditional Russian values” (cited Queer Russia 2014).

Other universal values promoted by the Western countries are democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Russia denies the universality of these values, or at least of how these values are understood in the West. Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox Church remains “the only large and influential Christian church in the world that is alien to the principles of democracy and human rights” (Filatov 2011, p.17). For Russia, Western countries tend to use “double standards” when it comes to the implementation of these values: they tolerate shortcomings in domestic policies, but severely condemn minor violations of democratic principles and human rights in other countries or even interfere in the internal affairs of these states to impose their own rules and norms. Correspondingly, the West does not accept the fact that the development of democracy is a gradual process that needs time and adjustment to local conditions and cannot be simply “copy-pasted”. At the same time, according to the concept of sovereign or managed democracy, Russia has made a significant contribution

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to democratization on the global level as a counterbalance to Western powers, and “all is well with democracy in Russia, and the Kremlin doesn’t establish puppet parties or control television broadcasting”, as Russian politicians claim (Surkov cited in Ambrosio 2009, p.75). The abovementioned counter-concepts “cast” by Russia do not remain abstract; they are used to characterize the two major Others of Russia: the US and the EU.

Russian politicians and media do more than simply stress the difference between the EU and the US on one side, and Russia on the other. They use demonization of the significant Others as a tool of political propaganda in order to motivate and mobilize people to take action or support state policies against the Others. Russian official political rhetoric includes references – often religious in nature – to the categories of good and evil. Thus, in March 2014 the Speaker of the Russian Parliament Sergey Naryshkin commented on the annexation of Crimea by Russia: “It is a watershed event in world history, it is a turning point in the confrontation between good and evil, black and white” (TASS 2014). Russia’s significant Others, in turn, are believed to be engaged in “evilizing” Russia. As Putin (2014b) said in his most recent address to the Valdai club in regard to the position of the US in the world,

Arbitrary interpretations and biased assessments have replaced legal norms. At the same time, total control of the global mass media has made it possible when desired to portray white as black and black as white [...] Today, we are seeing new efforts to fragment the world, draw new dividing lines, put together coalitions not built for something but directed against someone, anyone, create the image of an enemy as was the case during the Cold War years, and obtain the right to this leadership, or diktat if you wish.

The evilization of the Other lies at the core of Russian propaganda in the Ukrainian crisis. As mentioned above, appointing the Other as an evil performs at least four functions (Casebeer 2004, pp.447-448). In the case of the Ukrainian crisis, the evilization of the Other is used, first, to motivate pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine and their supporters in Russia to take action against the rest of Ukraine’s population. Second, Russian political leaders have adopted evil rhetoric as a response to being labelled evil or enemies themselves, as Putin’s recent Valdai speech shows. Third, Russian ruling elites and media use demonization to draw divisions between Western and Russian values, thereby justifying the confirmation of Russia’s own special way and antagonizing the population against the West. Fourth, the term “evil” “mirrors” the normative perspective that radical representatives of the statist, civilizationists and hard-line nationalists have on the West.

As far as the appointing of evil presupposes the presence of bad intentions, beastly actions, and disastrous consequences, the Russian media and politicians have to attribute these characteristics to the political elites in Ukraine and the West. This is where harsh rhetoric in the coverage of the crisis in Ukraine by the state media comes from. Thus, during the television program “Genocide in Eastern Ukraine”, screened on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2014, Russia’s propaganda network RT accused Ukraine of carrying out beheadings, rape, ethnic cleansing, systematic genocide, of using weapons of mass destruction, and of engineering international conspiracies – to name just a few atrocities (Euromaidan Press 2014).

The Russian official discourse on the Ukrainian crisis is more restrained. It is constructed in line with the counter-concepts ascribed to the Western powers. This vision implies the following pattern: The US tried to expand their influence and promote liberal values in Eastern Europe through the mechanism of EU enlargement. When Yanukovich refused to sign an Association Agreement they ignited a revolution and sponsored a coup d’etat. Euromaidan was supported by Ukrainian ultranationalists and fascists, as well as by those who blindly believe in decaying European values. Considering the decisive role of the Russian people in World War II, Russia had to prevent the revival of fascism in Europe. Hence the banners during the pro-government demonstration on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2014 in Moscow said “We believe Putin” and “Fascism will not pass” (RB.ru 2014). In his speech at the Security Council meeting on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2014, Putin (2014a) stated:

Undesirable regimes, countries that conduct an independent policy or that simply stand in the way of somebody’s interests get destabilized. Tools used for this purpose are the so-called color revolutions, or, in simple terms – takeovers instigated and financed from the outside. [...] Frequently the forces used here are radical, nationalist, often even neofascist, fundamental forces, as was the case, unfortunately, in many post-Soviet states, and as is the case with Ukraine now.

On the same occasion he also mentioned that “it is important for all Russians, regardless of where they live, to have equal rights and equal opportunities”. Accordingly, in the view of the increasingly nationalist sentiments in Ukraine, Russia had to defend the Russian-speaking population in the country. While fulfilling this mission, Russia restored historical justice and returned the Crimean peninsula to its territory through a referendum. The situation in south-eastern Ukraine with a majority Russian-speaking population appeared to be more complicated. According to the official Russian propaganda,

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Western powers deny the right of these regions to self-determination, despite the fact that this norm is enshrined in international law. Therefore it is Russia's responsibility to protect the rights of Russian-speaking people and save the Russian world from the expansion of the liberal Western ideology<sup>3</sup>. Putin (2014a) promised to do everything possible to resolve the large-scale humanitarian crisis in south-eastern Ukraine.

The propagandist version of the Ukrainian crisis described above attempts to shape the perception of the goals and policies of the EU and US among the Russian population. It contains elements of both statist and civilizationist ideologies, which currently prevail among Russian political elites, appeal to national memory, and instrumentalize nationalist and religious sentiments in society. Using propaganda allows Russian political elites to promote their vision of Russia's identity and hence legitimize the domestic autocratic regime, including the restriction of rights and freedoms, strengthening the power vertical and non-transparent governance, as well as manifestations of Russia's aggression, from the annexation of Crimea through the retaliatory sanctions against the Western countries to the hostilities in southern and eastern Ukraine. Thus, Russia has experienced an unprecedented surge of patriotism and unity domestically with 83% of Russians saying they approve of Putin's leadership (Gallup World 2014). As one of the leading experts on Russia, Shevtsova (2014b), put it:

the amazingly successful military-patriotic Kremlin mobilization of the Russian society after the Crimea annexation has confirmed the sad truth: Russian state and national identity is still based on the search for the enemy.

The enemy-or-friend-thinking promoted by Russian propaganda implies a conceptualization of evil as non-Self. This means that the negative Other is externalized from the Self in order to facilitate aggression against the Other. However, as mentioned by Abdel-Nour (2004, p.430), this concept is an illusion: while identity is constructed through the interaction between the Self and the Other, the Other is connected to the Self. Moreover, according to aspirational constructivism, the process of identity formation is ambiguous and fluctuating; identity is never fixed. Thus, along with the statist and civilizationist ideologies, Russia's national identity also encompasses elements

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically enough, according to opinion polls conducted by KIIS in February 2015, pro-European orientations prevail over pro-Russian choice, among others, in the predominantly Russian-speaking Southern region and Kyiv (Sakhno 2015).

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of Westernist ideology. Therefore, the counter-concepts that Russia has cast and labelled as external evil in its propaganda are inherent in its own society.

As a matter of fact, the concepts of liberalism, democracy or globalization have never been alien to Russia's identification process. Liberal values are supported by those who demonstrated on Bolotnaya Square in December 2011 or made anti-war statements and advocated holding a Congress "Against the war, against the isolation of Russia, against the restoration of totalitarianism" in March 2014. Globalization is an essential characteristic of economic relations between Russia and the rest of the world, with Russia's foreign trade turnover in May 2014 totaling 70.3 billion USD (Federal State Statistics Service 2014). Internationalism does not only describe the diversity of the Russian population, it also describes the processes of communication and cultural exchange in the globalized world in which the Russians are actively involved. Moreover, the brand-new concept of sovereign democracy needs rigorous revision to become at least comparable to the long-standing European tradition of democracy. Recent developments in Russia, such as anti-gay laws, the foreign agents law, mandatory registration of popular blogs as mass media, and increasing restrictions on freedom of speech are not commensurate with democratic principles, regardless of how democracy and human rights concepts are interpreted. Self-reflection and awareness about the fact that the Other cast and labelled as evil is an integral part of one's identity contributes to a deeper understanding of the Self.

In sum, in order to justify Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, Russian ruling elites attempt to construct a vision of the West as a declining global power in an unjust unipolar world. For this purpose, they use political propaganda to motivate pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine and their supporters in Russia, draw divisions between the Russian world and the West, and respond to allegations of Russia being an evil force itself. Thus, the Russian media and politicians have cast certain counter-concepts, like liberalism, globalization, and democracy, as significant Others, and then identified them with images of the US and the EU to construct external threats. In the Ukrainian crisis, Russia presents itself as a defender of the Russian-speaking community and a counterforce to the liberal West in a civilizational conflict. Even though Russian involvement in Ukraine has contributed to the domestic legitimacy of Putin's regime, the constructed battle of values with the West could further weaken Russian identity in the long term, while deepening the inconsistency of its ideological elements.

## Conclusion

This article argued that Russia resorted to political propaganda and enemy-or-friend thinking as a tool to justify its involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, thus legitimizing its authoritarian rule. The focus was on the construction of the Russian national identity and interconnection between its components. Aspirational constructivism sees national identity constructed by political elites on the basis of their need for self-esteem and in accordance with the self-image they promote. Moreover, national identity influences the relationship between the Self and its “casted” Others, and hence the foreign policy of the state. The ruling elite tends to transform alien Others into external “evil” or enemies in order to mobilize the population for the support of the country’s external policies, and strengthen domestic legitimization of the regime.

The article has shown that the Ukrainian crisis provided a fertile soil for the promotion of the statist and civilizationist visions of Russia’s image by the ruling elite. Thus, during the crisis in Ukraine, Russian politicians and the mass media resorted to the evilization of Russia’s Others through political propaganda to set up pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine and their supporters in Russia against the rest of Ukraine’s population, draw divisions between the Russian world and the West, and react to the evilization of Russia by the Western political elites. The constructed ideological conflict between the elements of Russia’s national identity can further weaken it in the long run. However, in the short term, the mobilization of the Russian population in the face of external threats stemming from Western values strengthens the legitimization pillar of an autocratic regime in Russia. In general, the study exemplified the interconnection between Russia’s identification process and the country’s foreign policy using the aspirational constructivist lens. It also extended the knowledge on legitimization strategies of autocratic regimes on the post-Soviet space.

As suggested by Köllner (2008, p.363), future research might explore the other side of the legitimization pillar, namely specific or output legitimization of autocratic regimes. In the case of Russia, a further study could assess to what extent the legitimacy beliefs among supporters of the current Russian authorities are reinforced by the socio-economic performance of the regime, considering the severe financial crisis in Russia that started in 2014 or the economic impact of annexing Crimea.

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