

# ANTITHETICAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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**ABSTRACT.** The objective of this article is to analyse collective identity formation as a strategic narrative, focusing on a specific case where identity is formulated by casting the enemy as antithetic. The article outlines discursive strategies that justify and preserve an antithetical identity and describes the inherent dangers of these strategies, the prime example being a potential security dilemma. The author also proposes ways to relieve these kinds of security dilemmas. The theoretical framework is illustrated with a brief meta-analysis of the foreign policy discourse of Russia, foregrounding its strategic narratives and their antithetical dimension.

**Keywords:** identity, strategic narrative, security dilemma, Russian foreign policy, semiotic theory of hegemony

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Identity is a core concept that unites political groups and defines the lives of individuals<sup>2</sup>. It is interesting, however, that commonalities are usually perceived through dissimilarities; homogeneity essentially requires differentiation<sup>3</sup>. Identity largely depends on who is selected for comparison or in what context self-definition takes place<sup>4</sup>. Based on this understanding, we can conclude that, instead of focusing on already established identities, it is more

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<sup>2</sup> **Pakhomenko, S.; Tryma, C.** 2016. Identity and Propaganda in Russian-Ukrainian Hybrid Warfare. – *Sõjateadlane*, No. 2, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> **Hall, S.** 1996. Who Needs “Identity”? – Hall, S.; Du Gay, P. (eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, pp. 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> **Kotov, K.** 2005. Kultuur, identiteet ja enesekirjeldus. – *Acta Semiotica Estica II*, p. 184. [Kotov 2005]

important to study the dynamic process of identity formation and its guiding balances of power. One way this can be achieved is by understanding the role of strategic narratives that illustrate the purposefulness of identity formation as well as its wider (political) context.

Focusing on the image of 'the other' may reveal a hidden or so-called underwater dimension of relevant strategies, especially if one can only see their extroversive side or description of others. An understanding of other(s) is often formed according to one's own values which are directed outwards in a converted form<sup>5</sup>. For example, it is interesting that patriotic movements gathering momentum across Central and Eastern Europe describe themselves as the future of Europe, attributing such issues to the West that, according to political scientists, they themselves actually struggle with<sup>6</sup>. This clearly outlines an idealistic fight for European identity that largely depends on opposition.

The objective of this article is to analyse a specific case of collective identity formation where political unity is achieved through antithetical means, or through a diametrical opposition to the image of an enemy. Although anti-thetical meaning-making and identity formation have been mentioned in several relevant research papers in the past<sup>7</sup>, their specificity and purposefulness have never been thoroughly systemised. Initial connections between strategic narratives and the semiotic view represented herein already exist<sup>8</sup>. The perspectives proposed in this article will be illustrated with the strategic narratives and foreign policy of the Russian Federation. According to a 2020 report of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, the latter is characterised

<sup>5</sup> **Ivanov, V. et al.** 1998. Kultuurisemiootika teesid. – Tartu Semiootika Raamatukogu 1. Tartu: TÜ Kirjastus, pp. 61–62. [**Ivanov et al.** 1998]

<sup>6</sup> **Krastev, I.; Holmes, S.** 2018. Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents. – *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29 (3), pp. 117–128.

<sup>7</sup> **Ventsel, A.** 2006. „See vereside on nüüd uuesti kinnitatud, värskendatud ja laiendatud“: „Rahva“ konstrueerimine II maailmasõja järgses nõukogude poliitilises retoorikas. – *Akadeemia*, No. 6, pp. 1427–1449; [**Ventsel** 2006] **Lepik, P.** 2007. Universaalidest Juri Lotmani semiootika kontekstis. – Tartu Semiootika Raamatukogu 6. Tartu: TÜ Kirjastus; [**Lepik** 2007] **Madisson, M.-L.; Ventsel, A.** 2018. Paremäärmuslikud kajakambrid ja autokommunikatsioon. – *Mäetagused*, No. 70, pp. 149–175; [**Madisson, Ventsel** 2018] **Kasekamp, A.; Madisson, M.-L.; Wierenga, L.** 2018. Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society. – *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 66 (1), pp. 47–58.

<sup>8</sup> **Ventsel, A.; Madisson, M.-L.; Hansson, S.; Sazonov, V.** 2018. Hirnu mehhanismid strateegilistes narratiivides Zapad 2017 näitel. – *Sõjateadlane*, No. 8, pp. 103–127; [**Ventsel et al.** 2018] **Madisson, M.-L.; Ventsel, A.** 2020. Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach. London: Routledge. [**Madisson, Ventsel** 2020]

by an increasingly deepening polarisation, an important part of which is opposition to the Western world (primarily NATO and the European Union)<sup>9</sup>.

The first part of the article is focused on developing an original approach to analysing antithetical identity formation within the framework of strategic narratives. The second part is dedicated to discussing the discursive strategies that justify and preserve an antithetical identity. In the subsequent discussion of potential security dilemmas I will also outline the inherent problems in antithetical identity formation. The final part of the article contains a meta-analysis of secondary literature with a focus on the manifestation of an antithetical dimension in various strategic narratives that guide Russian foreign policy, offering a possible key for their interpretation.

Although the article is primarily focused on the theoretical and descriptive side of antithetical identity formation, several measures will be proposed to help mitigate the resulting tensions. Furthermore, the viewpoint of strategic narratives illustrates the arbitrary nature of any political identity, revealing the power relations within. Clearly distinguishing these will give us a better understanding of the context of such unity which, in turn, will provide us with new possibilities to either support or change it.

## 2. Antithetical identity formation as a strategic narrative

### 2.1. The specificities of political identity formation

An oppositional dimension is common to any collective political identity. According to the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, politics is about differentiating between a friend and an enemy, and these categories are not naturally fixed but have to be determined<sup>10</sup>. This means that politics is not necessarily confined to a specific location where political decisions are made (e.g., a party or a parliament) but is rather a process of antagonistically classifying social relations in the context of power relations<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> **Välisluureamet** 2020. Eesti rahvusvahelises julgeolekukeskkonnas. Tallinn: Teabeamet, p. 11. [**Välisluureamet** 2020]

<sup>10</sup> **Schmitt, C.** 2002 [1932]. Poliitiline mõiste. – Lipping, J. (ed.). Kaasaegne poliitiline filosoofia: valik esseid. Tartu: EYS Veljesto, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> **Leftwich, A.** 2004. Thinking Politically: On the Politics of Politics. – Leftwich, A. (ed.). What is Politics? Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 14.

This idea has been developed, among others, by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe of the Essex School of discourse analysis<sup>12</sup>. According to them, any (political) unity is formed discursively and requires a specific categorisation of meanings to create a whole<sup>13</sup>. Its core prerequisite is confrontation with anything external to the system, uniting differentiated elements under a joint opposition<sup>14</sup>. As already mentioned, such opposition is not naturally established<sup>15</sup>. The process of forming unity is a constant political battle where different actors aspire to represent a whole, trying to respond to as many societal demands within a single discourse as possible<sup>16</sup>. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the relationship that is the basis for discursively establishing political unity should be perceived as hegemonic<sup>17</sup>. Such a categorisation, however, can never be complete because no discourse is able to assert the entire meaningful world<sup>18</sup>.

In an epistemological context, it is important to differentiate between actual and declared identity in addition to individual and collective identity<sup>19</sup>. Declared self-description also pursues hegemony, is inevitably just a fraction of reality, and is therefore unable to comprehensively describe reality<sup>20</sup>, unlike narratives where the complexity of the world is mediated as a consistent chain of events<sup>21</sup>. A natural instinct to narrationally explain causal relationships is

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<sup>12</sup> **Lipping, J.** 2020. Armsad vaenlased: Laclau ja Schmitti poliitilisest hingesugulusest. – *Aka-deemia*, No. 10, pp. 1859–1881.

<sup>13</sup> **Laclau, E.; Mouffe, C.** 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, p. 105. [**Laclau, Mouffe** 1985]

<sup>14</sup> **Laclau, E.** 2015c. Poliitika subjekt, subjekti poliitika. – Laclau, E. *Antagonism, poliitika, hegemoonia: valik esseid*. Lipping, J. (compiler) Tartu: EYS Veljesto, p. 207.

<sup>15</sup> **Laclau, Mouffe** 1985, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> **Laclau, E.** 2015a. Uusi mõtisklusi meie ajastu revolutsioonist. – Laclau, E. *Antagonism, poliitika, hegemoonia: valik esseid*. Lipping, J. (compiler) Tartu: EYS Veljesto, p. 95. [**Laclau** 2015a]

<sup>17</sup> **Laclau, E.** 2015b. Miks on tühjad tähistajad poliitikas olulised? – Laclau, E. *Antagonism, poliitika, hegemoonia: valik esseid*. Lipping, J. (compiler) Tartu: EYS Veljesto, p. 197. [**Laclau** 2015b]

<sup>18</sup> **Laclau, Mouffe** 1985, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> **Kotov** 2005, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> It must be specified that the description emanating from outside that is used in this article cannot be considered exhaustive either because, on a meta-level, this is also an abstraction (therefore, not appealing to conclusive objectivity).

<sup>21</sup> **Eco, U.** 2009. *Kuus jalutuskäiku kirjandusmetsades*. Tallinn: Varrak, p. 9.

considered inherent to humans<sup>22</sup>, which is why identity formation can also be considered a narrational activity<sup>23</sup>. In a political context, discursive power applied through narrational activities can be described as a nomenclature of strategic narratives, referring to wider concepts that unite different inter-related narratives.

## 2.2. The traits of strategic narratives

Strategic narratives are intentionally created stories that contain meaningful chains of events, determining the positions of characters and actions within. Political actors use strategic narratives to try to create a stable framework for interpretations to help a group give meaning to where they came from, where they are now, and where they are going, in order to justify certain political measures and influence the behaviour of the audience in the direction favoured by the author of the narrative<sup>24</sup>. Their success largely depends on how well the projected values can be integrated with the specificities of the target audience and its cultural codes<sup>25</sup>.

Strategic narratives differ from common narratives (both artistic and non-artistic), firstly, in their intentionality and purposefulness that place an emphasis on the desired outcome and overcoming relevant obstacles<sup>26</sup>. Secondly, they are manifested dispersedly, which is why any strategic narrative and its constancy is rather a mental construction composed in the analysing process from several intertwined discourses and sub-narratives, rather than being found in all texts in their entirety<sup>27</sup>.

There are three types of strategic narratives: 1) system narratives that describe how to comprehend a political (e.g., international) order and its construction; 2) identity narratives that define the values, traits, and intentions

<sup>22</sup> **Olson, D. R.** 2012. Narrative, Cognition, and Rationality. – Gee, J. P.; Handford, M. (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 604–615.

<sup>23</sup> **Georgakopoulou, A.** 2007. *Small Stories, Interaction, and Identities*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

<sup>24</sup> **Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.; Roselle, L.** 2013. *Strategic Narratives, Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge, p. 7. [Miskimmon *et al.* 2013]

<sup>25</sup> **Miskimmon *et al.*** 2013, p. 22; **Schmitt, O.** 2018. When Are Strategic Narratives Effective? The Shaping of Political Discourse through the Interaction between Political Myths and Strategic Narratives. – *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 39 (4), pp. 487–511. [Schmitt 2018]

<sup>26</sup> **Miskimmon *et al.*** 2013, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> **Ventsel *et al.*** 2018, p. 106.

of different actors; and 3) policy narratives whose purpose is to propose and justify political moves<sup>28</sup>. This classification, however, is merely theoretical because, in actuality, all three categories intertwine. For example, each policy narrative generates a certain understanding of a political system and vice versa.

### 2.3. Antithetical identity formation and its functions

An antagonistic dimension is common to any political identity; however, it has different forms of expression. An identity can be considered antithetical if it is preserved by a hostile image of an enemy, commonly described as diametrically opposing but created as a reverse or a contradictory reflection. The second side of the opposition that forms an identity is, therefore, an antipode described through self-denial that reconfirms the worldview of oneself through confrontation. The primary purpose of forming an antithetical identity is to establish a hegemonic order in chaotic conditions because such conditions are what generate the need for any kind of order<sup>29</sup>. This can be described more precisely through the strategies of projection and mirror projection: the first addresses an antithesis and the second the logic of the resulting identity formation.

Projective formation of an antithesis means that individual character traits are projected onto an alien actor. The enemy is also given internal differences that threaten to break the entrenching hegemony. For example, minorities that deviate from the norm are, in this case, described not only as different but also as destructive and, consequently, entirely negative. The projection of an antithesis manifests in two ways: its content (semantics) is presented non-symmetrically while its construction (topology) is symmetrical. On the one hand, this means that one side reflects its own traits in a backward manner, in a plus-minus-opposition<sup>30</sup>; for example, 'our' alleged morality and purity is contrasted with 'their' moral impairment and filthiness. On the other hand, the relevance of such a projection also matters, which is why the topology of an antithesis is derived from individualities but in a coinciding direction, or a bilateral manner. Therefore, 'our' steadfastness in protecting our traditions is

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<sup>28</sup> **Miskimmon, A.; O'Loughlin, B.; Roselle, L.** 2017. *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> **Laclau** 2015b, p. 198.

<sup>30</sup> **Lepik** 2007, p. 67.

equivalent to ‘their’ equal steadfastness in standing for their abnormal ways. An antithesis must show an equivalent expression of things with the wrong content<sup>31</sup>.

Mirror projection, however, manifests in a completely different direction. Alongside an external projection of shortcomings caused by a lack of order, one must entrench internal unity. In the case of antithetical identity formation, this is done by joining two negatives, or using a mirror projection system: ‘us’ is defined as an antithesis of the negative ‘other’<sup>32</sup>. Continuing the previous example, ‘our’ traditions first become ‘their’ moral impairment, and by contradicting it we will come back to the same old traditions. In addition to character traits perceived as positive, this can also concern negative traits. “First, ‘our’ troubles are attributed to ‘them’, and then, a mirror projection antithesis is formatted: /.../ a designated zero-feature,” which is the absence of their problems in our group<sup>33</sup>. A twist like that means that hegemonic power will secure its roots even deeper because any sort of discord is attributed to an imaginary anti-community and internal harmony is constantly regenerated by opposing this community. After semitones vanish, an antisymmetric expression of a common content in the form of an antithetic enemy will become more important than the cohesion of such content.

Therefore, antithetical identity formation can be described as a strategic identity narrative. Its main purpose is to establish a hegemonic order through a specific political identity that is justified with the image of an enemy displayed as an antithesis. The threats proposed by such an enemy are used to unite society: all differences will not only be forgotten but, if necessary, attributed to the alleged enemy. It is also important that the formatted image does not get too detached from the empirical experiences of individuals. The more realistic and widely acknowledged the dangers deriving from the enemy are, the better they can be utilised for antithetical identity formation. In the case of strategic systems and policy narratives, this benefits the zero-sum game and the measures that serve a cause because antithetical identity formation leaves no room for compromise, or a so-called grey area. In order to fight competing narratives, antithetical identity formation uses different discursive strategies that are outlined in the next subsection.

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<sup>31</sup> Lotman, J; Uspenski, B. 2013a. Kultuuri semiootilisest mehhanismist. – Uspenski, B. Vene kultuuri jõujooni. Valik artikleid. Tartu: Ilmamaa, p. 223. [Lotman, Uspenski 2013a]

<sup>32</sup> Lepik 2007, p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. Discursive strategies and their outcomes

Discursive strategies display systematic schemes of meaning classification and argumentation that serve certain political, psychological, and linguistic goals<sup>34</sup>. In the context of this article, we could think of them as building blocks of strategic narratives whose dispersed manifestation in different texts also give us grounds to analyse them as a single component of a strategic narrative. In this section I will take a closer look at some strategies of blame avoidance<sup>35</sup> that are used to preserve and justify an antithetical identity (although these do not have to be confined only to antithetical identity formation). This section also includes a discussion of the inherent problems of these strategies, namely the potential to escalate into a security dilemma, and ways to relieve such security dilemmas.

#### 3.1. Strategy No. 1: Semiotic disarming

The concept of semiotic disarming is borrowed from semiotician Juri Lotman who used it to describe a situation where “the nickname polemically given by an opponent is usurped and integrated into ‘our own’ language, transferring its meaning from belittling to positive.”<sup>36</sup> In a wider sense, this means a mirror projective acceptance of an accusation, altering it from condemnable to somewhat honourable. For example, the term ‘nationalist’, which is commonly disparaging, may become a compliment in certain groups. Similarly, the Social Democratic Party of Estonia has embraced the informal nickname ‘socials’ used by their political opponents to imply that the Party has a background in socialism. Semiotic disarming may be considered an efficient strategy because it deprives an opponent of potential arguments while also serving to undermine the seriousness of previous accusations.

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<sup>34</sup> **Wodak, R.** 2001. *The Discourse-Historical Approach*. – Wodak, R.; Meyer, M. (eds.) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage, p. 73.

<sup>35</sup> See more, for example, **Hansson, S.** 2015. *Discursive Strategies of Blame Avoidance in Government: A Framework for Analysis*. – *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 26 (3), pp. 297–322.

<sup>36</sup> **Lotman, J.** 1999a. *Kultuuride vastastikuse mõju teooriast (semiootiline aspekt)*. – *Semio-sfäärist*. Tallinn: Vagabund, p. 69. [Lotman 1999a]



### 3.2. Strategy No. 2: Discursive mimicry

The biological term ‘mimicry’ means protective resemblance, whereas discursive mimicry refers to a linguistically constructed mimicking relationship with the purpose of trying to appear more favourable by making the accomplishments of others seem like one’s own<sup>37</sup>. In such cases, an individual characterisation with a term or label that is generally perceived as positive will manifest on a self-descriptive level, if not with a completely opposite meaning then at least in an altered form. A similar strategy, or semiotic reversal, was proposed by philosopher Margus Ott who said that the most radical changes are often justified in Estonia under the notion of conservatism<sup>38</sup>, for example, Estonian support of the European Union<sup>39</sup>. In this case, the term ‘conservatism’ is not intended to reflect a generally accepted worldview, but rather to justify any initiative with a legitimate-sounding reason.

### 3.3. Strategy No. 3: Preventive projection of vices

While semiotic disarming and discursive mimicry are relatively widespread in political rhetoric, preventative projection of vices is characteristic of a more specific antithetical identity formation. In addition to distorting traits commonly perceived as positive, this also includes an extroversive reattribution of perceived inconsistencies that may cast a negative shadow on the image of ideal unity. For a political actor that characterises itself as antithetical, ‘the other’ is not a potential partner in a dialogue but solely an anti-community used to monopolise an antithetical worldview; therefore, everything that disturbs its internal order must be attributed to the external ‘other’<sup>40</sup>. Firstly, this provides the grounds for denying all deficiencies, but it is even more beneficial in a wider perspective: any future accusations can be discarded as hypocritical since all the relevant negative traits have already been attributed to the

<sup>37</sup> See more on its subcategories, for example, **Siltaoja, M.; Juusola, K.; Kivijärvi, M.** 2019. “World-class” Fantasies: A Neocolonial Analysis of International Branch Campuses. – *Organization*, Vol. 26 (1), pp. 78–79.

<sup>38</sup> **Ott, M.** 2019. Vehm II. Diskursus. – *Sirp*, 6 December.

<sup>39</sup> **Kiisler, I.** 2021. Mart Helme asutab riigikogus Euroopa Liidust väljaastumise toetusgrupi. – *ERR*, 10 April.

<sup>40</sup> **Burke, K.** 2011. Hitleri „Minu võitluse“ retoorika. – Jowett, G. S.; O’Donnell, V. (eds.). *Propagandast ja mõjustamisest. Uusi ja klassikalisi käsitlusi*. Tallinn: Tänapäev, p. 222.

enemy (i.e., critics)<sup>41</sup>. Historically, this has been most apparent in antisemitism where all economic issues were attributed to the Jews<sup>42</sup>.

### 3.4. Strategy No. 4: The image of a moral victim

Bringing differences to a moral level is also common in antithetical identity formation. Intolerance and the pursuit of homogeneity causes any conflict to manifest as a fight between good and evil. In designating these two sides as 'our own' and 'alien', any external criticism can be rendered insignificant because it will automatically signify axiological judgment. Anything external, perceived in extreme cases as purely evil, is already categorised, which is why it cannot be included in a political unity or apply to it. The context of a playing field described as manichaeist is fertile ground for developing a victim narrative where 'our' troops are united through opposition. In addition to the fact that describing the surrounding spheres as maleficent and dangerous justifies the use of alternative viewpoints, it also allows one side to identify as the victim and avert all blame by claiming to be defenceless<sup>43</sup>. For example, Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel have pointed out that radical nationalists describe mainstream media in their online communication as an essentially deceitful and repressive channel of information that is threatening to suppress them<sup>44</sup>.

### 3.5. Strategy No. 5: Rationalising the end that justifies aggression

Similarly, any measures adopted to stand for unity can be rationalised as self-defence from the position of a moral victim because the radical externals that threaten it were already postulated<sup>45</sup>. An actor that defines itself as antithetical

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<sup>41</sup> See more on its psychological background, for example, **Kelsey, D.** 2017. *Media and Affective Mythologies. Discourse, Archetypes and Ideology in Contemporary Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35–37.

<sup>42</sup> **Zukier, H.** 1996. The Essential "Other" and the Jew: From Antisemitism to Genocide. – *Social Research*, Vol. 63 (4), pp. 1110–1154.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, **Wodak, R.** 2015. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: Sage, p. 64; **Madisson, M-L.; Ventsel, A.** 2015. Grupuskulaarne identiteediloom eesti paremäärmuslaste võrgusuhtluses. – *Methis*, No. 15, p. 14; **Ventsel et al.** 2018, pp. 117–119.

<sup>44</sup> **Madisson, Ventsel** 2018, p. 156.

<sup>45</sup> **Wodak, R.** 1991. Turning the Tables: Antisemitic Discourse in Post-War Austria. – *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 2 (1), pp. 69–70.

generally tends to capsule and communicate only through confrontation<sup>46</sup>. This can be justified even with the measures previously attributed to an enemy since the circumstances force ‘us’ to descend to ‘their’ level<sup>47</sup>. Initiating and maintaining conflicts is an important part of antithetical identity formation because it activates the idea of danger posed by an enemy, thereby justifying extreme measures. Developing the metaphor of semiotic disarming, it can be said that sometimes, in order to prove that ‘our’ actions are justified, a gun from a personal holster is “magically” put in the hands of an enemy just so ‘we’ can grab it back and fire from a redirected barrel. The ends that justify aggression have been thoroughly studied, for example, in the context of medieval witch hunting<sup>48</sup>.

### 3.6. The consequences of antithetical identity formation: A dual security dilemma

A political identity formed by contradicting an antithesis may be relatively firm but cannot be considered stable. Whereas internal order is proportional to the extent of an antithesis, the former always strengthens the latter<sup>49</sup>. Combating a personal antipode regenerates its importance because, as long as a binary opposition remains, any categorisation will realise the opposition<sup>50</sup>. The more unity is perceived, the greater the force of evil and the fight against it is justified, even with the most extreme measures. This could turn an escalating conflict into a self-fulfilling prophecy—fighting fire with fire. Such opposition can never come to a conclusion because these tensions are the basis for the entire antithetical identity formation. Therefore, war can be fought against a specific embodiment of an enemy currently perceived as an antithesis but, in principle, it is a Pyrrhic fight that can never end. The enemy does not have any specific traits and its face is constantly changing<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Lotman, Uspenski 2013a, p. 226.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Madisson, M.-L.; Ventsel, A. 2014. Paremäärmuslik sõnavabadus eesti rahvusradikaalide veebisuhtluses. – Mäetagused, No. 57, pp. 69–90.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Lotman, J. 2007. Nõiajaht. Hirnu semiootika. – Hirm ja segadus: esseid kultuurisemiootikast. Tallinn: Varrak, pp. 50–68.

<sup>49</sup> Ivanov *et al.* 1998, p. 62.

<sup>50</sup> Lepik 2007, p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Lotman, J. 1999b. Kaasaeg Ida ja Lääne vahel. – Semiosfäär. Tallinn: Vagabund, p. 365. Similar meaning-making processes are also portrayed in conspiracy theories, see, for example, Madisson, M.-L. 2012. Vandenõuteooriate semiootiline tähistamisloogika. – Akadeemia, No. 6, pp. 1024–1070.

Once established, this principle of confrontation constantly seeks new ways to manifest itself<sup>52</sup> and, depending on the political circumstances, this role can be assumed by anyone<sup>53</sup>.

In international relations, such reciprocally increasing insecurity is termed a 'security dilemma'; more specifically, it signifies a situation where the decisions made by different parties with the purpose of securing themselves (unintentionally) magnify general distrust. It causes "spirals of mutual insecurity" where improving the security of one party decreases the relative sense of security of the other, and so on<sup>54</sup>. I will firstly distinguish an internal security dilemma common to antithetical identity formation that manifests in the addictive relationship between an antithesis and its author. The more unified the internal order and need for it are, the clearer become the boundaries of a hostile antipode. Secondly, I will distinguish an external security dilemma (as is commonly understood in international politics) where an actor described as an anticulture will respond, so to speak, and adopt the corresponding behaviour. Antithetical identity formation will, thereby, become reciprocal and manifest primarily in a state of war. As one example, we can consider the bipolar world order established during the Cold War.

### 3.7. Relieving a security dilemma

A security dilemma cannot be conclusively solved because antagonism as a basis of insecurity is common to any political identity. However, security dilemmas can be relieved. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe has proposed, for example, agonism as an alternative manifestation of antagonism. In this case, 'the other' would be more of an opponent than an enemy<sup>55</sup>. Parties in an agonistic relationship, firstly, acknowledge the legitimacy of each other and, secondly, share a certain symbolic space, the organisation of which they disagree on<sup>56</sup>. In this case, the essential antagonism is preserved (since a political identity still requires an exclusion of something or someone) and the portrayal of an opponent still includes a conflict between hegemonic

<sup>52</sup> **Uspenski, B.** 2013b. Vene intelligents kui vene kultuuri eriline fenomen. – Uspenski, B. Vene kultuuri jõujooni. Valik artikleid. Tartu: Ilmamaa, p. 380. [**Uspenski** 2013b]

<sup>53</sup> **Ventsel** 2006, p. 1441.

<sup>54</sup> **Mälksoo, M.; Toomla, R.** 2018. Julgeolekupoliitika. – Berg, E. *et al.* (eds.). Sissejuhatus rahvusvahelistesse suhetesse: õpik kõrgkoolidele. Tartu: TÜ Kirjastus, p. 257.

<sup>55</sup> **Mouffe, C.** 2000. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, p. 13. [**Mouffe** 2000]

<sup>56</sup> **Mouffe, C.** 2005. *On the Political*. London: Routledge, p. 20.

narratives (conflicts between these cannot be rationally solved) but it can be constructed so that one political identity will not exclude the other<sup>57</sup>. For example, in the context of parliamentary democracy, agonism is expressed in a manner whereby different political parties exchange power and are even able to achieve consensus on certain issues, even if they represent conflicting ideologies.

The recession of an internal security dilemma requires the rise of alternative identification mechanisms that could propose a new narrative about a more open and flexible identity. Here, the fact that a hegemonic order is incapable of exhaustive discursive mediation becomes decisive. When circumstances change (e.g., in the case of an economic crisis or natural disasters), a certain window of opportunity opens where other political actors will try to diagnose and then solve the issue that arose<sup>58</sup>. Antithetical identity formation legitimizes itself largely with order and stability and if one of these should disappear (or, conversely, if a chaotic period comes to an end), its popularity tends to decline.

When relieving an external security dilemma, it is useful to separate the stages of interpretation dilemma and response dilemma<sup>59</sup>. Easing an interpretation dilemma would require an adequate interpretation of the motives of an opposing party, whereas managing a response dilemma means that the interpretation is utilised for planning an adequate reaction<sup>60</sup>. In the context of this article, the first would mean translating an antithetical identity into 'our' language as truthfully as possible and deconstructing the antithetical identity formation in a certain way. Otherwise, one would be communicating with an ideal partner rather than a real one, and a relevant understanding would be constructed according to individual traits rather than those of the communication partner<sup>61</sup>. This also explains the need to examine different political identity narratives and their arbitrariness. When managing a response dilemma, it is crucial to refrain from all provocations that escalate confrontation and not respond to any antithetic approaches.

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<sup>57</sup> Mouffe 2000, pp. 101–103.

<sup>58</sup> Laclau 2015a, pp. 109–111.

<sup>59</sup> Booth, K.; Wheeler, N. J. 2008. *The Security Dilemma. Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>61</sup> Lotman 1999a, p. 68.

### 3.8. Inverted reading model of an antithesis

In order to deduce a so-called realistic situation from a declared antithetical identity, it could be helpful to use an inverted reading model that unfolds a mirror projective logic in reverse<sup>62</sup>. Assuming that the two poles of an antithesis are in a mirroring symmetric relationship, we can conclude that inverse reading will help us to understand the actual core of both sides<sup>63</sup>. A negative modelling of the aforementioned external space is characterised with rather rigid rules that make an antithetic system bilaterally symmetric and semantically antisymmetric<sup>64</sup>. Therefore, if we change the direction of this act we could actually form a more realistic sense of the actual situation: one that the declared identity is trying to deny<sup>65</sup>. Naturally, this never occurs in a pure form because, like translation, no antithetical identity formation is ever complete. But it is enough to make assumptions. This is supported by the fact that we often only have access to the extroversive or description-of-others part of an identity narrative (the author of the narrative cannot reveal the entire strategy to the public).

According to the inverted reading model of an antithesis we can, therefore, assume that a topologic construction attributed to an antithesis also applies to its author but with opposite content. This involves both positive and negative core elements: 'our' values are equivalent to 'their' reverse values, whereas 'they' are dealing with issues that 'we', allegedly, are not. The author of an antithesis is often characterised by what he is trying to attribute to an enemy. This also refers to the intentionality of an antithetical identity and its directing power relations since this is only a single possible narrative to reflect reality. In order to avoid the regeneration of an antithesis and an external security dilemma, it is important to undermine its sole power and relate to it, if possible, not as so-called pure evil but as a potential partner in a dialogue, reflecting on its real and not declared specificities (to the maximum possible extent).

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<sup>62</sup> See also **Madisson, Ventsel** 2020, ch. 3; **Lepik** 2007, p. 65.

<sup>63</sup> **Lepik** 2007, p. 74.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> **Lotman, J.** 2002. Kultuuri fenomen. – Akadeemia, No. 12, p. 2645.

#### 4. Analysis: An antithetical dimension in the strategic narratives of Russia

In order to exemplify the previously discussed theoretical framework, I first looked through scientific publications published during the period 2012 to 2020 (since the third term of office of Vladimir Putin) on Russian foreign policy as indexed in the JSTOR digital library. Based on this overview, I distinguished five primary strategic narratives that are, in my estimation, good illustrations of the directions of Russian foreign policy and worldview, and searched for additional specialised publications according to relevant keywords whenever necessary. Therefore, this is not an original analysis but rather an extensive meta-analysis with the purpose of focusing on general trends that are important in studying strategic narratives. Understanding the narrational context helps to examine and discredit the sub-narratives within<sup>66</sup>. Several earlier publications have analysed Russian antithetic meaning-making and identity formation based on historic examples<sup>67</sup>, the most popular subject being the period of the Soviet Union<sup>68</sup>. This article, however, focuses on the strategic narratives of the Russian Federation, primarily during Putin's term of office.

Putin's first and second terms of office saw a flourishing economy with rising oil and gas prices and extensive support by the Russian people. In 2012, when Putin began his third term of office as president, people were gathering on the streets and accusing him of falsifying election results. Ever since then, the Kremlin has increasingly used confrontation with the Western world (not, of course, an innovative approach) to centralise power and firmly establish the Russian position<sup>69</sup>. Maintaining a sense of external danger enables Russia to, first, mobilise society and, second, distract people's attention from various

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<sup>66</sup> **Ventsel et al.** 2018, p. 122.

<sup>67</sup> **Uspenski, B.** 2013a. Antikäitumine vanavene kultuuris. – Uspenski, B. Vene kultuuri jõujooni. Valik artikleid. Tartu: Ilmamaa, pp. 350–369; **Uspenski** 2013b; **Lotman, J.; Uspenski, B.** 2013b. Duaalsete mudelite rollist vene kultuuri dünaamikas XVIII sajandi lõpuni. – Uspenski, B. Vene kultuuri jõujooni. Valik artikleid. Tartu: Ilmamaa, pp. 240–294.

<sup>68</sup> **Lepik, P.** 2000. Antiikkultuuri fenomen nõukogude kultuuris. – Akadeemia, No. 4, pp. 718–754; **Ventsel, A.** 2008. Totalitaarkeel ja poliitiline retoorika nõukogude poliitilises diskursuses. – Pärli, Ü.; Lepik, E. (eds.). 2008. Nimetamise strateegiatest Eesti kultuuris. Tartu: TÜ Kirjastus, pp. 65–84; **Ventsel** 2006.

<sup>69</sup> **Mendras, M.** 2015. The Rising Cost of Russia's Authoritarian Foreign Policy. – Light, M.; Cadier, D. (eds.). Russia's Foreign Policy. Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 90–91. [**Mendras** 2015]

internal problems regarding, for example, economic, social, and legal issues<sup>70</sup>. I will now examine five strategic narratives common to this approach and focus on their antithetical dimension as well as the discursive strategies.

#### 4.1. Narrative No. 1: Russia as a besieged fortress

Russia often describes itself as a besieged fortress forced to protect its values from dangers posed from all sides (but mostly from the West)<sup>71</sup>. Its main objective is to legitimise the governing elite, based on perceived threats from external enemies, and thus justify strict law enforcement measures and the prevailing predicamental circumstances<sup>72</sup>. Here, antithetical identity formation is implied by the victim narrative.

This particular narrative serves to revitalise the anguish of losing in the Cold War, which demolished Russia's identity and position in global politics<sup>73</sup>. The narrative of a besieged fortress also refers to the continuous threat posed by Western hegemony that endangers Russian sovereignty by, for example, promoting democracy and causing the economic recession of Russia with their sanctions<sup>74</sup>. There are also frequent claims that the United States of America intervenes in the internal political affairs of Russia<sup>75</sup>. By asserting, for example, that every wave of democratisation has been initiated by the intelligence agencies of the USA, Russia is also able to denigrate democracy and diminish its reliability in the minds of Russian citizens<sup>76</sup>. By describing all external powers as essentially malignant, Russia is able to interpret any

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<sup>70</sup> **Välisluureamet** 2020, p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> **Mendras** 2015, p. 82; **Monaghan, A.** 2016. *Russia's World. Facing a Century of Instability*. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, p. 3. [**Monaghan** 2016]

<sup>72</sup> **Lipman, M.** 2015. *Putin's "Besieged Fortress" and Its Ideological Arms*. – Lipman, M.; Petrov, N. (eds.). *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 110–136; [**Lipman** 2015] **Götz, E.; Merlen, C.-R.** 2019. *Russia and the Question of World Order*. – *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 20 (2), pp. 140–141.

<sup>73</sup> **Lukyanov, F.** 2016. *Russia: Geopolitics and Identity*. – Hitchcock, W. I.; Leffler, M. P.; Legro, J. W. (eds.). *Shaper Nations: Strategies for a Changing World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 112. [**Lukyanov** 2016]

<sup>74</sup> **Götz, Merlen** 2019, p. 138.

<sup>75</sup> **Bugayova, N.** 2019. *How We Got Here With Russia: The Kremlin's Worldview*. Washington: Institute for the Study of War, p. 21. [**Bugayova** 2019]

<sup>76</sup> **Pomerantsev, P.** 2015. *The Kremlin's Information War*. – *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26 (4), p. 42.



unfavourable claims against itself as accusations and, therefore, portray itself as a defenceless victim<sup>77</sup>.

The narrative of the besieged fortress also includes a moral dimension. As a fortress, Russia is superior to the degenerating Western world<sup>78</sup>, whereas the latter is threateningly forceful and on the verge of collapsing at the same time<sup>79</sup>. This moral superiority is also confirmed by a mirror projective aversion of blame. For example, Putin has repeatedly disapproved of increases in NATO's defence expenses because "Russia is not going to assault anyone" and all the dangers coming from the East are only in the imagination of the Member States<sup>80</sup>. Similarly, Russia has criticised the United States of America for concealing national deficiencies and justifying this with a so-called threat by Russia, also justifying its failures by searching for foreign political conflicts<sup>81</sup>. Additionally, the expansion of NATO is, allegedly, a threat to European security and increases instability in every other region as well<sup>82</sup>.

It is true that NATO's external borders constantly approach those of Russia and the USA has repeatedly justified questionable political moves (e.g., the invasion of Iraq in 2003) on the basis of perceived threats from external enemies. It is noteworthy, however, that Russia denies similar accusations and, instead, tends to identify itself as being quite the opposite. Furthermore, this enables Russia to easily discard all accusations regarding aggression because all these traits have already been attributed to the enemy.

## 4.2. Narrative No. 2: The Russophobic West

In order to silence anyone who is critical of the idea of Russia as a besieged fortress, the diagnosis of Russophobia is usually assigned<sup>83</sup>. The origins of the

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<sup>77</sup> Except when these coincide with Kremlin positions. In this case, the assessment is opposite.

<sup>78</sup> **Makarychev, A.** 2014. Russia and/versus the EU: From Post-Political Consensus to Political Contestations. – *L'Europe en Formation*, Vol. 374 (4), p. 32 [**Makarychev** 2014]; **Lipman** 2015, p. 121.

<sup>79</sup> **Missiroli, A.; Andersson, J. J.; Gaub, F.; Popescu, N.; Wilkins, J.-J.** 2016. *Strategic Communications: East and South*. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, p. 10. [**Missiroli et al.** 2016]

<sup>80</sup> **Bugayova** 2019, p. 22.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> **Monaghan** 2016, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> **Feklynina, V.** 2013. *Constructing Russophobia*. – Taras, R. (ed.). *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions*. Routledge: London, pp. 91–109; [**Feklynina** 2013] **Darczewska, J.; Żochowski, P.** 2015. *Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy. A Weapon of Mass Destruction*. – *Point of View* 56. Warsaw: Centre of East European Studies. [**Darczewska, Żochowski** 2015]

term signifying an anti-Russian attitude date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but use of the term has spread more widely since 2014 when Russia initiated the war with Ukraine. In short, accusing someone of Russophobia makes it possible to interpret any complaint from the opposing side (both national and foreign political) as hostile, and to apply all criticism towards the leader of Russia to the country as a whole, including its citizens and culture<sup>84</sup>. It also stresses the natural confrontation between the East and the West, promising to stigmatise all opponents who hold a different opinion about the uniqueness of the East (i.e., Russia)<sup>85</sup>.

By establishing an implied equation between Russian culture (and citizens) and its ruler (i.e., Putin), the current government of Russia can make itself look irreplaceable<sup>86</sup> and legitimise itself at the expense of the cultural heritage of Russia, since it is harder to stigmatise a heritage than hesitancy about a political view<sup>87</sup>. Here, discursive strategies are about discursive mimicry (the Kremlin claims to represent the entire Russian culture<sup>88</sup>) as well as an automatic axiological condemnation of foreign views (anyone sceptical about the Kremlin is a Russophobe).

### 4.3. Narrative No. 3: The Russian World

The narrative of the Russian World (Русский мир) is closely related with Russophobia and the idea of a besieged fortress and has achieved its current political charge from the spring of 2014<sup>89</sup>. The Russian World directly refers to the idea of a civilization that extends far beyond the current national borders of the Russian Federation, with Russia considering itself the cultural and political centre of that civilization<sup>90</sup>. Maintaining contact with the diaspora is important, but so is revitalising the legacy of the Soviet Union. Among other

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<sup>84</sup> Darczewska, Żochowski 2015, pp. 20–21.

<sup>85</sup> Feklyunina 2013, pp. 97–98; Darczewska, Żochowski 2015, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> Hinck, R. S.; Kluver, R.; Cooley, S. 2018. Russia Re-Envisions the World: Strategic Narratives in Russian Broadcast and News Media During 2015. – Russian Journal of Communication, Vol. 10 (1), p. 33.

<sup>87</sup> Ventsel *et al.* 2018, p. 119.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Surkov, V. 2019. Putini pikk riik. – Vikerkaar, No. 6, pp. 87–93.

<sup>89</sup> Laruelle, M. 2015. The “Russian World”. Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination. Washington: Center on Global Interests.

<sup>90</sup> Makarychev 2014, pp. 30–31.

things, this allows Russia to intervene in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries since these, allegedly, also belong to the Great Russian World<sup>91</sup>.

The scars left from the fall of the Soviet Union remain in the identity of Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>92</sup>. This is why the Russian World narrative involves strong confrontation against what Russia considers to be the so-called Western world. Several researchers have described a multipolar world order with a number of power centres as the core objective of Russian strategic communication<sup>93</sup>. It is important to remember that the Kremlin often appeals to multilateralism simply as a subterfuge to ward off American hegemony<sup>94</sup>. Russian understanding of a multipolar world order also includes a strict hierarchical dimension whose higher purpose is to restore Russia as a global power<sup>95</sup>. Remarkably, Russia does not have any clear ideological program to define these superior values<sup>96</sup>. Currently, the prevailing values of Russia are conservative and nationalistic views with the constantly growing significance of the Orthodox Church, but Putin and his entourage are still primarily pragmatists who use everything that opposes the West in designing the national ideology of Russia<sup>97</sup>. Therefore, the Russian World narrative tends to be anti-hegemonic rather than counter-hegemonic because its primary goal is to subvert Western superiority in international politics<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>91</sup> **Brown, R.** 2017. Public Diplomacy, Networks, and the Limits of Strategic Narratives. – Miskimmon, A.; O’Loughlin, B.; Roselle, L. (eds.). *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, pp. 177–178.

<sup>92</sup> **Schmitt** 2018, p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> **Miskimmon, A.; O’Loughlin, B.** 2017. Russia’s Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World. – *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 5 (3), pp. 111–120; **Bugayova** 2019, p. 8.

<sup>94</sup> **Krastev, I.** 2007. *Venemaa contra* Euroopa: suveräänsussõjad. – *Vikerkaar*, No. 12, p. 99. [**Krastev** 2007]

<sup>95</sup> In this context, it is especially noteworthy that the Russian constitution was changed in 2020 to state that the Russian constitution is superior to international law.

<sup>96</sup> **Fedchenko, Y.** 2016. Kremlin propaganda: Soviet Active Measures by Other Means. – *Sõjateadlane*, No. 2, p. 146. [**Fedchenko** 2016]

<sup>97</sup> **Götz, Merlen** 2019, pp. 139–140; **Wilkinson, C.** 2014. Putting “Traditional Values” Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti Homopropaganda Laws in Russia. – *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 13 (3), pp. 363–379.

<sup>98</sup> **Sakwa, R.** 2020. Stasis and Change: Russia and the Emergence of an Anti-hegemonic World Order. – *Paral Dal, E.; Erşen, E.* (eds.). *Russia in the Changing International System*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 18.

The Russian World narrative also justifies the expansion of the regional sphere of influence of Russia, which is thought to guarantee its sovereignty<sup>99</sup>. In relations with NATO, this reveals a classic security paradox: the more Russia expands its sphere of influence, the more forcefully NATO responds which, in turn, provides Russia with an excuse to continue its operations, and so forth<sup>100</sup>. Another interesting paradox is that, under the guise of preserving its own sovereignty, Russia justifies attacks against the sovereignty of neighbouring countries and condemns Western intervention in the affairs of the Russian World, all the while operating in the same way itself<sup>101</sup>. This can be explained by the mirror projective logic of averting blame as well as the discursive mimicry of the concept of sovereignty.

Whereas from the Western point of view, sovereignty refers to independence and free speech, the Russian idea of sovereignty is primarily rooted in capability<sup>102</sup>. Appealing to sovereignty enables Russia to justify its exceptionalism with democratic language (hence the concept of 'sovereign democracy'<sup>103</sup>). Since sovereignty as a capability requires a harsh hand and survival of the fittest, it helps to encourage aggression against foreign countries, centralise power in an increasingly narrower circle, and establish a more rigid order<sup>104</sup>. In a sense, this is also the basis for semiotic disarming. Russia might even accept some of the blame (e.g., intervening in the internal affairs of another country) but it is all for the greater good (protecting the sovereignty of Russia).

#### 4.4. Narrative No. 4: Ukraine as a fascist country

In the spring of 2014, Russian forces invaded Ukraine in order to annex the Crimean Peninsula. Russia definitely had a military goal: to secure a strategic location by the Black Sea. But the cultural aspect of the attack was equally important: protecting local Russians<sup>105</sup>. This was justified (among other

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<sup>99</sup> Mendras 2015, pp. 82–84.

<sup>100</sup> Duke, S.; Gebhard, C. 2017. The EU and NATO's Dilemmas with Russia and the Prospects for Deconfliction. – *European Security*, Vol. 26 (3), pp. 379–397.

<sup>101</sup> Götz, Merlen 2019, p. 144.

<sup>102</sup> Krastev 2007, p. 100.

<sup>103</sup> Fisher, S. 2014. Sovereign Democracy: Russia's Response to the Color Revolutions. College of Arts & Sciences. Senior Honors Theses. Paper 90.

<sup>104</sup> Liik, K. 2018. Winning the Normative War with Russia. An EU-Russia Power Audit. London: The European Council on Foreign Relations, p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> Lukyanov 2016, p. 120.

things) by a strategic narrative that identified Ukraine as a fascist country and, according to the narrative, claimed that the Russians living in Ukraine were suffering under the repressions of the local power<sup>106</sup>.

Portraying Ukraine as fascist tied the conflict with Russia that began in 2014 to the Great Patriotic War; victory over Nazism in this war is still one of the greatest sources of national pride for Russia<sup>107</sup>. They revived the threat of fascism that was allegedly still smouldering under the surface in Ukraine because, according to Russia, antisemitism, discriminating against Russians, and violating war memorials were common in Ukraine<sup>108</sup>. This provided the grounds for creating a strong emotional bond with the historical legacy of Russia: respecting “the grandfathers who triumphed over fascism” is a pillar of this legacy<sup>109</sup>. For example, this manifested in the so-called Immortal Regiment; its main purpose was to gather personal stories from the Great Patriotic War, but it soon transformed into an event to support the more comprehensive legacy of the Soviet Union, allowing grief to be replaced with pride<sup>110</sup>. This also gave rise to the opportunity to justify an invasion of Ukraine with the purpose of finishing what the grandfathers had started.

It must be noted that various extreme right wing movements have gained momentum in Ukraine lately<sup>111</sup>, which is how Russia was able to support the narrative of Ukraine as a fascist country with real-life examples. Their influence, however, was severely distorted, just as the Ukrainian contribution to defeating Nazi Germany was ignored<sup>112</sup>. Rather, Ukrainian nationalism was equated with fascism because Ukraine wished to depart from the Russian World, which became evident, for example, in the 2013–2014 Euromaidan

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<sup>106</sup> **Fedchenko** 2016, p. 159; **Synytsina, K.** 2018. The Construction of the Image of Ukraine as the Other in Russian Media. Master's thesis. Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, p. 86; [**Synytsina** 2018] **Lucas, E.; Pomeranzev, P.** 2016. Winning the Information War. Techniques and Counter-strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe. CEPA, p. 15. [**Lucas, Pomeranzev** 2016]

<sup>107</sup> **Kudors, A.** 2015. Reinventing Views to the Russian Media and Compatriot Policy in the Baltic States. – Pabriks, A.; Kudors, A. (eds.). The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe. Riga. University of Latvia Press, p. 157. [**Kudors** 2015]

<sup>108</sup> **Fedchenko** 2016, pp. 163–165; **Lucas, Pomeranzev** 2016, p. 19.

<sup>109</sup> **Synytsina** 2018, p. 90.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, **Rudling, P. A.** 2013. The Return of the Ukrainian Far Right: The Case of VO Svoboda. – Wodak, R.; Richardson, J. E. (eds.). Analysing Fascist Discourse. European Fascism in Talk and Text, pp. 228–255.

<sup>112</sup> **Synytsina** 2018, p. 90.

demonstrations<sup>113</sup>. It is probably no coincidence that the Russian economy had begun to enter recession at the beginning of the same year. The success of the operation is illustrated by the fact that the economic low point was reached at the time when support for Putin was at its highest (85%)<sup>114</sup>.

An invasion of Ukraine was, therefore, justified with an antithetically derived strategic narrative where an external enemy was created in a mirror projective manner, or by inverting personal values: Russian anti-fascism became Ukrainian fascism. In a way, this is a prophecy coming true because the idea of a sphere of influence characteristic to Russia (and requiring military defence) is not much different from the way in which Nazi Germany justified the invasion of Austria and Czechoslovakia in the 1930s<sup>115</sup>.

#### 4.5. Narrative No. 5: The European Union decaying under separatism

Russia is sceptical about the European Union and, therefore, eager to magnify its internal conflicts<sup>116</sup>. The spreading of this discourse relies strongly on English-language news portals that submit to Russian central power, for example, RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, that distribute false information among the Western audience who favour Russia, with the purpose of fracturing the European consensus<sup>117</sup>. This has recently gained momentum from various separatist movements that have held different referendums, the most famous of which are Brexit and the Catalan pursuit of independence.

Regarding Brexit, the official position of the Russian government was neutral but, according to a report of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Brexit was reflected in Russian national media rather one-sidedly with support for the decision of Great Britain to leave<sup>118</sup>. According to Emma Flaherty and Laura Roselle who studied the strategic narratives spread in RT before the referendum, in addition to reporting on Brexit itself it was

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<sup>113</sup> **Kudors** 2015, p. 159.

<sup>114</sup> **Välisluureamet** 2020, p. 26.

<sup>115</sup> **Kudors** 2015, pp. 159–160.

<sup>116</sup> **Missiroli et al.** 2016, p. 12.

<sup>117</sup> **Ramsay, G.; Robertshaw, S.** 2019. *Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and Targeted Disinformation*. London: King's College London.

<sup>118</sup> **Corker, B. et al.** 2018. *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security*. Washington: U. S. Government Publishing Office, p. 118. [**Corker et al.** 2018]

even more important to question the general unity of Europe<sup>119</sup>. Regarding the Catalan declaration of independence (which was later declared invalid), Russia officially adopted a position that supported the centralised power of Spain, but its English-language state media expressed contradicting views<sup>120</sup>. For example, they accused the Spanish government of being corrupt and disseminated narratives that undermined the European Union and its legitimacy in general<sup>121</sup>.

In his topical analysis of RT and Sputnik, Johannes Voltri specifically stressed that one of Russia's primary strategic narratives regarding Catalonia was the downfall of the so-called decaying Europe that might even be breaking apart "because of different separatist movements that are gaining momentum."<sup>122</sup> Russia's goal was to divide Spain and the European Union, but it is worth mentioning that emphasising European separatism was a great distraction from the concurrent secession in North Caucasus<sup>123</sup>.

Russia's statements in support of separatism inside Europe are noteworthy because, concurrently, Russia was suppressing all national independence movements within the country<sup>124</sup>. In 2016, a special conference was organised for separatists with invitations sent, among others, to representatives of California and Northern Ireland. In contrast, supporting the independence of Chechnya can be punished with imprisonment in Russia<sup>125</sup>. This, again, reveals Russia's ambiguous views on sovereignty and the superiority of internal unity. One option is to interpret it through an inverted reading model. This

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<sup>119</sup> **Flaherty, E.; Roselle, L.** 2018. Contentious Narratives and Europe: Conspiracy Theories and Strategic Narratives Surrounding RT's Brexit News Coverage. – *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 71 (1.5), pp. 53–60.

<sup>120</sup> **Milosevich-Juaristi, M.** 2017. The "Combination": An Instrument in Russia's Information War in Catalonia. – Elcano Royal Institute, November 20. <http://www.tepsa.eu/the-combination-an-instrument-in-russias-information-war-in-catalonia-mira-milosevich-juaristi-elcano-institute/> (23.10.2020). [**Milosevich-Juaristi** 2017]

<sup>121</sup> **Corker et al.** 2018, p. 135.

<sup>122</sup> **Voltri, J.** 2018. 2017. aasta Kataloonia iseseisvusreferendum: RT ja Sputniku levitatud Venemaa strateegilised narratiivid. – Toomla, R.; Müil, E. (eds.). *Maailmast 2018*. Tartu: Eesti Ülikoolide Kirjastus, p. 56.

<sup>123</sup> **Milosevich-Juaristi** 2017.

<sup>124</sup> **Salvo, D.; Soula, E.** 2017. Russian Government's Fission Know-How Hard at Work in Europe. – The Alliance for Securing Democracy, October 31. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russian-governments-fission-know-how-hard-at-work-in-europe> (23.10.2020).

<sup>125</sup> **Mirovalev, M.** 2016. What's Behind Russian Support for World's Separatist Movements? NBC News, July 23. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/what-s-behind-russian-support-world-sseparatist-movements-n614196> (23.10.2020).

could lead to the conclusion that the more actively Russia supports separatism in the West, the more forcefully it suppresses the same on its own territory. It may be assumed that Russia's ultimate goal is not just breaking up the European Union but creating an alternative union that would tilt the scales in favour of Russia in the international arena<sup>126</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, antithetical identity formation is a specific form of identification but it can also be perceived as a strategic narrative. In this case, antithetics would also determine policy and understanding of the general political system. The primary ideological aspect of an antithetical identity is a black-and-white separation of the world into two mutually exclusive sides where everything good meets an equally evil reaction. If real threats are absent they must be created because an enemy portrayed as antithetical allows a state, first of all, to justify all means; secondly, to reject all competing views; and, thirdly, to blame the enemy for every failure. Thus, the core of the political fight becomes the enforcement of individual views that give the principle of confrontation a specific content. In this sense, a collective political identity is not previously determined but is rather the result of politics that is naturalised through an antithesis that threatens it.

This forms a basis for interpreting the foreign policy of Russia which is, according to the current analysis, driven by strategic narratives based on antithetical logic. Their objective is to centralise Putin's power at home, building Russian unity as a reaction to threats from the West. Since this is largely driven by projective and mirror projective strategies, we can apply an inverted reading model of an antithesis, drawing conclusions about the internal state of Russia based on the way they describe their enemies.

In order to avoid an external or conventional security dilemma, it is advisable to refrain from all antithetical encounters and, whenever possible, reflect on the real situation instead of a declared one. This, of course, does not mean that circumstances can be explained solely on the basis of antithetical logic. An antithesy always manifests with intermittent intensity and alongside other mechanisms of identification. From the position of an internal security dilemma, perceived danger tends to magnify the antithesis for its author. This is why it is important to spread competing identity narratives in Russia

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<sup>126</sup> Makarychev 2014, p. 38.



to allow a different approach to the confrontation between the East and the West. Foreign countries, however, can only indirectly encourage it (e.g., by supporting local citizenship activities).

This article focused on the theoretical bases of a political identity and the discursive strategies that express antithetical identity formation. The goal was to develop an original framework of analysis that would connect identity formation with the framework of strategic narratives and help to interpret a more comprehensive context of Russian foreign policy. Considering the schematic nature of the analysis, subsequent studies with a focus on narrower source material are crucial. Since polity pursuant to the perspective adopted herein expands far beyond the direct locations of policy-making, various media texts can be illustrative. These would provide excellent material for analysing more specific rhetorical techniques that reveal an antithetical identity formation, developing the analysis framework designed herein on a microlevel (e.g., by the use of metaphors and metonymy). One thing is certain: antagonism will always be part of politics and analysing antithetical identity formation is far from being complete.

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