Nuclear Brinkmanship in Russia Today: A Strategic Narrative Analysis

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For over two years, the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine has kept the world in suspense. With this invasion, strategic Russian disinformation via social media as well as international news media has increased substantially. The Russian disinformation campaign reached an intensity that led to the European Union imposing heavy sanctions on Russian news networks such as Russia Today (RT). The EU High Representative of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, described Russian disinformation via networks such as RT as "a significant and direct threat to the Union's public order and security" (Borrell as cited in Council of the EU, 2022). Next to Russian disinformation, the increasing nuclear rhetoric of Russia has worried NATO and has, since Russian President Putin's Annexation Speech in which he vowed to retain Russian territorial integrity including the annexed Ukrainian territories at all costs, occupied the forefronts of Western newspapers.

This research seeks to shed light on the current situation by answering the following research question:*What is Russia's strategic narrative regarding the nuclear tensions with NATO over the Ukraine conflict as presented in Russia Today?* To answer this research question, this paper will give a short overview of the important developments in the war on Ukraine which led to the nuclear tensions between Russia and NATO. Subsequently, this paper introduces the theoretical framework of strategic narrative analysis, a new approach to analyzing a state's public diplomacy. A literature review with a following elaboration on this research's relevance gives insight into previous research on Russian strategic narrative analyses and elaborates on how this paper improves the existing body of research. In a thorough section on this research's findings, the identified themes and strategic narratives are described and subsequently discussed. Lastly, limitations and future research needs are addressed before concluding finding that Russia's strategic narrative regarding the nuclear tensions with NATO as presented in RT is threefold: Russia sees the international system as a renewed Cold War system in which two superpowers engage in a nuclear face-off; it conceptualizes itself as a responsible actor wanting to avoid nuclear war while NATO is seen as internally divided and pushing nuclear brinkmanship; and it sees itself as facing nuclear threats from both Ukraine and NATO.

Nuclear Brinkmanship in the War on Ukraine

In December 2021, U.S. intelligence started warning about a Russian military build-up of a hundred thousand troops near the border and, shortly after, the Russian foreign ministry issued demands. NATO was not to expand further toward Russia, military action in the Eastern parts of NATO was to cease, and an assurance was to be issued that Ukraine would not be allowed to join NATO in the future. These demands were rejected by NATO and full-scale invasion started on 24th February 2022. So, while the war engages mostly Russia and Ukraine, NATO has been a party to the conflict since the very beginning (Center for Preventive Action, 2022).

Russia and NATO, however, perceive the alliance's role in the conflict differently. While Russia follows a narrative that often conceptualizes NATO as a direct opponent and combat party, NATO rejects all notions of being involved in active war against Russia. Instead, it stresses its defensive functions concerning its member states and a supportive function concerning Ukraine and its right to self-defense (NATO, 2022).

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Among others, the narrative around NATO being at war with Russia has been identified as a part of Russia's strategic misinformation campaigns targeted at Western audiences. These campaigns escalated with the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine. Other myths propagated by the Russian government in this way include the notion that Ukraine is an inherent part of Russia instead of an autonomous state, or that it was governed by national socialists (Bazio Terracino and Martasick, 2022).

The U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center (2022) has issued a detailed report about Russia's misinformation campaign and identified state-linked media as being one of the five pillars upon which the campaign rests. Within this report, RT and Sputnik were mentioned as the most prominent examples of state-linked media. Especially RT has often been described as a mouthpiece for the Kremlin (Yablokov, 2015). It was founded in 2005 through a Kremlin-funded program to promote the Russian state and its perspectives abroad. Since then, it has established regional offices like RT DE (Germany), RT America (United States), and RT Arabic (Middle East). While its initial goal was the promotion of Russian culture, the channel turned towards political reporting in 2008 during the conflict in Georgia. Since then, it has established itself as an alternative to so-called Western mainstream media (Yablokov, 2015).

Although RT is not an official state medium as Sputnik is, the direct ties with the Kremlin are evident: by 2015 (last reliable numbers), the Kremlin increased its investments in RT by 40% (Rawnsley, 2015), hiring processes are government controlled, stories can be disapproved and censored by the government, direct phone lines exist between the editorial board and the Kremlin, and writers receive training which ensures coherence with government lines in RT articles (U.S. DoS GEC, 2022). RT's prominent role in spreading Russian government positions to Western audiences is thus undebated, including the ongoing war.

In September 2022, Vladimir Putin gave a speech during the annexation ceremony of the Ukrainian regions Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. The ceremony followed referendums, which were heavily criticized in the West and reports of coerced voting soon followed (Polityuk, 2022). The speech, which sealed the annexation, included a phrase regarding the newly acquired territories that quickly sparked unrest in the West: "We will defend our land with all the powers and means at our disposal" (Putin, as cited in Polityuk, 2022). While Putin made no direct reference to the country's nuclear arsenals, the wording was understood to include a level of nuclear compellence by NATO (de Dreuzy and Gilli, 2022), and an answer by President Biden equated the situation to the Cuban Missile Crisis and stated that the use of even tactical nuclear weapons would end in "Armageddon" (Fossum et al., 2022). While Putin openly declared that there was no true intention of using nuclear weapons in the conflict, actions such as the Russian postponement of the New START weapons inspection talks with U.S. officials (Dixon, 2022) or announcements declaring the expansion of nuclear arms infrastructures in Russia by 2023 (Reuters, 2022) kept the topic of nuclear escalation at the forefront of media coverage of the war in an attempt to understand the re-emerging nuclear brinkmanship.

Strategic Narratives

"Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or—if you really want to be blunt— propaganda.", Richard Holbrooke, a Washington Post journalist, writes in 2001 in an article covering the war on terror (Holbrooke, 2001). With this sentence, he summarizes a phenomenon that has become increasingly important in the study of International Relations with the emergence of large, transnational media, such as CNN International, Al Jazeera, or BBC World, and the internet. These are mediums that have become central sources of information for people around the globe. They provide a stage for state- and non-state actors, individuals, and NGOs to share their viewpoints and spread a favorable image or reputation about themselves and their actions abroad as well as in their home country (Gilboa, 2008).

Analyses of the shaping of foreign public perception, or public diplomacy making, were especially important during the Cold War but were given new importance with the emergence of the internet and international media, which allows governments more direct access to populations abroad (Gilboa, 2008). Gilboa (2008) criticizes the vagueness of the concepts which concern the shaping of public opinion in populations abroad, which can range from propaganda to public diplomacy, terms that often carry a normative connotation with them.

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Miskimmon et al. (2014) in their seminal work present a neutral way of analyzing what they term *strategic narratives*. The term describes the narrative approaches used by political actors, which are targeted at foreign audiences and seek to influence their opinion in favor of the narrating political actor. These political actors are usually states. Strategic narratives are especially important in matters of war, strategic communication, and security and, as aforementioned, become especially important in a highly accessible and internationalized internet and media landscape (Miskimmon et al., 2014). The authors describe three interrelated levels of strategic narratives: system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives. System narratives are intended to shape the recipient audiences' understanding of the international system, its nature, and its structures, in the favor of the political actor pursuing the narrative. Identity narratives seek to influence how the political actor is perceived abroad, namely its attributed characteristics (e.g., authoritarian, free or liberal). Lastly, issue narratives are related to a specific event and intend to focus the discourse on it in favor of the political actor (Miskimmon et al., 2014).

The concept of strategic narrative analysis can provide an efficient tool to conceptualizing how Russia presents the possibility of nuclear escalation in the Ukraine conflict via popular international networks such as Russia Today. Therefore, this paper aims to trace Russia's strategic narrative in RT regarding nuclear confrontation with NATO through the following research question: *What is Russia's strategic narrative regarding the nuclear tensions with NATO over the Ukraine conflict as presented in Russia Today?*

Literature Review

To build on the existing literature and effectively add to it, this research seeks to first give an overview of the existing literature in the field of strategic narrative analyses concerning Russia. Ryzhova (2019) analyzes the strategic narratives, which Russia spreads about Sweden via RT. Her analysis finds that Sweden is mainly characterized by its attitude towards migration, identity/values, and security. Bushue (2015) similarly engages in a strategic narrative analysis regarding the role of the Arctic for Russian security and finds themes that portray Russian military engagement in the Arctic as important due to the need to match NATO and the US, to defend the country, or to reclaim previously inhabited areas. Khaldarova (2016) analyzes how Russian strategic narratives differ between home and international audiences and finds that these are rather similar. For this, she also draws data from RT, which prominently spreads narratives that set the West and Russia in contrast and competition with each other. Hinck et al. (2018) in an analysis of Russian international media, prominently among them RT, find that one of Russia's main strategic narratives is the negative portrayal of NATO. NATO is characterized as an aggressive, destabilizing, unified actor dominated by the US. Russia, in contrast, is always characterized positively. Szotek (2017a) also considers Russia's self-portrayal in its strategic narratives in RT and finds that Russia defines itself positively and benign in contrast to a negatively connoted West/the US as well as presenting a great power within Europe and the world. Several other papers discuss Russian strategic narrative formation without directly mentioning or employing Russia Today. Khaldarova and Pantti (2020) analyze Russian disinformation about the Crimean annexation crisis within Ukraine. They find that Russia employs strategic narratives which link the Ukrainian government to Nazi Germany and frame Ukraine as a security hazard. Claessen (2021) considers the role of Russian strategic narratives in the relationship between the EU and Russia and finds that Russia engages in geopolitical othering of the EU (the practice of othering in which geography, identity, and politics are equated) and warns that this might complicate the two actors' relationship in the future. Ventsel et al. (2021) assess the use of strategic narratives concerning Russia's military strategy and its relationship to NATO and find that Russia positively defines itself against a negatively defined NATO.

While all of the previously mentioned articles discuss the formation and projection of Russia's strategic narratives and seek to point these out, few articles focus on the reception of these narratives within the target audience. Wagnsson and Lundström (2022) assess the reception of strategic narratives in Sweden and find that it is relatively easy for strategic narratives to be received by the Swedish population. In an analysis of Russian strategic narrative reception among Ukrainians, Szotek (2017b) finds that Ukrainians are especially receptive to Russian strategic narratives when individual linkages, i.e., family ties, travel experiences, friendships, or other pro-Russian dispositions already exist. Although the research on Russian strategic narratives is still sparse, the existing literature reveals one main strategic narrative in which Russia seems to engage, especially through RT: a positive framing of Russia against a negative framing of the West, NATO, or the US.

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Lastly, to establish a holistic overview of the research topic, this literature review must address the issue of public diplomacy which is closely connected to the framework of strategic narratives for a holistic review of the research topic. Public diplomacy is seen as a way of strengthening the soft power of a state by engaging with foreign audiences, mostly through the media (Yablokov, 2015). Strategic narratives as well as propaganda are part of public diplomacy, and thus, literature on the utility and strategy behind Russia's approach to public diplomacy might be useful in understanding strategic narratives further. Public diplomacy has also been used as a framework before the popularization of strategic narrative analysis since the articles surrounding the issue are from before 2020, which is why reviewing articles that engage with public diplomacy is essential to include in this review.

Yablokov (2015) assesses the use of RT as a public diplomacy tool and finds that the network is mostly engaged with delegitimizing Western or American power and, instead, legitimizing a Russian rise to power. Yablokov also finds that RT is a mouthpiece of the Kremlin, which strictly follows Kremlin guidelines on political issues. Paul and Matthews (2016) delineate what they call the Russian Firehose of Falsehood Model. In this model, Russia Today is described as engaging in high-volume, repetitive disinformation to convince foreign populations of Kremlin opinions on political issues. In a 2015 study, Rawnsley finds that the Russian public diplomacy scheme in Russia Today is mostly preoccupied with countering the prominent Western voice in the media. Russian public diplomacy mostly prioritizes being an antithesis of the West.

Eventually, research on strategic narratives in general, but also on Russian strategic narratives is relatively sparse. However, a literature review of the relevant sources has established that a prominent, research-spanning narrative followed by Russia through RT is a positive self-definition against a negative definition of NATO, the US, or the West in general.

Methodology

The basis for this research's data collection was formed by articles published on RT.com, the international Russia Today website. Reasons for selecting RT over other media to pursue strategic narrative analysis can be summarized by RT's specific task to promote Russia abroad, its direct connection to the Kremlin, as well as its influence on Western populations (Council of the EU, 2022; U.S. DoS GEC, 2022; RT, 2022). The time frame for the articles selected was September 30th, 2022, which is the date of Putin's annexation speech that sparked heightened unrest with regard to the use of nuclear weapons in the West (Polityuk, 2022). This date marks the beginning of a new awareness around the potential use of nuclear weapons and was, thus, taken as an appropriate date to start data collection. As an end date, 31st December 2022 was selected. Eventually, 58 articles were selected for a thematic analysis following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis has, due to its inductive nature, also been employed in the strategic narrative analyses of Ryzhova (2019), van Noort (2017), and Szotek (2017b). After generating several main themes from the selected articles, they were compared to the three kinds of strategic narratives: system narratives, identity narratives, and system narratives. The themes were then attributed to those categories, which led to the identification of strategic narratives based on the identified themes.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the 58 RT articles shows four main themes:*Russia's role and position, the West/NATO as an agitator, internal fragmentation and weakness of the West/NATO,* and *Ukraine as a nuclear threat to Russia*. This section will proceed by giving a thorough explanation of each theme and elaborating on its relevance in this research. The themes were then organized into the three strategic narrative categories, which Miskimmon et al. (2014) propose: System Narratives, which represent Russia's view on the international system; Identity Narratives, which represent Russia's characterization of itself and other actors; and Issue Narratives, which represent Russia's position on the nuclear tensions over the Ukraine war. For this, the different themes were associated with whether or not they portrayed views on the international system, on the identity of either actor or the issue of the war in Ukraine. The synthesis of these themes yielded three distinct Strategic Narratives, namely one system, identity, and issue narrative.

Main Themes

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Russia's Role and Position

This section seeks to lay out Russia's self-understanding regarding the nuclear tensions of the conflict as well as their position and objectives as presented by RT. Russia's main objective is to characterize itself as a responsible actor who wants to prevent nuclear escalation of the conflict. This self-portrayal is established by denying Western allegations of Russian nuclear threats, referring to the clarity of the Russian nuclear strategy, condemning the idea of nuclear war, and making efforts in the UN to secure the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

First, Russia denies perceived Western allegations frequently and often in similar wording. Out of the 58 articles analyzed, 24 included direct refutations of having issued a nuclear threat to either Ukraine or the West. Often, these refutations appear in similar wording such as "[n]umerous Russian officials have since insisted that the country was not threatening anybody with atomic weapons" or "[h]owever, several Russian senior officials insisted that Moscow is not threatening anyone with its nuclear arsenal".

Moreover, whenever these denials are mentioned, they usually follow explanations of how a "comment [Putin's Annexation Speech] set off a wave of nuclear panic in the West". The West has merely interpreted the speech and Russian nuclear rhetoric wrongly ("His words were interpreted by the US and its allies as a "veiled threat" by the Kremlin to use atomic weapons during Russia's military operation in Ukraine"). Whether or not this is a purposeful misinterpretation or a misunderstanding is generally left open and not further commented on by RT. In general, RT uses language, which indicates an overreaction to the annexation speech and further remarks by Russian officials such as "nuclear panic", and classifying the Western reaction as an "interpretation" instead of a legitimate reaction to a nuclear threat. Also, Western threats of "severe" or even "catastrophic consequences" are contrasted with the previously introduced refutations of nuclear threats. Whenever an RT article introduces the possible Western answers to a nuclear strike by Russia, RT substitutes this with a reminder that Russia has never issued a nuclear threat, thus contributing to the image of a responsible Russian Federation that tries to balance the overreactions of the West with regards to nuclear questions.

Secondly, when the issues of possible nuclear confrontation arise, RT articles often refer to the Russian Nuclear Strategy (RNS) that is mentioned in 26 of the 58 articles, mostly in connection to contextualizing the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia for the reader. Interesting here is the mention of Russian territorial integrity and the RNS. Officially, the RNS states the following:

The Russian Federation retains the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies and also in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is put under threat.

Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence (2020)

While the RNS does not mention a threat to Russian territorial integrity as a reason for the use of nuclear weapons, this was indicated in Putin's Annexation Speech as well as multiple RT articles ("[the separation of the annexed territories from Russia] would qualify as a threat to the territorial integrity of Russia and therefore 'a direct reason for applying Clause 19' of the Russian state doctrine on nuclear deterrence"). The RNS is consistently referred to when denying that the annexation speech, which indicated that Russia would use "all means necessary to defend the nation if its territory was threatened", constituted a veiled nuclear threat. Reference to the RNS in response to allegations of nuclear threats is made in 14 articles.

Thirdly, RT portrays Russia as preventing nuclear escalation by condemning nuclear war and Westerners who entice it. RT articles cite Russian officials who are committed to preventing a nuclear escalation of the conflict 14 times. These assurances of nuclear non-escalation take a similar wording as the following quote: "Russia stands by its signature on the January 3 joint statement with leaders of the 'Nuclear Five' […] on the prevention of nuclear war and the unacceptability of a nuclear arms race." Furthermore, RT cites Russian officials who call out Western leaders' alleged rhetoric pushing nuclear brinkmanship. Next to the direct condemnations of nuclear war, Russia also sees itself as preventing nuclear war by warning the United Nations and other states about Ukraine's alleged dirty-bomb

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endeavor. This is where this theme interlinks with the section *Ukraine as a Nuclear Threat to Russia* , where a closer description of this aspect can be found.

The West/NATO as Agitator

Russia sees NATO as being controlled by the US or as a European extension of the US's military power. Similarly, RT uses the expression "the West" as a synonym for NATO. For example, Putin remarked that Russia was fighting against "the entire Western military machine", while other articles portray NATO as an actively participating war party: "Russia has repeatedly warned the US and its allies that their overt aid to the government in Ukraine makes them parties to the conflict in Ukraine". Therefore, this research addresses NATO and The West jointly to reflect the Russian sentiment.

The West/NATO is seen as the true agitator behind the nuclear tensions over the Ukraine conflict. RT claims that NATO engages in nuclear brinkmanship through aggressive rhetoric and military exercises, and claims that NATO and individual NATO countries seek to expand NATO's nuclear capacities and are willing to break treaties to do so. The West/NATO is the one seriously entertaining the possibility of a nuclear confrontation, RT seeks to convey to its reader, and continuously engage in nuclear brinkmanship: "The [foreign] ministry also called [on the Nuclear Five to] abandon dangerous attempts to infringe on each other's vital interests, balancing on the brink of direct armed conflict and encouraging provocations with WMD" or "Putin was asked whether the world was indeed on the brink of nuclear war, given increasingly worrisome rhetoric in Western media". The theme of the West/NATO engaging in nuclear brinkmanship is found in 23 of the 58 articles. Most articles quote NATO officials or NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg, US officials, and President Biden, but also Polish and British officials. Often, when a position is introduced, which portrays the West/NATO as engaging in nuclear brinkmanship ("Western governments are drawing up plans to avoid panic among their citizens should a nuclear weapon be used in Ukraine"), the article will subsequently introduce a section that explains how Russia has never issued any nuclear threats to warrant this ("Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu in August made it clear that Moscow is not considering a nuclear strike on Ukraine."). This amplifies the reader's feeling that the West/NATO is even more irresponsible and unjustified in pushing nuclear rhetoric and portrays Russia as a contrasting, responsible actor.

Furthermore, Russia alleges NATO and NATO member states of breaking or ignoring treaties regarding nuclear policies, which distort the balance of power within Europe and endanger Russia's Western border. Russia claims that NATO breaks the NPT through the US stationing nuclear weapons in Western Europe and training non-US personnel on how to utilize them. Next to that, RT presents Finland and Sweden, both of whom have not ruled out stationing nuclear weapons on their territory after accession to NATO, as well as Poland, which is interested in joining the US's nuclear sharing program, as contradicting the 1997 Russia-NATO Founding Act. In this political agreement, NATO stated it had "no intention" of stationing nuclear weapons in countries accessing the alliance after 1997 as well as that it had no intentions of making severe changes to its nuclear strategy, but these statements of course do not exclude adaptations to new developments. RT declares that Finland and Sweden believe that "the 1997 NATO-Russia treaty should not be treated as an obstacle to achieving this [stationing nuclear weapons on their territory]" while "Warsaw considers [the treaty] void". It is important to note here that the NATO-Russia Founding Act is not formally considered a treaty and can thus not be broken (Dyner et al., 2018). RT's use of the word *treaty* is thus highly misleading and insinuates that NATO member states break treaties they have never made. RT also focuses on an alleged breaking of the Act in detail despite Finland and Sweden not having had joined NATO at that time and being far from becoming hosts for US nuclear missiles. At the time, the US had directly rejected Poland's invitation for talks on the nuclear sharing program. This is recognized by RT, however, the focus remains on the fact that "Poland absolutely wants to host both a permanent NATO troop presence and US nuclear weapons on its territory", and the fact that "over half the population of Poland believe the US should station nuclear weapons in the country", attempting to portray Poland as an actor who actively seeks to break international law and obtain and threaten Russia with nuclear weapons.

Internal Fragmentation and Weakness of the West/NATO

Despite the previous theme, which has alluded to how the West/NATO is perceived as a threat, another theme that is

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found throughout the RT articles is the supposed internal fragmentation of NATO. While NATO is often called a "Western bloc", hinting at Cold War tensions and assuming a unified actor, RT articles focus heavily on internal contradictions and issues which divide the alliance's member states. One prime example of this are the contradictory statements of the US and Poland regarding nuclear sharing talks. RT articles, as explained in the previous section, regard Poland as a more aggressive force within NATO, which "has suggested that Washington expanded its nuclear-sharing program and deployed warheads on its territory to serve as a deterrent against Moscow". However, the articles that concern Poland asking for nuclear weapons always include the very direct answer of the US: "The US, however, has insisted that it has no plans to move nuclear weapons to any Eastern European NATO member or any nation that joined the bloc after 1997".

Another example includes Turkey blocking the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO, and contradictory statements by the UK and France when French President Macron publicly stated that, even if Russia were to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, this would not warrant a reason for France to attack Russia with nuclear weapons in turn. Articles address harsh UK criticism over Macron exposing too much of France's nuclear plans to Russia, quoting UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace "scolding French President Emmanuel Macron for revealing too much when he said Paris would not respond with its own arsenal of nukes". Further articles address a conflict between Belgium and the UK regarding the delivery of parts needed to maintain the UK nuclear arsenal. According to RT, "two senior sources in the Belgian government […] voiced concerns that the dispute could "endanger western unity and NATO" amid the Ukraine conflict".

Russia portrays NATO as divided over nuclear policies and stances towards Russia. This indicates a certain weakness and inability to focus and unite into a threat to Russia. This is in stark contrast to the findings of the previous section, which explain how NATO is a threatening agitator in the conflict which is taken seriously by Russia.

Ukraine as a Nuclear Threat to Russia

The last major theme throughout the RT articles indicates that Ukraine is seen as a nuclear threat to Russia. Russia accuses Ukraine of fabricating a dirty bomb and utilizes this to distinguish itself as a responsible actor, which seeks to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. According to RT, President Zelenskyy ordered the production of the illegal nuclear bomb to "intimidate the local population, trigger a refugee exodus to the EU, and portray Moscow as "a nuclear terrorist"". The alleged dirty bomb is thus supposed to be used directly against Russia in an act of nuclear terrorism. The same line of argumentation holds for the supposed bombardment of the Zaporizhzhia powerplant. RT articles again characterize the alleged attacks on the power plant as nuclear terrorism, which is supposed to escalate the conflict and make Russia seem like the instigator since the powerplant was controlled by Russia at the time.

Three more articles discuss Ukraine allegedly wanting to resume a nuclear program, stating that "[t]he Ukrainian leader [Zelenskyy] lamented that Kiev [Kyiv] had given up nuclear weapons stationed there during the Soviet era and said that his country could break its promise to stay a non-nuclear state". Next to this more overt nuclear threat which RT perceives, multiple articles discuss how Zelenskyy presumably asked NATO to carry out a nuclear first strike on Russia to end the war: "Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky called on Thursday for NATO to launch "preemptive strikes" against Russia during a discussion on nuclear weapons". The alleged nuclear threats, which Russia perceives from Ukraine, are thus covert (nuclear terrorism or blackmail in the cases of the powerplant and dirty bomb) and overt (threats to return to a nuclear weapons program and instigating NATO against Russia). More directly, one article even names nuclear threats from Kyiv as a reason for the war ("Kiev's nuclear ambitions spurred Moscow's military operation") In total, 14 articles discuss Ukraine as a nuclear threat and 10 more – as a threat in general, not specifying its nature but using language such as "regime" or "psychos in Kiev".

Strategic Narratives Identified in RT

The themes, which have been extracted through thematic analysis, can now be sorted into the three categories of strategic narratives depending on which category they correspond to: system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives. System narratives are intended to shape the recipient audiences' understanding of the international system, its nature and its structures, in the favor of the political actor pursuing the narrative. Identity narratives seek

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to influence how the political actor is perceived abroad. Lastly, issue narratives are related to a specific event and intend to focus the discourse on it in favor of the political actor (Miskimmon et al., 2014). The system narrative is informed by the themes *Russia's Role and Position, The West/NATO as Agitator* and *Internal Fragmentation and Weakness of the West/NATO*. The identity narrative Russia seeks to convey is mainly informed by the same set of themes, and the issue narrative is informed by *The West/NATO as Agitator* and *Ukraine as a Nuclear Threat to Russia.*

System Narrative: A Re-Born Cold War System With a Nuclear Face-off Between Superpowers

Russia perceives the nuclear stalemate with NATO as a Cold-War-like conflict. Closely connected to the identity narrative, Russia seems to perceive itself as a superpower due to its hold on nuclear weapons and the effect these weapons would have on its adversaries, rather than traditional superpower features such as being a world-leading economies. Due to its ability to exert influence over the NATO states through veiled nuclear threats, Russia conceptualizes the current nuclear stalemate as the meeting of two more or less equal conflict parties, which actively mirrors nuclear hotspots of the Cold War such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. This is also reflected in the frequent references to either the Cold War itself or the Cuban Missile Crisis and likening those to the current situation. The strategic narrative Russia disseminates about the international system via RT is thus a narrative that conceptualizes a re-emergent Cold War system with a renewed nuclear face-off between NATO and Russia as superpowers.

Identity Narrative: Russia as a Responsible Actor Wanting to Stop Nuclear Escalation

Two identity narratives are prominently featured throughout the analyzed articles. Russia and NATO are conceptualized in contrast to each other, one as the responsible and one as the irresponsible conflict party. The image which Russia seeks to convey to foreign audiences via RT shows Russia in an entirely positive light. Russia is framed as a responsible actor with regard to nuclear questions that wants to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons and warns the United Nations when it suspects their illegal production. Russia is framed as not engaging in nuclear rhetoric or brinkmanship, as following a clear and reasonable nuclear strategy and condemning any (Western) efforts which might spur nuclear confrontation.

This contrasts with the picture that Russia paints of NATO. NATO is framed as an irresponsible actor who, through its indiscriminate support for Kyiv, aggressive rhetoric, and threats of nuclear and territorial expansion, bears the responsibility for the nuclear tensions between the two sides. Next to their responsibility, NATO is also seen as highly fragmented over nuclear and non-nuclear issues: the US and Poland contradict each other, France is publicly scolded by the UK, and a conflict between the UK and Belgium threatens to dismember NATO.

Framing NATO as aggressive, but at the same time weakened due to internal disintegration, seemingly contradicts the elevated superpower status that NATO is granted through Russia's system narrative and shall be discussed further in the following section of this paper. Concludingly, Russia's identity narrative in RT seeks to portray Russia as a responsible actor who wants to stop nuclear escalation driven by a fragmented and aggressive West/NATO.

Issue Narrative: Russia Is Currently Facing Nuclear Threats from Ukraine and NATO

Regarding the issue at hand, namely nuclear tensions over the war in Ukraine, Russia seeks to portray the situation in a way that puts the responsibility for the tense situation on both NATO and Ukraine. Related to the identity narrative, Russia as a responsible actor is not responsible for the situation. Rather, NATO's active territorial expansion and the threat of stationing weapons in new NATO countries as well as their nuclear brinkmanship in rhetoric and action is what spurred the conflict. Ukraine, in contrast, is portrayed as engaging in nuclear blackmail or terrorism. Ukraine seeks to target relevant nuclear infrastructure, build a dirty bomb, and eventually obtain nuclear weapons for itself. Through this, Ukraine is alleged of plotting NATO and Russia against each other by provoking a nuclear confrontation between the superpowers. Lastly, Ukraine resorts to overt nuclear threats such as asking NATO to conduct a first strike on Russia. The strategic narrative, which Russia seeks to promulgate about the issue of nuclear confrontation over the Ukraine war, is thus that Russia faces active nuclear threats from Ukraine as well as NATO.

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Discussion

A thematic analysis of 58 selected RT articles has eventually yielded three distinct strategic narratives disseminated by Russia. The first strategic narrative identified concerns the situation of the international system. The international system here was conceptualized as a re-born Cold War system with a renewed nuclear face-off between two superpowers, the West/NATO and Russia. The second strategic narrative consists of two interrelated identity narratives which characterize Russia in opposition to the West/NATO. Here, Russia is conceptualized as a responsible, actor who wants to stop nuclear escalation driven by a fragmented and aggressive NATO/West. Lastly, the issue narrative surrounding nuclear tensions around the Ukraine conflict conveys the assumption that Russia is currently facing nuclear threats from Ukraine and NATO.

These three major findings show cases of interrelatedness. First, the system narrative in which Russia sees itself as a superpower is closely connected to the identity narrative, which constructs Russia as such. The international narrative, thus, rests on the identity narrative which must first establish Russia as a superpower, while the system narrative then takes up this characterization and uses it to construct the international system as a Cold War system between two superpowers.

Secondly, the three narratives also seem to conflict in certain instances. Through the system and issue narratives, the West/NATO is constructed as a threatening superpower that presents a serious threat to Russia. The identity narrative, while it agrees with the aggressive acts of the West/NATO, additionally finds a presumed internal division between NATO states. These two assertions seem to initially contradict themselves: How can Russia be threatened by a fragmented alliance? The following paragraphs will attempt to clarify the interconnectedness of the three narratives as well as put them into the context of previous research.

Several themes and narratives that this research has identified and described in the past sections can also be found in previous research. There is a significant overlap in the findings of previous Russian strategic narrative analyses, especially with regard to the use of RT to spread these. The most prominently featured Russian strategic narrative which has continuously been identified by researchers is an identity narrative that constructs Russia positively against an aggressive West/NATO. More precisely, Russia is characterized as righteous, peaceful, and moral, while the West/NATO is characterized as hypocritical, aggressive, hegemonic, and hostile (see Szotek, 2017a; Ventsel et al., 2021; Hinck et al., 2018; Khaldarova, 2016). This research is no exception with regard to the antithetic use of characterizations. The identity narrative identified concerning the use of nuclear weapons also shows Russia as a responsible and peaceful actor who makes active efforts to stop the anticipated nuclear escalation of the conflict. The West/NATO, on the other hand, is indeed characterized as the prominent actor in pushing a nuclear agenda, engaging in nuclear brinkmanship, expanding territorially and with nuclear weapons, and acting generally aggressively. Interestingly, all previous studies as well as this study found that Russia never characterizes itself as a positive actor without also characterizing a negative other (the US, NATO, the West). The positive traits which Russia claims for itself are always found only in connection to the negative traits of the West.

The existing literature has found two pillars of Russia's constructed self-identity: first, the positively connoted moral traits, which Russia claims for itself, and second, a great power status (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Szotek, 2017a; Hinck et al., 2018; Khaldarova, 2016). Russia understands itself as one of the world's superpowers with a growing influence in world politics (Szotek, 2017a; Hinck et al. ,2018). This feeling of equality to countries or alliance systems such as the US and NATO is also reflected in the system narrative this research has identified. While the identity narrative did not make direct attempts at framing Russia as a world-leading superpower but rather as a responsible actor in nuclear questions, the identified system narrative conceptualizes a system in which Russia and the West/NATO face each other directly. Russia is never portrayed as an underdog or significantly weaker than the West/NATO, but as assertive and strong. Russia's identity as a superpower thus directly influences its understanding of the international system and its role within it.

Hinck et al. (2018) assessed strategic narratives in connection to the Crimean annexation and found that Russia conceptualized the conflict as the West trying to rob Russia of Ukraine. This perceived injustice was seen as the West/NATO understanding the immense Russian power and influence and trying to undermine it. This theme reflects

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the issue narrative that this research identified. Russia again portrays itself as directly threatened by the West/NATO in the context of nuclear tensions between the two powers. In line with this, Szotek (2017a) also identifies Russian strategic narratives which divert the blame of tensions between Russia and the West/NATO towards the West. Western expansionistic and aggressive behavior as causes for a declining relationship have thus been narratives constructed by the Russian government in past Ukraine crises as well.

This research has found that Russia seeks to portray NATO as an internally divided alliance. This is a theme that past research has equally identified. Rhyzhova (2019) elaborates on Russia portraying the European Union as a disintegrating alliance without prospects. Hansson et al. (2022) find that Russia seeks to delegitimize the US and NATO by referring to their internal erosion of democracy. Miskimmon et al. (2014) put these defamation attempts into context. These are part of a wider perspective on international developments in which Russia sees the West, and specifically the US, as losing power and only playing a marginal role in the world politics of the future, which will be dominated by, for example, the BRICS countries, where among them is Russia.

This also puts the seeming contradiction between this research's system and identity narratives into context. This section has already alluded to the question of why Russia portrays the West/NATO as an equal opponent and threat in the system narrative while characterizing it as a weakened and internally divided actor in the identity narrative. Miskimmon et al.'s (2014) analysis of a declining West versus a rising Russia indicates that Russia sees the current tensions over Ukraine as an equalized position. The West, in its decline, meets Russia half-ways in its rise. This interpretation might resolve the seeming contradiction and explain why Russia can see the West/NATO as an essential threat while at the same time portraying a presumed, growing weakness in this opponent.

One narrative which is more difficult to put into context with previous research is the issue narrative this research has identified. Publications assessing Russian strategic narratives around the war on Ukraine are still missing. This is especially true for the case of Ukraine as a nuclear threat to Russia which lacks relations to previously identified strategic narratives. As this discussion has already mentioned, the characterization of the West as a threat has been a theme in previous Russian strategic narrative analyses and through the first invasion of Ukraine as well (Szotek, 2017b). Khaldarova (2016) also finds a characterization of Ukraine as a threat to Russia. However, next to these publications, the literature regarding the securitization of Ukraine in Russian strategic narratives is sparse and does not allow for additional insights at this point.

Eventually, this discussion must address why Russia follows these identified narratives. While this constitutes a research question in itself and should be subject to further research, the following section shall try to give a brief overview of the Russian reasoning behind choosing these strategies. The need for certain strategic narratives might be explained through RT's audience. Only two studies have scrutinized RT's audience and have reached contradicting results. For one, Crilley et al. (2022) refuse to characterize RT's audience as a homogenous group of disillusioned Westerners who seek out RT's content specifically. Carter and Carter (2021), however, find that Americans who regularly consume RT content are 10-20% more likely to favor the US's decline as a global superpower. Since these studies only form the beginnings of a body of research, this paper will settle on the difficulty to assess the audience which RT seeks out. However, the US Department of State report on RT and Sputnik clearly states that RT does not seem to engage in proper audience analysis either. The assumption is simply that RT reaches the West in general (US. DoS, GEC 2021). Therefore, the lack of knowledge about RT's audience does not influence the importance which RT and the information it emanates to its Western audience has to the Kremlin.

This importance is reflected in, for example, the ever-growing investments Russia makes into RT (Ranwsley, 2015). The Kremlin's approach to international broadcasting, however, does seem to gamble on the success of Carter and Carter's (2021) findings. Rawnsley (2015) explains that the Russian leadership is mostly concerned with countering the American perspective in the West and giving an alternative explanation to world politics. The Russian leadership is also convinced that a positive external perception of Russia equals increasing political influence. Strategic narratives on RT are thus mostly concerned with creating a counterfactual to the US way of reporting: Russia and the US switch their roles as antagonists. The findings of this study can be seen as matching Rawnsley's (2015) analysis of the use of Russian state media abroad. Russia seeks to convey a positive image of itself with regard to the nuclear tensions over the Russia-Ukraine war: Russia seeks to de-escalate and act responsibly while the West is the true

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agitator behind the issue. The most important task of RT is to counter Western mainstream reporting.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to answer what Russia's strategic narrative regarding the nuclear tensions with NATO over the Ukraine conflict as presented in Russia Today are. Through a thematic analysis of 58 articles extracted from Russia Today, this paper finds that Russia's strategic narrative regarding the nuclear tensions with NATO as presented in RT is threefold: Russia sees the international system as a renewed Cold War system in which two superpowers have a nuclear face-off; it conceptualizes itself as a responsible actor wanting to avoid nuclear war while NATO is seen as internally divided and pushing nuclear brinkmanship; and sees itself as facing nuclear threats from both Ukraine and NATO.

This paper adds to the body of scholarly literature concerning Russian strategic narrative analyses in general but also provides important insights into a highly current topic. The present research opens up several further research questions which should be addressed in the future, e.g. about the reception of strategic narratives in RT's audience and with special regard to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

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