

# Perspectives for Russia's Future: The Case for Narrative Analysis

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## Perspectives for Russia's Future: The Case for Narrative Analysis

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EDWIN BACON, MAY 15 2015

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Any observer looking at Russian politics at the end of 2014 cannot fail to be struck by the magnitude of change over the course of that year. 2014 saw Russia expand its territory by the absorption of Crimea, taking to itself the land of a neighbouring state against the wishes of that state's government. It saw Russians fighting in a conflict against the Ukrainian armed forces on the territory of Ukraine. It saw Russia's relatively stable, albeit fractious, relationship with the western powers dramatically worsen, with sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on many of those close to President Putin. It saw economic decline, as the rouble and oil prices fell dramatically and official Russian forecasts posited recession in 2015.

Few, if any, analysts predicted these developments. A year earlier, in December 2013, the headlines from Russia were different. An official amnesty in December 2013 mandated the release of the highest profile prisoners in Russia – oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina – all of whom had been the subjects of sustained campaigns for their freedom in the West. A few months earlier, in September 2013, leading opposition figure Aleksei Navalny performed strongly in Moscow's mayoral election, as other opposition candidates across the country gained a handful of seats and mayoralties, including that of Russia's fourth largest city, Yekaterinburg. Even in early 2014, Russia's global image was burnished by a successful Winter Olympics in Sochi in February.

The ominous turn of events in 2014 reveals the complexities of forecasting Russia's path of development. A tendency to polarisation and preconception can lead to insufficient attention to nuance and competing voices within Russia. My recent research has focused on two particular approaches to assessing political developments within Russia, namely, political narratives and political forecasting (Bacon, 2012a; Bacon, 2012b). This article sets out how narrative analysis helps us to discern Russia's key interests from the perspective of the ruling regime, and then draws on these findings to consider the complexities of scenario building as Russia moves into the second half of this century's second decade.

### **The Russian Narrative**

In terms of public political narratives, at the methodological centre of narrative analysis lies the normative assertion that in order to better understand a political system, we should take seriously – and therefore pay close attention to – the stories that its political actors tell about themselves and their system. This is not a Russo-specific assertion. To understand the United States, we need to be cognisant of narratives representing the US as the leader of the free world and promoter of democracy. To understand the EU, we must acknowledge its developing story of ever-closer

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union. These narratives are repeated, believed, and enacted. They highlight factors that matter within a political system. They reveal self-conceptualisations that play into policy development. US Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged the ubiquity of systemic narratives after meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in March 2014, noting that they 'talked for a good six hours and ... really dug into all of Russia's perceptions, their narrative, our narrative, our perceptions, and the differences between us' (Kerry, 2014).

To assert that narratives matter and that we should take seriously what political actors say about themselves and their systems is not of course to accept the content of these narratives as true and right. Public political narratives are artificial constructs, making selective use of different elements to create a desirable account. In analysis of public political narratives, these elements – or 'narrative parts' – are identified and interrogated. Choices made in terms of inclusions and omissions serve to reveal the central concerns of political actor-narrators. The narrative parts include temporalities and agents, symbols and motifs, plots and sub-plots. Analysis of narrative parts highlights the choices made in terms of when stories begin and end, who are the heroes and villains, what are the most significant themes, and how the story might develop. Applying the narrative analysis approach to Russia's stance on Ukraine in 2014 facilitates clarification of those elements which particularly motivate Russian action. I have developed such an analysis in detail elsewhere (Bacon, 2015), and summarise it here before turning to the application of that analysis in developing future scenarios.

Official Russia has built a narrative around events in Ukraine, which, in terms of temporalities, looks back further than the narrative of the Putin regime has habitually done. This is not just a matter of the narrative's unexpected emphasis on the pre-modern period – as exemplified by President Putin's dwelling on the 10<sup>th</sup> century baptism of Grand Prince Vladimir in his annual address to parliament in December 2014 (Putin, 2014c) – but of the temporal pivot around which Russia's national narrative now revolves, namely the end of the Cold War. For most of the Putin era (from 2000 onwards), his regime defined itself and its actions as post-Yeltsin, with the turn of the millennium being the decisive moment. The symbols of the Putin narrative (for example, the introduction of the National Unity Day holiday, and the establishment of the United Russia party) developed the story of President Putin bringing unity and stability to a country riven with political, socio-economic and ethno-national fissures during the 'time of troubles' of the 1990s. From early in Putin's third term, and particularly in 2014, the narrative's temporality has decisively shifted. The key moment now is the Soviet collapse, after which – so Russia's narrative now relentlessly reminds us – Russia 'found itself in such a difficult situation that realistically it was simply incapable of protecting its interests'. But today, that narrative asserts, the time has come 'to refute the rhetoric of the Cold War' since a strong and independent Russia with national interests which demand respect is back on the scene (Putin, 2014a). In 2014 this insistence on respect for national interests was, according to President Putin, a key factor which led to the absorption of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Russian Federation.

Analysing narrative parts facilitates our awareness of where the Kremlin believes the events of 2014 in Ukraine stem from in temporal terms. The narrative analysis approach also enhances awareness of whom Russia perceives as ally or opponent. In the story told by President Putin – most notably in his speech on the acceptance of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Federation in March 2014 – two particular nuances stand out. First, the view widely held in the West of Russia and Ukraine as enemies does not match that held by Vladimir Putin. In his narrative, the 'fraternal Ukrainian people' are part of the 'we' on whose behalf Russia is standing against potential western encroachment. Second, there remains a small degree of ambiguity in the way the West, and particularly the United States, is portrayed in the Putin narrative. Although the Russian narrative repeatedly portrays 'the United States or its allies' as the villains of the piece who use any excuse to contain Russia (Putin, 2014c), Russia's president also insists on using the words 'partners' and 'friends' in relation to them, as exemplified both in the Crimea Speech of March 2014 and in his address to parliament in December 2014. When questioned as to his use of the phrase 'our American friends' in a television interview in November 2014, President Putin responded 'of course, they are all our friends' (Putin, 2014b).

The ambiguity in Putin's references to Western friends and partners reflects the important final aspect of narrative analysis in relation to Russia and Ukraine which this short article covers, that is, the existence of plot and sub-plot. It is perhaps beyond cliché to note the historical ambiguity and conflict within Russia in terms of relations with the West and whether Russia's path is as a unique civilisational exemplum or, as Putin himself once put it, part of the 'mainstream of civilisation' (Putin, 1999). The contemporary version of this debate spans questions of democratic

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development versus increased authoritarianism, and decisions over whether Russia's path in terms of economic, security, and diplomatic priorities should be predominantly internationalist or nationalist, European or Eurasian, ideological or interest-based. Narrative analysis distinguishes between plots and sub-plots in political narratives, with the latter providing flexibility and alternative policy options. The sub-plot within a political narrative does not represent an opposing view, since the narrative of opposition forces differs from that of the ruling regime, but rather a sub-plot presents another course of action within the overarching story. For most of the Putin years, since 2000, the regime's narrative plot has – whatever its relationship to reality – posited Russia as a reliable international partner, modernising and democratising in peaceable and non-ideological pragmatism within the framework of international law. The alternative path of nationalism, military power, and Great Power hegemony existed only as a sub-plot, to be hinted at as a potential turn to be taken, but for the most part serving as background. Events in Ukraine in 2014 saw the sub-plot become the main plot in Russia's political narrative. The pronouncements of Russia's political élite have followed this new line with ubiquitous ease and notable rapidity, as talk of historical vocation, military glory, and western malfeasance dominate where more sober, restrained, and diplomatic language had previously been the norm.

The changing influence of think tanks close to the regime illustrates well this shift. During the Medvedev presidency (2008-2012) the think tank closest to the regime was the Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR), whose board of trustees is chaired by Medvedev and whose reports habitually sought to push policy in a more liberal and reformist direction. In the autumn of 2012, apparently with tacit government encouragement (Khamraev, Savenko et al., 2012), a new ultra-conservative think tank, the Izborskii Club, was formed, bringing together the leading names in anti-western and Eurasianist thinking, such as Aleksandr Dugin, Aleksandr Prokhanov, and President Putin's advisor on Eurasian integration, Sergei Glazyev. Their early reports seemed somewhat fantastical and detached from the real world, being replete with vague notions of Orthodox 'spirituality', militarism, and nostalgia for a non-existent Red-White amalgam of the Soviet Union and Imperial Russia (Delyagin, Glazyev et al., 2012;

Izborskii Club, 2012; Dugin, 2013). As noted in this article's opening paragraph, the changes, which 2014 wrought in official Russia's narrative, are such that these ideas now appear close to the official line. When the United States imposed its first round of sanctions on named Russian individuals, Sergei Glazyev was on its list. If INSOR seeks to push Russia in a more reformist direction, the Izborskii Club pushes for further steps along a reactionary path. The extent to which the discourse of official Russia has travelled along this path may perhaps be judged by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's reported assertion that President Putin has 'lost contact with reality' and is 'living in another world' (Baker, 2014). The world of Russian ultra-conservatism is a far cry from the norms of western diplomatic engagement.

Analysing the development of Russia's political narrative in 2014 brings to light the central concerns of the Putin regime in relation to events in Ukraine, revealing a nationalist revanchism which draws on notions of Russian power and destiny and sees the West as an undesirable and hostile other. At the same time, however, the notion of sub-plot has significance as it keeps alive alternative approaches. President Putin still insists on referring to Western partners and American friends. Prime Minister Medvedev remains chair of the INSOR board of trustees. The current sub-plot of international law and Russia as a state willing 'to have as many equal partners as possible, both in the West and in the East' (Putin, 2014c) remains in play as a potential future scenario, albeit one that seems unlikely to come to the fore again in the short term.

## Building Future Scenarios

When it comes to developing future scenarios for Russia following on from the tumultuous events of 2014, the place of narrative is pertinent. Since the end of the Cold War the dominant methodology employed by analysts and academics seeking to anticipate potential futures for states and regions has been the scenario approach. The scenario methodology identifies key drivers and elaborates their effect in a series of divergent scenarios, for example, best case, worst case, and continuity (Bacon, 2012c). Narratives play a central role in scenario development, as they are used to draw disparate drivers into a coherent and feasible story of the future. In the case of Russia's post-2014 future, there has – at the time of writing – been no systematic scenario development process conducted and published in the light of the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine. On the Russian side, the

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Kremlin's narrative has been notably lacking in terms of future vision. Whereas the political narrative of Putin and Medvedev in previous years presented a clear picture of a modern, law-based, and more democratic Russia to come at some undefined yet not too distant future point, in 2014 there was little focus on future vision. On the Western side, in contrast, there has been no shortage of forecasts, though these have tended to come from media and policy analysts, rather than academics, and have correspondingly lacked something in terms of methodological rigour.

The most common western forecast at the end of 2014 is that, faced with declining oil prices, a collapsing rouble, and western sanctions, Russia's economic difficulties will worsen to such an extent that political pressure on President Putin will see him removed from office (Bacon, 2014). The political scientist stands no more equipped than any knowledgeable Russia-watcher when it comes to certainty over whether such a scenario will come to pass or not. That said, the study of forecasting does provide the tools for a short and concluding critical analysis of this scenario based around two common hazards of forecasting, namely, the temptation to shape forecasts around the forecaster's own preferences and prejudices, and the danger of positing an outcome without a preceding process.

In a paper at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Convention 2014, David Fogleson analysed portrayals of and predictions about the Putin regime in the *New York Times*. He noted the preponderance of negative articles about Russia in the past decade and drew particular attention to the persistent image of Russia as 'an unstable nation headed for a popular revolt against the Putin regime' (Fogleson, 2014). Critically analysing the repeated appearance of this forecast since 2005, Fogleson concludes that, given Putin's survival in power, the 'correspondents would be disappointed. But disappointments have not led *The Times*' editors to rein in prophets of Putin's demise in the last year ... One could go on citing examples of how wishful thinking on *The Times*' editorial pages ran counter to the rising Russian patriotic support for Putin, whose approval rating climbed to over 80% according to public opinion surveys' (Fogleson, 2014). Shearer and Stark go so far as to argue that the 'predilection among reporters for looking at events through the prism of their own expectations and beliefs' is 'especially noticeable among Moscow correspondents' (Shearer and Starr, 1996, p.37).

The phenomenon of wishful forecasting has a strong tradition in relation to Russia. Although it is widely accepted that remarkably few analysts in the 1980s predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union (Seliktar, 2004), such was not the case almost two decades before the Soviet collapse when Dziewanowski was able to assert that 'predicting the downfall of the Soviet regime has been a favourite academic pastime in the West for well over half a century. Probably no other regime has ever survived so many prophecies of inevitable catastrophe' (Dziewanowski, 1972, p.367). Dziewanowski's prophets were in the end correct, since the Soviet Union collapsed, but few would see the repeated and temporally inaccurate prediction of that collapse as effective scenario development.

The same might be said about constant assertions of the coming collapse of the Putin regime. The notion that such a collapse might come about through economic pressure appears at first glance to provide a certain explanatory rigour to the scenario. However, what is lacking here is process. The jump is made from the likely behaviour of a key driver – Russia's economy – to a single political outcome. More rigorous scenario development would explore a range of potential political responses to economic decline, from regime collapse to regime strengthening enhanced by factors such as anti-western feeling or a more authoritarian turn by a defensive élite. Furthermore, the need for process to proceed outcome in scenario development insists too on providing an account of *how* Putin's removal from power might come about. Absent revolution, there are a limited number of ways in which a Russian president can leave office, and those who assert Putin's coming downfall need to consider the process by which economic difficulty might lead to a change of the entrenched political leader or regime, particularly given that there are numerous examples of severe economic problems in Russia without such a change. As I have noted elsewhere (Bacon, 2014), the scenario of authoritarian stability and global power alongside economic decline and consumer dissatisfaction ought at least to be considered, given that it kept the Brezhnev regime in power for decades. After all, the purpose of scenario development is not to predict, but to anticipate possible futures.

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