

Russia, the West and the Growing Gap between Narratives

Written by Alisher Faizullaev

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ALISHER FAIZULLAEV, MAY 8 2018

States have always had differences, and sometimes sharp disparities, in their interests, values, aspirations and perceptions of the truth. Propaganda is not a new thing in international politics. The same applies to information warfare – using disinformation, manipulation of information and information technologies to demoralize the enemy and win confrontation. Nowadays, not just governmental propaganda and the traditional media but also social media are involved in developing, defending and promoting political narratives of international actors and the assertion of ‘the true truth’. Both traditional (intergovernmental) and public diplomacy as well as the media played a role in building up Russian and Western contrasting narratives regarding the Crimean Crisis in 2014 (Faizullaev and Cornut 2017). Ever since, Russian and Western narratives related to many fundamental and urgent issues of world politics turned to be increasingly confrontational. The armed conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine became a bone of contention between Russia and the West: the West condemned the Russian military involvement, but Russia did not admit the presence of its troops in Ukraine. The United States accused Russia of meddling in the U.S. presidential election in 2016, but Russia denied it. Just look at the latest two major incidents – the poisoning of former Russian and then British spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, England, and allegations of chemical weapons use in Douma, Syria. These cases poured oil in the political fire, i.e. intensified narrative confrontation between Russia and Western countries.

Having an opportunity to follow the coverages of these cases in the Russian and Western open governmental sources, media and social media, I have a feeling that the modern world lives in two – separate – realities. The two sides tell two completely disparate stories, and the same events are described and interpreted in diametrically opposed ways. Western countries believe that Russia has poisoned the Skripals, but Russia accuses the West of provocation, concealing information, and also of covertly arranging the poisoning. These are two typical news headlines in this regard: “Britain Blames Moscow for Poisoning of Former Russian Spy” (Barry and Pérez-Peña 2018), and “Russia Accuses U.K., U.S. of Poisoning Spy to Maintain Western Unity” (Halpin and Meyer 2018). Western countries blame Bashar al-Assad in using chemical weapons against civilians in Syria, but Russia, who supports al-Assad, believes that this incident was staged with the assistance of the Western powers. The parties tell not just conflicting stories, but try to present their narratives with a variety of arguments.

Here I do not want to act as an advocate or mediator, or as a person who can provide the truth in the last instance. I want to draw attention to the fact that we are facing a clear division of reality, or, more precisely, perceived reality. And I believe, this phenomenon is not just about propaganda, information warfare and defending strategic interests but also about a truly different vision of the world and judgement of political events. Moreover, all specific facts and circumstances regarding the Skripals and Douma cases that seem to be compelling for one of the parties remain completely unconvincing to the other. Let’s look at some other news headlines for some examples: “Sergei Skripal: Russia accuses UK media of ‘phobia’ and ‘hype’ over spy ‘poisoning’ story” (The Independent 2018) and “UK attacks Russia’s ‘changing fantasies’ on Skripal nerve agent attack at chemical summit” (Sky news 2018), or “The Russian TV Uses Film Stills as Proof Syria Chemical Attack Was Staged” (The Moscow Times 2018) and “Theresa May: Russia, Syria working to ‘conceal the facts’ of gas attack” (Washington Examiner 2018).

No matter what stands behind powerful narratives, they are ‘real as long as they are believed to be so’ (Faizullaev

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and Cornut 2017: 595). Russian and Western narratives about the Skripals and Douma are widely supported by the public in Russia and Western countries respectively. In such a condition, Russia and the West trust each other less and less, and suspect the opposite side of manipulation and deception. In short, in the modern Russian-Western confrontation, we can see 'a conflict between incommensurate worldviews' (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997: 16).

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the West also had different political narratives and were not receptive to each other's positions. However, then the determining factors were differences in their strategic interests and ideologies (communism vs capitalism). The current world is more globalized and integrated, countries have more interdependent economic and political interests and there are no such ideological barriers as they existed in the Cold War era. In the modern world, confrontation between Russia and the West has acquired a more moral substance. Based on their political morality, the parties claim that they are right and the other side is wrong in their assessments and approaches to the events in Crimea, Donbass, the U. S. election, Salisbury and Douma. Trying to prove their case, the representatives of Russia and Western countries extensively refer to legal norms and international law, but often use them as elements of narration (Faizullaev and Cornut 2017). Again, here my task is not to find out who is right and who is wrong. I want to point out the widening gap between narratives of the parties in which many people believe.

The present and growing differences between Russian and Western conflicting narratives are predominantly based on their political worldviews and understanding of right and wrong. That is why these are intractable differences. Many factors played a role in the origin of these disparities, including historical, cultural, economic, political, institutional, societal, etc. Perhaps, some accidental events also played a role in the emergence of the current situation. However, all kinds of incidents – intentional and unintentional – tend to be built into the chain of dominant narratives of actors and become complimentary parts of the actor's worldview, or narrative structure. Narrative structure affects people's thinking, perception, imagination and moral choices (Sarbin 1986: 8). Moral factors and moral differences appear as one of the fundamental causes of the growing gap between Russian and Western political narratives, and moral differences 'exist when groups have *incommensurate moral orders*' (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997: 51). For example, Russia feels not only a legal but moral right to support Bashar al-Assad's regime, and the West is convinced that this regime is criminal and should end.

Can diplomacy help?

We don't know where such disparities in political narratives can lead the world – to the new Cold war or even to a hot one. Or, will these matters gradually get normalized? Can diplomacy help in finding some common ground? International diplomacy is involved in narrative building and practices, but I think the world needs to develop a more constructive narrative diplomacy and narrative negotiations in order not to be stymied. What I mean by this is that the world powers need to find some common explanation of world events and vision for the world. Since political narratives have become part of our reality and are shaping our perception of the world and our practices, we need to think about negotiating narratives and constructing some shared ideas and stories, which would help us to prevent further confrontation or global war. Negotiating narratives means, above all, understanding one's own and other's concerns, values and convictions; discovering and discussing fundamental stories, myths and beliefs of the parties involved, and finding out common and meaningful ideas and practices. This is not about negotiating agreements or joint statements but rather about negotiating meanings and creating a shared worldview. In short, it is a joint meaning-making process in conversation.

People and states are inclined to narratives, and political narratives are at the heart of international and domestic politics. States always produce their political narratives and deal with the narratives of other international actors. Narratives help actors to link events together, connect the past, present and future, and have a cohesive worldview (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2013). And people, organizations and states are getting used to stories they tell the world. While Russia and the West point fingers at each other in the cases of the Skripals and Douma, it is important, of course, to get the facts, objective information and hear the opinion of experts. But I am afraid that wouldn't change the narratives and moral orders of the parties: they are too strong and have a huge impact on people's perception of the reality. Moreover, narratives themselves provide a picture of reality, so they shape and construct the reality and our practices. In the current world, political narratives are developing so 'comprehensively'

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and with a variety of powerful tools, including the media and social media, and hardly any facts can essentially change them. There is a risk that any unsuitable fact will be rejected by a more convenient 'fact', and there will be no end to the war of words and evidences.

It is time to train specialists in deep and comprehensive analysis of political discourses and narratives, and in delivering messages for their governments and the international community. I do not think that countries currently have a sufficient number of such experts and such practices in international diplomacy. Does this mean moving away from real problems and clashing interests of the parties? Some may say that narratives in world politics do not arise from scratch, but reflect political, economic and strategic interests of international actors. Yes, indeed. But narratives equally affect our reality and real issues of international relations. Our worldview is woven from different practices and narratives. And by negotiating narratives, or trying to construct common and more adequate narratives, we can enter in new practices and make our world better and safer.

States can negotiate explicitly, and they can also be involved in tacit bargaining through various indirect means (Schelling 1980; Faizullaev 2017 a). Tacit bargaining happens when communication between actors are incomplete or impossible (Schelling 1980: 55). In tacit bargaining, parties mainly 'watch and interpret each other's behavior, each aware that his own actions are being interpreted and anticipated' (Schelling 1980: 21). It is better to conduct narrative negotiations explicitly but not tacitly, and rely not just on the observer's interpretation of the actor's intentions and actions, but also directly listen to and discuss the actor's explanation of his own behavior.

Narrative negotiations and transformations comprise listening to and understanding what others – even adversaries – say. It is important to understand any political worldview in historical, social, cultural and psychological contexts. That doesn't mean that one needs to accept the opponent's narratives, worldview and values, and be blind to propaganda and deception. It simply means awareness, engagement, and dialogue. That is a practice of mindfulness which may affect understanding and building a political narrative.

Some may object: will this not create an opportunity for some international actors to manipulate expert and public opinions? Others may also say that by entering in narrative negotiations, the diplomats might be deceived and drawn into useless and endless conversations. Well, these risks exist even in 'normal' international encounters, diplomatic negotiations and consultations. But the science and art of narrative negotiations should include the skills of detecting and dealing with manipulations, tricks and deceptions, and also addressing the issues of concern. This means negotiators need to ask questions and understand each other's most fundamental values that affect their narratives, and the logic behind their narrative construction.

To find a common and meaningful language

The aim of diplomacy is to promote international understanding and peace, but as an instrument of foreign policy, diplomacy may resort to insults, particularly symbolic ones (Faizullaev 2017 b). In a heated informational environment of modern diplomacy, it becomes more difficult to distinguish the truth from the fake news. With the increase of conflicting political narratives, politicians, the public and diplomats from the opposed camps are less able to listen to and understand each other. Unfortunately, the modern international public space is filled with both open and concealed accusations and insults.

The power of one's own convictions is such that it often prevents people, organizations, and states from delving into the narratives of the other parties. The simplest narrative logic says this: we are right (and we have the true evidence!), and you are not (and your evidence is fake!). Even the most notorious villains can think that they, and only they, are right. It is not enough to say that they are wrong in order to convince them or change their opinion. Even in case of wrongdoers and liars, we need, first of all, to understand them. It is important to listen carefully and understand their values, stories, the origin and development of their narratives, their logical and emotional aspects. It is just impossible to change a person, group or country without changing their fundamental beliefs.

Why does Russia say what it says? Why do Western countries say what they say? Because their stories are not built on an empty foundation, and their narratives are associated with their identities, needs, hopes, worries, values,

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interests, beliefs, and relationships, with their perception of the world and everyday lives. To change a story, we have to recognize and discuss it, but not ignore it. And we need to introduce new practices of creating new stories. To Russia: why not give the West the opportunity to fully explain its position and fears on the Skripal and Douma cases? To the West: why shouldn't Russia do the same, and explain in detail its position and worries on these issues? And to both Russia and the West: why not listen to the other side patiently and carefully? Not only at the United Nations Security Council and some other international fora, but widely – in the mainstream media, among diplomats and expert communities, and even ordinary people, without interruptions, obstruction, ridicule and aggression, but by asking questions. For example, by doing some joint work in a special workshop on interaction of Russian and Western political narratives.

This might not seem realistic. But it is time for Russia and the West to discover something in common and create narrative bridges. To do so they need, first of all, to find a common language to speak and listen to each other. Currently that is extremely difficult. But it must not be allowed to be even more difficult in the future. It makes little sense to tell the opposite side that it is wrong, if the other side thinks otherwise. Alas, the truth would be hardly accepted as the truth if it contradicts the actor's convictions, worldview, and understanding of what is right and what is wrong, i.e. his or her moral order. Cognitive dissonance may happen at state level too, and states tend to keep their systems of beliefs consistent by resisting any information that threatens to destroy their integrity. It would be more effective to engage the other side in dialogue, and that may allow the parties to discover the truth more clearly by being involved in meaningful interactions.

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