

Manufacturing the Western Threat: Strategic Narrative Construction and Authoritarian Exploitation of Democratic Fragmentation

A Geopolitical and Rhetorical Analysis of Russian Strategic Discourse

March 20, 2026

Abstract

This paper analyzes the construction and deployment of “the West” as a unified strategic adversary in Russian state discourse, despite the absence of any formal legal or institutional entity bearing that designation. Through systematic examination of Kremlin rhetoric, official statements, and narrative patterns, we identify how this discursive construct functions as a mobilizing and legitimizing mechanism in Russian foreign policy, particularly in the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. We argue that the deliberate ambiguity of the term “the West” enables its exploitation as a geopolitical instrument, producing narrative asymmetry that pluralistic democracies struggle to counter due to their institutionalized accountability and decentralized communication structures. This work proposes a theoretical framework grounded in constructivist international relations theory to understand how non-institutionalized geopolitical abstractions gain performative reality, and suggests quantitative methodologies employing Natural Language Processing (NLP) for empirical measurement and validation of such narrative structures. Our findings indicate that authoritarian regimes systematically weaponize semantic ambiguity to achieve simultaneous domestic mobilization and international obfuscation.

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1 Introduction

In contemporary international relations, the relationship between language, power, and geopolitical reality has become increasingly complex and consequential [18]. Narratives no longer merely reflect underlying structural conditions; rather, they actively constitute the political landscape through processes of discursive construction and social reproduction [37]. The invocation of “the West” across Russian media, diplomatic discourse, and presidential rhetoric exemplifies this dynamic: a term that designates no formal institution, legal entity, or democratically constituted body is routinely deployed as though it possessed singular agency, unified intentionality, and malevolent purpose.

This semantic maneuver is not accidental. Vladimir Putin and the Russian state apparatus have systematically constructed and weaponized the concept of “the West” as a coherent antagonist—what we term here a *discursive entity*—thereby enabling simultaneous blame assignment, narrative coherence, and strategic flexibility in the absence of any identifiable formal opponent [?, 41]. The resulting geopolitical fiction serves multiple functions simultaneously: it unifies domestic Russian constituencies around a shared external threat; it externalizes responsibility for economic hardship, military failure, and institutional decay; it justifies expansive military actions and violations of international law; and it exploits the communicative fragmentation inherent in democratic pluralism, allowing a unified authoritarian narrative to achieve disproportionate informational dominance in contested discursive spaces [12].

The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 provided the most dramatic test case for this narrative strategy. Prior to and throughout the military campaign, Putin repeatedly framed the conflict not as aggression against a sovereign neighbor but as defensive action against Western encroachment [44]. Notably, this framing persisted despite overwhelming material evidence of Russian initiation, planning, and strategic design [?]. The success of this counter-narrative among significant portions of the Russian domestic audience, as well as its traction in non-aligned countries and within Russian diaspora communities, attests to the rhetorical power of the constructed “Western threat” [40].

This paper advances three primary arguments: (1) that “the West” functions as a

strategic social construction lacking material referent but possessing significant performative power; (2) that the deliberate ambiguity and institutionless quality of this construct enables exploitation strategies unavailable to more formally defined adversarial relationships; and (3) that the information asymmetries resulting from authoritarian narrative coherence versus democratic pluralism create structural vulnerabilities that undermine liberal democratic response capacity [34].

2 Literature Review

2.1 Strategic Narratives and Identity Formation in International Relations

The theoretical foundations for understanding how narratives shape geopolitical identity and threat perception have been substantially developed over the past two decades. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle define strategic narratives as “networks of storylines that are publicly presented by state and non-state actors, and travel across the international system to shift beliefs and influence behavior” [35]. These narratives are not merely rhetorical embellishments upon underlying material interests; rather, they constitute the interpretive frameworks through which actors identify their interests, define threats, and justify actions [1].

In the Russian context specifically, scholars have documented a fundamental narrative shift coinciding with Putin’s assertion of centralizing state control and his response to perceived Western encroachment. Shlapentokh and Levita argue that post-Soviet Russian identity formation has been characterized by oscillation between Westernization and civilizational distinctiveness, with contemporary Kremlin rhetoric decisively favoring the latter trajectory [46]. This shift accelerated following Putin’s 2007 Munich Security Conference address, wherein he explicitly critiqued the “unipolar world” and asserted that “a unilateral, sometimes even blunt, use of force...is making the world increasingly unstable” [41].

Historically, Russian state identity formation has consistently involved othering processes targeting external entities. As Tsygankov notes, the construction of a distinctly Russian civilization in opposition to the “West” dates to early modern formulations of Moscow as the Third Rome, a narrative strategy that has been repeatedly invoked and reformulated across Russian intellectual history [52]. Contemporary Russian discourse represents not a

novel phenomenon but rather a recrudescence of historically rooted identity narratives under conditions of geopolitical pressure and perceived systemic challenge.

2.2 “The West” as Constructed Adversary: Discursive Materialization

The term “the West” possesses inherent semantic instability. It can refer variously to NATO, the European Union, the Group of Seven advanced economies, generically to liberal democracies, to the United States and its close allies, or, in some formulations, to the entire contemporary international liberal order [28]. This multivalence is not a defect in usage but rather a constitutive feature that enables its strategic exploitation.

Domańska’s analysis of Russian state media output demonstrates the pervasive deployment of “the West” across a diverse range of narratives and accusations [10]. In Russian state television and official discourse, “the West” functions as a catch-all category for explaining phenomena as disparate as economic sanctions, NATO expansion, support for Ukrainian independence, LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, and even accusations of sabotage against Russian infrastructure [13]. Strikingly, no single spokesperson, institution, or decision-making body within this amorphous construct is ever held responsible for specific actions; rather, the collective entity bears perpetual guilt for the presumed malevolent trajectory of Western civilization.

This rhetorical strategy aligns with what scholars of propaganda and disinformation have identified as characteristic authoritarian communication patterns. The European Council on Foreign Relations documents that Russian state media systematically casts “the West” not as a merely competitive or even hostile international entity, but as a malevolent civilizational force engaged in a zero-sum struggle for dominance and cultural hegemony [11]. This framing accomplishes the rhetorical erasure of legitimate European political pluralism: disagreements between Germany and Poland regarding Ukraine policy, or between France and the United States regarding NATO strategy, are subsumed within the undifferentiated category of “Western consensus,” thereby naturalizing the assumption of unified Western intentionality.

2.3 Weaponization of History and the Construction of Grievance Narratives

Putin’s rhetoric systematically deploys historical references to construct a genealogy of Western aggression against Russia. The narrative encompasses the Napoleonic Wars (presented as Western European attempts to dominate Eastern Slavic lands), 19th-century imperial competition, World War II (framed as a Western-backed Nazi assault upon Russia), the Cold War (characterized as Western attempts to encircle and destroy the Soviet Union), and post-1991 NATO expansion (interpreted as fulfillment of centuries-old designs to subjugate Russia) [44].

Kondryukova’s scholarly examination of Putin’s narrative construction demonstrates that this historical genealogy is not presented as debatable interpretation but as objective fact, with contemporary actions justified through direct invocation of past grievances [24]. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine, for instance, was explicitly justified in Putin’s February 24 address through reference to historical patterns: “NATO’s eastward expansion has nothing to do with a military threat to Russia. This is obvious. Russia does not pose any threat to NATO countries” [44], yet this factual assertion is immediately subordinated to a broader narrative framework wherein any NATO expansion is inherently threatening regardless of actual military disposition.

This temporal strategy serves a crucial function: by constructing the present moment as merely the latest iteration of a centuries-long pattern, it naturalizes the assumption of perpetual Western hostility while simultaneously exempting the current Russian regime from responsibility for initiating conflict. Russia becomes not an agent of change but a defender against inevitable Western encroachment [31].

2.4 Values, Morality, and Civilizational Struggle

In recent years, Putin’s rhetorical strategy has increasingly emphasized alleged moral and civilizational differences between Russia and the West [27]. This shift represents a deliberate repositioning of the Russian state as defender of “traditional values” against Western decadence and moral relativism [42]. The strategy encompasses explicit critiques of liberal attitudes toward gender identity, family structure, religious authority, and individual

autonomy [26].

The 2013 Russian ban on “homosexual propaganda to minors,” the 2022 constitutional amendments emphasizing traditional family structure, and recurring Kremlin rhetoric condemning Western “gender ideology” represent the policy codification of this narrative strategy [25]. Notably, these policies do not merely restrict behavior; they construct a comprehensive civilizational identity in opposition to the “West,” positioning Russia as the sole defender of humanity’s spiritual and moral foundations [32]. The Institut Montaigne notes that this civilizational framing has become increasingly central to Russian state legitimacy claims, particularly as economic performance and democratic legitimacy have declined [20].

This strategy accomplishes several objectives simultaneously: it appeals to conservative constituencies both domestically and internationally; it provides cover for the suppression of dissent as necessary defense of Russian civilization; it appeals to actors in the Global South who may be ambivalent about liberal democratic models; and it creates a discursive framework wherein criticism of Russian government actions becomes equatable with cultural imperialism [50].

3 Theoretical Framework: The Discursive Entity and Weaponized Ambiguity

3.1 Constructivism and the Social Construction of Threat

International relations theory has increasingly recognized that threat perception is not determined solely by material capabilities and relative power distributions, but rather is significantly shaped by identity, narrative, and shared interpretative frameworks [7, 53]. Within constructivist theory, actors’ interests are not pre-given but rather are constituted through processes of social interaction and discursive construction [1].

Applied to the Russian case, constructivism suggests that Putin’s invocation of “the West” as a unified threat is not merely a cynical distortion of objective reality, but rather represents an attempt to constitute a particular understanding of Russian identity, interests, and the structure of international relations. Through repeated invocation and elaboration of the “Western threat” narrative, Russian state actors attempt to make this particular

construction of geopolitical reality appear natural, inevitable, and factually grounded [18].

3.2 The Discursive Entity: Definition and Characteristics

We propose the concept of a *discursive entity* to describe a geopolitical actor that possesses significant performative effects and narrative coherence but lacks formal institutional structure, legal personality, or unified decision-making apparatus. The “West,” in Russian state rhetoric, exemplifies this category [8].

Discursive entities differ from formal state actors in several material respects:

1. **Absence of Accountability:** No single entity can be held legally or diplomatically responsible for actions attributed to “the West,” because no such entity exists in international law. This contrasts sharply with state-to-state relations, where formal diplomatic channels and international legal frameworks provide mechanisms for accountability.
2. **Semantic Flexibility:** The referent of “the West” shifts contextually. In one speech it may refer primarily to NATO; in another, to the United States; in a third, to European liberalism more broadly. This flexibility allows accusers to assert propositions without confronting potential counterevidence.
3. **Collective Attribution:** Actions by any member of the loosely defined “West” can be attributed to the collective entity. When the United States provides military aid to Ukraine, this becomes evidence of “Western” aggression; when Sweden and Finland join NATO, this is interpreted as “Western” expansion; when the EU imposes sanctions, this exemplifies “Western” hostility.
4. **Structural Inevitability:** Because “the West” is presented not as a contingent alliance of actors with diverse interests but as an inherent civilizational unit, its behavior is rendered predictable and inevitable. The West *must* encroach upon Russia, *must* seek dominance, *must* undermine Russian interests—not because of specific policy decisions by identifiable actors, but because this is the essential nature of Western civilization.

3.3 Mathematical Formalization: Threat Perception and Accountability

The relationship between perceived threat magnitude, attributed intent, assessed capability, and accountability can be formalized through a simplified model. Let us define perceived threat T as a function of attributed intent I , assessed capability C , and accountability A :

$$T = \frac{I \cdot C}{A} \quad (1)$$

Where:

- I represents the perceived intentionality and malevolence of the adversary (scaled 0–1)
- C represents assessed military, economic, and political capability (scaled 0–1)
- A represents the degree of institutional accountability and identifiable locus of decision-making (scaled 0–1)

In conventional interstate relations, all three terms are empirically bounded and verifiable. A threat assessment regarding Germany, for instance, must account for Germany’s actual military capabilities, the documented intentions of German policymakers, and the accountability mechanisms provided by German democratic institutions and international law.

By contrast, in the case of “the West” as constructed in Russian state rhetoric:

$$I \rightarrow 1, \quad C \rightarrow \text{effectively unbounded}, \quad A \rightarrow 0 \quad (2)$$

The absence of accountability ($A \approx 0$) becomes the critical variable. In the limit as A approaches zero, the denominator approaches zero, and T approaches infinity, regardless of whether actual capability or demonstrable intent has changed. A formally infinite threat can justify any defensive measure, any preemptive action, any suppression of domestic dissent, without being subject to the constraint of proportionality or empirical verification.

This mathematical formulation captures an essential strategic advantage of the discursive entity: it enables perpetual threat construction unconstrained by the requirement to identify specific decision-makers or verify specific claims against identifiable institutions.

3.4 Narrative Asymmetry and Democratic Fragmentation

Liberal democracies operate through institutionalized mechanisms of political pluralism: multiple parties, diverse media outlets, decentralized decision-making across multiple levels of government and across public and private sectors. This pluralism produces genuine policy disagreements and communicative fragmentation [34]. When the United States and the European Union disagree regarding Iran policy, this disagreement is publicly visible and debated. When Germany’s approach to Russian energy policy differs from Poland’s, these differences are extensively documented in open media.

This transparency and pluralism, while fundamental to democratic legitimacy, creates a communicative vulnerability when confronted with a unified authoritarian narrative [22]. A single coherent (if false) claim from the Russian state media apparatus encounters a fragmented response from multiple democratic governments and civil societies. By the time these diverse actors generate a coordinated counter-narrative, the original authoritarian claim has already circulated widely, established cognitive anchors, and shaped elite and public opinion [49].

This asymmetry is not symmetrical to the advantages of coherent authoritarianism. Democratic pluralism generates its own significant advantages—resilience, adaptability, genuine legitimacy, institutional stability. The specific vulnerability exploited here concerns the temporal and coordinational dynamics of narrative construction and contestation [51].

4 Rhetorical and Narrative Analysis: Kremlin Construction of “The West”

4.1 Personification and the Attribution of Unified Agency

Putin’s rhetoric consistently employs linguistic strategies that personify “the West” and attribute singular agency and intentionality to what is in fact a diverse, sometimes contradictory set of state and non-state actors [30, 37].

In Putin’s February 24, 2022 address announcing the invasion, he states: “NATO has begun its active expansion to the east of our country, moving toward our borders” [44]. This

formulation is linguistically revealing: “NATO has begun”—a singular entity performing a unified action. But NATO expansion is not a centralized decision emanating from a single decision-making center; it results from the sovereign decisions of multiple independent states choosing to join the alliance based on their own geopolitical assessments and security concerns.

Similarly, in his 2021 article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Putin writes: “The West, which has declared itself the leader of the free world, sees Ukraine differently” [43]. Here, “the West” is granted intentionality (it declares itself), vision (it sees), and preferences (about Ukraine). But in fact, various Western actors hold substantially different views regarding Ukraine policy. The 2015 Minsk agreements were negotiated with German and French participation; the Biden administration’s approach to Ukraine differs in important respects from that of other NATO members; European energy dependence on Russian gas created incentives for cautious approaches inconsistent with a unified “Western” position.

By consistently employing linguistic structures that presume unified agency, Putin’s rhetoric naturalizes the assumption that “the West” is indeed a singular actor, thereby pre-empting the empirical counter-claim that Western positions are actually differentiated and contradictory [15].

4.2 Moral and Civilizational Condemnation

Kremlin rhetoric has increasingly employed moral and civilizational framing to position Russia and the West as locked in a quasi-religious struggle between good and evil, traditionalism and decadence [27].

Putin stated in a 2013 speech: “Many Western countries have moved away from their roots, including Christian values. Policies are being pursued that place on the same level a multi-child family and a same-sex partnership, a faith in God and a belief in Satan” [42]. This formulation accomplishes several discursive objectives: it elevates the Russian-Western conflict from a matter of political and economic interest to a struggle over fundamental human values; it positions Russia as the defender of universal (Christian, traditional, spiritually grounded) principles against Western (secular, relativistic, spiritually empty) nihilism; and

it appeals to conservative and religious constituencies worldwide who may feel threatened by liberal social changes.

The Atlantic Council documents that this moral framework has become increasingly prevalent in Russian state media output, with systematic framing of “gender ideology” and liberal sexual ethics as emblematic of broader Western degeneracy and civilizational decline [3]. Notably, this narrative strategy enables the equation of Western foreign policy critique with cultural imperialism: if the West is fundamentally decadent and morally bankrupt, then any Western assertion regarding human rights, democratic values, or international law can be dismissed as the projection of Western corruption onto healthier societies.

This represents a rhetorical strategy of some sophistication: by establishing that the fundamental disagreement is civilizational and moral rather than political, the Kremlin pre-empts engagement with specific policy disputes (the justification for invasion, the documented facts of military action) by operating at a level of abstraction where claims of moral equivalence between Russia and the West appear absurd to both constituencies simultaneously.

4.3 Historical Genealogy and the Construction of Perpetual Threat

Putin’s rhetoric systematically constructs historical narratives wherein contemporary Western actions appear as the latest iteration of centuries-long patterns of aggression, expansion, and attempts to dominate and civilizationally destroy Russia and Russian peoples. This historical genealogy serves multiple functions: it naturalizes the assumption of perpetual Western hostility; it exempts the contemporary Russian state from responsibility for initiating conflict (merely responding to inevitable Western aggression); and it renders compromise or negotiation strategically irrational (one cannot negotiate with an adversary pursuing civilizational destruction).

In his February 24, 2022 address, Putin invokes: “Let me remind you that in 1991 the Soviet Union fell apart. Russia lost 25 percent of its population. This was a national catastrophe” [44]. This framing is historically misleading (the Soviet Union did not “fall apart” due to Western action but rather experienced internal collapse; Russian-speaking populations in former Soviet republics are not presented as having exercised agency regarding

their own independence). Yet the emotional resonance of this frame—Russia as victim of Western-orchestrated destruction—structures subsequent interpretations of NATO expansion, Western support for Ukraine, and contemporary sanctions regimes.

Similarly, Putin’s invocation of World War II rhetoric positions Russia as the sole defender of European civilization against Nazi Germany, implicitly constructing contemporary Ukraine (and by extension, any Russian adversary) as a proxy for fascism. This historical framing is accompanied by what Laruelle terms “myth of the Russian resistance”—a narrative wherein Russia alone sacrifices itself to defend Western civilization against its self-destruction [31].

4.4 Blame Externalization and Refusal of Accountability

Kremlin rhetoric systematically externalizes responsibility for negative outcomes to the West. Economic difficulties resulting from sanctions are attributed to Western economic warfare rather than to government policy or structural economic challenges. Military setbacks in Ukraine are attributed to Western military aid rather than to Russian strategic failures. Domestic dissent is attributed to Western information operations rather than to genuine grievances [16].

This rhetorical strategy serves a critical domestic function: it preserves the legitimacy narrative of the Putin regime by ensuring that negative outcomes cannot be attributed to government failure. Any inadequacy can be reinterpreted as evidence of Western aggression against which the Russian state is heroically defending. This creates a closed narrative loop from which escape requires rejection of the entire discursive framework [34].

5 Structural Exploitation of Semantic Ambiguity

5.1 Meaningful Ambiguity as Strategic Asset

The deliberate ambiguity of the term “the West” functions not as a weakness in Russian state rhetoric but rather as a strategic asset. Because “the West” simultaneously can refer to NATO, the EU, the United States, liberal democracies broadly, or European culture as a whole, the term enables accusations that are simultaneously capacious, flexible, and

empirically difficult to refute.

When the Kremlin accuses “the West” of sabotaging the Nord Stream pipelines, it need not identify which Western state conducted the sabotage, which decision-making body authorized it, or provide evidence against a specific accountable entity [23]. The accusation gains rhetorical force precisely through its ambiguity: it is simultaneously an accusation against the United States, the NATO alliance, the European Union, and a unified civilizational force. No single Western entity can effectively defend itself because the accusation is not directed at any single entity.

Similarly, accusations of “Western interference” in Russian internal affairs encompass vastly disparate phenomena: CIA intelligence operations, the U.S. State Department’s public statements regarding Russian elections, European media coverage of Russian politics, academic research on Russian corruption, and philanthropic activities by Western organizations. By subsuming all these under the category of “Western interference,” the Kremlin accomplishes a rhetorical feat: activities ranging from the genuinely covert to the completely transparent, from state policy to civil society action, from legitimate democratic speech to actual intelligence operations, all become evidence of unified Western aggression.

This categorical compression serves propaganda functions: it obscures the distinction between legitimate forms of cross-border communication and actual intelligence operations; it positions Western civil society actors and journalists as proxies of state power; and it enables claims of victimhood and civilizational persecution that resonate across diverse audiences [48].

5.2 Target Flexibility and Narrative Shifting

The institutional diffuseness of “the West” enables narrative shifting as political circumstances change. When bilateral relations with Germany appear advantageous, Russian rhetoric can distinguish between “Atlanticists” (primarily the United States and its closest allies) and more independent European perspectives, thereby dividing the Western alliance [38]. When conflict escalates, all European nations can be subsumed back into a unified “Western” hostility.

This flexibility was particularly evident during the period of Russian-German energy

cooperation under the SPD-Green government and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Russian rhetoric emphasized European independence from American domination and suggested the possibility of a distinctive European-Russian relationship freed from Atlantic constraints. The specific institutional differentiation between American and European actors was strategically highlighted when advantageous, then abandoned when Germany’s political orientation shifted [?].

This represents what we might term *narrative targeting flexibility*: because “the West” possesses no fixed institutional referent, the definition of who belongs to “the West” can be revised to match strategic objectives. Countries that resist Russian policy can be incorporated into the “Western” bloc; countries that appear amenable to Russian position can be partially excluded from it or repositioned as victims of Western imperialism.

5.3 Narrative Asymmetry and Information Environment Dynamics

The fundamental asymmetry between authoritarian narrative coherence and democratic pluralism deserves detailed examination. In the Russian information environment, competing perspectives on the West are systematically marginalized. State media dominates; independent outlets face legal persecution, emigration, or closure; alternative narratives are not legitimized through prestigious outlets [12].

By contrast, in the Western information environment, multiple competing narratives circulate. Critics of NATO expansion hold their own space in elite discourse; scholars document historical Western misdeeds and foreign policy failures; diverse media outlets present contradictory accounts of events; government spokespersons, politicians, civil society actors, and journalists offer competing interpretations [45].

This pluralism is a strength for democratic resilience and adaptive capacity. However, it creates a specific vulnerability: the existence of multiple competing Western narratives, when filtered through the Russian information apparatus, becomes evidence for the incoherence, decadence, and civilizational bankruptcy of the West. Disagreements within Western democracies are reinterpreted as evidence of Western moral confusion and decline. Democratic openness to self-criticism becomes evidence of spiritual weakness [49].

Russian state media can selectively amplify Western critics, portraying marginal or fringe

positions as representative of Western intellectual consensus, thereby validating the narrative that the West is fundamentally divided and self-destructive [12]. This is possible precisely because the Western information environment is sufficiently open that such selective amplification can be technically accurate (the position does exist somewhere in Western discourse) while being radically misleading about its actual prevalence or intellectual legitimacy [39].

6 Performative Effects and International Consequences

6.1 Domestic Mobilization and Suppression of Dissent

The construction of a perpetual Western threat serves critical domestic functions for the Putin regime. The narrative justifies the suppression of dissent as necessary response to Western-orchestrated subversion; it provides emotional and ideological cohesion to a politically diverse constituency; and it displaces responsibility for economic and political failures from the regime to external enemies [36].

The 2012 constitutional amendments explicitly protecting traditional family structures, the 2013 “homosexual propaganda” law, and successive laws restricting civil liberties and foreign funding of NGOs are all justified in terms of defense against Western cultural imperialism [25]. Dissidents can be portrayed not as legitimate internal critics but as Western-funded agents of foreign power. This rhetorical strategy was particularly evident in Kremlin responses to the 2011-2012 Bolotnaya Square protests, where the narrative of “Western-backed color revolution” dominated state media accounts [14].

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine intensified this dynamic. Military conscription, military losses, and economic hardship resulting from sanctions were all narratively reframed as evidence of Western aggression requiring unified Russian response. The narrative provided emotional structure and meaning to sacrifice: deaths were not portrayed as resulting from questionable military decisions but as martyrdom in defense of Russian civilization against Western destruction [33].

6.2 Geopolitical Realignment and the “Global South” Strategy

By positioning the West as a declining, decadent, imperializing force, Putin’s rhetoric seeks to position Russia as the authentic representative of non-Western alternatives [2]. This strategy explicitly targets actors in the Global South, presenting alignment with Russia as opposition to Western imperialism and a means of pursuing independent, civilizational authentic development paths [6].

This narrative has achieved surprising traction in certain contexts. Votes at the United Nations in March 2022 condemning Russian aggression showed that many African, Middle Eastern, and Asian nations abstained or voted against the condemnation, despite the substantial evidence of Russian military aggression and violations of international law. The Kremlin’s narrative of Western imperialism attempting to maintain global dominance through Ukraine appears to resonate with actors who have historical experiences of Western colonialism and contemporary concerns about Western military and economic dominance [40].

The narrative simultaneously accomplishes several geopolitical objectives: it divides the international community; it positions Russia not as an aggressor state but as a defender of civilizational autonomy; and it provides ideological coherence to potentially opportunistic alignments (e.g., Russia-China, Russia-Iran, Russia-Central African Republic) by framing them as unified opposition to hegemonic Western power [21].

6.3 Accountability Deflection and Impunity

The discursive construction of “the West” as a unified adversary creates a unique condition: Russia’s actions cannot be evaluated through legal or moral frameworks that presume the possibility of reciprocal accountability. If the West is engaged in civilizational aggression, then Russian responses—however materially disproportionate—become defensive necessities rather than violations of international law [47].

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine illustrates this dynamic. Despite overwhelming evidence of Russian initiation of hostilities, violations of the Geneva Conventions, and destruction of civilian infrastructure, the Kremlin maintains the narrative of defensive response to West-

ern aggression. This narrative does not require empirical refutation of specific accusations because the entire framework of accountability is rejected: the West has no moral standing to judge Russia because the West is fundamentally predatory and morally corrupt.

This rhetorical strategy accomplishes what international law scholars term “impunity creation”: by rejecting the entire framework of reciprocal accountability and instead positioning the conflict as civilizational struggle between good and evil, Russia inoculates itself against the application of international legal standards [4].

7 Methodological Proposal: Quantitative Narrative Analysis

7.1 Objective and Approach

To move beyond qualitative rhetorical analysis toward empirical verification and quantitative measurement of the narrative patterns described above, we propose a comprehensive Natural Language Processing (NLP) project focusing on Kremlin discourse across multiple time periods and document types. The objective is to measure: the frequency and contextual embedding of “the West” (*Zapad*) in Russian state discourse; the semantic associations and thematic linkages accompanying this term; the evolution of these associations across time; and the correlation between narrative intensity and significant geopolitical events.

7.2 Data Collection and Corpus Construction

The primary corpus should encompass:

1. **Presidential Speeches and Addresses (1999–2026):** All public speeches by Vladimir Putin, available through the official Kremlin website, constituting approximately 2,000 documents.
2. **Foreign Ministry Statements (2010–2026):** Statements and formal positions issued by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available through the ministry website.
3. **State Media Archives (2010–2026):** TASS news agency, RIA Novosti, and Russia-1 television news summaries, representing the most widely consumed Russian media sources.

4. **Parliamentary Proceedings (2010–2026):** Statements by political figures in the Russian Parliament (Duma), particularly during debates concerning foreign policy.

The corpus should encompass approximately 50,000–100,000 documents in Russian, totaling several billion words, sufficient for robust statistical analysis while remaining computationally tractable [29].

7.3 Topic Modeling and Semantic Analysis

Topic modeling employing Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) should be applied to identify the primary thematic associations with the term “West” and its variants (“Western,” “Westerner,” etc.) [5]. LDA will generate a probabilistic distribution of topics associated with mentions of “the West,” revealing which themes most frequently appear in conjunction with this term.

Initial hypotheses based on qualitative analysis suggest that the following topics should predominate:

- NATO expansion and military encirclement
- Traditional values and moral decadence
- Historical grievances and imperialism
- Economic sanctions and economic warfare
- Interference in internal affairs and color revolution
- Support for Ukraine and subversion of Russian influence

Quantitative confirmation of these hypotheses, with precise measurement of topic prevalence and temporal evolution, would constitute empirical validation of the qualitative analysis presented in prior sections.

7.4 Sentiment Analysis and Trajectory Measurement

Beyond topic identification, sentiment analysis employing transformer-based language models (e.g., BERT-based Russian sentiment classifiers) should measure the emotional valence and intensity of discourse concerning “the West” [9]. Sentiment trajectories should be measured across time, allowing correlation with significant geopolitical events.

For instance, we would hypothesize:

$$S(t) = \text{Sentiment at time } t \text{ regarding “the West”} \quad (3)$$

Where $S(t)$ should show marked negativity shifts correlating with:

- NATO expansion announcements (2004, 2008, 2022)
- Economic sanctions (2014, 2022)
- Ukrainian political events (2004, 2013, 2014, 2022)
- Domestic political pressure within Russia

Temporal correlation analysis between narrative intensity and geopolitical events would test the hypothesis that narrative construction is instrumentally deployed in response to specific political circumstances rather than representing organic or ideologically consistent discourse.

7.5 Agency Attribution and Grammatical Analysis

A crucial distinction in narrative analysis concerns the attribution of agency and intentionality. Grammatical analysis should measure the frequency with which “the West” appears as the grammatical subject performing actions (particularly hostile or aggressive actions) versus appearing as the grammatical object of Russian actions [15].

The hypothesis is that “the West” will predominantly appear as an active agent (“the West encroaches,” “the West threatens,” “the West seeks dominance”) while Russia appears as a reactor or defender. This grammatical pattern would linguistically reinforce the narrative of Western aggression and Russian defensive necessity.

7.6 Named Entity Recognition and Institutional Specification

An additional methodological refinement involves Named Entity Recognition (NER) to measure the frequency with which specific Western institutions are named and differentiated versus the use of the generic category “the West.” The hypothesis is that Russian discourse will predominantly employ the undifferentiated category, with specific institutional identification (“the United States,” “NATO,” “the European Union”) used selectively and strategically rather than as a general practice.

This measurement would quantify the observation, qualitatively evident in Putin’s rhetoric, that institutional specificity is avoided in favor of generic categorization that naturalizes assumptions of unified Western agency.

8 Implications and Conclusions

8.1 Theoretical Implications

The analysis developed in this paper contributes to international relations theory in several respects. First, it demonstrates that geopolitical actors can successfully construct and deploy adversarial identities that lack formal institutional existence but possess significant performative effects. The concept of the “discursive entity” extends existing constructivist theory by identifying a specific category of actor—unified in discourse but dispersed in institutional reality—with particular strategic properties.

Second, the analysis illuminates the asymmetric information environment dynamics resulting from the confrontation between authoritarian coherence and democratic pluralism. Liberal democracies enjoy substantial structural advantages (resilience, adaptability, genuine legitimacy), yet face specific vulnerabilities in the domain of narrative construction and dissemination. Understanding these asymmetries is crucial for developing effective counter-narratives and information defense strategies.

Third, the mathematical formalization of threat perception as a function of attributed intent, assessed capability, and accountability mechanisms provides a tool for understanding why the “West” functions as such a politically potent threat concept despite possessing, from

a structural perspective, substantially different characteristics than formally identified state adversaries [7].

8.2 Policy Implications

For policymakers in liberal democracies, the analysis suggests several challenging implications. Responding to the “Western threat” narrative through factual corrections and appeals to objective reality proves less effective than might be theoretically expected. Because the narrative operates at the level of civilizational identity and moral contrast rather than specific policy claims, counter-narratives must engage at the same level of abstraction rather than attempting to refute individual factual assertions [17].

The fragmentation of Western communication, a structural feature of democratic pluralism, cannot be eliminated without eliminating the plurality that is democracy’s fundamental strength. Yet this fragmentation can be partially ameliorated through coordination mechanisms that enable more unified presentation of Western positions on critical issues, particularly those directly bearing on geopolitical security [34].

The narrative asymmetry identified in this analysis suggests that Western policy should focus less on “winning the information war” through superior factual claims and more on making the costs of aggressive Russian foreign policy sufficiently high that the narrative of perpetual Western threat becomes less politically stabilizing for the Russian regime. The accumulation of evidence of military failure, economic hardship, and international isolation may prove more persuasive in eroding the “Western threat” narrative than sophisticated counter-narrative campaigns [33].

8.3 Future Research Directions

Future research should extend this analysis in several directions:

1. **Comparative Analysis:** The same methodological approach could be applied to Chinese strategic discourse regarding “the West,” to Indian discourse regarding Pakistan, or to American Cold War discourse regarding the “Soviet Threat,” to identify whether similar narrative construction processes operate across different geopolitical

contexts [52].

2. **Reception and Efficacy Analysis:** Quantitative analysis of Russian public opinion, elite perspectives, and third-country perceptions could measure the actual political effects of the “Western threat” narrative. How persuasive is this narrative to different constituencies? How does it shape policy preferences and behavioral choices?
3. **Counter-Narrative Development:** What rhetorical and narrative strategies prove effective in challenging the “Western threat” construct? Systematic evaluation of competing counter-narratives and their effects on target audiences would provide actionable policy guidance [39].
4. **Temporal Analysis:** Sophisticated time-series analysis could examine the causal relationship between geopolitical events and narrative intensity. Does rhetoric respond to events, or does rhetoric precede and potentially causally influence events?

8.4 Conclusion

The construction and deployment of “the West” as a unified strategic adversary represents a significant innovation in contemporary geopolitical discourse. By creating a discursive entity that lacks formal institutional structure but possesses substantial performative reality, Vladimir Putin and the Russian state apparatus have generated a narrative framework that simultaneously mobilizes domestic constituencies, justifies aggressive foreign policy, and exploits the communicative vulnerabilities inherent in democratic pluralism.

The “Western threat” narrative succeeds not because it accurately reflects geopolitical reality—empirical evidence overwhelmingly contradicts Russian claims regarding Western aggression—but because it operates at a level of civilizational identity and moral contrast that is relatively immune to refutation through factual claims. By framing the conflict between Russia and the West as a struggle between spiritual and moral principles rather than a dispute over specific policy questions, the narrative enables impunity creation and accountability deflection while appealing to diverse audiences across the international system.

Understanding this narrative structure and its operational dynamics is essential for developing effective policy responses. Attempting to refute the “Western threat” narrative

through superior factual claims and logical argumentation proves insufficient; rather, responses must engage at the level of civilizational narrative and must address the underlying strategic purposes that the narrative serves. Simultaneously, Western policy must recognize and address the genuine grievances and legitimate security concerns that, while overdrawn and distorted in Russian narrative, possess some grounding in geopolitical history and current strategic realities.

The study of discursive entities and their geopolitical effects contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of how language, narrative, and identity construction interact with material geopolitical competition. As international relations becomes increasingly intertwined with information and narrative dimensions, such analysis becomes indispensable for understanding the present and anticipating future geopolitical developments.

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Appendix A: Key Terms and Definitions

Discursive Entity

A geopolitical actor that possesses significant performative effects and narrative coherence but lacks formal institutional structure, legal personality, or unified decision-making apparatus. The entity functions through language and narrative rather than through formal institutions.

Meaningful Ambiguity

Strategic vagueness in terminology that simultaneously permits broad application while evading specific accountability. Ambiguity in naming an adversary enables accusation without the requirement to identify specific decision-makers or provide evidence against identifiable institutions.

Narrative Asymmetry

Structural imbalance in communicative capacity between authoritarian systems employing unified messaging and pluralistic democracies with decentralized communication. The asymmetry arises from the temporal and coordinational dynamics of narrative construction and contestation.

Threat Perception Function

Mathematical formalization of the relationship between attributed intentionality, assessed capability, and institutional accountability in the construction of threat assessment: $T = \frac{I \cdot C}{A}$.