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Russian Statehood and the Western Strategic Narrative: Identity versus Rhetorical Coercion

Abstract. The article examines instrumental and substantive forms of borrowing from Western ideological complexes by Russian social theory during the period following the collapse of the USSR. Along with an assessment of their damaging effect, some directions for counteracting their distorting potential are proposed. The process of transferring borrowed ideological complexes is shown to involve a toolkit created under conditions of competition with the Soviet/Russian model and directly intended for expert support of this competition. It is shown that the borrowed items were directed to the value centre of the system and used for the transformation of its identity core. The instrumental nature of the applied techniques is revealed through the concept of strategic narrative as a technique for the semantic programming of political experience along with its substantive components, qualifying features and scope of action in ideological, social and managerial spaces. Common semantic complexes used to describe and self-describe Russian statehood are considered as strategic narratives. A direct dependence of the state's subjectivity on its preservation of the systemic sociolinguistic configuration that determines its identity and the ability to resist rhetorical coercion from external centres of influence is revealed. A number of directions for the protection and development of the representative power of the Russian Federation under contemporary conditions are proposed. In particular, it is shown that the preservation and protection of identity require the development of normative self-descriptions of Russian statehood in terms of its essence and meaning consolidated at the level of programme and strategic planning documents.

Keywords: state identity; strategic narrative; intellectual transplant; identity; rhetorical coercion; representative power; state sovereignty; distortion of the civilisational development of the Russian Federation

Introduction. During the 1990s, the catastrophic collapse of a historically unique social system as represented by the USSR determined the need to re-establish the Russian state in a new form and on new ideological foundations. However, the reform process did not only require a reconfiguration of the political and administrative regime along with major revisions and changes in the economic principles of distribution of public resources and goods. An even more significant need arose at a deep societal level for large-scale rethinking of the very essence of the unity embodied in the new Russian state, which manifested itself as a successor not only to the Soviet Union but also to the Russian statehood of historically more distant periods, to which at the same time it was opposed.

The situation having thus developed had the character of a deep crisis. A historical failure taking the form of a major geopolitical catastrophe made it impossible to rely on the established foundations of social solidarity and institutions of governance, which were labelled from that moment on not as “special”, “progressive” or “superior”, but as historically “erroneous” or empirically “defective”. At the same time, the monopolisation of ideological influence and the simultaneous consolidation of the functions of critical social theory exclusively for the party centre of the Soviet system precluded the possibilities for the formation of strategies for independent self-description, which would allow the preservation of the identity core of society during the period of necessary reforms.

Under the conditions of an inadequate vocabulary capable of describing the emerging social formation, as well as the need to use established terminology while simultaneously denying it confidence, the consideration of the experience of an entire historical era from the position of total repudiation became the typical form of political judgment in mass and expert discussion (see e.g.: Zubov, Salmin 1991: 42).

The supposed need to work on mistakes, to “normalise” the social structure in relation to the models of the countries that claimed to have won the Cold War as a condition for joining the world community directed the interest of public discussion to substitute descriptive and analytical strategies. In the post-Soviet situation, these almost invariably took the form of intellectual borrowings and transplants.

Under normal conditions of social development, the role of such borrowed semantic complexes is generally quite modest. Serving primarily to fill niches in areas where there is a deficit in regulatory frameworks, such strategies are primarily of utility when used in vital processes of institutional reconstruction. Even in this case, their impact can be ambivalent and often result in unpredictable negative effects (Pankevich 2014: 55-57).

Under the conditions of catastrophic breakdown following the collapse of the USSR the functional area of borrowing went far beyond the local need to fill the gaps that had arisen in the diagnosis of problems in social conditions and identification of strategic and legal solutions for their correction. Intellectual borrowings were directed directly to the value centre of the system and used to transform its identity core, comprised of key semantic complexes and principles of self-description, self-understanding and reflection. As well as examining the instrumental and substantive forms of this borrowing, the present work evaluates their effect and identifies some potential approaches for counteracting their distorting potential.

Borrowed Strategies: the Substantive Aspect. Despite the obviously low compatibility of their methodological principles, premises and axiomatics, the complex of borrowed approaches in application to Russian statehood quite quickly acquired consistent outlines. The idea of the *end of history* (Fukuyama 1992)¹, which became influential in the post-Soviet moment in the light of the apparent victory of the West in the bipolar confrontation, assumed the accession of Russian society to the basic paradigm of Western society in the form of liberal competitive market democracy as the only normative – and, in fact, the only possible – political form.

The loss of superpower status and the need to correct the uniqueness of the Russian state in its unexpected capacity

¹ Later, the creator of this idea, which quickly became a cliché, was forced to explain that the “end of history” in his understanding did not at all mean the common notion of the cessation of development in light of the final victory of the Western political form, but the final *goal* of world development itself. From our point of view, such an admission reveals to an even greater extent the ideological motivation of the entire theory (Fukuyama 2024: 18-19).

as an ordinary participant in the international community were reflected in the theories of democratic and market *transition*, which designated the final point of reforms necessary to achieve the end of local history in the course of *catch-up development*. As such, Russia's new place in the world cycle of production, distribution, and consumption was determined within the framework of a postulated centre-periphery structure of the contemporary world system. This position was predictably characterised by *(semi)peripherality*, asymmetry of participation in global market exchanges, institutional deficits, underdevelopment, and an irrational economic complex structure, which included the stigma of the *resource curse*.

Over time, the slow progress of Russian society towards the *end of history* and its inability to reproduce the normative form were explained within the framework of the idea of the *hybrid* nature of the political system and its economic complex. According to this understanding, the colossal stress of dependence on the results of previous development (path-dependence) inevitably resulted in the distorted nature of institutions, which everywhere revealed their otherness in relation to Western norms: the distribution of goods in the economy, the archaism of the social structure, the discrepancy between legislative norms and practice, the intensity of informal practices and the significance of informal institutions.

It is especially necessary to point out the damaging nature of the transfer from Western discourse of ideas about the Russian state as a *failed empire*, whose unity collapsed under the pressure of an anti-colonial movement (Bovdunov 2022). In relation to the USSR, this negatively charged trope has long been firmly rooted in Western ideological discourse. At the same time, in its instrumental capacity, it obviously relied on examples of Soviet criticism of the imperial experience of Russian statehood before the 1917 revolution, which were aimed at dismantling Tsarist Russia (Tikhonov 2024). The further unification of this part of the self-description of Russian pre-revolutionary reality with the political priorities of the bipolar confrontation created the ground for defining the USSR as an empire not only in the sense of its intensive influence on a number of states in the foreign policy domain, but also in the domestic space, i.e., as an order based on the colonisation, subordination and exploitation of internal space.

The application of this semantic complex to the emerging new Russian statehood opened up unexpected opportunities for actions leading to a transformation of its identity core. Statements about the subordination and exploitation of the peoples of the country directly reinforced the potential for separation of national peripheries and subsequent ruptures of the territorial integrity of the nation state.

No less negative a charge was possessed by the complex of ideas associated with the colonialist exploitation by the state of the entire space and population comprising its social and ethnic majority (Fadeicheva 2007). The resulting idea of a loose formation that arose in the process of *internal colonisation* (Etkind 2013²) dealt tangible blows to the legitimacy of the Russian model of development and governance. The practical application of this part of the corresponding narrative was fully demonstrated during the “parade of sovereignties” that the country experienced in the 1990s, whose consequences are still being felt today. Thus, the results of thirty years of spatial and social development of the country are described in ideologically loaded terms of colonisation/decolonisation of individual regions and territories (Shabaev 2022).

Finally, the combination of the idea of the rooted imperial nature of the modern Russian state with the assertion of its peripherality as a systemic quality (Kagarlitsky 2009³) created opportunities for challenging the country’s position across the broadest spectrum of its actions in the international context.

In the combination of various approaches to the description of the new Russian identity by foreign researchers and its self-description by a number of Russian authors can be discerned a general assumption of the insurmountable defectiveness and dead-end of the domestic development model. Ultimately, this view encouraged Russian sociologists to take the next step and begin to discuss the country in terms of the kind of calamitous decline that falls into the category of failed states.

Strategic Narrative as a Transformed Social Theory. Today, the massively damaging effect of this kind of imposed conception is often explained by the fact that the categorical apparatus used is

² Included in the register of foreign agents.

³ Included in the register of foreign agents.

closely connected primarily with the European experience of creating a standard model of social life, which is however clearly inapplicable in a huge number of cases in regions outside the European civilisational core. Therefore, it would be fair to criticise the fact that the “Western mainstream” is burdened with ideological connotations and thus represents an inadequate analytical tool due to its elevation of the exception represented by the evolution of states in Europe and the civilisational “West” into the rule (Martyanov 2021).

Also justified is the more recent criticism associated with the revelation of the incompleteness, bias and idealised nature of descriptions of the Western model, the purity of which is called into question in light of the inclusions that are constantly discovered in its composition that contradict the liberal / democratic ideal – the increasing role of state regulation in economic activity, the role of informal elite alliances and transfer of power only within their framework of nepotism, etc. (Martyanov, Rudenko 2022).

However, it seems to us that the broader problem consists not only in the use of a rather unsuccessful, ideologically loaded and reality-divergent categorical apparatus for distorting description and self-description based on borrowed approaches. Much more importantly, the toolkit used was one that was created in the explicit context of Western competition with the Soviet/Russian model, which was directly intended as a means to expertly maintain this competition.

Despite the comparatively low intensity of the military-force agenda, the Cold War was nevertheless by its nature a state of active struggle, in which the humanitarian component acquired a fundamental significance. The importance of rooting the necessary interpretation of the outcome of the confrontation by the winner – thus considered fair and final – within the framework of the Western paradigm is fully realised and expressed more than explicitly: “For war’s outcome to have purchase on people, they need to accept it’s meaning; if they do not, they may well see things differently” (Simpson 2012: 31); “most of the time victories are won when “those other actors in war” are brought to subscribe to a specific interpretation of events taking place on the physical battlefield” (De Graaf et al. 2015: 5). Even more desirable is the consolidation of such an interpretation at the level of the constitutional and legal complex of the target states (Carrington 2007).

Under the prevailing conditions, the instrument for the formation of a new identitarian core of the Russian polity, in essence, became not the analytical aspect of explanatory theories, but only their ideological and evaluative component. As a result, questions of interpreting the identity of Russian statehood and its substantive content were resolved using formative *strategic narratives*, which have their own performative capacity – and which, in relation to the situation under consideration, merely imitate the form of scientifically based approaches developed within the framework of respectable social theories.

Therefore, an attempt to scientifically substantiate their inconsistency as certain *theories* of social development is in a certain sense futile since the nature of the object of criticism itself is initially different.

The task of social theory is to analyse causality and explain patterns, while the management function of strategic narrative is “the semantic programming of political experience and (the production of) an interconnected complex of mutual expectations... through symbolisation, typification of political events in space and time” (Zavershinskiy 2019: 102). This tool forms a semantic complex that can be used to structure the response to developing events, determine ways of formulating problems and propose countermeasures (Freedman 2006: 22).

The difference between a strategic narrative and a social theory lies in its focus on a specific outcome of the process that it directs. It is the end point of the entire movement of a strategic narrative that gives meaning to all parts of its meaningful whole (Roberts 2006: 712). The semantic framework that emerges during the unfolding of such a narrative holds together a very disparate mix of approaches that permit the creation of transgressions between their semantic components.

In fact, the correlation, consistency and semantic unity of the fundamental premises for strategic narrative do not have the same meaning as they have in social theory in its scientific sense. Indeed, this instrument has a directly opposite aim: to facilitate the implementation of individual committed political initiatives, comprising actions that have a pre-programmed result. Thus, its function consists precisely in linking together disparate events and tendencies and subordinating them to an instrumentally determined

causality in an interpretative structure, with the help of which it is possible to give an event or process the desired social meaning.

Rhetorical Coercion: External Management of Identity.

The main semantic complexes proposed and borrowed for the conceptualisation of Russian statehood in a crisis situation and the search for ways to overcome it have all the signs of being oriented toward the creation of certain significant effects of a practical nature. In the absence of sufficient internal resources for creating theories of social development, ideas crystallised in the process of intellectual evolution according to the traditions, systems of reference, and values of the West, were introduced into the core of the Russian state's self-understanding. For this reason, they can be understood as a tool for serving hegemonic interests.

The fine line between explanatory political theory and formative strategic narrative turns out to be fundamental. Here, we are talking not just about the formation of a picture of the country's civilisational development that is accidentally or intentionally distorted in the abstract space of media communications. Rather, it directly influences the distribution of such an important resource as prestige to further program a significant number of the practical steps supposedly necessary to correct situations interpreted as deviations from the standard form. And this distorted picture *de facto* contributes to changes in the relative political weight of actors competing in the global space in terms of their subordination.

It is obvious that the rooting of imposed self-descriptions in public consciousness leads to the loss of sovereign control over what can be called nominative power – the power of self-determination. This organisational deficit further leads to the impossibility of independently forming the identity of the state and society, leading to an inevitable degradation of a significant part of the communication resource of the polity consisting in the ability to transmit its own semantic complexes and values as a projection of influence in the external environment.

This situation has critical consequences for the definition of identity not only in the internal space, but also for the view of it from the outside. Moreover, having become an independent part of the internal Russian public discussion and being subsequently returned to the global ideological space already as self-descriptions

and self-reflection, the borrowed concepts appear as representations of the true endogenous self-perception and self-understanding of the country.

Thus, the narrative of peripherality, which was returned to the global communications system as characterising the Russian role, indicates that the technological and social underdevelopment of the country is not evidence of its specific state in a specific period, but an integral essence of the system. The accepted narrative of transition takes on the character of a signal of readiness for targeted reforms oriented toward a given model; moreover, since this direction of development ultimately becomes the only possible one, the apparent need for external organisational consulting arises. The functionality of the problematic of hybridity is determined by the recording of the finality of failure in moving towards the norm and the inevitability of the defective nature of the system of social relations, consequently serving as proof of the justice of the peripheral position assigned to the polity in the global distribution of political and economic power, labour, resources and goods. Along with the quality of peripherality, the attribution to Russian polity of the quality of imperialism ensures its delegitimation within the framework of the modern world system according to the principle of sovereign equality of states and creates the idea of a participant in the international community acting beyond its real status and weight in international relations. Thus its leadership potential also turns out to be blocked in light of the ascribed otherness of the value foundations and practices, which also, according to this optics, contradict the generally significant principles of a responsible and socially controlled government apparatus of the modern state.

Used together, especially when widely circulated in public debate within the country, transferred to the mass media and into the process of creating works of mass culture, the twin narratives of peripherality and imperialism create the idea of a weak participant in the international community, who needs guardianship, patronage, guiding organisational assistance, and (if necessary) discipline and coercion.

The resulting effect strongly resembles one that has been referred in Western discourses as *rhetorical coercion*. This phenomenon arises as a result of communication asymmetry, when a domi-

nant actor is able to impose on the opponent a position and actions that would otherwise be rejected (Krebs, Jackson 2007: 36). In such a situation, representative power and coercion are transformed into *meta-power* consisting in the ability of dominant actors to reconfigure, form or recreate the identity of target communities (Singh 2012: 472).

However, in the case of conformist borrowing, such coercion can be considered as both legitimate, since it presumably pursues the bona fide goals of assistance and providing the reform process with superior expert knowledge and practical experience, and voluntary, since the subordinate actor independently and proactively presents itself as a subject who is interested in such forms of interaction.

Thus, for example, the recognition of the value and institutional imperfection of the human rights protection system in the emerging Russian state – and, at the same time, the superior prestige of the Western model of democracy and human rights protection – predetermined the transfer of a significant part of the functions of justice and conflict resolution outside the legal system of the Russian Federation to the European Court of Human Rights. The subordination of the country's legal system to an external arbitrator already at the constitutional level turned out to have significant consequences.

The implementation of such subordination simultaneously created a new significant channel for further export and integration into the legal system of norms of external genesis to create conditions for the emergence of high-profile situations that frequently caused irreparable reputational and material damage. Correcting this situation required constitutional reform that strengthened the protective mechanisms against attempts at external regulation. Moreover, a number of outstanding situations of this kind still remain in need of correction.

Strategic Narrative: Not Just Rhetoric. In assessing the depth of its impact on target societies, it is also important to understand that a strategic narrative need not solely be intended to shape a particular opinion or perception of a situation. As an integrator of discursive coalitions comprising politically and media-active groups, it also becomes an instrument for directly modifying the social structure (Pankevich 2023). A special role in such

processes of intellectual export-import is played by the epistemic communities that emerge in the structure of the target society that orient themselves towards a certain ideological complex.

This is precisely why the form of external ideological influence through a non-standard channel that enjoyed the highest public prestige in the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods – that is to say, scientific discussion – should not be used to mask the strategic nature of the semantic complexes employed. In the case under consideration, we should not speak only of those inevitable distortions and errors in understanding social development that are associated with the impossibility of ensuring the absolute objectivity of the most conscientious researcher of social relations and his or her dependence on value and ideological preferences conditioned by socialisation within a certain value paradigm. It is also important that the operational autonomy inherent in the scientific sphere in putting forward and substantiating certain hypotheses be understood as serving to enhance the status and practical effectiveness of such influence. The apparent demand for imported ideas and their wide circulation in the scientific and then in the media space contributed to the perception of the main theses as Russian social consensus.

At the same time, the localisation of scientific activity in the structure of public relations provided direct access to the transmission of ideas to centres for the development of social development strategies and the adoption of specific political decisions. The feedback that arises in the structure of the media environment is also obvious: the interests and strategies of certain players who are dismantling the management system and carrying out the removal of certain power functions outside the state were legitimised from the positions of “advanced social theories”.

Thirty years of experience in statecraft following the collapse of the USSR clearly demonstrates that the preservation of the representative power of the state, which is associated with the stability of ideas about itself, its essence and nature, is of critical importance. It is localised “above” and “beyond” all the specific roles and functions, states and statuses that may be inherent or, for various reasons, prescribed to the polity in specific historical circumstances. The subjectivity of the state directly depends on the preservation of the configuration of sociolinguistic systems that determine its identity (Mattern 2005: 97). Therefore, control over such an important iden-

tity resource as self-understanding and self-description can be confidently classified as a mandatory component of societal security.

Conclusion. Under contemporaneous conditions, the ability to resist rhetorical coercion is visibly complicated by the formation of new media landscapes that open up prospects for the emergence of new types of actors capable of exerting pressure on the substantive components of state identity. These involve decentralised transnational politically motivated communities that were virtually unknown at the time of the collapse of the Soviet system, which typically operate across state borders. Today, the activism of such extraterritorial communities is extremely significant due to its creation of new meanings, alternative ideologies, methods and channels for introducing ideas into public discussion.

At the same time, the experience of the post-Soviet period is valuable due to its direct revelation of the factors leading to an acute lack of independent value foundations and semantic complexes capable of protecting the identarian core of society from a large-scale injection of semantic programming due to external evaluative and politically motivated strategic narratives. Despite the importance of control over the spiritual and value space of the country, the monopolisation of the ideological function and its merging with the function of developing a critical social theory to close off public discussion carries with it the obvious risks of a need to turn to substitute semantic complexes. Many, if not most, of them eventually reveal their ideological and instrumental charge.

The preservation and protection of identity requires the development of normative self-descriptions of Russian statehood in terms of its essence, meaning, and identity. By relying on such self-descriptions, it will become possible to create the necessary reserve of stability and predictability of value orientations whether in the foreign or domestic political spaces. Such semantic complexes should be developed and consolidated within the framework of the adoption of strategic planning documents to reflect both the historically revealed character of Russian identity and future prospects for its development.

This work has already begun – its results are enshrined, for example, in the framework of the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, and the Concept of the State Language Policy. Its

continuation may be associated both with the development of new tools and concepts of strategic planning, as well as with the enrichment of existing concepts having new normative content.

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