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Mario Baumann holds an MLitt in International Security Studies from the University of St Andrews. He is currently reading for his PhD at the University of Kent’s Brussels School of International Studies. In his research, he focusses on the interaction of interpretations in Russia and the European Union. His wider interests include Discourse Analysis, Poststructuralism, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

## **‘Propaganda Fights’ and ‘Disinformation Campaigns’: The Discourse on Information Warfare in Russia-West Relations**

**Abstract:** This article scrutinizes the role of discourses on the manipulative use of information for Russia-West relations. Discourses on so-called information warfare have gained prevalence in the public and political debate both in the West and in Russia. Applying a poststructuralist framework, the comparative analysis discusses how these discourses work respectively in each country, how they interact, and what this interaction implies for Russia-West relations. While the contemporary discourses facilitate a confrontational stance of both Russia and the West towards the respective Other, it is argued, first, that these dispositions are malleable. On the long run, Russia-West relations are thus not condemned to remain hostile. Secondly, both sides still speak to some extent the same language. However, if the current cool down prevails, this common discursive ground may fade and give way to more fundamental confrontational stances. Finally, by revealing each other’s contingency, discourses in both countries make it appear less natural which interpretation is “true” or “right”.

**Keywords:** Discourse Analysis, Poststructuralism, Comparative Research, Russia-West Relations, Information Warfare, Identity

Mutual accusations revolving around notions of “propaganda” and “disinformation” increasingly pervade the public and political debates both in Western and Russian societies. “Information warfare” has become a paradigmatic catchword. Based on these observations, this article seeks to explore the role, these discourses on information warfare in Russia and the West play for Russia-West relations. It argues that both discourses facilitate confrontational rhetoric by creating a hostile ‘Other’. However, the analysis shows that, first, these hostile representations are relatively malleable and, second, both (discursive) subjects still speak to some extent the same language when using entrenched liberal ideals as reference points. Thus, on the longer run, Russia-West relations are not doomed to remain hostile. Should the current cool down of relations persist, however, it is likely that the subjects’ confrontational stances become more fundamental.

Since the conflict in Eastern Ukraine started in 2014, the discourse on information warfare increasingly gained prevalence. Manipulative use of information has been included in

fundamental strategic documents of Russia (Galeotti, 2016; Schneider, 2015), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (NATO, 2018), and the European Union (EU) (EPRS, 2015). Beyond the Ukrainian conflict, elections among others in the United States (2016), France (2017) and Germany (2017) have added to the discourses' pervasiveness.

This article follows Campbell (2013) in his claim that '[every] attempt to make sense of the world and to represent it is always an act of interpretation' (p. 223). It thus asserts that for a thorough understanding of Russia-West relations, it is necessary to profoundly examine how Russia and the West interpret their relations and what this interpretation implies. Consequently, this article employs a poststructuralist lens, focussing on how interpretations come into being through discourse. This approach seems pertinent to address the ongoing tensions in Russia-West relations with 'widely diverging perceptions and narratives of the current crisis on either side' (Casier, 2016, p. 377).<sup>1</sup>

To date, no study of the discourse on information warfare or its implications for Russia-West relations exists. This article aims to fill this lacuna with a thorough empirical investigation into Russian and German media publications since the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. On the conceptual level, by juxtaposing discursive structures in Russia and the West, the article aims at providing an instructive example of comparative Discourse Analysis. It breaks through the 'narrow focus on second-image accounts' many constructivist studies apply (Morozov, 2015, p. 45) and seeks to position the EU's and Russia's Selves within a wider international discursive encounter. It thereby offers a nuanced theoretical understanding of the (discursive) interaction of identities between Russia and the West – an area that has so far remained understudied.

The analysis sets off with outlining the theoretical groundwork, touching in particular upon the notions of discursive subject-positions and discursive interaction. On this basis, section two introduces a research design for comparative Discourse Analysis. The following two sections

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<sup>1</sup> The deterioration of Russia-West relations has been subject to a vast array of studies employing different approaches. Handy overviews offer Forsberg (2018) and Götz & Merlen (2019).

then present the empirical findings in the form of prevalent themes in Russian and Western discourse. These are then discussed analytically, delving into questions of identity construction, genealogy and discursive struggle.

### **Accessing Interpretation through a poststructuralist Framework**

The point of departure is the assumption that in order to gauge the role of any given discourse for any (political) practice, it is fundamental to understand how a subject relates to the world by examining its position within the structure of meaning created by this discourse. Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical edifice (1985) constitutes a widely recognised coherent and comprehensive poststructuralist theory of discourse (Torfing, 2005, p. 9). This section will first introduce their notion of *discourse* to form a theoretical fundament. It then presents the concept of *discursive subject-position* as an analytical tool for capturing how an actor relates to, how they interpret the world and *Others*. Since this article aims at exceeding a mere investigation of static discourses, in a third step dynamic interaction and change of discourses will be discussed together with its implications for politics.

Discourse, in poststructuralist thought, is key to understand how meaning is produced (Campbell, 2013, p. 234). Laclau and Mouffe reaffirm the poststructuralist understanding of discourses as relational systems of signification that has been indebted to Derrida (Torfing, 2005, p. 14). Derrida developed Saussurian structuralism which postulates that meaning attached to words is not inherent to them but the result of the relational structure of language (Weber, 1987; Wæver, 2002). Having shown that meaning is constantly differing and deferring, Derrida examined how discourses stabilise it (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010 p. 64). He recognised that Western thinking is structured in terms of mutually defining, hierarchically

organised binary oppositions. Through positively linking signs to other signs and negatively differentiating them from others, discourses aim to fix meaning around a given linguistic structure. However, meaning can never ultimately be pinned down (Hansen, 2006, pp. 17-18). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) contend: ‘neither absolute fixity nor absolute non-fixity is possible’ (p. 111).

Showing that binary oppositions can be deconstructed, Derrida claims that their hierarchical relation can ultimately not be maintained (Torfing, 2005, pp. 11-12). This leads to what Torfing (1999) calls the ‘undecidability’ of meaning (pp. 95-96). Lacking any pre-given determinacy, any structuring is possible. Also, any structuring thus necessarily happens at the expense of alternatives and ‘involves [discursive] practices that silence or marginalise those alternatives’ (Doty, 1997, p. 378). One set of meaning is therefore institutionalised through exclusionary practices that repress various other possibilities (Laclau, 1990, p. 34). Foucault (1987) aptly proclaims: ‘[we] must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them’ (p. 67). Discourses are therefore the product of *contingent* – possible but not necessary – articulations (Joergensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 25).

Subjects, through discourse, are assigned a certain *subject-position* that defines their identity, their *Self*, in relation to others (Weldes, 1996, p. 287; cf. Doty, 1997). Understanding the character of this discursively constructed identity is paramount to understanding the position from which a subject interprets the world. Like any discursive structure, identity is established relationally through processes of linking and differentiation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 127-134). The relational constitution of identities thus implies a relationship between a *Self* and an *Other* (Fierke, 2015, pp. 81-82).

The quality of these relations between *Self* and *Other* has been subject to a rich discussion (e.g. Connolly 2002; Doty, 1996; Rumelili, 2004; Wæver, 1996). In his landmark study *Writing Security* (1992), Campbell points to the fundamental role of danger and threat in differentiating

an Other from the Self. Danger and threat, according to him, are no objective conditions. They are subjective interpretations, ‘the consequence of a calculation [...] which objectifies events, disciplines relations, and sequesters an ideal of the identity of the people said to be at risk’ (p. 3). Consequently, in order to secure the boundaries of its identity, the state engages in representations of danger to demarcate an orderly inside from a disorderly threatening outside. Importantly, Campbell notes that the demarcation of an inside and an outside is not confined to territorial terms. ‘Threats to identity’, that is, dissident positions that do not comply with the discursively constructed Self, can be exiled to the outside, turning them into *internal Others* through representations of danger (pp. 70-71).

Hansen (2006) contests Campbell’s concept of the threatening *radical Other*. She argues that to ‘define a priori that radical forms of identity construction would be the only form of identity construction within foreign policy discourse would result in an unnecessary theoretical and empirical limitation’ (p. 36). She advocates instead for a three-dimensional analytical approach to map the discursive construction of identities: spatial, temporal, and ethical constructions (pp. 41-48). The spatial dimension captures the construction of boundaries. Space is thereby not only to be understood as territory but rather as an abstract realm. It therefore refers to the exclusion of Others from a distinct political space. Self/Other relations with a temporal dimension are characterised by notions of progress or stasis. Others can be represented as able or unable to develop, transform, change or stagnate. Finally, ethical constructions comprise representations that invoke references to ethics, responsibility or morality. Taken together, Campbell’s radical Other and Hansen’s three dimensions constitute apt analytical lenses through which discourses can be analysed and discursive subject-positions therein located.

Conceptualising change of discursive structures facilitates an assessment of the dynamic interaction of discourses and the way this interaction affects how subjects relate to the world. Because of their contingent – possible but not necessary – character and the fact that discourses

are never absolutely fixed, there is always room for a given structure of meaning to be challenged by its alternatives (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 29). All discourses ‘as being unstable grids [require] work to “articulate” and “rearticulate” their knowledges and identities [...] making discourse changeable and in fact historically contingent’ (Milliken, 1999, p. 230). No discourse is ever produced irrevocably. Articulations either reproduce or challenge a given discourse (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 29). The reaffirmation or challenging of a given discourse can be conceptualised as political *struggles* among competing discourses to dominate (Torfing, 1999, pp. 92-93).

In Laclau’s and Mouffe’s framework, the question of the extent to which discourses – and therefore the meanings and identities that are constructed through them – are changeable is one of sedimentation. In principle, no discourse is immune to variation. Some, however, are established – or sedimented – to such an extent that their contingent character is masked. These discourses appear natural and *objective* (Laclau, 1990, p. 34). Sedimentation – or objectivity – is thus a relatively stabilised structure of meaning. Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) assert that: ‘discourses have [...] a weightiness and an inertia in which we are more or less caught up, and there is at all times a vast area of objectivity which is hard to think beyond’ (p. 38). Thus, the more sedimented discourses are, the more natural they appear, and the harder they are to challenge.

Wæver (2002, 2005) maintains that discursive struggle can take place on different levels of sedimentation or objectivity. He contends that even competing discourses, while articulating different interpretations of the world (for example by positing different narratives on the conflict in Ukraine), share essential understandings (for example the notion of the “state”) in more deeply sedimented discursive levels. Since different levels of sedimentation imply more or less inert discursive structures, it is likely that changes appear first at the surface where discourses are not yet stabilised, that is where the contingent character of discourse is most apparent. Ultimately, however, also the most sedimented (objective) discursive structures are

not immune to change. When changes at the “surface level” become increasingly inconsistent with what seemed to be natural or objective, these sedimented structures might come under pressure to adapt. (Wæver, 2002, pp. 31-32; cf. Diez, 2001).

Based on this layered approach to discursive change, Wæver offers a conceptual framework to grasp how discursive structures leave room for agency and possible policy outcomes. In order to gauge longer-term foreign policy, one must look at what policies the more sedimented discourses facilitate or preclude. (Inert) discursive structures determine what can be said and what not, and policy-makers always have to justify their policies reasonably within the dominant domestic discourses (Wæver, 2002, pp. 27-29). A thorough examination of these discursive structures can thus reveal what policies are in principle possible within the limits of the discourse (Wæver, 2002, p. 30; cf. Milliken, 1999).

## **Methodology and Research Design**

The research design for this Discourse Analysis takes Hansen’s (2006) model (pp. 65-82) as a guiding structure. As major parameters she takes into account the specific issue a discourse evolves around, the number of Selves to be considered, the time frame(s) under study, and the scope of discourse. In the following, these four parameters will be defined and operationalised for the purpose of studying the representation of Russia and the West respectively in each other’s discourse on information warfare.

The catchword “information warfare” represents the wider issue of this discourse. More precisely, the issue of analysis can be described as the Russian and Western discourses on the purposeful manipulation of information, or in other words, ‘the use of biased and deceptive information as a strategic communication tool’ (EPRS, 2015).

For the analysis of debates on information warfare in Russia and the West, both can be considered as two distinct Selves within their respective discourse. Both historically constitute important reference points for the respective other's discursive identity construction (cf. Heller, 2010; Morozov, 2003; Neumann, 1996; 1997; 1999; 2016). '[Studying] the discourses of both Self and Other' in such a comparative design, according to Hansen (2006), 'is significant in that it provides knowledge of the discursive and political room of maneuver of foreign policy issues' (p. 68). Scrutinising how Russia is represented in the West and how the West is represented in Russia thus offers valuable insights that allow for inferences on intersubjective dynamics that go beyond one-dimensional studies focussing solely on one side's identity.

"The West", however constitutes a concept too vague and divers to be reasonably scrutinised here as a whole. The closer association of "the West" with Western Europe in post-Soviet Russian discourses (Hopf, 2002, pp. 169-170) suggests a focus on this region. Discourses on Russia, however, vary extraordinarily between European states. Germany lends itself here as a case study representing the European discourse. On the spectrum of EU member states' positions, Germany takes a rather balanced position between the extremes of firm anti-Russian attitudes, articulated for example by Poland, and pro-Russian ones, as represented by Hungary (cf. Siddi, 2018). Also, Germany's unprecedented political weight in the formulation of the EU's Russia policy (Meister, 2019; Trenin, 2013) makes the country's discourse highly relevant for the study of EU-Russia relations.

Commonly seen as a major turning point for contemporary Russia-West relations, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 offers a temporal demarcation for the analysis. A rigorous examination of primary sources forms the fundament of a profound analysis of discourse. Therefore, Russian and German media were reviewed, understanding the media as a major arena of the wider foreign policy debate (Hansen, 2006, p. 54).

The analysis is based on articles, published online in two major national daily newspapers respectively. Circulation figures, accessibility to articles, and broader political representation informed the choice of newspapers.

For Germany, “Bild” and “Süddeutsche Zeitung” (SZ) have been selected. These constitute the two daily newspapers with the largest circulation figures. The political outlook of Bild, a ‘prototype for tabloid journalism in Germany’ (Klein, 1998, p. 79), is right/conservative. SZ is a centre/left quality newspaper, primarily addressing readers with a higher educational and financial background (SZ, 2017). Taken together, Bild and SZ cover a broad political spectrum and an extensive readership in Germany.

For the Russian case, “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” (RG) and “Kommersant” have been chosen. The daily publication with the highest circulation in Russia is the pro-governmental tabloid “Komsomolskaya Pravda”. Since access to its online archive is limited, RG was chosen instead. Published by the Russian government, RG has a similar political outlook (Hinck, Kluver & Cooley, 2018, p. 26). The paper counts among Russia’s most popular daily publications (Lipman, 2017, p. 15). Kommersant has been described as ‘analogue of the Western quality press’ (Poberezhskaya, 2016, p. 100). It has a liberal outlook and is characterised as ‘neutral’ (Hinck et al., 2018, p. 26). These publications thus represent two influential perspectives in the Russian media landscape.

Articles were gathered from two one-year periods, February 2014 to January 2015, and January to December 2017. While the former constitutes the period during and after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the latter covers the time after the US presidential election in November 2016 and during the German federal election in September 2017. It is assumed that these periods were especially relevant for the contemporary discourse on information warfare. To reduce the number of articles to a manageable size, only uneven months were considered.

The analysed articles are the outcome of a keyword-search for each newspaper. In order to detect articles that feed into the discourse on information warfare, ‘propaganda’

(‘Propaganda’/’Пропаганда’) and ‘disinformation’ (‘Desinformation’/’Дезинформация’) were chosen. These terms are central to the issue of manipulative use of information (EPRS, 2015; NED, 2017), also in the Russian notion (Alekseyeva, 2016). With unrelated articles and duplications removed, a total of 130 (Germany) and 59 (Russia) articles were considered for analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Each article was screened for relevant passages on the use of biased and deceptive information that carry a representation of Russia or the West respectively. This repeated process of rereading led into an identification of a number of prevalent themes that characterise this representation. While allocating relevant passages to themes, frequency of occurrence, wording, and the two time periods under study were considered in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their composition, temporal development, and prevalence by newspaper. All quotes and referenced terms have been translated by the author. The following two sections present the empirical findings.

### **The contemporary Discourse on Information Warfare in the West**

The keyword-search for SZ/Bild (Russland AND Desinformation, Russland AND Propaganda) resulted in 31/29 articles in the first and 34/36 articles in the second period. On this basis, nine themes were identified that characterise the representation of Russia within the contemporary German media-discourse on information warfare:

- i) **Russia as offensive threat:** A major theme is the construction of Russia as a “threat”. Represented as offensive assailant that threatens a defensive West, Russia

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<sup>2</sup> See Annex 1 for all primary sources analysed.

is termed an “aggressor”, fuelling a war through propaganda. In this ‘propaganda war against the West’ (BILD, 2014, November 4), Russia is attacking democracy and the current world order by manipulating elections and public opinion. It is feared that “we” are about to lose this information war. Therefore, NATO and the EU must increase their defensive capabilities in response to Russian “hybrid warfare” and “disinformation”. One subtheme, mainly referring to Ukraine and frequent in the first period, is a Russia that treats neighbouring states as objects, thus denies agency.

- ii) **Russia causes disorder:** In 2014/15, Russia is represented as deliberately using propaganda and disinformation to destabilise Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s lies to preclude normality and order as well as to produce chaos. Russia’s goal is to create a zone of disorder. Similarly, this theme came up in 2017. One title reads ‘main goal chaos’ (SZ, 2017, November 2), and EU-experts are quoted saying that ‘[the] goal is not to convince the audience of one standpoint but to cause confusion’ (SZ, 2017, January 24). A subtheme that came up in 2017 is Russia aiming to destabilise and split up Western societies.
- iii) **Russia represents untruth:** Russia is represented as a liar, impersonated untruth, and manipulator. Disinformation and manipulation are inherent to Russian state practices. Disinformation and manipulation are carried out with the help of state and state-controlled media, intelligence services, international PR-agencies and companies. Especially Russian action in Ukraine is characterised by dishonesty and propaganda, but Russia is also accused of distorting the situation in Syria.
- iv) **Russia is acting immorally:** Russian action is frequently represented as immoral and bad. Being an underlying part of the whole discourse, this moral judgement

finds expression in various articulations. Russian methods are represented as “brazen”, “perfidious”, “dishonest” and ‘endangering the peaceful coexistence of people’ (BILD, 2017, March 8). The war in Ukraine is fuelled by “unleashed propaganda” and “dishonesty”. Putin’s propaganda is opportunistic, legitimates “ruthlessness” and “impertinence”, and aims at destroying faith in truth. Not even the crash of flight MH17, a “tragedy”, ‘a catastrophe with 298 innocent victims’, can change Putin’s mind (SZ, 2014, July 30).

- v) **Russia is irrational:** This representation was identified only in the first period and mainly in SZ. Putin reacts in an “irrational” way to defeats. The Russian perspective is paranoid and fails to fully understand the West. Also, consumers of “absurd” and “bizarre” propaganda are represented as being unable to judge objectively what is true and false. The Russian perception of the Ukrainian crisis is “schizophrenic”. ‘Like their President, many Russians live in their own reality’, ‘a different reality than people in other European countries’ (SZ, 2014, July 30).
  
- vi) **Russia the autocracy:** Russia is regularly and explicitly associated with authoritarianism and contrasted to democracy. One article reads: ‘[Putin’s] notion of governance is incompatible with Western ideas of democracy and the rule of law. These systems are antipodean’ (SZ, 2014, November 28). Putin governs autocratically and fears democracy and freedom. Russia’s information policy is compared to China and Putin is listed as “villain” together with Kim Jong-un, Rodrigo Duterte and others. Russian interference in elections are articulated as an attack on the West and the what is the “core of democracy”.

- vii) No monolithic Russia:** As an overall feature of this discourse, it has been noticed that Russia is usually not represented as a monolithic Other. Instead, a line is drawn between Putin/Kremlin/Moscow, the Russian population, and independent media. The population is depicted as victim of anti-Western propaganda and political pressure; Russians are “incited” and subject to “brainwashing”. Independent media, on the other hand, are represented positively, fighting for a good cause against a repressive Russian state.
- viii) Russia’s “submarines” in the West:** A theme that strongly increased in the second period covers Russian “allies” in the West. RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, two Russian media outlets abroad, are mentioned frequently. Moreover, Russia is linked to anti-Western populists in Europe as having close ties or supporting them through information campaigns and funds. One exemplary article represents some German Left Party deputies as serving Russian propaganda: ‘Putin’s submarine in the German parliament’ (SZ, 2014, March 18). Russia, however, is depicted to be opportunistic, indifferent to a party’s political ideology as long as it destabilises the West.
- ix) Soviet Past:** References to the Cold War have been a theme, however less frequent. Putin repeats the Soviet Union’s mistake to confront the West over great power status. Bild and SZ accuse Russia of using Cold War methods and “Cold War” is invoked for describing Russian-Ukrainian disputes.

## **The contemporary Discourse on Information Warfare in Russia**

For Kommersant/RG, the keyword-search (Запад AND Дезинформация, Запад AND Пропаганда) resulted in 9/26 articles for the first period in 2014/15 and 5/19 articles in the second period covering 2017. The Discourse Analysis based on these sets revealed nine themes that define the representation of the West within the Russian media discourse<sup>3</sup> on information warfare:

- i) **The West as offensive opponent:** The West is frequently depicted as offensive opponent who aims at pushing through its interests and keeping Russia small to maintain its global domination. This happens through ‘the internet and social networks, TV, all kinds of media’ (RG, 2014, July 16), by means of “colour revolutions” and with the help of the ‘massively subsidised transnational NGO cohort’ (RG, 2014, November 11). “Western opponents” and “anti-Russian forces” wage an “information war” against Russia using “anti-Russian propaganda”. Through manipulation and discreditation, the West suppresses Russian influence and seeks to secure its dominating role in the international arena.
  
- ii) **The West causes disorder:** The representation of the West as provoking disorder has not been very dominant, yet it was present in RG especially with regard to the events in Ukraine. With its actions, the West has fuelled the crisis in Ukraine where the “legitimate”, “lawful” government of Victor Yanukovich was overthrown in chaos.

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<sup>3</sup> The empirical findings for Russia are primarily representative of the RG sample. Given the big portion of Kommersant articles that do not correspond to RG articles, it cannot be claimed that both outlets articulate a very similar representation of the West. However, no coherent representation was identified within Kommersant articles which often included different perspectives.

- iii) Western propaganda distorts truth:** The West is regularly presented as drawing a wrong picture of or not understanding Russia. It is stated that ‘[since] 2013, the propaganda against Russia became total: positive or simply correct news on Russia were virtually not transmitted’ (RG, 2017, January 15). Especially the Western version of what happens in Ukraine is incorrect and distorted by propaganda. Furthermore, demonising the Soviet Union, the West and Ukraine propagate a wrong interpretation of history.
- iv) The West is immoral:** While no clear moral judgment could be identified within Kommersant articles, Western actions and “propaganda” are presented as “immoral”, “insane”, against “the well-being of the people”, or “hysterical” in RG. Russia, on the other hand adheres better to ‘ethical norms [...], manners, historical knowledge and political wisdom’ (RG, 2014, November 11). One of two subthemes is the representation of the West as violator of international law. Another subtheme represents the West, especially with regard to the events in Ukraine, as being linked to, supportive, or ignorant of nationalism and fascism.
- v) The West is irrational:** In RG, the West is represented as not understanding how things really are. One title asks: ‘Conflict of virtual opponents – Why does the contemporary West not see real Russia?’ (RG, 2015, January 15). The West and Western media, including Ukraine, thus do not acknowledge obvious facts and basic understandings. In the logic of Western leaders, Russia is guilty by default. Regarding its fear of Russian media, the West is said to suffer from ‘genuine paranoid schizophrenia’ (RG, 2017, September 30).

- vi) Western double standards:** The West is represented as lacking commitment to democratic norms, such as the freedom of press. One commentary asks: ‘[indeed], why is the West killing democracy and the constitutional order in Ukraine?’ (RG, 2014, March 12). The Ukrainian revolution is depicted as undemocratic. Important for this theme are Western double standards. Often, events in Ukraine, Serbia, Georgia, Egypt, and Libya are depicted as opportunistic “democratic” revolutions instigated by the West against inconvenient governments. In one article it is thus inferred that ‘all Western talking about wanting to build a fair, open, honest, transparent, democratic world – is only propaganda, manipulation [...]’ (RG, 2017, March 16).
- vii) No monolithic West:** In the results of the keyword-search, “Europe”, the “EU” and “America” are frequently mentioned together. Occasionally, however, “America” or “Washington” are brought up individually in association with dominance or a notion of “mastermind” within the West. It is claimed that the US uses propaganda and disinformation to convince European marionets.
- viii) Allies in the West:** RG articles often rely on Western figures that are presented as “experts”, civil servants, politicians or journalists who seem to confirm the dominant Russian discourse. One article is headed: ‘[renowned] Western analytics and experts of international relations call the US and Europe for an unbiased stance towards Russian policy on Ukraine’ (RG, 2014, March 6). The president of the American Center for the National Interest Dimitri Simes is quoted claiming that the US government deliberately provoked the crisis in Ukraine (ibid.). American economist Paul Craig Roberts talks about the influence of Washington’s propaganda on American journalists (RG, 2014, March 12) and German parliamentarian of the

Left Party Ulla Jelpke is quoted saying that the West has helped ‘fascists’ to rule in Kiev (RG, 2014, March 13). Other academics, journalists, and public figures are brought forward, not least American actor Steven Seagal.

- ix) References to Cold War:** Contemporary relations of Russia with the West are often compared to the Cold War. This applies to the use of ideological frames in the conflict and the suspension of contacts and projects. The US is accused of policies along Cold War principles to further its own interest. The EU and NATO are criticised for moving the frontlines of a new Cold War to Russia’s borders.

In what follows, the article seeks to analytically discuss these discourses from the poststructuralist perspective outlined above. First, it explores the identities constructed through them, that is how the representations that are characterised by the identified themes are discursively positioning the Western and the Russian Self towards each other. In a second step, a genealogical reflection of the contemporary representations seeks to identify different levels of sedimentation to gain understanding of the inertia of given representations. Finally, taking a step back, the interaction of Western and Russian discourses is discussed, using the conceptual lens of discursive, indeed political, struggle.

### **Russian and Western discursive Subject-Positions**

Applying Hansen’s (2006) three dimensions and Campbell’s (1992) radical Other as analytical categories to the themes identified above reveals how both discourses position a Russian or Western Self to a respective Western or Russian Other. The representations of Russia and the

West are the results of processes of linking and differentiation. The identified themes map these processes, thereby revealing a striking similarity. Table 1 offers a comparative overview.

[Here Table 1]

The Russian discourse represents the West as a *radical Other*, an offensive opponent who, with the aim of maintaining its dominance in the world, engages in a conflict *against* Russia to suppress it as an emerging power. Similarly, in the German discourse, Russia is represented as a threat to Western security. Depicted as an offensive aggressor that engages in a propaganda war *against* the West, Russia is clearly excluded from the defensive Western Self.

Looking at the *spatial* dimension reveals, however, that this radical Russian Other does not neatly correspond with the territorial boundaries of the Russian state. Firstly, the representation of Russia as a non-monolithic actor shows that the radical Other discourse is primarily stuck with the Russian leadership whereas the population and “Western allies” within Russia are depicted as victims. Secondly, Russian “submarines” and allies within the West are exiled to the outside by representing them as a threat and linking them to Russia. Within this discourse, these internal Others serve to consolidate a more homogenous Western identity by discrediting dissident interpretations of society. In the Russian discourse, the spatial dimension reveals a strong ambiguity. Firstly, representations of the US as mastermind within a non-monolithic West suggest that Europe is at times represented as less radically different from a Russian Self than “Washington”. The second spatial theme carries numerous references to allegedly renowned Western “experts” and other figures who support the dominant Russian discourse (who can be denominated as external Selves). This observation suggests an ambivalent relationship to the West as a whole.

While in a seemingly similar way the Western discourse presents independent Russian journalists (external Selves of the West) as victims, the Russian discourse attributes authority

and respect within the West to these confirmative voices. It is argued that these are different dynamics. While the Western representation of its external Selves reinforces the pejorative othering of the Russian repressive government, Russian evocations of Western experts on Russia's side imply a notion of authority that is – regardless of strict differentiations otherwise – attributed to the notion of “the West”.

*Temporal* othering, depicting the respective Other as stuck in the past, is present in both cases yet playing smaller a role in the German discourse.

*Ethical* constructions, conversely, including themes building on binaries of disorder/order, untruth/truth, immoral/moral, irrational/rational, and references to democracy, conjure up a strong normative valuation. Thereby, the respective other is transported to the realm of the disorderly, dishonest, and unintelligible. In the German discourse, values of liberal democracy serve as a permanent reference point, linking Russia to the non-liberal, non-democratic, non-free world and associating it with other autocratic “villains”. In the Russian discourse, the ethical dimension reveals a similar ambiguity like the spatial one. Besides general ethical considerations of disorder, untruth, immorality, and irrationality, the strong theme of double standards also conveys a judgement based on liberal ideals like democracy or freedom of speech. Thus, the Western Other is judged based on values that globally are frequently associated with it (Browning & Lehti, 2010, p. 16). At the same time, the representations of the West as having double standards and lacking integrity challenges the West as a reference point.

### **Genealogy: Sedimentation**

Due to the unstable but inert character of discourses, there is always change *and* continuity at play (Paul, 2009, p. 245). Contemporary representations of Russia and the West must therefore be understood as being grounded in older, more deeply rooted discursive structures. Hansen

(2006) speaks of the ‘conceptual history’ of a representation and calls for a ‘genealogical reading’, in Foucault’s terms, to ‘[trace] the constitution of the present concept back in history to understand when and how it was formed [...]’ (p. 47; cf. Foucault, 1984). Tracing the genealogy of the representations just outlined thus reveals what parts of the discourse are located in deeper, more sedimented and thus more inert structures and which representations are relatively flexible. To this end, the section goes on depicting historical representations of Russia in the West and the other way around. Each of these two historical accounts is complemented by a brief genealogical discussion of the contemporary discourse.

Throughout the last centuries, Russia served European identity construction<sup>4</sup> through various depictions as a constitutive Other (Heller, 2010; Morozov, 2010; Neumann, 1997, 1999; Semenenko, Lapkin, & Pantin, 2006; Timofeyev, 2008).

In his profound study of European discourse on Russia, Neumann (1999) identifies the early 18<sup>th</sup> century with Peter the Great coming to power as formative for the representation of Russia as an actor, but also a learner, in the European state system (p. 74-76). By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, having played a vital role in the Napoleonic Wars and becoming part of the Holy Alliance in 1815, Russia was recognised as a Great Power in the European concert (Neumann, 1997, p. 164). During this time, the East/West divide was entrenched through an increasing perception of differences between Western Europe and an Eastern sphere of Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans (Heller, 2010, p. 36). After the revolutions in 1917, Russia was first represented as a ‘learner gone astray’, soon about to abandon Communism, before Soviet Russia as a political threat became the pervasive idea (Neumann, 1999, pp. 99-100). The dominant Western discourse observable in political debates and academia constructed the Soviet Union as an Asiatic, barbarian political power willing to intrude into Europe. This construction built on

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<sup>4</sup> Since Russia historically served an important reference point as external Other for the construction of a *common* (Western) European Self (Neumann, 1997, 1999), it is pertinent to focus on this European discursive tradition in order to trace the genealogy of contemporary representations of Russia in the German discourse.

distinctions between West/East, sedentary/nomadic, civilised/barbarian, free/unfree, defensive/offensive, democratic/totalitarian or authoritarian (Neumann, 1997, pp. 159-162).

After 1991, Russia was widely represented in the West as “learner” of European political and economic practice (Morozov & Rumelili, 2012, p. 39; Neumann, 1997, p. 158). While there are articulations that endow Russia with a promising future as a European country, the dominant representation framed Russia as a reticent and unwilling disciple with references to ‘a lack of a democratic past, the need for a strong hand, for a different approach to politics, etc.’ (Neumann, 1997, p. 158). Neumann (1997) claims that this discourse reasserts Europe as the centre – a teacher with the right to sanction the learner – with Russia at the periphery who is lagging behind and strives to become *less different* from the European Self (p. 158).

Since then, references of Russian “Europeanness” largely disappeared from European discourse (Casier, 2018, p. 111). Russia’s otherness has no space *within* an imagined European community but is banned to the outside (Morozov & Rumelili, 2012). The Orange Revolution in 2005 constitutes an exemplary focal point for the contemporary discourse that shows that the meaning of Europe is frequently defined by differentiation from a negatively framed Russia (p. 39).

The “othering” through various dimensions in today’s Western discourse on information warfare is consistent with Neumann’s (1997) claim that ‘the centrally held idea that Russia is on the periphery of a network whose centre is to be found in Western Europe has been a major discursive focus ever since the days of the Enlightenment’ (p. 168). Within the discourse under study, “the West” is an abstract political Self of which Russia is not a part. The dominant representation in the 1990s of Russia as an unwilling learner of European practice cannot be identified here. Solely the temporal dimension – Russia as lagging behind – plays a minor role. Russia is represented as a radical Other, as a threat that intrudes into the Western Self with the intention to split the society and create chaos. This depiction does not involve the idea of a

Russia (either enthusiastically or reluctantly) becoming less different to Europe. It is rather reminiscent of the dominant Cold War discourse that represented the Soviet Union as military and political threat. Moreover, the binaries described by Neumann (1997, pp. 159-161) as characteristic of the Cold War period are very similar to the ones identified above. Plakhina and Belyakova (2016), too, claim that the general (English-speaking) Western post-Crimea discourse on Russia is structurally comparable to the Cold War (pp. 167-171). This observation is in line with pre-Crimea contributions of the 2000s that observe an increasingly negative representation of Russia in Western discourse, for example concerning the Orange Revolution (Morozov & Rumelili, 2012; Semenenko et al., 2006). Yet, these representations do not conjure up a new Cold War. Instead, it is the discursive structure that is reminiscent of this time, creating today 'new heroes and [...] events' along similar patterns (Plakhina & Belyakova, 2016, p. 175).

The genealogical discussion suggests that Cold War representations are still deeply entrenched in Western discourse. However, the interlude of the 1990s shows the contingency of these representations. They therefore cannot claim discursive objectivity and contemporary representations must be considered to a certain extent malleable. Moreover, the spatial dimension of the contemporary discourse implies that these representations are closely linked to the Russian government and not Russia as such.

Likewise, the West – and Europe in particular – historically played a vital role as constitutive Others for the development of the Russian identity (Morozov, 2010; Morozov & Rumelili, 2012; Neumann, 1996; 1999; Timofeyev, 2008; Tsygankov, 2008). The most striking constant of this identity is its ambiguous relationship to Europe characterised by simultaneously belonging to and being excluded from it (Morozov, 2005, pp. 41-42).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russian debates about Europe were shaped by Peter the Great who sparked a passion for the West and strived to present Russia, if in a learning position then still, as a

European power (Neumann, 1996, p. 9-12). In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the state's position regarded Europe as a 'Europe of Christian monarchs' (Neumann, 1996, p. 26) – and Russia being part of it. This stance was opposed by a constitutional position advocating for republican values and the adoption of new European political ideas. A third strand developed, inspired by German romantic nationalism, emphasising Russian spirituality and culture in delineation from morally inferior Europe (Heller, 2010, p. 36; Neumann, 1996, pp. 13-27). The latter two positions developed into a bifurcation of the discourse on Europe that produced a never-ending debate between Westernizers, who praised Europe's political and economic superiority as an example for Russia, and Slavophiles, who emphasised Russia's unique culture and advocated a turning away from a decadent and immoral Europe (Morozov & Rumelili, 2012, p. 36, cf. Heller, 2010, pp. 36-37; Neumann, 1996, pp. 28-39; Tsygankov, 2008, p. 766).

After the revolutions in 1917, the Bolsheviks, who initially came from the Westernizer camp, represented Western – the “false” – Europe as evil Other, the bourgeois enemy. The term “West” was increasingly associated with post-war Europe under the hegemony of the US (Neumann, 1996, pp. 61-130). With the radical opening of the public political space during Glasnost' and Perestroika, the liberal position of Gorbachev's famous “common European home” became the dominant representation in the Russian discourse on Europe (Neumann, 1996, pp. 161-162). It conveyed a rejection of dividing lines in Europe and the recognition of historical ties between Russia and Europe (Timofeyev, 2008, p. 106). This position, understood as a “return to civilisation”, was initially taken over by Boris Yeltsin's government after 1991 (Neumann, 1996, p. 180). Tsygankov (2008) highlights, however, that ‘while bringing about a fundamental change in Russia's discourse, [the Soviet disintegration] preserved the core civilizational debates’ between liberal Westernizers and Nationalists (p. 767). In this ‘political struggle over how to differentiate Russia from Europe’, the liberal discourse represented Europe as equal, in some respects superior, partner (Neumann, 1999, p. 164; cf. Timofeyev, 2008, p. 105). The initial optimism about Russia's swift integration into Europe as a “return to

civilization” soon waned. Pressure from the Nationalist camp and a feeling of not being accepted as an equal partner within Western discourse led to Europe being framed as one of many foreign policy vectors (Neumann, 1996, p. 159; Timofeyev, 2008, p. 110).

Starting from the disenchanted liberal position, Putin developed a more confrontational attitude towards the West during his second term, increasingly asserting Russia’s uniqueness (Feklyunina, 2008, pp. 610-611; Morozov, 2010, pp. 193-194). Prozorov (2004) offers an instructive account of the competing representations of Europe in the early 2000s. He claims that with Putin becoming President, the conventional pro-Western liberalism of the 1990s develops into a liberal conservative synthesis (p. 4). This “liberal conservatism” clinches to the idea of a shared underlying political identity of “liberal values” between Russia and Europe. However, disenchanted by EU exclusionary practices and the perception that European integration would inevitably demand of Russia to play a subordinate role, this strand advocated for an institutionally more autonomous path (Prozorov, 2007, pp. 311-324). Prozorov (2007) describes “left conservatism” as the strongest nationalist opposition to the liberal strand. Departing from the underlying assumption that Russia is European, it is differentiated from a ‘false “Europe of pederasts and punk”’ (p. 322) represented by the EU. In opposition to the liberal strand, left-conservatives thus highlight a legitimate ideological difference between Russia and Europe (p. 324).

Putting the contemporary Russian discourse into a historical context reveals a compelling genealogy. Overall, the optimist liberal position of the 1990s that proclaimed a “return to civilisation” with Europe has not been identified. Instead, the general depiction of the West corresponds to the increasingly oppositional stance the Putin government took in the late 2000s. While Prozorov (2004) argues that this position overrode the traditional Westernizer/Nationalist divide (p. 5), looking at both strands individually is helpful for understanding the ambiguities in the contemporary discourse.

The dominant themes that represent the West as hostile and convey its moral inferiority on the basis of immorality, irrationality, and disorder can be traced to past Nationalist discourses on Western Europe. The spatial differentiation between the US and Europe corresponds to the Cold War conception of the West as post-war Europe under the hegemony of the US.

However, the Nationalist and Bolshevik heritage can neither account for the second spatial theme that attributes Western “experts” with authority nor can it explain the ethical judgement of the West on the basis of liberal ideals in Russian accusations of double standards. The former theme is reminiscent of the liberal discourses that dominated in the 1990s, representing the West as moral authority. This holds true also for the latter theme which further reminds of the official position in the early 2000s that, while turning away from the West institutionally, still acknowledged Western liberal ideals as common political identity.

These observations suggest that the Russian discourse on information warfare, while being dominated by elements that can be traced back to the Nationalist and Bolshevik tradition, also still exhibits elements from the liberal camp. While Nationalist and conservative articulations build on an old historical genealogy, their contingency and thus malleability has – similar to the Western discourse – been revealed during the liberal stance of the 1990s. Despite today’s domination of hostile representations, the surfacing of Western authority and judgement on the basis of liberal ideals suggests that the liberal discourse still forms part of the more sedimented discursive structures.

### **Contemporary EU-Russia Relations: Discursive Struggle**

While these discourses have their genealogy in national narratives, they relate to each other and thus cannot be understood in isolation. Neumann (1996) insists that the Russian debate cannot be seen ‘in isolation from the dialogue, or rather heterologue, which has gone on between

Russia and (the rest of) Europe' (p. 205). To better understand the interactive dynamics, this heterologue is conceptualised here as a discursive struggle. Representing the West as offensive, disorderly, irrational, immoral, corrupt, false insinuates a defensive, orderly, rational, moral, true Russian Self. Organised in four categories of radical Other, spatial, temporal, and ethical differentiation, a coherent structure becomes clear, through which the Russian discourse strives to stabilise the articulated identities. The respective opposite holds for the Western Self.

However, by presenting contrasting representations of the world, both discourses reveal each other's inherently contingent – possible but not necessary – nature. It can thus be argued that both discourses mutually deconstruct each other. Revealing each other's contingency, both discourses reveal a discursive struggle between a Russian and a Western interpretation of the world. This struggle is about which interpretation of the world is considered "true". It is about the "true" interpretation of Ukraine, Syria, the United States' elections, and who is on the right side of history. This struggle prevents any interpretation from attaining a mutually agreed objective status *among* the Russian and the Western discourse. *Within* the respective societies, the discreditation of the Other serves to consolidate one's own interpretation as homogenous. Yet, in denying the validity of an *alternative*, the alternative is understood to exist. This acknowledges the contingent nature of one's own interpretation. Therefore, discreditation, by its nature, allows for putting into question the supposedly unquestioned objectivity of the dominant interpretation it seeks to consolidate, and thus inevitably destabilises it.

While the return to hostile discreditations in Russia-West relations is relatively recent, suggesting that these representations are relatively malleable on the surface, the Russian discourse's ambiguity towards the West reveals that sedimented liberal ideals still form a certain common discursive ground. Taking a step back and looking at interactions with the West from a wider perspective is instructive for explaining these Russian references to liberal ideals. The presence of liberal elements in the Russian discourse, Neumann (1996) argues, is a consequence of the West's privileged position in shaping discourses in non-Western societies:

‘it has always been the fate of Russians and others who have wanted to forge a non-European, antihegemonic debate that such debates cannot fail to maintain ties to Europe, if only inversely so, because of the very fact that they are patterned as attempts to negate the European debate and therefore remain defined by it’ (p. 204). Consequently, Russian discourse always comprised European ideas.

Morozov (2010) claims that Russia will not overcome Western discursive dominance unless it presents a radical alternative. However, given that no discursive structure is ever ultimately fixed, it is argued here that also the sedimented Western elements that currently still form a common ground are not immune to change. The more “discursive pressure” builds up through surface changes that are incompatible with these sedimented liberal ideas, the likelier this common ground fades. This means that, should the hostile representations in both discourses differ increasingly on an ideological level, the common liberal ground would wane and make the struggle more fundamental with regard to the opposition interpretations.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This article has raised questions about the role of the prevalent discourses on information warfare in Russia and the West for the relations between them. On the basis of poststructuralist theoretical premises, it analysed Russian and German media publications since the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. The comparative Discourse Analysis revealed an ambiguous positioning of a Russian and a Western Self towards each other. With representations building on long-established genealogies, Russian and Western discourses engage interactively in political struggles.

But what are the implications of this discussion for Russia and the West as (discursive) subjects engaging in Russia-West relations? Wæver (2002) contends that ‘[overall] policy in particular

must hold a definite relationship to discursive structures' since it defines what is deemed sayable or doable (p. 27). This follows the Foucauldian tradition, seeking to elucidate 'the rules for what can and cannot be said and the rules for what is considered true and false' (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 12-13). It seems obvious that currently, both subjects are constrained by a rather hostile discourse that constructs the respective Other as offensive opponent. That the domestic discourse constrains extreme dissident positions became visible when Donald Trump was heavily criticised by both Democrats and Republicans for doubting Russian interference in the United States' elections during a press conference with Putin in 2018.

However, the preceding discussion has shown, firstly, that these hostile dispositions are relatively malleable. Rhetoric and policies in the longer run are thus not necessarily doomed to remain confrontational. Moreover, the fact that the Western derogatory discourse is stuck primarily with the Russian government and President Putin suggests that any political change in Russia could facilitate a major change in discourse. Secondly, the sedimented nature of liberal ideals in the discursive structure implies that both Russia and the West still speak to some extent the same language. The current confrontational posture is thus not necessarily a long-term development. However, given that even the most sedimented discursive structures are not immune to change, it is likely that the antagonistic discourse becomes more fundamental, should the current cool down of relations persist. Finally, given that both discourses reveal each other's contingency by representing different, alternative interpretations of the world, neither appears objective. For all participants within the West and Russia it thus appears less natural what is "right" or "wrong", "true" or "false".

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## Tables

Table 1:

	<b>Western discourse</b>	<b>Russian discourse</b>
<b>Radical Other</b>	Offensive threat	Offensive opponent
<b>Spatial</b>	No monolithic Russia Russian submarines (internal Others)	No monolithic West Allies in West (external Selves)
<b>Temporal</b>	Soviet past	Cold War
<b>Ethical</b>	Disorder Untruth Immoral Irrational Autocratic	Disorder Untruth Immoral Irrational Double Standards

*Table 1: Categories of relational identity construction in Russian and Western discourse*