

Graduate Section

Russian Collective Identity Construction in State Media During Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract: In the evolving landscape of communication technology, the interplay between media and collective identity becomes crucial due to its ability to shape the socio-political dynamics of nations. This article aims to address the role of collective identity construction in Russian state media, arguing that it is a highly manipulated process in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that aims to shape the way the events are perceived by the Russian population. Through narrative analysis, the article aims to explore how the subject of Russian collective identity is constructed in the political talk show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* during the timeframe of one and a half years starting from the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The identified narratives constitute a complex structure that contributes to the construction of a particular Russian collective identity. While addressing different themes, overall, they shape public perceptions towards uniting individuals around particular ideas beneficial to the state and legitimising the actions of the Russian regime.

Keywords: Russian media, agitainment, talk show analysis, state propaganda, collective identity, narrative analysis

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, has proven that a government, armed with the right means, can craft a narrative so powerful it can convince a large percentage of its population of a reality constructed to serve its aggressive geopolitical goals. As the most recent available data demonstrates, even after two years of full-scale war, over half of Russian society continues to support the military aggression against Ukraine (Levada Center, 2024). This data also indicates that the largest percentage of supporters relies on television as their preferred source of information (Levada Center, 2024). The present study aims to address the role of collective identity in the described dynamics, arguing that its portrayal in state media, in particular state television, is a highly manipulated process in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has a profound influence on how the events are perceived by the population.

In the evolving landscape of communication technology, the interplay between media and collective identity becomes crucial due to its ability to shape the socio-political dynamics of nations. Seen as a processual and multifaceted phenomenon that is shaped through communication practices (Melucci, 1996), the subject of collective identity is important for understanding how authoritarian states legitimise their rule and maintain control over the population (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2017). Focusing on the specific socio-political context of Russia – a state with restricted political participation and high level of media control and censorship (Gel'man, 2015) – the article explores how the subject of collective identity serves as a powerful tool for the authoritative shaping of identity narratives, constructing an image of the collective self that is beneficial for the regime's objectives. The research question is: *What narratives about Russian collective identity are constructed in Russian state talk shows in the context of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine?*

To answer this question, the study conducts a narrative analysis of the episodes of the Russian talk show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* broadcast during the period of February 2022 to September 2023 – a timeframe that comprises the first 20 months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The selection of this medium is intentional due to its specific format, wide reach and prevalent role on the state television, which has the potential for influencing a broad audience.

The article begins by navigating through the theoretical foundations of the subject of collective identity, the unique characteristics of the Russian media landscape and the existing research on state and media portrayal of Russian collective identity. After describing the methodological approach, the results of the analysis are presented and discussed in relation to the previous works in the field and the theoretical concepts upon which this study is based.

Conceptual framework

Melucci (1996) originally introduces the concept of collective identity in the context of social movements and defines it as a system of relations and representations shaped by relationships, culture, communication and social interactions. The subject of collective identity is shaped by how people think about their goals and actions (cognitive), how they relate to others (relational) and how they feel about being part of a shared identity (emotional). The processual approach to collective identity emphasises its construction through recurrent interactions among individuals or groups, with the research focusing on “the processes through which a collective becomes a collective” (Melucci, 1996, p. 70).

Collective identity in authoritarian states

National identity constructions are the ultimate manifestation of collective identity. Eder (2009) claims that national identity has effectively established itself as a predominant identity within a geographically defined political community. This exclusivity is embedded in the idea that connects individuals identified as citizens of a political community, with the narrative being passed down and acquired by new generations. Similar to collective identities in general, national identities function as narratives recognised by members of a community as integral to their shared identity (Eder, 2009).

Anderson’s (1983) conceptualisation of nations as *imagined communities* emphasises the socially constructed nature of nations that is imagined and accepted by people, despite the fact that most individuals within a nation will never meet or interact with all of their fellow citizens. A nation, to him, is a product of collective imagination, sustained through shared symbols, rituals and narratives. A nation provides a sense of belonging and identity to individuals, fostering a shared understanding of community and commonality and contributing to social cohesion and cooperation.

The construction of persuasive identity-based claims is crucial for maintaining the stability of authoritarian regimes (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2017). Foundational myths play on the sentiments of historical consciousness, providing a sense of continuity and legitimacy to a nation’s existence. Ideology offers a set of beliefs that nurture a shared sense of purpose and values among a group. Lastly, personalism involves emphasising the role of a leader’s persona to enhance connection with the population.

Lewis (2016) highlights the remarkable resilience of maintaining regime continuity in several contemporary post-Soviet countries since the mid-1990s. While these authoritarian governments extensively suppress independent media to maintain discursive dominance, their resilience is not solely reliant on repression (Lewis, 2016).

Official discourses are disseminated in media through subtle language patterns, legitimising patterns of domination and depicting actors who voice critical opinions as threats to society's collective well-being through negativisation.

By embodying the collective "we", state leaders facilitate the dissemination of collective frames, aiding group members in interpreting shared grievances, identifying external and internal enemies and defining the broader societal context (Hopkins & Reicher, 1996), involving group-building through articulating grievances related to national recognition (Fukuyama, 2018), and replacing emotions of anger and shame with pride and hope to boost self-esteem through group affiliation (Haslam & Reicher, 2016).

Russian collective identity

The subject of collective identity in post-Soviet Russia underwent a complex process following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ideological shifts initiated by perestroika resulted in a period of redefining collective identity. Several factors, such as geopolitical and cultural uncertainty, existence of ethnic-Russian and Russian-speaking minorities, persistent imperial legacy, extensive territorial spread, evolving international landscape and Russia's declaration as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, complicated this process (Malinova, 2012).

During Putin's rule, the Kremlin has been relying on a nuanced approach to constructing collective identity, incorporating diverse civic, ethnic and imperial elements without fully committing to any particular narrative (Zevelev, 2016). Sharafutdinova (2020) marks the annexation of Crimea as the culmination point of Putin's strategy that relies on national identity politics as central and essential to his leadership.

Over the last ten years, the political leadership in Russia has consistently extolled the idea of Russian exceptionalism and moral superiority (Zevelev, 2016). The state utilises a nostalgic statist narrative of great power, with authoritarianism, expansionism and the great power vision all viewed as inseparable parts of one imperial identity. The narrative of continuity emphasises the belief that Russia is "naturally" and historically destined to be a great power and a leader on the global stage (Tsygankov, 2012).

The topic of superiority is intrinsically tied to the concept of the "Other". Constructing Russian identity vis-à-vis the "West" historically allowed for overlooking the cultural diversity within the empire (Teper, 2016). Russia was portrayed as a culturally homogeneous society, which directed public attention outward and created myths that portrayed the collective "us" as a unified community. As Malinova (2020) claims, after the 2008 economic crisis and the protests in 2011 the Kremlin re-adopted anti-Western conservative politics that heavily relied on the "Us vs. Them" confrontation.

The concept of civilisation is also central to the regime's idea of Russian collective identity. Teper (2016) argues that the concept of civilisation in the context of Russian identity gained prominence during Putin's 2012 electoral campaign, with a new macro-political identity portraying Russia as a unique multi-ethnic civilisation anchored by the Russian cultural core. Rooted in the same logic of historical continuity, this rhetoric emphasises the importance of the "thousand-year-old" statehood as the crucial element of Russian collective identity (Malinova, 2017).

The politics of resentment is characterised by the expression of grievances and the propagation of a narrative portraying Russia as a victim manipulated by the West during its openness in the 1990s (Sharafutdinova, 2022). Throughout Putin's rule, the Kremlin's media apparatus has effectively harnessed powerful group emotions rooted in shame and humiliation that revolve around grievances and a feeling of loss, transforming feelings of shame into expressions of pride and patriotism (Sharafutdinova, 2022).

The patriotic elements of Russian collective identity find their expression mostly through the narratives about the Great Patriotic War, which Malinova (2017) describes as "the most politically usable element of Russia's past" (p. 45). The recollection of the war functions as a crucial legitimising factor for Russia's foreign policy in the current political context, serving as a unique symbolic resource for shaping national identity.

Lastly, Matetskaya et al. (2018) highlight that in the post-Soviet era, Christian Orthodoxy has gained significance in shaping Russian collective identity. Orthodoxy has become increasingly politicised through the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church leadership and the political elite, integrating into an emerging civil religion that justifies the specific characteristics of Russian society, its historical development and political structure.

Political talk shows and agitaionment on Russian state TV

Putin's presidency has been marked by a shift towards tighter control over the media, with the outlets having been brought under state or state-friendly ownership and dissenting voices having encountered censorship (Kaltseis, 2022). In particular, his third term was marked by the implementation of the foreign agent law, more restrictive legislative measures, increased state surveillance capabilities and expanded online content blocking (Snegovaya, 2015). Following February 2022, numerous mass media outlets have been shut down, access to thousands of media resources has been restricted, the spread of "fake" information has become subject to administrative and criminal penalties, and regular Internet users have encountered legal repercussions for expressing their political viewpoints (Alyukov et al., 2022).

Over the last decade, political talk shows became central to Russian state propaganda, selectively presenting information aligned with promoted ideologies (Gulenko, 2021). A new media strategy has been implemented, labelled by Tolz &

Teper (2018) as *agitainment* – a mixture of agitation and entertainment that blends aggressive political messages with entertainment formats, striving to correspond to the production standards of worldwide talk shows formats and to convey the state’s fundamental ideological messages in an engaging format. Agitainment has become the main format that spreads the key topics of the regime’s propaganda campaign (Alyukov, 2024).

Gulenko’s (2021) analysis reveals that selective information presentation and an illusion of balanced representation are key pre-production mechanisms of agitainment. The shows incorporate entertaining techniques, such as spectacularisation, scandalisation, personalisation and aggression. Despite having stylistic differences, hosts exhibit political bias in favour of the Russian state and discredit opponents. The choice of participants aims to create an illusion of diverse opinions, while audience reactions are framed to create a false image of widespread support for the state narratives.

The role of political talk shows is particularly significant in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine. Since 2014, the number of political talk shows on Russian television significantly increased (Bilder & Kaltseis, 2020), with many of the broadcasts focusing on events in Ukraine (Kaltseis, 2021). A notable rise in the number of talk show programmes was observed in connection with the annexation of Crimea (Bilder & Kaltseis, 2020). After the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, political talk shows have become one of the most popular formats on state TV in Russia. For instance, *Pervyi kanal* broadcast around 10 hours of talk shows daily in 2022, making place only for news broadcasts (Kaltseis, 2023), with the mechanisms deployed by agitainment being crucial for constructing a particular version of collective identity beneficial to the regime.

Russian collective identity in state media

The role of state-controlled media in shaping the subject of Russian collective identity has become evident in the last decades (Sharafutdinova, 2022). Centralised media campaigns increased the cognitive emphasis on national identity in Russia, heightening its importance by portraying other countries as threats. Simultaneously, patriotism was actively promoted as the sacred duty and Russia’s sole national idea (Sharafutdinova, 2022). Particular focus was put on the emotional aspects of collective identity by strengthening in-group ties and fostering a sense of belonging and national solidarity (Laruelle, 2016).

Tolz & Teper (2018) discuss the importance of the subject of identity during the annexation of Crimea. Portrayed as a moral obligation for ethnic Russians, the narrative about a strong association of Crimea with Russian identity was created, with the World War II analogies used to distinguish the good “us” (Russians) from the evil “them” (Ukrainians). Moreover, large segments of the shared history and cultural legacy were claimed for a separate “russkiy” nation, overlooking historical context.

Kaltseis (2022) identifies arguments that are used to legitimise the full-scale invasion in Russian media. The arguments focus on the supposed danger from which Russia had to defend itself and the people of Donbas. The narratives are framed in a spiritual-religious context, using symbols and slogans to express visual support for the war and strengthen national unity.

Most recently, Kaltseis (2023) claims that pro-Russian separatists are heroised and depicted as defenders of the homeland. Slogans and symbols, such as the Saint George ribbon, are used to express support for the war. The representation emphasises Russia's role as a saviour and liberator that restores peace and security. The tone of talk shows demonstrates a radical change compared to previous years, with discussions becoming more aggressive and targeting those who do not support the official position.

The subject of collective identity, rationally chosen by elites, is rarely discussed in the literature (Malinova, 2014). Analysing it in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine helps to shed light on how the state attempts to legitimise its military decisions. In the broader context, it contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes maintain control, shape public opinion and suppress dissent.

Methodology

Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method that focuses on the ways in which stories and discourses are constructed. As Bruner (1991) claims, humans organise their experiences and memory mainly in the form of narrative that contains stories and myths: "Narratives, then, are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification" (p. 4). Departing from the foundations of narrative analysis by Bruner (1991), who claimed that narrative thinking shapes individuals' understanding of their identities and realities around them, this article employs narrative analysis as a method to examine how Russian collective identity is constructed in state media during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Subject of analysis

The talk show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* was selected as a subject for analysis due to its representation of state narratives and extensive presence in television broadcasting, with two to three hours of nearly daily airtime. The host, Vladimir Solovyov, is known for his alignment with state ideology, making the show a key medium through which official perspectives are conveyed. His role in shaping and guiding discussions, coupled with close ties to the political establishment, adds significant weight to the show's influence in propagating state narratives (Gessen, 2022). The choice of participants on the show is carefully curated. Each episode

hosts between 10 and 15 participants, with discussions often getting heated and aggressive.

This study analyses episodes that were aired in the timeframe between February 2022 and September 2023. Crucial dates were chosen for analysis that were significant to the political context in Russia, since it was assumed that during important events the narratives about collective identity are made more salient.

Table 1: Sample selection

#	Date of episode	Date of event	Event
1	24.02.2022	24.02.2022	Beginning of the full-scale war
2	11.05.2022	09.05.2022	Victory Day 2022
3	21.09.2022	21.09.2022	Declaration of mobilisation in Russia
4	30.09.2022	30.09.2022	Annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions
5	09.10.2022	08.10.2022	Crimean bridge explosion 2022
6	26.02.2023	24.02.2023	One-year mark of the full-scale war
7	10.05.2023	09.05.2023	Victory Day 2023
8	25.06.2023	24.06.2023	Wagner Group armed rebellion
9	23.07.2023	17.07.2023	Crimean bridge explosion 2023
10	24.08.2023	23.08.2023	Yevgeny Prigozhin's jet crash

Initially, the talk show episodes were transcribed and watched in chronological order, with transcriptions being checked for accuracy and edited when needed. At this stage, information about the participants was also collected. Brief notes were made in regard to visual information such as gestures, facial expressions, symbolic objects and camera work that complement the analysis.

Subsequently, the transcripts underwent a coding process, identifying cohesive sets of statements that formed various themes on the subject of collective identity. Following the initial coding, a list of broader themes was created. The identified themes

were organised into narratives, supported by linguistic evidence from the transcripts. Finally, the implications of these themes for understanding the construction of Russian national identity were interpreted.

Results

This chapter presents the results organised into distinct narratives or narratives grouped into sections based on the commonality of themes they evolve around. An illustrative quote is used for each narrative that is followed by a short analysis.

Narratives about the past

Russia has over 1,000 years of great historical continuity

Over 1,160 years, we have firmly learned that it is mortally dangerous for Russia to even temporarily weaken its sovereignty and abandon its national interests. (Translation of Putin's speech, 21.09.2022)

The narrative emphasises Russia's long history, connects contemporary Russians with their ancestors and suggests that Russia has endured various challenges. This is often referred to as *historical memory*, implying that the experiences of the past have given collective wisdom upon the state and the nation that guides its decision-making processes.

Russian people share the genetic code of superiority

They absorbed the genetic code of the Nazis into themselves. Leaders, first of all. Of Western countries. <...> And accordingly,... what is our [code]? And ours is the code of winning. (E. Ponomareva [guest], 10.05.2023)

This narrative implies that all Russian people share the same physical genetic characteristics that predefine certain non-physical qualities of the society, such as superior moral values or even future predestined events. It carries particular emotional resonance by framing the actions of the current generation as a continuation of the past legacy of heroism against Nazism/Fascism in World War II.

Life in Soviet times was better

Here is to better and diverse republics, as long as they are all part of the Russian Federation in the end, honestly. We will get along quite well there, just as we got along in the Soviet Union. (V. Kornilov [guest], 11.05.2022)

The narrative revolves around a nostalgic view of the former Soviet Union and portrays it as a time when various republics coexisted harmoniously within a larger federation. The particular emphasis in this example is on the Russian people who live in different regions of Ukraine. By using the term "republics" he is referring explicitly to regions in Eastern Ukraine occupied by Russia that according to this view

were painfully separated from Russia/Soviet Union in the 1990s and according to his interpretation are now united again with Russia.

Ukraine is historically Russian

I still hope that Kharkov will return.

Yes, everything will return.

Yes. And I really hope, Odessa, Nikolaev...

These are all our lands.

I really hope, the mother of Russian cities – Kiev. In general, it's time to return the old lady to her homeland.

(V. Solovyov [host] and A. Leonkov [guest], 21.09.2022)

This narrative revolves around the idea of historical, cultural and territorial ownership of Ukraine by Russia. It goes beyond the Soviet era and evokes a sense of nostalgia for the Russian imperial past and the founding myth of the Kievan Rus, expressing a desire to regain influence over territories that were once part of a larger geopolitical entity.

Russia is a peaceful country

Our mission is this very service, salvation and liberation. <...> These are the building blocks that form the basis of Russia's new ideological and value field. <...> It exists within each of us, within the entire Russian society. (V. Avatkov [guest], 30.09.2022)

This narrative emphasises Russia's overarching commitment to peace, its peaceful intentions, its role in fostering global harmony and a mission beyond geopolitical interests. In the context of the war, it frames Russia's involvement as defensive, emphasises instances of humanitarian aid and peace initiatives, presents Russia as actively seeking peaceful resolutions, thus justifying its actions and downplaying the damages. In this frame, it positions Russia as the promoter of global justice and defender against the so-called oppressive forces, which are seen as the West and 'the Nazis in Ukraine'.

Russian patriotism

Russian army is heroic

<...> together, shoulder to shoulder, show to our soldiers: they are heroes. <...> This is not only the liberation of the Ukrainian brotherly people from Nazism, but in reality, we... we are fighting for the right to be Russian. (V. Solovyov [host], 11.05.2022)

The narrative emphasises the commitment and distinctiveness of the military forces by painting a heroic image of the Russian soldiers. It links the military efforts to a broader sense of national identity, adding a layer of perceived significance to their mission.

Russian people are patriots

The number of volunteers is fantastic, who just need to be told where to show up and how to show up. <...> And I talk to people, people say: “Give us an opportunity [to help]”. (V. Solovyov [host], 11.05.2022)

This narrative emphasises the readiness of the Russian population to support the war and portrays patriotism as an integral part of the Russian nature. It underscores the voluntary and proactive nature of societal engagement, communicating the ways in which the people of Russia are expected to behave in regard to the events in Ukraine.

Orthodoxy protects Russia

And we must beat [Nazism] to the end, only then will there be victory. And prove to the whole West that there is no point in messing up with Russia. Don't mess with the Russian world. With the Orthodox world. In general, with Russia. (Stepan [Russian soldier, footage of V. Solovyov's visit to the frontline], 26.02.2023)

The narrative emphasises the role of the Orthodox faith in defending Russia against external influences and providing moral guidance. It portrays the war as a religious battle, where Ukraine and the West are believed to “*practise satanism*” and “*act in the interests of the devil*” (30.09.2022).

Russia is the preserver of traditional values

<...> our state, in essence, is the custodian of traditional values, as it has been for more than a thousand years of history. All the people not only support, but you have no idea what's going on today. <...> people are rejoicing. And they rejoice there, in our new territories. (Gurulev [guest], 30.09.2022)

This narrative positions Russia as a guardian of longstanding traditional values and puts it in opposition to liberal values associated with the West. Remarkably, which values are meant is hardly discussed in the show, with the only concrete instance being the rejection of LGBTQ+ rights. Moreover, it emphasizes the narrative that those who lived in Ukraine were exposed to “immoral” Western values. Yet with the illegal annexation of these regions by Russia, they are finally able to live according to traditional (Russian) values and no longer are exposed to supposedly un-Russian/un-Orthodox values.

Russian state is a fundamental Russian value

And when it became obvious that this [Wagner's armed rebellion] movement would not have support in society, <...> then it became clear that awareness of the values of the state as the bearer of the social well-being and the safety of people, their whole way of life is simply built on statehood, which is the most valuable thing there is. (K. Vyshinsky [guest], 25.06.2023)

This narrative focuses on the acknowledgment of the state as a fundament that underpins societal well-being. It implies that the structure of people's lives is built on

the foundation of the state's existence. Thus, any criticism of state authority and state institutions would amount to attacking the core existence of Russia.

Putin and the Russian people are strongly bonded

Today once again Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin proved that he is exactly the president that Russia and the Russian people need today. (I. Markov [guest], 21.09.2022)

This narrative emphasises a strong bond between the president and the people (narod) of Russia and implies that Putin is a unifying force against external threats and a guarantor of well-being of the Russian society. The concept of “the people” often refers specifically to the parts of Russian population living in regions far from Moscow and the annexed regions. They are described as the “real” Russian people with true values that should serve as an inspiration for the rest of the nation, who became too “Westernised” by living in big cities like Moscow. Connecting it to the figure of Putin reinforces the narrative that Putin shares these “authentic” values.

Russia is humiliated and betrayed

<...> the vast majority of our people, ordinary, normal men and women, saw the role of Russia in the post-Soviet space exactly like that. Because this humiliation that we endured for 30 years, including [humiliation] from Ukraine, was impossible to endure forever. (S. Mikhnev [guest], 24.02.2022)

The narrative focuses on perceived historical injustices which is epitomized by the breakup of the Soviet Union and is expressed through frustration, resentment and a desire to repair perceived wrongs. It emphasises a sentiment that Russia endured a prolonged period of humiliation related to its perceived loss of global superpower status in the post-Soviet era.

Narratives about endangered Russia

Russia is threatened internally

Biden said that “those Russians who are against the war, – we are not your enemies”. That is, he turned to national traitors, to those whom he had sponsored for many years. We noticed this. (V. Solovyov [host], 26.02.2023)

The narrative reflects a perception of a segment of the Russian population as a danger to society and is characterised by a sense of exclusion of those who are perceived as either not understanding the current socio-political context or actively not aligning with the dominant state narratives.

Russia is threatened externally

Today, the special operation of the Russian Federation in Ukraine is part of a huge, big war of the Collective West against our state. This is completely obvious. (O. Morozov [guest], 11.05.2022)

The narrative evolves around the perception of the so-called “collective West” as entities working against Russia’s interests. In the context of the war in Ukraine, it explicitly ties the conflict to a larger narrative of a colossal war waged by an imagined collective West against Russia, implying a coordinated effort to weaken the Russian state.

Russia is exceptional

Russia is morally superior to the West

We are a thousand years old, and we have never practised racism. This is not in our history. <...> We have created an empire that is a homeland for everyone. <...> If we talk about how we differ from them. (D. Kulikov [guest], 30.09.2022)

The narrative addresses various themes (such as historical exceptionalism, geopolitical positioning and superior moral values) which put Russia as superior to the West. It describes Russia as a more powerful and respected force and suggests that Russian people are characterised by their intelligence, empathy and compassion, in contrast to the supposed indifference, ignorance and hostility of the West.

Russia is a unique Civilisation

I am personally deeply convinced that Russia is a historically unique civilisation. (S. Mikheev [guest], 11.05.2022)

This narrative asserts the uniqueness, resilience and historical significance of Russia as a distinct civilisation and manifests itself through expressions of national pride, historical continuity and uniqueness. It highlights a shared responsibility of the Russian people to protect the unique civilisation, its rich cultural heritage and values, and suggests a civilizational confrontation of Russia and the West as a battle between good and evil.

Narratives about the future

Russia is in the process of self-reformulation

We really need to work with ourselves today. This formative observing development, this is probably the most important task facing us now. <...> now a new world awaits us. And it’s up to us to shape this new world. (V. Avatkov [guest], 30.09.2022)

The narrative suggests that Russia is in the process of reshaping itself in response to changing global dynamics and internal challenges. It calls for active transformative development, the creation of new strategies and self-improvement to regain global political influence.

Russia is on its clear distinct path

[The time] when we were carried along absolutely alien currents and alien winds has ended, and our ship, our ark, suddenly understands the direction of movement, and the captain has a firm hand on the helm, and the sails are raised, and now it is clear where we are headed to. (V. Solovyov [host], 30.09.2022)

The narrative conveys the idea of having found a clear direction after a period of uncertainty and emphasises a sense of confidence in the country's trajectory. In contrast to the previous narrative, which suggested that the people could actively participate as citizens in the transformation process, this narrative turns away from Russians as active citizens shaping the future of the country but instead focuses exclusively on the leadership, mainly the president, guiding the nation as only he knows what is best for his people.

Discussion

In regard to the theoretical foundations upon which this study is based, the results show the three dimensions of collective identity – cognitive, relational and emotional (Melucci, 1996) – in action. The findings highlight how state-controlled media in Russia shapes certain cognitive definitions of collective identity, such as associating the Russian opposition with foreign enemies or framing Orthodox religion as a lens through which one should interpret the invasion of Ukraine. The divisive categorisation into “Us vs. Them” demonstrates how state-controlled media influences relationships between social actors. The use of emotional elements, such as portraying certain groups as defenders and emphasising Russia's patriotism and Russia's role as a saviour and protector of the Russian people beyond the Russian Federation, further shapes the formation of collective identity.

The strategies of persuasive authoritarian legitimisation, such as foundational myths, ideology and personalism, as discussed by Grauvogel & von Soest (2017) and Hopkins & Reicher (1996), are evident in the findings. Furthermore, the study consistently demonstrates the heavy reliance on discursive strategies of negativisation of the “Other” and positive portrayal of the state (Lewis, 2016). In combination with repressive mechanisms against opposition and alternative media, these strategies contribute to the maintenance of a hegemonic narrative about Russian collective identity that is used to legitimise the rule and actions of the state.

Regarding the empirical observations, various narratives presented above constitute a complex structure that contributes to the construction of a particular Russian collective identity. The collective identity constructed is salient, positively framed and emphasises the physical and moral superiority and exceptionalism of the Russian nation. This goes in line with the previous findings that reveal the continuous efforts of the state to foster a favourable representation of national identity, aiming to evoke a positive emotional connection with being part of the Russian nation and consequently enhance collective self-esteem (Sharafutdinova, 2022).

The emphasis on superiority, greatness and historical destiny become a manifestation of the imperial identity. Similarly, the civilisational narrative reinforces Russia's perceived exceptionalism and influences its role in global geopolitics. Historical events and patriotic elements are used to legitimise current political actions, reinforce a sense of national pride and justify future predictions (such as Russia's supposedly pre-destined victory in Ukraine).

Simultaneously, the Russian collective sense of self is filled with negative emotions of insecurity and danger, with past grievances and present threats serving as the central topics around which the national identity evolves. The emotional landscape combines the strong and positive image of the collective self with the negative emotions fuelled by a sense of being wronged and endangered. By portraying the West and Ukraine as antagonists, the narratives work together to create a clear "Us vs. Them" antagonism between the idealised Russian identity and the perceived aggression and evilness of the "Other". Furthermore, the results demonstrate the encouragement of the "Us vs. Them" mentality within Russian society, portraying those who do not support the state's actions as internal threats to the security of the state.

The study also resonates with the previous research on the symbiotic relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the political elite (Matetskaya et al., 2018), demonstrating the role of Orthodoxy in contributing to social cohesion and its impact on people's loyalty to the regime.

The emphasis on Putin's persona suggests a cult of personality, where his image is elevated to an almost iconic status that is never criticised or questioned. Together with the narrative Russian state is a fundamental Russian value, this suggests the effort of state media to portray as natural the narrative that the current government is central to the well-being and identity of the nation, discouraging any critical examination. The narratives about future allow the state to rationally choose further new versions and ideas related to the Russian nation that fit to the government's objectives (Malinova, 2014).

A particular demographic, namely white Russian men predominantly aged above 50 who share pro-Kremlin views, indicates a deliberate selection of whose opinions are represented in the show. By consistently excluding participants of other genders, ethnic groups, confessions and age groups, the show contributes to a very particular image of who gets to represent the collective "us", reinforcing a singular narrative and discouraging the exploration of alternative viewpoints. The editorial process, tightly censored and guided by the presidential administration, ensures that the media consistently reinforces the desired collective identity. By allowing criticism of lower-level governmental institutions, the show creates an illusion of a democratic discussion forum. At the same time, the role of Putin and the invasion of Ukraine are portrayed exclusively in the light pursued by the Russian state. These broader institutional influences are central to how Russian collective identity narratives are constructed within the show.

Limitations

One potential limitation of the study comes from the subjective nature of the analysis and the possibility of the researcher's excessive interpretation. Addressing this, it is crucial to once again highlight the choice of an interpretative methodological framework for analysing the results.

Furthermore, while this study considers the narratives in the analysed talk show as embedded in the official regime discourse, the extent of this incorporation is not thoroughly explored. Although it has been made clear that the talk show content is carefully curated by the state, there is still a possibility that some of the narratives are not fully supported by the government.

Conclusion

State-controlled media in Russia are actively involved in shaping and constructing collective identity through recurrent interactions. Together, the identified narratives contribute to a carefully crafted image of the Russian collective self and function as tools to legitimise the actions of the Russian government, particularly the military invasion of Ukraine. The study reveals a multifaceted construction that emphasises nationalistic elements, such as physical and moral superiority of the Russian nation and its exceptionalism on the global stage, while also evoking negative emotions of grievances, insecurity and danger. The emphasis on historical continuity, patriotic narratives, the role of the state and its leader in ensuring the well-being of the nation, Russia's mission as a protector and preserver of traditional values and the narratives about the nation's transformation and future pathway are all important elements in creating a cohesive image of Russian identity that is beneficial to the regime.

This construction of Russian collective identity has several dangerous tendencies. Firstly, it can foster an inflated sense of national pride and lead to a mindset that prioritises assertiveness and aggression. Furthermore, the narratives contribute to a divisive world view which rejects cooperation with other nations and hinders the development of collaborative international relationships, isolating Russia on the global stage. This not only threatens stability in the region but also has bigger consequences for global politics. Moreover, the findings are concerning, as the individuals disagreeing with the state do not only face repressive consequences, but also might fear social stigma and isolation.

More research is needed to explore how the Russian society interprets and internalises the constructed collective identity. Though challenging in authoritarian settings, the research on interpretation of state-controlled narratives is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of identity construction efforts.

Further comparative studies of different media types and content format can provide a more comprehensive view of the Russian media landscape. Moreover, it is interesting to compare the state-controlled collective identity with the one constructed in the oppositional and activist media to identify alternative narratives. Furthermore, longitudinal research projects are needed to explore the evolution of Russian collective identity over longer periods of time, as it can reveal how state narratives adapt to broader events and geopolitical changes.

Another possible future area of research includes conducting comparative analysis of collective identity construction strategies in different authoritarian regimes. This can help to deepen the understanding of patterns, variations and the level of context-sensitivity of the strategies of collective identity construction for legitimising authority in different states and political systems.

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