Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia’s Zapad war games

Andreas Ventsel, Sten Hansson and Mari-Liis Madisson
University of Tartu, Estonia

Vladimir Sazonov
Estonian Military Academy and University of Tartu, Estonia

Abstract
Modern military training exercises often include an information warfare component. Combat manoeuvres and weapon tests may be combined with large-scale information operations, including attempts at mass deception and cultivation of fear via strategic uses of narratives in media. The ways in which fear is constructed in strategic narratives deserve more detailed discursive analysis. In this article, the authors use the largest recent Russian war games on NATO’s eastern borders, the ‘Zapad 2017’ military exercise, as an example to show how to interpret fear narratives. They identify and analyse three strategic narratives that were formulated by Russian official spokespeople in relation to the exercise and uncover some of their underlying meaning-making tendencies: the logic of antithesis, affirmation through negation and the rhetoric of moral victimhood. Their analysis sheds new light on the uses of fear discourses that are more sophisticated and indirect than straightforward threats or (rhetorical) demonstrations of power to inflict damage.

Keywords
cultural semiotics, fear, information warfare, military exercises, military studies, Russia, strategic narrative

Introduction
Strategic communication related to military exercises differs from typical wartime rhetoric. In the case of a war, the main aims of discursive activities of the adversaries
are demonization of a concrete enemy and mobilization of people for fighting (Gudkov, 2005: 14). In the case of exercises, strategic narratives can be used for frightening and misleading potential adversaries. The amplification of the feeling of danger related to concrete enemies as well as the cultivation of a general atmosphere of fear and confusion are seen as key elements of present-day strategic communication (Hellman, 2016; Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Nissen, 2015; Swimelar, 2017). However, there are not many academic studies that explicitly focus on the meaning-making aspects of the fear discourse (see, e.g., Altheide, 2002; Ventsel et al., 2018; Ventsel and Madisson, forthcoming; Wodak, 2015).

Fear characterizes the mediated socialization processes (Altheide, 2002; Castells, 2009: 417) and is an essential discursive means for legitimation of political decisions (Wodak, 2015). In news media, fear is increasingly treated as a general context or backdrop against which specific events or phenomena are presented (Altheide, 2002: 59). From a constructionist point of view, various actors, actions and circumstances can be presented as posing a threat to society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010), and certain fears may be constructed in public communication to distract people from other fears or struggles (Glassner, 1999). Various security doctrines have also started to produce and reproduce insecurity characterized by the culture of fear (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Furedi, 2002; Massumi, 2005).

In this article we use discourse analysis to identify specific rhetorical means by which fear is constructed – such as the logic of antithesis and affirmation through negation – that are more complex than straightforward threats or depictions of danger. We contribute to the study of fear discourse by combining concepts and insights from literatures on strategic narratives (e.g. Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017) and cultural semiotics (e.g. J Lotman, 2007; M Lotman, 2009). We analyse Russia’s official narratives about the ‘Zapad 2017’ military exercise as a case study to exemplify concrete uses of fear discourses in strategic communication.

‘Zapad 2017’ was a joint military exercise conducted by Russia and Belarus on their territories in September 2017. The exercise had multiple aims, including synchronization of the activities of armed forces, training of troops and testing of new weaponry. It has also been suggested that Russia and Belarus tried out the scenario of a potential war with NATO (Röpke, 2017) and designed the exercise as a major information operation against the West (Suhanin, 2017; Wilk, 2017). ‘Zapad 2017’ reflects Russia’s foreign policy goals in relation to the West and should be seen as playing an important part in Russia’s overall attempt to destabilize NATO (Cohen, 2018; Snyder, 2018; Winnerstig, 2014). Therefore, Russia’s official communication about these war games deserves close discursive analysis in terms of the uses of fear for strategic purposes.

‘Zapad 2017’ took place in the context of long-running Russia–NATO tensions (Diesen, 2016; Sakwa, 2017). Because of their borderland status, the Baltic states – occupied by the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1991, and members of NATO since 2004 – have often been in the centre of information conflicts between Russia and NATO. Therefore, the empirical material for our study was collected from news media in Estonia as a NATO member state located in the immediate vicinity of the Zapad exercises. We analysed the statements by Russian official spokespersons in 35 articles about the ‘Zapad 2017’ exercise published from June to November 2017 in major Estonian dailies.
We approached Russian spokespersons who speak about war games as strategic narrators who articulate scenarios of past, present and future events in ways that serve the interests of their government, seeking to justify their actions and influence the behaviour of audiences in NATO countries, such as mainstream news consumers in Estonia. With this regard, two caveats should be noted.

First, as our study focuses on texts and rhetorical devices, we cannot make concrete observations about the reception of specific narratives by particular audiences; we can only analyse the narratives that the spokespeople have formulated in their statements and hypothesize (with appropriate hedging) about their intentions and possible effects. Accordingly, we treat fear here not in terms of feelings, affect or cognition, but in terms of symbolic resources (e.g. components of narratives) used in its formation. Moreover, we acknowledge that strategic uses of fear discourse may not always elicit those results in the audience that the creator of the narrative desired. The effect of strategic inducement may greatly depend on the preliminary attunement of the audience to the addresser’s intentions, the perceived reliability of the media channel and other contextual variables.

Second, we collected news media material about the Zapad exercise not to study its journalistic content, but to find and analyse statements and quotes by Russian officials. In the press, official statements may be picked and edited by news professionals for the purpose of constructing particular types of newsworthiness, such as eliteness (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). Especially within today’s competitive media ecologies, editors may at times take certain quotes out of context, exaggerate the importance of some quotes and contribute to a fear narrative by the simple act of printing those quotes. Even though there is some evidence of particular instances where Western news organizations have spread Russian government’s propaganda narratives (e.g. Watanabe, 2017), we do not assume that journalists in Estonian mainstream news media are engaged in the construction of strategic narratives for the Russian regime. When they include certain direct quotes by Russian sources in their stories, journalists may (and often do) also provide competing statements or arguments that counter Russian narratives. While we acknowledge that editorial choices affect who and what gets quoted, in this study, we do not analyse the specifics of how the news is framed: we zoom in on what the quoted Russian officials say and what kind of narratives they build.

In what follows, we first provide a brief historical background to Russia’s military exercises and the particularities of the ‘Zapad 2017’ war games. We then shed light on the concept of strategic narrative and its uses in the context of fear and danger discourse. In the analytical part, we flesh out the narratives identified in our empirical study and discuss how the various articulations of fear in these narratives may serve the interests of Russia.

Background: Russia’s military exercise ‘Zapad 2017’

Every four years, Russia conducts large military exercises on a principle of rotation in all of its strategic districts. War games in the Western district close to the NATO’s eastern
Media, War & Conflict 00(0)

flank are called Zapad (Giles, 2018; Stoicescu, 2017). These military war games have shown Russia’s increasingly aggressive anti-Western attitudes (Kowalik and Jankowski, 2017). Notably, some Russian military interventions have been previously accompanied by large military exercises, which were also supported by massive information operations (Müür et al., 2016). In August 2008, the Russian army invaded Georgia just after finishing the military exercise ‘Kavkaz 2008’ (Cohen and Hamilton, 2011). The annexation of Crimea in 2014 by Russian troops took place in the context of a regular Russian military exercise (Kowalik and Jankowski, 2017).

The history of Zapad war games can be traced back to the Cold War. The Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact conducted military exercises called Zapad in 1973, 1977, 1981, 1984 and 1985 (Palmer, 2014: 548). Already then, these war games were used for propaganda: the Kremlin demonstrated its military power to the Western audiences (Suhhanin, 2017). After the collapse of the Soviet system, Russia re-introduced the Zapad military exercise in 1999 and held these again in 2009, 2013 and 2017. Soviet and Russian war games have been extensively analysed by scholars and military experts (De Haas, 2016; Giles, 2018; Kowalik and Jankowski, 2017; McDermott, 2015; Norberg, 2018; Palmer, 2014).

According to the scenario of the ‘Zapad 2017’ war games presented by the Russian Defence Ministry, some extremist and terrorist groups, supported by the NATO members Poland and Lithuania, entered the territories of Belarus and Kaliningrad Oblast to arrange terrorist attacks and destabilize the Union State of Russia and Belarus (Zapad 2017 joined strategic exercise, nd). The first stage of the exercise between 14–16 September was meant to include ‘stabilization of the situation’ and ‘completion of preparations’ for averting potential aggression by terrorists. The second stage of the exercises, between 17–20 September, included fighting with terrorists and defending the borders of the Union State (Stoicescu, 2017: 3).

The combat training of the exercise took place on nine military practice grounds on a front of nearly 600 km length in Belarus and in Kaliningrad, Pskov and Leningrad Oblasts (Zapad 2017 joined strategic exercise, nd). According to the statement of the Russian Ministry of Defence, 12,700 troops participated in the exercise from 14–20 September. When more than 13,000 troops participate in the exercises, the state that conducts the exercise must invite foreign observers to the exercise (Vienna Document, 2011). However, as exercises like Zapad involve, in addition to military personnel whose numbers are officially announced, a great number of auxiliary forces (e.g. the units of the Russian Railways, the militarized units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Security Service), it is very difficult to check the stated figures (Stoicescu, 2017: 4).

The fact that one of the aims of the Zapad exercise was informational and psychological influencing is not surprising. The role of informational operations has noticeably grown in Russian treatments of military conflicts and exercises (Berzinš, 2014; Darczewska, 2014; Galeotti, 2015). General Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, has written about informational influencing (Gerasimov, 2013: 2, 2017). Moreover, this has been mentioned in the military doctrine (Voyennaya doktrina, 2014) and the security doctrine of the Russian Federation (Shtepa, 2016). Although Russia does not name concrete enemies in its security doctrine, one of the main adversaries appears to be NATO. This is indirectly confirmed by the press
secretary of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin, who states that information warfare is going on between Russia and the West (Peskov, 2016). Therefore, the information presented in the Western media about Russia’s military exercises deserves particular attention.

**Framework: Strategic narratives and the semiotics of fear**

According to the communication theorist Manuel Castells (2009: 10), the defining feature of power is its capacity to shape the human mind: he defines power as ‘the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favour the empowered actor’s will, interests, and values.’ The selection of the influencing strategy and its success depend on the influencer’s skill in profiling the target audience, e.g. recognizing its characteristic visual and verbal signification dominants (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 22) as well as the pragmatics of communication or the character of the addresser’s aims (Raudsepp and Ventsel, 2019; Nye, 2011: 84).

One of the tools of discursive power is strategic narratives: stories ‘by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 6). Strategic narratives may be formed and projected to serve various purposes, such as the justification of policy objectives or policy responses to economic or security crises, the formation of international alliances, or the rallying of domestic public opinion (Antoniades et al., 2010: 5–6; O’Loughlin et al., 2017: 50–51). Therefore, the concept of strategic narratives has been widely adopted in political communication and international relations (Dimitriu and De Graaf, 2016; Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017; Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011; Szostek, 2018), (information) warfare (Hellmann, 2016; Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017; Swimelar, 2017), and conflict studies (Wetoszka, 2016).

**Components and types of strategic narratives**

A basic feature of a narrative is depiction of event(s); its components are an initial state and a final state that differs from the initial state because of temporal and causal changes (Eco, 2005: 116). Semiotician Juri Lotman (1999: 127) has noted that narrating about an event presupposes the articulation of logical and causal relations – subsidiary events are arranged into a fixed storyline; simultaneous events that need not even be connected are reorganized into a consistent and cohesive chain. Telling a story entails segmentation of the flow of experience, which was perceived as continuous, into many concrete units which are thereafter ordered in a definite way: temporal and causal relations are created with other elements of the story, and meaningfulness is attributed to the whole story (see Lotman J, 2001: 170). Narratives are inextricably accompanied by interpretation. There are no ‘true stories’ as events are identified and stories are told from specific perspectives linked to specific interests; they are not found in the world in a ready-made form (White, 2003: 9).

Strategic narratives usually establish the identity of the active actor (who we are?), a desired destination (what we want to achieve?), the obstacles related to it, and the recommended way for overcoming these obstacles (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 3).
Within the framework of international relations, Miskimmon et al. identify three types of strategic narratives: international system narratives, national narratives and issue narratives. These can be treated as an interpretation framework or levels of analysis for concrete narratives (Roselle et al., 2014: 76). *International system narratives* describe how the world is structured, who the players are and how it works. *National narratives* frame the story of the state or nation, the values and the goals of it. *Issue narratives* set out what kind of policy is needed, why it is (normatively) desirable and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished.

In the context of Russia’s strategic communication, the system narrative might refer to Russia’s ideas of a multipolar world order with several power centres (the US, Russia, China) and its ‘justified’ spheres of interest (Mölder, 2016). Russia’s national narratives refer to the exceptionality of Russia and the ‘Russian world’ as a separate civilization, to defending the Orthodox world (Taras, 2013). Issue narratives primarily depend on concrete aims and contexts: for instance, in the case of ‘Zapad 2017’, Russian official statements mainly characterized the war games as peaceful and defensive. Our analysis focuses mainly on Russia’s issue narratives but, as we will discuss later, the three levels of strategic narratives should be seen as functioning in combination with each other.

When studying strategic narratives, one can also distinguish analytically between their three stages: *formation* – how narratives are formed; *projection* – how narratives are spread and contested; and *reception* – how narratives are received (Miskimmon et al. 2017: 9; Roselle, 2017). As indicated at the outset, our study mainly attends to the first of the three: we are interested in the discursive construction of fear narratives by Russian officials with regard to their military exercises. The details of projection and reception of these narratives could be addressed in future research.

**Fear as a factor guiding meaning creation**

Narratives are influential because they provide ordered and simplified meaning frames that are easy to communicate, comprehend and remember, and also to associate with the interpreter’s personal experience. Therefore, the shapers of strategic narratives try to take into account the stories existing in the collective memory of the target groups as well as other factors framing the interpretative atmosphere, like the shared ideological beliefs, agendas of current debates, and also – people’s fears.

In its most general form, fear is a reaction to danger (Lotman J, 2007: 208). From a cultural semiotic perspective, fear is not a reaction to a concrete event or object but interpretation of various anticipatory signs or phenomena as threatening and dangerous. Fear creates new connections and transforms existing meanings (Lotman M, 2009: 1219).

In strategic narratives, the discourse of fear only ‘works’ if it engages the audience’s cultural memory. From the semiotic viewpoint, fear can be, according to its temporal relation, either a reaction to an event that has happened and seems unexpected to the subject, or anticipation of events that have not happened yet. In the case of the latter, the anticipation of a prospective threat is a factor that increases potential fear (Lotman J, 2007: 209). For Russia’s spokespersons included in our study, the premise for integrating fear as a constitutive part of their strategic narrative is that particular target audiences in
the neighbouring countries already share a general sense of danger with regard to Russian military capability (Galeotti, 2018).

Ambiguity is an important source of fear. The meaning-making process provoked by fear is oriented to searching for the signifying expression needed for communication – putting it into words and sharing it with others – and thereby possibly mitigating the subjective feeling of fear. This explains why the signification mechanisms of fear are fuzzy and ambivalent in their nature (Lotman M, 2009: 1239) and suggests that fear can be discursively fuelled by the use of highly ambiguous language.

In strategic communication, one of the functions of fear discourse is to confuse the audience. According to the Danish military researcher Thomas Nissen (2015), one of the strategies of informational subversion is creation of ‘information fog’ for which selected snippets of information, contradictions, forgeries, misleading information and outright lies are used. The discursive construction of fear can function as a background for directing the interpretations of the audience, as, in the case of successful ‘information fog’, the audience has trouble differentiating between true and false claims. The feeling of confusion can be increased by overabundance of the information presented and its intensive repetition (Hansson, 2015).

Fear narratives affect the ways in which policy issues – including questions of national security – are debated in the public sphere. Threats can be described either concretely or abstractly. In a concrete depiction of threats, causal links are explicated – the precise source of threat is described (e.g. concrete persons or their activities), and it is explained whom it can put in danger and how. Such a manner of depiction facilitates rational debates over the severity of the threat at hand, as well as the possible ways of reducing or avoiding it. If the threat is described abstractly, perhaps just as a general (and inevitable) context people find themselves in, without showing the exact connections between the source of the threat and those (allegedly) affected, then reasonable discussion is hindered.

**Analysis: Russia’s fear narratives in relation to ‘Zapad 2017’**

In the following sections, we zoom in on the rhetorical means by which the discourse of fear was constructed by Russian officials in their narratives concerning the ‘Zapad 2017’ military exercise. Our analysis proceeded in three steps. We began by identifying textual signs of fear discourse in our data: both direct references to threat, such as depictions of Russia’s military might, as well as indirect references, such as ambiguous or contradicting claims about their military exercise. Then, using the components of strategic narrative (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017) as a heuristic guide, we distinguished between three mutually closely connected strategic narratives formulated by Russia’s spokespeople in our data. The first of these framed the West as a negative force, the second alluded to the image of Russia as a great military power and the third depicted Russia as a victim of Western ‘Russophobia’. The analytical reconstruction of these narratives enabled us to further separate the different guises and functions of fear in our data. Below, we describe each of these in turn, together with a couple of concrete textual examples that help us shed light on specific articulations of fear.
The logic of antithesis: ‘The West spreads irrational fear and confusion’

One of the most frequent narratives in the texts we studied was referring to the allegedly irrational ‘fear of Russia’ fuelled by the Western media. Russian spokespersons maintained that all danger scenarios about Zapad were ungrounded because the exercise was, in their words, ‘defensive’. They claimed that Russia had been transparent and cooperative when sharing information about the exercise. In their stories, Russian officials characterized NATO as a malevolent actor that attempted to exacerbate the situation by emphasizing the deficiency of information about the exercises and disseminating arbitrary numbers about its participants. NATO’s criticisms were treated in Russian narratives as manifestations of information warfare. The conflict of this narrative could be restated as follows: ‘NATO is hostile towards Russia, constantly looking for errors in the activities of the latter, and therefore the war games also receive heightened attention.’

NATO’s alleged discourse of fear and threat was cast by Russian officials as an attempt at seeking justification to NATO’s aggressive activities towards Russia, such as deployment of increasingly larger forces on the Russian border. For example, Estonia’s major news outlets Postimees, ERR and Delfi cited the statement by Igor Konashenkov, press officer of the Russian Ministry of Defence, who accused NATO of ‘quietly deploying the US 2nd Armoured Brigade to Poland’ (Laugen, 2017a) and referred to further offensive aims of the West. He was quoted as saying: ‘The whole Baltic and Polish hysteria about the “Russian threat” related to Zapad 2017 is a dishonestly created smoke-screen to Pentagon’s operation. Thus, who is actually preparing for an aggression?’ (Postimees, 2017a)

Within this narrative, NATO’s experts who spoke on the theme of Zapad were depicted as propagandists who deliberately disseminated false information with the aim of cultivating an extensive feeling of danger in the audience. Often, pathologizing metaphors like ‘panic’, ‘hysteria’ and the ‘Zapad syndrome’ were used to describe the discourse of ‘irrational fear of Zapad’, allegedly cultivated among Western people by the NATO allies themselves. This occurred, for instance, in the statements by the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov (Postimees, 2017b), Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin (Kund, 2017), and Dmitry Peskov, the Press Secretary for the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin (Pealinn, 2017).

When ‘Zapad 2017’ had officially concluded, Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu was quoted reasserting the main elements of this narrative:

‘Western media gave rise to speculations about Zapad 2017 to hide NATO’s growing involvement near the borders of Russia and Belarus.’ Shoigu brought an example of the actions of the alliance on the eastern flank, including the increase in the number of exercises, along with the training of the deployment of a nuclear weapon. According to Shoigu, in spite of the ‘routine nature and defensive goal’ of Zapad 2017, constant accusations were voiced by certain ‘partners’. (Laugen, 2017b)

We suggest that this narrative could be interpreted via the logic of antithesis and the principle of mirror projection. When an antithetic enemy is created, it is often constructed as a symmetrical copy of one’s own structures with a minus sign or a mirror projection.
(Lotman and Uspenski, 2013: 223). Mirror projection is often preceded by projection, or first ‘our’ problems are attributed to ‘them’, and thereafter, the mirror-projective antithesis is created: ‘their’ problems are contrasted to the zero marker or absence of problems in ‘our’ structure (Lepik, 2008: 72; Ventsel, 2010, 2016). In Russian officials’ depictions of ‘Zapad 2017’, NATO was cast as waging an active and even aggressive information war, ignoring international rules, giving inexact information about its exercises (including scaring the public and lying), proliferating statements by amateurish analysts in the media – everything that Russia has usually been accused of. Meaning-making based on mirror projection seems to be characteristic of strategic players’ behaviour in the context of a security dilemma (Booth and Wheeler, 2008) in which the allegedly defensive steps taken by one side (e.g. NATO) are interpreted as offensive and trigger a defensive reaction by the other side (e.g. Russia), producing increased tensions.

**Affirmation through negation: Allusions to Russia’s growing military power**

The narrative formed by Russian spokespersons who accused the Western countries of spreading irrational fear was tied in with a narrative aimed at demonstrating Russia’s growing military power. The central conflict of this narrative is the military confrontation between Russia and NATO. The purpose of this narrative is to depict Russia’s military might as being at least on a par with that of NATO. If Russia were to issue direct threats against NATO, this would contradict the first narrative – of peaceful Russia and fearmongering NATO – described above. Therefore, this narrative is based on indirect allusions to Russia’s potential to deploy its military resources. For instance, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed in his speech that Russia is capable of taking ‘defensive countermeasures’ against NATO’s activity that undermines stability in a region (Laugen, 2017b), and President Vladimir Putin instructed Russian industry to prepare for war mobilization, stating that ‘the ability of our economy to increase military production and services at a given time is one of the most important aspects of military security’ (Laugen, 2017c).

It is notable that when representatives of the Russian Federation spoke about the threat of war in relation to Russia, they did it in a ridiculing tone, casting the threat scenarios related to Russia’s military capability as absurd, and referring to the ‘paranoia’ in the Western media. For example, the news portal Delfi quoted Russian Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin’s interview to Deutsche Welle, where he insisted that Russia is ‘certainly not’ turning the exercise into an offensive operation:

I can assure you: there are no plans for any sort of invasion into the territory of neighboring countries. The main goal of the exercise is to practice relevant strategies for the battle against terrorism and to practice the use of the armed forces for that battle. (Laugen, 2017d)

Fomin’s explanation could be seen as both ironic and threatening because, according to the scenario of the exercise, the terrorist groups were based in fictional countries Veishnoriya, Lubeniya and Vesbasriya that partially overlapped with NATO members Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Moreover, heavy offensive weapons – jet fighters, tanks and rockets – were involved in dealing with these ‘terrorist groups’.
What this example illustrates is that, rhetorically, Russia did not always need to express the growth of its military capability directly. Although the Russian spokespeople persistently denied the threat of Russia instigating a war, they nevertheless referred to the narrative of Russia’s increased military capability and the potential of entering a conflict. This rhetorical means could be called *affirmation through negation* – if something is constantly negated, the target audience develops a justified doubt that something is disguised behind the negation.

One of the foundations for constructing a discourse of fear related to Russia’s growing military capability was the ambiguity of the size of the troops participating in the exercises. According to Western military experts, the number of the troops participating in the exercises was several times greater than officially declared (Buckley, 2017; Stoicescu, 2017: 4). According to the Polish General Staff, Russia mobilized almost 100,000 troops; Lithuania and Ukraine proposed the number to be 140,000 and later even 240,000 (Giles, 2018: 5; Sutyagin, 2017; Turchynov, 2017). There were also more modest assessments: 60,000–70,000 participants, 12,000 of whom were deployed in the territory of Belarus and the rest in Russia (Johnson, 2017).

We can assume that a sense of danger among Western audiences was increased by the discourse of secrecy surrounding the Zapad exercises which made it impossible to assess the exact size of troops involved. Official statements by several Russian military and state officials indicate that this was a deliberate strategy. The numbers presented in the Western media were assessed by them in a ridiculing tone, which amplified the speculations about the size of the troops even further. For example, the Delfi news portal quoted the statement by Igor Konashenkov, an official representative of the Russian Ministry of Defence:

> We are astonished at the statements by the leader of the German military authorities which openly used unbelievable numbers about the alleged hundreds of thousands of Russian military personnel who are engaged in the exercises and thus pose a threat to Europe. The German side received timely and exhaustive information about the intentions and the defensive character of the exercise and the real number of the Russian troops. (Laugen, 2017e)

In this case, the German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen was criticized. The commentary could be seen as mocking the minister, as it is inconceivable that the defence minister who could use ‘timely and exhausting information’ would misstate the size of the troops by seven or eight times.

The systematic denial actually reinforced ambiguous attempts by Western military experts and politicians at putting the fear into words, which were expressed as ambivalent speculations over the size of the troops (12,000–140,000 soldiers), rather reproduced confusion and fear in the audience and covertly referred to the idea that Russia can move its troops quickly and invisibly as a proof of the narrative of Russia as a military superpower.

As noted above, strategic communicators try to construct narratives that easily tie in with and build upon the stories that are familiar to and widely shared among the members of their target audience. Hence, even though our analysis focuses on the discursive construction of fear narratives in statements made by Russian officials, we have to make
some observations about the cultural context in which these statements were published in Estonia. Before and during the Zapad exercise, journalists and commentators in the Estonian media often spoke about a potential attack by Russia, possibly targeted at the Baltic countries, Ukraine or Georgia. There were also mentions of Russia’s looming military conflict with NATO and the US. The press presented various negative scenarios and referred to the signs of Russia’s growing military capability. In those stories, the discourse of fear was primarily fed by the associations between Zapad and earlier negative consequences of Russian politics in the region, be it historical aggressions in the Baltic countries (under the regimes of Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union) or recent conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). The texts that articulated historical parallels often constructed certain ‘what if …’ risk scenarios, and presented the Russian army as mobile and constantly active on the borders of the Baltic and Nordic countries (primarily Finland and Sweden). It may be assumed that these stories formed a backdrop onto which new narratives about Russia’s growing military power could be added more easily.

The rhetoric of moral victimhood: ‘Russia suffers from Western “Russophobia”’

Some Russian officials’ narratives constructed the impression of Russia as a dreaded military power in such a way that the creators of the image of ‘terrifying and feared Russia’ would be associated with the Western media and political elites. In these narratives, Russia was depicted as a victim who suffered from ‘Russophobia’ – an overall negative attitude towards Russia and Russian culture in the West. Thereby, Russia classified the interest of the Western public in the Zapad exercises as a mere information operation by NATO and the US. For instance, an editorial in the largest daily Postimees (2017c) referred to a statement by a high-ranking Russian official: ‘According to Igor Konashenkov, spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Defence, Zapad was accompanied by “unprecedented hysteria in European media” which was fuelled by the Russophobia of the eastern member states of the European Union.’

In this example, the representative of Russia did not accuse the West in general but singled out particular sources that allegedly spread this fear: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, which border on Russia. This accusation served two goals: in addition to creating tensions between the member states of the European Union, it criticized the policies of these countries towards their Russian-speaking minorities. Not only Russia as a state was shown as suffering from ‘Russophobia’ but the whole Russian-speaking population.

The ‘Russophobia’ narrative is not new: it dates back to the mid-19th century. This narrative has been used for both domestic and foreign political aims, and historically the Kremlin’s power elite has labelled all kinds of negative stances towards Russia as ‘Russophobia’ (Feklyunina, 2013; Petersson, 2013). This narrative has three facets:

1. ‘Russophobia’ symbolizes the model of confrontation of two cultures and civilizations, the conflict between Eastern and Western values.
2. Russian authorities depict ‘Russophobia’ as the undeclared war of the West against Russia. In the media coverage of Zapad, this made it possible to connect fear with war rhetoric and different narratives in the cultural memory (e.g. parallels with the Cold War, connections between Nazism and ‘Russophobia’).

3. Russian authorities try to equate opposition to the Kremlin’s policy with opposition to Russian culture (Darczewska and Żochowski, 2015).

In recent times, accusations of ‘Russophobia’ seem to form a constitutive part of Russia’s narratives that refer to the conflict between Russia and the West. This conflict is related to the enlargement of NATO and the European Union: these developments have been interpreted in Russia as essentially anti-Russian activities (Darczewska and Żochowski, 2015).

The rhetoric of ‘Russophobia’ enables Russia to position itself as a moral victim despised by the West and its allies. This can be seen as a peculiar ‘anticipative strategy of blame avoidance’ (see Hansson, 2017) which makes it possible to nip in the bud the accusations by the opponent perceived as malevolent and destructive, and to attribute to the enemies precisely those condemnable qualities that the latter use to characterize Russia. To map essential events and trends or to articulate visions for the future, Russian spokespersons use references to various memory layers of the audience (e.g. victory over Nazism in World War II; accusations of the Baltic states of Nazism). These constructions lend support to the view that the West should be seen as the main culprit of growing Russia–NATO tensions.

**Concluding remarks**

In this article, we used Russian officials’ statements about ‘Zapad 2017’ war games as a case study to show how to interpret military discourses of fear by combining insights from works on strategic narratives and cultural semiotics. We identified three main strategic narratives that were constructed by Russian official spokespeople in relation to the exercise and noted how these represented NATO members as ‘fearmongers’ and Russia as a ‘victim’, all the while hinting at Russia’s growing military power. We uncovered some of the underlying meaning-making tendencies of those strategic narratives: the logic of antithesis/mirror projection, affirmation through negation and the rhetoric of moral victimhood. Our analysis sheds new light on how the discourse of fear is dominated by associative and speculative relations, and how the uses of fear discourses are sometimes more sophisticated and indirect than straightforward threats or (rhetorical) demonstrations of power to inflict damage.

Fear can be discursively constructed via manipulation with ambiguous messages and numbers. Although, in their statements, Russian authorities ridiculed the Western speculations about the larger than permitted size of the troops, the continuous amplification of the ‘numbers game’ alluded to the idea that Russia was disguising its actual military capacity. Because of its ambiguous reference, such articulation of the feeling of fear may increase fear-infused confusion among the audience.

Discursive references to fear can be used to discredit one’s adversaries. In their statements, Russian spokespersons suggested that the Western politicians, experts and journalists spread speculations, ungrounded fear and ‘Russophobic’ views. These articulations chimed with Russia’s earlier narratives about ‘Russophobia’ and NATO’s ‘unfair’ actions
that were probably already familiar to the audience. Russian authorities emphasized the need for evidentiary materials in situations where concrete evidence was impossible to get. For example, it was not possible to ascertain the number of the troops as it was not clear who could be classified as military personnel. Representatives of NATO could not present factual data to confirm its refuting arguments. The constant hurling of evidence pro and contra may lead to a sense of disorientation and indecision among Western audiences.

Our examples show that military exercises, which have been traditionally used for propaganda purposes, provide a context in which there are ample opportunities for articulating and projecting fear narratives. Major military training events tend to attract a lot of media coverage. Mediated stories about a war game such as Zapad may influence public perceptions of not only the event itself but more broadly of relations of power in international politics. The strategic uses of particular narratives that could destabilize adversaries may be embedded in the set-up of a war game by its organizers. We cannot confirm whether ‘Zapad 2017’ was set up by Russia so as to depict NATO as exaggerating the ‘Russian threat’ and Russia as a moral victim, but this could indeed count as a plausible interpretation of Russia’s behaviour.

As noted earlier, our study focused primarily on issue narratives where articulations of fear played a central role: stories told by Russian officials about the Zapad exercise that served Russia’s goal of threatening its adversaries via allusions to its military might. However, it became evident that these stories also functioned as international system narratives, serving Russia’s goal of discrediting NATO, and as national identity narratives that constructed a positive image of the ‘Russian world’. The ways in which these different functions of strategic narratives intertwine to support Russia’s political and military goals deserves further research. Future studies could also include some form of reception analysis and take into account various counter-narratives that may be constructed and projected by Western politicians, experts and journalists in the news media. Combining these with discourse analytic and semiotic approaches could lead to new insights into the uses and effects of fear in strategic narratives.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by grants SHVFI19127 “Strategic Narrative as a Model for Reshaping the Security Dilemma”, PUTJD804 “Semiotic perspective on the analysis of strategic conspiracy narratives”, O-014 and PRG314.

Note

1. Information operations are attempts to disturb or undermine the internal or external information space or opinion climate to achieve strategic geopolitical or economic goals (Weedon et al., 2017). Researchers have accentuated different facets of information operations, concentrating on the context of psychological (Linebarger 2006) or hybrid warfare (Arold, 2016; Galeotti, 2016; Mäksoo, 2018; Polese et al., 2016; Rácz, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015) as well as technical infrastructure and planning (Allen, 2007).

ORCID iD

Sten Hansson https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1748-1969
References


Peskov D (Песков Д)(2016) Между Россией и англосаксонскими СМИ идет информационная война (Between Russia and Anglo-Saxon media is information war). Ria.ru, 26 March. Available at: https://ria.ru/world/20160326/1397514372.html (accessed 7 April 2018).


**Author biographies**

Andreas Ventsel is senior researcher of semiotics at the University of Tartu. His research topics are political semiotics, information warfare, and strategic communication. His work has been recently published in *Sign Systems Studies and Theory. Culture & Society*.

Address: University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, Room 313, Tartu 51005, Estonia.

Email: andreas.ventsel@ut.ee
Sten Hansson is a researcher at the Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu. He is developing new frameworks for analysing government communication, conflicts, scandals and blame games. His work has been recently published in Policy Sciences and Critical Discourse Studies.

Mari-Liis Madisson is a research fellow at the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu. Her research interests lie in cultural semiotics, political semiotics, international relations, and media studies. Her work has been recently published in Problems of Post-Communism and Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore.

Address: University of Tartu, Jakobi 2-313, Tartu 51005, Estonia.

Email: ml.madisson@ut.ee

Vladimir Sazonov is senior researcher of Near Eastern studies at the University of Tartu and senior researcher at the Estonian Military Academy. His research topics are Middle Eastern history and cultures, information warfare, history of propaganda, hybrid warfare, and theology (ideology) of war. His work has been recently published in European Politics and Society and Journal of Slavic Military Studies.

Address: University of Tartu, Ülikooli 18-226, Tartu 50090, Estonia.

Email: vladimir.sazonov@ut.ee