

## **Master's Thesis**

# Televising Russia's Strategic Narrative: "Traditional Values" in RT's Broadcasting (2014-2024)

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## Abstract

This thesis explores Russian strategic narrative-building within the English-language broadcasts of RT in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014–2024). Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, scholars have focused on Russian hybrid warfare, disinformation campaigns, and soft power politics. Strategic narrative-building can be seen as a form of soft power, aimed at garnering foreign public support for Russian geopolitical efforts. While the problematic nature of these narratives is clear to Western policymakers, strategic narratives are often difficult to identify. This thesis explores the formation of strategic narratives within the English-language Russian state media outlet, RT. To this end, the thesis conducts a narrative analysis of RT broadcast transcripts, carefully selected from a GDELT Project database of over 100,000 transcripts. It examines how Russia has used RT to construct a strategic narrative of being the protector of "traditional values" and how these narratives align with broader Russian geopolitical goals. The analysis argues that strategic narrative-building within RT broadcasts emerged in the months leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and has remained evident since. Before this period, the narrative of Russia as the protector of "traditional values" has come forward, particularly during elections in Western countries. The established narrative largely focused on "othering" the West, portraying Russia as the protector of traditional values by critiquing liberal values and policies, such as those related to "woke" culture and LGBTQ+ rights, which were framed as evidence of the "decay" of Western values. This narrative has been identified to align with Western populist narrative. Influential thinkers and journalists were used within RT broadcasts to garner support from the Western conservative community. These elements are directly linked to the war in Ukraine and Russia's aspirations for a multipolar world order. Strategic geopolitical moments, such as foreign elections and key events in the war with Ukraine, were utilized to reinforce this narrative within RT broadcasts, highlighting the geopolitical connection between this strategic narrative and Russia's broader geopolitical objectives.

**Keywords:** Traditional values, strategic narrative, Russia, Ukraine, RT, Russia Today.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“The West goes against the traditional values of many societies around the world, and it is very hostile, and aggressive” - George Szamuely, RT Crosstalk, 30 October 2022.<sup>1</sup>

This statement reflects a reappearing narrative in RT broadcasts, framing the West as a threat to “traditional values”. It was spoken by a guest on the RT Crosstalk talk show, which often focuses on geopolitics. The focus on “traditional values” in combination with criticism of the West is a recurring phenomenon in the Russian state-owned medium RT. Why would that be? It is known that Russia uses RT to influence international audiences and therefore the question arises whether there is a strategic use of these “traditional values” within RT.<sup>2</sup> In other words, would it be possible that Russia can strategically use the narrative of it being the protector of “traditional values” within RT broadcasts. Furthermore, considering the undermining statements towards the West that are visible in its media since the War with Ukraine, the question arises whether the Russo-Ukrainian War has had influence on the use of “traditional values” as a strategic narrative within RT broadcasts.<sup>3</sup> When this narrative within RT broadcasts would be strategically useful for the Russian state, contemporary topics such as hybrid warfare and information warfare immediately come to mind. As strategic narratives are part of information warfare tactics, the importance of exploring how these narratives are constructed and deployed becomes crucial knowledge to Western policymakers.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis investigates how RT has constructed a strategic narrative around the concept of “traditional values” since the 2014 invasion of Crimea, and how these narratives align with Russia’s broader geopolitical objectives. Russia’s use of media, particularly RT, plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions both domestically and internationally. RT first started as a tool for shaping public relations in foreign countries, but eventually became a platform for promoting

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<sup>1</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : October 30, 2022 10:30pm-11:01pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 23 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20221031\\_023000\\_CrossTalk&play=1667183640](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20221031_023000_CrossTalk&play=1667183640).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hutchings et al., ‘What Is Rt?’, in *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order*, RT as Populist Pariah (Cornell University Press, 2024), 50–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/jj.11981213.7>.

<sup>3</sup> Andriy Tyushka, ‘Weaponizing Narrative: Russia Contesting Europe’s Liberal Identity, Power and Hegemony’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 115–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1883561>; Samantha Bradshaw et al., ‘Strategic Storytelling: Russian State-Backed Media Coverage of the Ukraine War’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 36, no. 3 (1 September 2024): edae028, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edae028>.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Hellman and Charlotte Wagnsson, ‘How Can European States Respond to Russian Information Warfare? An Analytical Framework’, *European Security* 26, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 153–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2017.1294162>.

anti-Western narratives and conducting influence operations. Furthermore, it is fully owned, and despite proxy ship relations, it is infiltrated by the Russian states and complies on its commands.<sup>5</sup> Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has engaged in constructing a narrative that represents Russia as a defender of traditional Christian values, positioning itself against what it characterises as the morally declining West.<sup>6</sup> But Russia has also positioned itself as the protector of “traditional values” by opposing LGBTQ ideology with the use of *othering* techniques.<sup>7</sup> The nuance between “traditional Christian values, and “traditional values” opposing to LGBTQ values, shows that these “traditional values” do not have a consistent definition according to existing research. As strategic narratives are intended to influence foreign countries, and RT can be considered a tool for the Kremlin for foreign interference, strategic narratives within RT can be seen as a form of hybrid warfare.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, there is urgency to know how RT has built this strategic narrative to promote itself as the protector of “traditional values”, keeping in mind its geopolitical initiatives over the past decade.

## 1.1 Research Question

This thesis assesses the following research question:

*How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of “traditional values” since its invasion of Crimea in 2014, and how do these narratives fit with Russia’s larger geopolitical initiatives?*

The research question assesses the strategic use of RT aimed at a Western and international public. English-language RT broadcasts are used for this thesis. The time frame of the research question (beginning with the annexation of Crimea) is intentional and justified. This period was chosen due to the abundance of available information, necessitating a focused

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<sup>5</sup> Petr Gulenko, ‘RT (Russia Today): From Soft Power to the Weaponization of Information’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Non-State Actors in East-West Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2024), 699–715, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40546-4\\_52](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40546-4_52).

<sup>6</sup> Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska, and Michèle Knodt, ‘What Makes Strategic Narrative Efficient: Ukraine on Russian e-News Platforms’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 58, no. 4 (1 December 2023): 419–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367231161272>.

<sup>7</sup> Emil Edenborg, ‘“Traditional Values” and the Narrative of Gay Rights as Modernity: Sexual Politics beyond Polarization’, *Sexualities* 26, no. 1–2 (1 January 2023): 37–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607211008067>.

<sup>8</sup> Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.6504652>.

approach. The specific timeframe is significant because, since the annexation of Crimea, Russian strategic narratives targeting the West have intensified, with a further escalation following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>9</sup>

There is no agreed definition of “traditional values” when used within Russian political discourse.<sup>10</sup> As RT is used by the Russian state to influence foreign publics, an alignment with the flexible use of “traditional values” can therefore be expected.<sup>11</sup> This thesis hence recognises that there are multiple constructs of “traditional values”. These constructs can shift depending on the context in which the narrative appears in a broadcast, making “traditional values” a subject of research rather than a predefined concept.

To ensure a clear and structured argument throughout the thesis, the research question is addressed by answering the following sub-questions:

1. *How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of “traditional values” since its invasion of Crimea in 2014 until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022?*
2. *How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of “traditional values” from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 until October 2024?*

Each chapter addresses one sub-question, resulting in two chapters for the main analysis. This division of sub-questions is designed to provide a logical and comprehensive structure for the thesis. The first chapter focuses on the eight years starting from the annexation of Crimea by Russia on March 11, 2014. This marks the beginning of a new period of Russian hostility towards Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> It also marks the beginning of different Russian propaganda narratives, as can be seen in the case of Ukraine itself. Formerly, the narrative about Ukraine in Russian media revolved around being closely tied to Russia ethnically and historically, due to their shared past. However, after the full-scale invasion, a shift in the Russian narrative on Ukraine became

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<sup>9</sup> For an analysis on the attention that Russian strategic narratives have received before and after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine see: Kateřina Fridrichová, ‘Mugged by Reality: Russia’s Strategic Narratives and the War in Ukraine’, *Defense & Security Analysis* 39, no. 3 (3 July 2023): 281–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2023.2201018>.

<sup>10</sup> Elena Stepanova, “The Spiritual and Moral Foundation of Civilization in Every Nation for Thousands of Years”: The Traditional Values Discourse in Russia’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16, no. 2–3 (3 April 2015): 119–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2015.1068167>.

<sup>11</sup> Gulenko, ‘RT (Russia Today)’.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas D. Grant, ‘Annexation of Crimea’, *The American Journal of International Law* 109, no. 1 (2015): 68–95, <https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintlaw.109.1.0068>.

apparent, framing Ukraine more as part of the “other” side due to its perceived alignment with and influence from the West.<sup>13</sup> This changing narrative is thus expected to come forward in the RT broadcasts analysed in this thesis.

The second chapter assesses the Russian narrative during the period starting from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, until the end of the dataset: October 10, 2024. This approach allows the thesis to identify changes in the Russian strategic narrative regarding “traditional values”, as they have evolved in alignment with the country’s geopolitical initiatives.

## 1.2 Main Theoretical Concepts

An overreaching framework that connects the concepts that will be explored in the thesis is Russia’s use of hybrid warfare, which includes both military and non-military strategies. Central to this approach is the role of information warfare, a key element in Russia’s broader strategic objectives. Information warfare, as a subset of hybrid warfare, involves the use of various tools, including media, to shape perceptions and influence foreign populations.<sup>14</sup> Within this context, studying strategic narratives becomes essential for understanding how Russia constructs and spreads narratives to support its geopolitical aims. Acknowledging that strategic narratives are an integral part of Russian hybrid warfare offers a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on the audiences they target. As hybrid warfare is a concept which is widely studied, and has many definitions, this thesis focuses on strategic narratives, due to its focus on media and (international) politics.

The widely accepted definition of strategic narratives is the one that is constructed by Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle: “Strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors”.<sup>15</sup> The strategic narrative, in this case, is the narrative Russia presents in its foreign news broadcasts as part of its information warfare. In their book, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, Miskimmon et al. explain that there are three types of strategic narratives.<sup>16</sup> Firstly,

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<sup>13</sup> Chaban, Zhabotynska, and Knodt, ‘What Makes Strategic Narrative Efficient’; Bradshaw et al., ‘Strategic Storytelling’.

<sup>14</sup> Sascha-Dominik Dov Bachmann, Dries Putter, and Guy Duczynski, ‘Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation: A Ukraine War Perspective’, *Global Policy* 14, no. 5 (2023): 858–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13257>.

<sup>15</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*, 284.

<sup>16</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*.

there is a strategic narrative which explains a system of how the world works. These include the Cold War, and the War on Terror. These narratives show how the world is structured, who the players are, and how the system works. The Cold War narrative for example, immediately shows that there is a bipolar world. Secondly, there is an identity narrative, which is best understood as a narrative which sets the norms, values, and goals of a political actor. Lastly, there are narratives which explain the desires for certain policies, called policy narratives. All these narratives are linked at various levels. Because the research question of this thesis specifically mentions traditional values, the focus lies on identity narratives.<sup>17</sup>

Focusing on strategic narratives, particularly identity narratives, the practice of othering frequently emerges and can be anticipated in the narratives within RT broadcasts as well. This is a process within narratives in which the “other” is used to describe the “self” through mutually constructing the “other” group and the “self” group about each other. The relation between the two identity groups is often hierarchical, with the “self” generally being superior to the “other”. This superiority is usually implicit, because if the “self” group is set as the standard, this gives superiority over the “other” group which does automatically not fit the standard. Othering is an inherently human process and, therefore, is not a new concept in (political) science.<sup>18</sup> In times of war, political discourse that “others” the opposing side, or in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war the enemy, serves to bolster public support for the conflict. As portraying the “other” is used to describe the “self”, portraying the “other” as the evil, support can be gained for the “self” as the protector against this evil. Within the political discourse of war, othering can be used to portray the enemy through extremely negative representations, characterizing them as evil.<sup>19</sup> This tactic functions as a sociopolitical weapon, undermining the shared sense of humanity and fracturing societies into smaller, polarized groups. The polarizing effects of othering can lead to severe consequences, such as discrimination and even genocide. In this case, othering involves framing the “self” as inherently good and the “other” as inherently bad.<sup>20</sup>

In academic discourse, the link between othering and strategic narratives has already been established, including in the context of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Claessen concluded her paper “The making of a Narrative: The use of Geopolitical Othering in Russian Strategic Narratives during the Ukraine Crisis” (2023) that the type of othering in Russia’s

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<sup>17</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Lajos L. Brons, ‘Othering, an Analysis’, *Transcience, a Journal of Global Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 69–90.

<sup>19</sup> Yasmin Saikia and Chad Haines, eds., ‘Introduction’, in *On Othering: Processes and Politics of Unpeace* (Athabasca University Press, 2024), <https://directory.doabooks.org/handle/20.500.12854/148479>.

<sup>20</sup> Saikia and Haines.



strategic narratives changed depending on the state of the war. She found that the strategic narrative of the Russians actively made use of othering, and changed focus from solely a Russian-Ukrainian conflict to a conflict between Russia and the European Union.<sup>21</sup> Strategic narratives and othering, as a form of hybrid warfare, give this thesis a delineated theoretical framework to analyse RT broadcasts of the period of interest of this thesis. As explained in section 1.1, “traditional values” are composed of multiple constructs. When defining “traditional values,” an act of othering occurs, where these values are contrasted with alternative value systems. This process creates an “other” that helps clarify which specific construct of “traditional values” is being emphasized in each context.

### 1.3 Literature Review

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, academics have found a renewed interest in the strategic narratives that Russia outs via various channels. These narratives have intensified after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While during the Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014, the most prominent Russian narrative was portraying itself as a “welcoming, modern country”, by 2022 this had changed with Russian TV channels describing the Ukrainian government as “Fascists”.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis analyses strategic narratives in RT broadcasts. In the field of strategic narrative research, the work of Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2024) is frequently referenced when defining strategic narratives.<sup>23</sup> Their study analyses the strategic narratives employed by Russia in the context of the 2014 conflict with Ukraine, focusing on how these narratives were constructed and promoted. This study highlights that Russia soft power strategies through various channels, aiming to shape international perceptions. One prominent tool was Russian state-controlled television, which had a significant audience across the post-Soviet space. This played a pivotal role in spreading narratives that aligned with Russia’s geopolitical interests. As a result, the populations of countries such as Lithuania were particularly susceptible to Russian messaging, which sought to justify and legitimize the 2014

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<sup>21</sup> Eva Claessen, ‘The Making of a Narrative: The Use of Geopolitical Othering in Russian Strategic Narratives during the Ukraine Crisis’, *Media, War & Conflict* 16, no. 1 (1 March 2023): 82–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352211029529>.

<sup>22</sup> Chaban, Zhabotynska, and Knodt, ‘What Makes Strategic Narrative Efficient’; Joanna Szostek, ‘Defence and Promotion of Desired State Identity in Russia’s Strategic Narrative’, *Geopolitics* 22, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 571–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1214910>.

<sup>23</sup> Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, ‘Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, ed. Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies (Oxford University Press, 2024), 192, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198843061.013.25>.

invasion of Crimea. These narratives were carefully constructed to resonate with historical, cultural, and political ties within the region, amplifying their impact.<sup>24</sup> These scholars, who specialize in strategic narratives, further emphasized the potential for narrative analysis of Russian news media. They recommended this as a promising avenue for future research, highlighting the critical role that news media play in facilitating the narrative alignment of politicians.<sup>25</sup>

There is a body of research on Russian strategic narratives, frequently analysed in the context of the war in Ukraine. The 2021 study of Pupcenoks and Seltzer examines the Russian Strategic narratives within statements posted on the website of the Russian Mission to the United Nations, and that of statements on the website of the Russian president. This study mostly focussed on the Russian “Responsibility to Protect” narrative. This narrative is used by Russia to explain the need to intervene in post-Soviet countries to “save lives” of ethnic or Russian-speaking populations in those countries. Pupcenoks and Seltzer draw on previous research of Miskimmon et. al. which explains that strategic narrative analysis is mostly conducted on presidential speeches and interviews and widens this by using diplomatic postings on official websites.<sup>26</sup> This work broadens the discourse on Russian strategic narratives and demonstrates that it is an increasingly significant area of interest for International Relations scholars.

Research on Russian strategic narratives is expanding, yet discourse on “traditional values” in Russia remains largely focused on gender. Scholars often view Russia’s stance on gay rights as a contrast to the West’s progressive movements. However, Edenberg (2023) criticizes this, arguing that LBGT rights are subject to moral panic within Russia partly due to the liberal West framing these rights as a marker of being on the “right side of history”.<sup>27</sup> Edenberg states that Russia’s “conservative turn,” characterized by an emphasis on “traditional values” in Russian discourse, can also be interpreted as a response to Western LGBT rights and the criticism directed at Russia for its shortcomings in this area. But in contrast also highlights the role of local elites in portraying LGBT rights as a threat to Russian national security, beyond mere reaction to Western pressure.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, 177.

<sup>25</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, 319.

<sup>26</sup> Juris Pupcenoks and Eric James Seltzer, ‘Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the “Near Abroad”’, *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (July 2021): 757–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.54>.

<sup>27</sup> Edenberg, ““Traditional Values” and the Narrative of Gay Rights as Modernity”.

<sup>28</sup> Edenberg.

Another construct of “traditional values”, religion, has received comparatively less scholarly attention. The book *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (2019) examines the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping the narrative of “traditional values”.<sup>29</sup> Loukianov et al. argue in their chapter “A History of Russian Conservatism, from the 18th Century to the End of the 20th Century” that Russia has long maintained a stable foundation of conservative ideals, including norms and values rooted in its historical and cultural identity. These conservative principles stand in opposition to the liberal values associated with the West, which has often been portrayed as the geopolitical embodiment of such ideals. This contrast has allowed Russian politicians to leverage conservative values to position themselves against Western influence.<sup>30</sup>

In the same book, Hill observes that gay rights are framed by the Russian Orthodox Church as being incompatible with Christian values, reinforcing the association between conservative ideology and religious principles.<sup>31</sup> Grishaeva, in her chapter, employs critical discourse analysis to examine discourses on several Russian Orthodox websites. This qualitative approach enables her to uncover the deeper meanings and implications of the narratives presented on these platforms. Her findings reveal that these websites construct a polarity of “us” (Russian Orthodox) versus “them” (the West), portraying the West as a “post-Christian” society and criticizing it for abandoning traditional Christian values.<sup>32</sup> These chapters demonstrate that Christian values are a central element driving Russian criticism of the West and that othering is present within this narrative. Consequently, this construct of “traditional values” is best understood as referring to traditional Christian values.

As this thesis will use RT as primary source material for analysis, I have reviewed the existing literature on Russian state narratives in Russia Today (RT). However, I identified a lack of research specifically dedicated to analysing RT television news broadcasts to evaluate the state narratives they communicate. The most relevant research on this topic examines RT news

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<sup>29</sup> Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Boston, UNITED STATES: BRILL, 2019), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvtilburg-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6853606>.

<sup>30</sup> Mikhail Loukianov et al., ‘A History of Russian Conservatism, from the 18th Century to the End of the 20th Century’, in *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Boston, UNITED STATES: BRILL, 2019), 36–76, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvtilburg-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6853606>.

<sup>31</sup> Caroline Hill, ‘Framing “Gay Propaganda”: Morality Policy Arguments and the Russian Orthodox Church’ (Brill, 2019), [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004408005\\_016](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004408005_016).

<sup>32</sup> Ekaterina Grishaeva, “‘Making Europe Great Again’: Anti-Western Criticism from Orthodox Conservative Actors Online”, in *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Boston, United States: BRILL, 2019), 234–56, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvtilburg-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6853606>.

articles available online and on social media platforms. Hellman's book *Security, Disinformation, and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage About Sweden* (2024), provides valuable insights through a similar study that uses RT as a primary source to analyse Russian strategic narratives in the context of Sweden. This book, edited by Miskimmon, adopts his definition of strategic narrative. While the study offers interesting and relevant conclusions, it differs from the approach of this thesis in that it does not focus exclusively on RT television news. Instead, it analyses a broader mix of media sources, including RT and Sputnik news outlets, as well as social media and government websites.<sup>33</sup> While the research centres on Sweden as a "victim" of Russian strategic narratives in the media, it does not offer a comprehensive view of the narratives Russia employs across the entire Western world. This means that the conclusion of Hellman's study is mostly focused on specific events in the case of Sweden, such as the context of Swedish politics, and events that solely happened in Sweden.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the results of Hellman's study are not that compatible with explaining the greater strategic narratives that this thesis aims to explain. Still, the study of Hellman has found useful insights into the Russian strategic narratives in news outlets as a basis for this thesis. The way these news media use local news in Sweden to instigate polarisation is the most promising. Hellman observed that these Russian media outlets leverage existing controversial discussions, such as feminist ideas and gender issues, to polarize the debate, presenting two opposing sides: the defenders of traditional values and the advocates of feminist rights. By framing the defenders of traditional values as being unsupported by the government, the media aimed to further polarize the debate.<sup>35</sup>

The academic discourse on Russian strategic narratives, to which Hellman contributes, is a rapidly growing field. This can be attributed to the increasing use of Russian state-controlled media as a tool for advancing both soft and hard power. Hellman's conclusion, that Russian media exploit existing controversial discussions to polarize debates, raises the important question if this should be viewed as an exercise in sharp or soft power. Glazunova et al. engage with this debate in their study "Soft Power, Sharp Power? Exploring RT's Dual Role in Russia's Diplomatic Toolkit" (2023). This study fills the gap in academic research regarding whether Russia primarily uses RT as a tool to counter U.S. influence in foreign countries (soft power) or to achieve strategic objectives, often through the promotion of disinformation and conspiracy

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<sup>33</sup> Maria Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden*, The Palgrave Macmillan Series in International Political Communication (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 125, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58747-4>.

<sup>34</sup> Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives*.

<sup>35</sup> Hellman, 186.

theories (sharp power). Through an analysis of RT content shared in Facebook groups, the study concludes that the Russian narrative in RT has shifted from soft power to sharp power. This conclusion is drawn from the prominence of conspiracy theories found within the English-language cluster of their research, which is not geographically linked but demonstrates a notable prevalence of disinformation tactics.<sup>36</sup>

In the 2024 article “Two International Propaganda Models: Comparing RT and CGTN’s 2020 US Election Coverage”, Moore and Colley compare the how Russian and Chinese international news outlets were used for propaganda purposes during the 2020 U.S. election. They describe RT’s approach as a “partisan parasite propaganda model”, a term they develop through an extensive content and qualitative analysis of news articles and social media posts from RT and the Chinese state-controlled CGTN in the U.S. Their study suggests that RT functions as a “blood parasite” by mimicking the style and format of other media outlets in the countries in which it operates, hoping its content will be perceived as if a domestic news source produced it. This includes adopting topic selections from (right-wing) media outlets and emulating their writing style. Moore and Colley argue that the more RT aligns itself with U.S. media, the less it appears to be propaganda. Moreover, they identify “fighting against Woke liberal elites” as a recurring theme in RT’s U.S. coverage. These findings align the conclusions of Glazunova et al. that RT is increasingly employed by Russia to exert sharp power, particularly through the promotion of conspiracy theories and disinformation.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order: RT as Populist Pariah*” (2024) by Hutchings et al. explores RT as a medium for spreading disinformation. And the Russian aversion to the liberal world order.<sup>38</sup> The authors analyse RT and its impact on societies abroad through a wide lens; the overreaching question analysed in this book is “What is RT”.<sup>39</sup> The authors emphasize RT’s dual role as both a disruptor of the liberal order and a promoter of populist rhetoric. Through case studies, they analyse RT’s coverage of key geopolitical events, such as the Ukraine crisis and Western electoral campaigns, uncovering patterns of disinformation and populist rhetoric.<sup>40</sup> Hutchings et al. argue that RT critiques the liberal world

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<sup>36</sup> Sofya Glazunova et al., ‘Soft Power, Sharp Power? Exploring RT’s Dual Role in Russia’s Diplomatic Toolkit’, *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 16 (10 December 2023): 3292–3317, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2155485>.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Moore and Thomas Colley, ‘Two International Propaganda Models: Comparing RT and CGTN’s 2020 US Election Coverage’, *Journalism Practice* 18, no. 5 (27 May 2024): 1306–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2086157>.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Hutchings et al., *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order : RT as Populist Pariah* (Cornell University Press, 2024), <https://directory.doabooks.org/handle/20.500.12854/147488>.

<sup>39</sup> Hutchings et al., 5.

<sup>40</sup> Hutchings et al., *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order*.

order, as it is a perceived threat to the Russian authoritarian world order. Furthermore, the book argues that RT finds credibility with populists outside of Russia.<sup>41</sup>

The academic discourse surrounding the topic of this thesis is well-established, with a solid body of existing research that provides a strong foundation for a Master's thesis on the strategic narrative within RT's news reporting. Analysing the discourse on this topic reveals certain trends and gaps in the literature. Firstly, Russian state narratives, whether conveyed through social media, news outlets, or official press releases, receive considerable attention in academic scholarship. A common agreement among scholars is that Russia uses its media to influence public opinion in Western countries, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine. Miskimmon et al. demonstrated that Russian state media played a key role in this effort in 2014.<sup>42</sup> Pupcenoks and Seltzer further highlighted the connection between Russian narratives and international relations, illustrating how the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine has been used to justify Russian intervention in post-Soviet countries, framing it as a duty to protect their populations.<sup>43</sup>

RT is a news outlet that has received considerable attention in Western academic circles. Hellman's study, which focuses on Sweden as a victim of Russian strategic narratives, overlaps with the work of Miskimmon, particularly in their shared definition of strategic narrative.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Miskimmon's co-authorship of Hellman's study highlights the growing academic interest in using RT as primary source material, signifying the increasing scholarly focus on this area of research. While Miskimmon and Hellman delve into the narratives presented by RT, Glazunova et al. have developed these findings into a theory of sharp power. This sharp power theory can be seen as a prominent trend in RT-related research.<sup>45</sup> Both Moore and Colley, Glazunova et al., and Hutchings et al. have not shied away from explicitly describing how Russia leverages RT to enhance its influence, exert power, and manipulate public opinion in Western countries.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hutchings et al., 'What Is Rt?'

<sup>42</sup> Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*.

<sup>43</sup> Pupcenoks and Seltzer, 'Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the "Near Abroad"'.

<sup>44</sup> Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives*.

<sup>45</sup> Glazunova et al., 'Soft Power, Sharp Power?'

<sup>46</sup> Moore and Colley, 'Two International Propaganda Models'; Glazunova et al., 'Soft Power, Sharp Power?'; Hutchings et al., *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order*.

## 1.4 Innovative aspects

Following a review of the existing literature, it is crucial to determine how this thesis positions itself within the broader academic landscape and to identify both the academic and societal gaps it seeks to address. Regarding the academic gap, a particularly notable omission is the limited research dedicated to the concept of strategic narratives in the context of RT's news broadcasts. Contemporary research mostly focuses on Russian-language television in former soviet states, such as that of Miskimmon et al.<sup>47</sup> Alternatively, the research often focuses on presidential speeches or official statements made by the government, as seen in the study by Pupcenoks and Seltzer.<sup>48</sup> This creates a gap that this thesis seeks to address. By examining the use of strategic narratives within RT's English-language news broadcasts, the thesis aims to provide insight into how these narratives are communicated to Western audiences.

As discussed in the literature review section of this thesis, another gap in the existing literature is that contemporary research on RT does not solely focus on this medium. The study of Hellmann, Moore and Colley, Glazunova and Hutchings et al are examples of that. These all either use a mix of sources, including social media and conventional media or compare two different cases to each other. Where the study of Hellman focuses on Russian strategic narratives in a specific country (Sweden) while making use of a diverse set of primary sources, this thesis turns this around.<sup>49</sup> The goal of this thesis is to understand higher-order strategic narratives, of one specific media outlet. Therefore, this thesis focuses on Russian strategic narratives towards the West as a whole, and within one media outlet: RT. This research will yield concrete results upon which future studies can build.

Furthermore, Hellmann, Moore and Colley, Glazunova, and Hutchings et al. rely on datasets spanning at most two years for their primary sources, whereas this thesis utilizes a dataset covering nearly a decade. This extended timeframe provides an opportunity to analyse whether these strategic narratives evolve in response to changing (geo)political circumstances, therefore creating new academic insights into how these narratives are formed.

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<sup>47</sup> Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, 'Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy', 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Pupcenoks and Seltzer, 'Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the "Near Abroad"';

For an example of research on strategic narratives within Russian-language news see: Robert S. Hinck, Randolph Kluver, and Skye Cooley, 'Russia Re-Envisions the World: Strategic Narratives in Russian Broadcast and News Media during 2015', *Russian Journal of Communication* 10, no. 1 (March 2018): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2017.1421096>.

<sup>49</sup> Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives*; Moore and Colley, 'Two International Propaganda Models'; Hutchings et al., *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order*; Glazunova et al., 'Soft Power, Sharp Power?'

Regarding the societal relevance of the thesis, the most notable aspect is the war in Ukraine. Since the onset of the war, Western governments have been increasingly concerned about Russian disinformation, which has been disseminated through the news media.<sup>50</sup> Disinformation in the form of Russian narratives around values has already been identified in countries situated between the ideological spheres of Russia and the West. In Georgia, Russian narratives claim that Western influence has led the country to abandon its true values.<sup>51</sup> To be able to act appropriately on this foreign interference, Western societies must understand how Russia utilizes news media to undermine these societies. Only by grasping how Russia uses these platforms to influence populations can appropriate countermeasures be developed. Although the RT website is currently blocked in the European Union, it remains easily accessible via VPNs, and its content continues to circulate on social media platforms like X.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, developing an understanding of how strategic narratives are crafted within Russian state media enables politicians to devise more targeted approaches to countering these narratives.

### 1.5 Primary Sources

The primary sources this thesis uses to answer the research questions are transcripts of news broadcasts of RT. Transcripts of these news broadcasts are available on the website of the GDELT Project.<sup>53</sup> These transcripts are coded and are available via a custom interface for exploring and filtering GDELT project RT archives.<sup>54</sup> This interface makes it possible to search the GDELT project RT archives based on words in the title, the program, the description and the transcript itself. In the RT Archive Explorer, searching for transcripts of RT television programs containing the words “traditional values” “Ukraine” and “West”, and selecting

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Parliament to Call for Action against Russian Disinformation on Ukraine | 20-01-2025 | News | European Parliament’, 16 January 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2025-01-20/4/parliament-to-call-for-action-against-russian-disinformation-on-ukraine>.

<sup>51</sup> Niklas Nilsson and Mikael Weissmann, ‘Beyond Cyber and Disinformation: Russian Hybrid Warfare Tactics in Georgia’, in *Russian Warfare and Influence: States in the Intersection Between East and West* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 129–52.

<sup>52</sup> Tiffany Hsu and Steven Lee Myers, ‘Europe Banned Russia’s RT Network. Its Content Is Still Spreading.’, *The New York Times*, 30 May 2024, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/30/business/media/russia-rt-disinformation-europe-ban.html>.

<sup>53</sup> ‘The GDELT Project’, The GDELT Project, accessed 15 January 2025, <https://www.gdeltproject.org/>.

<sup>54</sup> The RT Archive Explorer is an interface accessible through Python coding. This tool enables users to search through 198,035 transcripts of various news broadcasts and television programs from RT. The interface allows filtering by date, program, title content, description content, and transcript content. Since the interface is built using downloaded transcripts, it is not publicly accessible. However, the transcripts themselves are publicly available for download via the GDELT Project website: <https://www.gdeltproject.org/>.



sources dated from the annexation of Crimea, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2014 until the end of the dataset, the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2024, yields a corpus of 401 transcripts. This is still too broad for a Master's thesis. By excluding broadcasts from the same day and those that do not focus on news (e.g., sports television shows), this results in a corpus of 103 broadcasts with broad temporal coverage. The distribution of the broadcasts in the selections is visible in Tables 1.1 and 1.2. The dataset formed the basis for a qualitative narrative analysis. When transcripts in the database are incomplete due to transcription issues, the broadcast is analysed directly using the linked video provided in the data. A narrative analysis has been conducted on all broadcasts within the corpus. As O'Loughlin, Miskimmon, and Roselle explain, strategic narrative analysis must be done systematically and transparently.<sup>55</sup> Comprehensiveness of the data is never a goal when performing narrative analysis, because this is unreachable because of the scale of the data available.<sup>56</sup> What has not been said is also considered, as this might include elements of interest for the analysis. During the analysis, guests and speakers are examined, as their identities can offer insights into the intended audience of the broadcast. Hellman's study highlights that RT tends to invite guests who align with its ideological stance, suggesting that the choice of guests reflects the target audience of the show.<sup>57</sup> For instance, inviting a conservative guest with a following in Europe may indicate that RT aims to appeal to a conservative European audience.

As is visible in Table 1.1, the distribution of primary sources selected is skewed. There is a gap in the primary source material in 2015 and 2016. The GDELT project archive does not have any archived broadcasts of 2015 and 2016. Considering this gap in the data is crucial during the analysis in Chapter 2, as those years were marked by significant events in the Western world, such as the 2016 BREXIT referendum and the United States presidential election that same year. Both events witnessed a surge in conservative movements and a setback for liberalism.<sup>58</sup>

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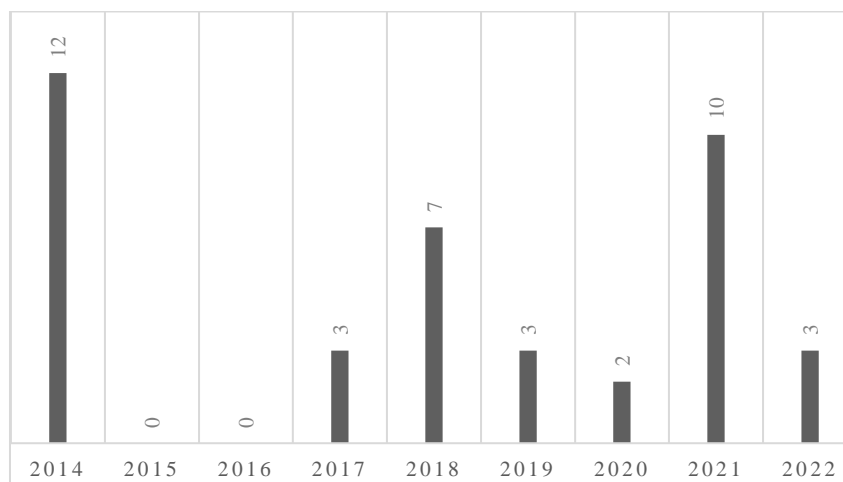
<sup>55</sup> Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, 'Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, ed. Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies (Oxford University Press, 2024), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198843061.013.25>.

<sup>56</sup> Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*.

<sup>57</sup> Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives*, 36.

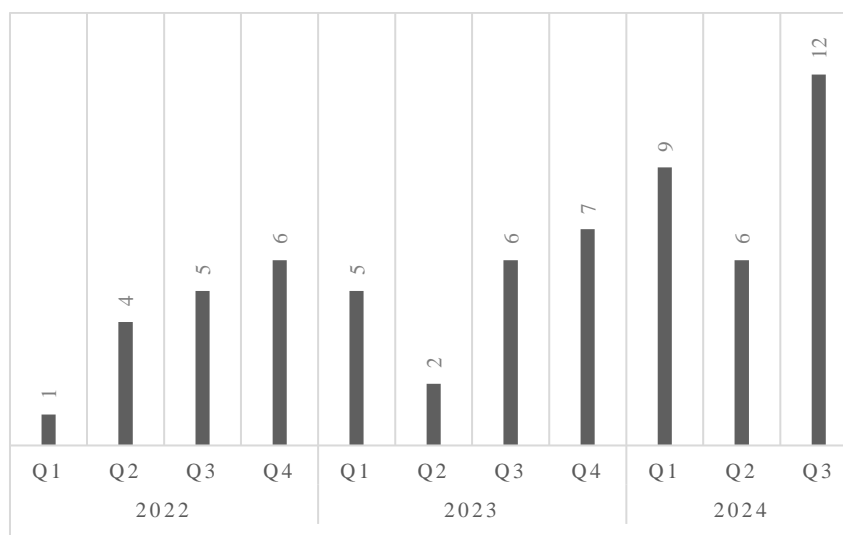
<sup>58</sup> John Pendlebury and Loes and Veldpaus, 'Heritage and Brexit', *Planning Theory & Practice* 19, no. 3 (27 May 2018): 448–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2018.1428337>.

**Table 1.1: Distribution of primary sources in Chapter 1 (n=40)**



**Source: Own calculations**

**Table 1.2: Distribution of primary sources Chapter 2 (n =63)**



**Source: Own calculations**

## 1.6 Methodology

The research method often used to examine strategic narratives, is narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method in which the researcher explores the structure, themes, and framing of stories to reveal their ideological, cultural, and social significance. This method highlights how “different parties, perhaps even different cultures, make a different sense of the same thing”.<sup>59</sup> To keep consistency, this definition of Miskimmon et al. is used. The method of narrative analysis strongly aligns with the theory of strategic narrative, defined by the same scholars.

Narrative analysis is a contested method in international relations (IR) and political science. The reasons for this are that scholars often people consider it to be storytelling, which is not something that scientists are meant to do. However, there are some clear advantages of using narrative analysis in IR research. Originating in literary studies, narrative analysis has come a long way to be applied in IR. Especially in history, narratives are influential. These historical narratives are fundamental to human beings. Narratives also provide reflections on culture in a societal setting.<sup>60</sup> Specifically when using RT news articles as a primary source, narrative analysis is the most logical choice as a research method. It allows for an examination of how stories are constructed, whose perspectives are prioritized, and how these narratives intend to shape public opinion and political discourse. By focusing on the framing, themes, and language used in RT news articles, this method offers valuable insights into the interplay between media, politics, and culture, making it a fitting choice for this type of qualitative research.<sup>61</sup>

With the narrative analysis that is performed in this study, special attention is given to the way RT makes use of othering techniques within their narratives. As discussed in section 2.1, othering is often found within Russian strategic narratives.<sup>62</sup> Regarding the concept of “traditional values”, studying how this othering has constructed multiple constructs of “traditional values” provides an opportunity to analyse how these constructs are enhanced by this strategic narrative. Furthermore, the narrative analysis in this study considers the possibility of changes in the strategic narrative over time. As a result, the development of the narrative

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<sup>59</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, ‘Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy’, 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Spencer, ‘Narrative Analysis as an Approach in IR’, in *Romantic Narratives in International Politics: Pirates, Rebels and Mercenaries* (Manchester, UNITED KINGDOM: Manchester University Press, 2016), 13–44, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvtilburg-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5446721>.

<sup>61</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, ‘Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy’, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Claessen, ‘The Making of a Narrative’.

between the two periods analysed in this thesis is examined to understand how a strategic narrative is formed.

The thesis consists of two analytical chapters, each addressing one sub-question. In these analytical chapters, primary sources are examined to explore Russia's strategic narrative of positioning itself as the protector of "traditional values", linking these narratives to broader geopolitical initiatives with support from academic secondary sources, thereby providing a clear structure for the thesis. Regarding the division into two unequal periods, careful consideration has been given. Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 had a less significant global impact compared to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>63</sup> As a result, a longer period is needed in the first sub-question will be advantageous for identifying trends in the data. In addition, chapters will be divided into logical sections. Chapter 2 is divided by the election of wartime president Zelensky on 21 April 2019, who is the current president of Ukraine. This marks an end to political struggles in the country which included the Orange Revolution, the Maidan Revolution, Poroshenko's difficult Presidency during the Crimea and the Donbas war. Zelensky, at the time known for being an actor on television, was criticised by Poroshenko for being weak and therefore being a threat to Putin. The campaign marked a major step for Ukraine because the question if Ukraine should become a NATO and EU member was at stake. With the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, this was seen as an important step towards a safe future for Ukraine.<sup>64</sup> Chapter 3 is divided by the Russian parliamentary elections, in which "traditional values" were a main topic, as well as 2024, being named the "Year of the Family" by Putin.<sup>65</sup> Which placed extra emphasis on "traditional values" in that year.

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<sup>63</sup> Maryna Rabinovych and Anne Pintsch, 'From the 2014 Annexation of Crimea to the 2022 Russian War on Ukraine: Path Dependence and Socialization in the EU-Ukraine Relations', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62, no. 5 (2024): 1239–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13572>.

<sup>64</sup> Melinda Haring, 'Will a Comic Actor Become Ukraine's Next President?', *Foreign Affairs*, 2 April 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2019-04-02/will-comic-actor-become-ukraines-next-president>.

<sup>65</sup> Irina Smolevskaya, 'Putin's "Year of the Family"', *Political Research Associates*, 16 May 2024, <https://politicalresearch.org/2024/05/16/putins-year-family>.

## Chapter 2: The construction of a narrative (2014-2022)

In this first analytical chapter, narratives within RT broadcasts are analysed to assess the extent to which narratives around “traditional values” strategic narrative, and how these strategic narratives are established through RT. The period in which RT broadcasts are analysed in this chapter reaches from the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2014 to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. This corresponds to the period in which an armed conflict was present between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas and Crimea. Covering eight years, this period is characterized by many geopolitical initiatives and events, including the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, and the annexation of Crimea.<sup>66</sup> Overall, this part of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict did not get as much attention in European news and politics as the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine did. Events in this war that got much attention were the Minsk agreements, and the association treaty that was signed between the European Union and Ukraine in 2017.<sup>67</sup> After the Minsk II agreement was signed, the Ukrainians sought rapprochement with the European Union and NATO to ensure long-term safety. With Volodymyr Zelensky elected as President of Ukraine in 2019, this process was sped up. However, in 2021 the first signs of a second phase of Russian aggression became visible, with large-scale military exercises and troop buildup at the Ukrainian border. This eventually turned out to be the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022 and marks the end of the period that is analysed in this chapter.<sup>68</sup>

Strategic narratives within this period have been analysed by scholars, mostly focussing on Russian strategic narratives within Russia. These narratives have been found to focus on discrediting European and American involvement in Ukrainian politics. Positioning the West as an aggressor within Ukraine helps to gain support for the Russian annexation of Crimea and the interference within Eastern-Ukrainian territories.<sup>69</sup> Hinck et. al. identified Russian strategic narratives in light of the conflict in Ukraine in 2015 but concluded that “the Russian narrative

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<sup>66</sup> Daniel Treisman, ‘Why Putin Took Crimea’, *Foreign Affairs*, 18 April 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/why-russian-president-putin-took-crimea-from-ukraine>.

<sup>67</sup> Kristian Åtland, ‘Destined for Deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the Unfulfilled Minsk Agreements’, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 2 (3 March 2020): 122–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1720443>.

<sup>68</sup> A comprehensive timeline of events that happened in the crisis that followed after the Russian annexation of Crimea is made by Nigel Walker to be presented to the British House of Commons: Nigel Walker, ‘Conflict in Ukraine: A Timeline (2014 – Eve of 2022 Invasion)’, Research Briefing (House of Commons Library, 18 February 2025), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9476/>.

<sup>69</sup> Hinck, Kluver, and Cooley, ‘Russia Re-Envisions the World’.

fails for non-Russian peoples” because of the narratives supposedly solely being in Russian.<sup>70</sup> Although Szostek argued that the impact of Russian strategic narratives aimed towards foreign audiences was low at the time because of the low profile of English language state media like RT at the time, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle already touched upon the fact that the Russian narratives around “traditional values” and the war with Ukraine was part of their “world narrative”.<sup>71</sup> This chapter analyses how the narrative of Russia as a protector of “traditional values” was constructed in RT broadcasts during this period. First, the period until the election of the Ukrainian wartime president Zelensky in 2019 will be assessed, after which the period until the full-scale invasion will be assessed. This chapter shows a narrative around “traditional values” that comes forward during certain events and gains strategic use throughout the years. At the end of the chapter, the first sub-question of this thesis will be answered:

*How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of “traditional values” since its invasion of Crimea in 2014 until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022?*

## **2.1 2014 - 2019: An Unknown War**

The start of the period analysed in this chapter is that of the annexation of Crimea by Russia. During this time, as seen from the dataset in Table 1.1, there have been several broadcasts that touch upon the subjects of “traditional values”, “West”, and “Ukraine”. Broadcasts including these subjects are spread out during the period of this section. This leads to the question of whether the narrative at this time is consistent enough to be called a strategic narrative. Nonetheless, two main topics were the narrative around “traditional values” have been identified, and will be discussed in this section, namely European politics, and AIDS and ideology.

### **2.1.1 European Politics**

The Use of “traditional values” within this conflict and geopolitical context is at the interest of this chapter. While there is no data available based on the criteria for this thesis from broadcasts during or immediately after the annexation of Crimea, the first instance where the use of the concepts of interest becomes visible is in the news broadcast on April 7, 2014. Just after the

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<sup>70</sup> Hinck, Kluver, and Cooley.

<sup>71</sup> Joanna Szostek, ‘Defence and Promotion of Desired State Identity in Russia’s Strategic Narrative’, *Geopolitics* 22, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 571–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1214910>; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*, 179.

elections in Hungary, the victory of Prime Minister Victor Orbán is discussed in this news broadcast. In an interview with the former chairman of the Bruges Group, a think tank in favour of BREXIT, Orbán is argued to be the one “protecting traditional values” in Hungary by RT.<sup>72</sup> Orbán is argued to be “not only the one who “actually protect the not only the national interest but also traditional Christian values”.<sup>73</sup> The chairman links this to European politics by stating that the “socially liberal elite” do not value these values, but that Hungarian people value Christianity and the family as the cornerstone of society. He also links this to Ukraine, stating that the reason that extremist right parties did so well in the 2014 Hungarian election is these “traditional values” and the fact that the EU is moving away from this. The EU is said to be hypocritical because it does deal with these parties in Ukraine.<sup>74</sup> The fact that Hungary is promoted as the protector of “traditional values” shows that Russia regards Hungary as part of the “us” group with regard to othering. The stark contrast with the critique on the EU then again shows this othering into practice, as the European Union is scaled into the “other group”. Good relations between Hungary and Russia explain this contrast, as Hungary has good financial and diplomatic relations with Russia.<sup>75</sup>

Elections in Western countries are approached differently than the elections in Hungary within RT broadcasts. Western elections are known to be a target for Russian interference, with the Russians performing cyber attacks, espionage, and manipulation of public opinion.<sup>76</sup> As it is believed that politicians can shape public opinion, and are not just reacting to their electorate’s will, strategic narratives are constructs that are used to shape these public opinions.<sup>77</sup> In the program “In the NOW” program transmitted on June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014, the link between European politics and “traditional values” is made. However, it is opened with the latest news on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The broadcast was opened by announcing the news of the airstrike that was conducted in Luhansk on June the 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014 by Ukrainian rockets. While the

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<sup>72</sup> ‘Interviews Culture Art Documentaries and Sports : Russia Today : April 7, 2014 5:00am-8:01am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 7, accessed 25 February 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20140407\\_090000\\_Interviews\\_Culture\\_Art\\_Documentaries\\_and\\_Sports](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20140407_090000_Interviews_Culture_Art_Documentaries_and_Sports).

<sup>73</sup> ‘Interviews Culture Art Documentaries and Sports : Russia Today : April 7, 2014 5:00am-8:01am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 7.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Interviews Culture Art Documentaries and Sports : Russia Today : April 7, 2014 5:00am-8:01am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>75</sup> Zsuzsanna Végh, ‘Hungary: The EU’s Troublemaker’, KEEPING EUROPEANS TOGETHER (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21671.17>.

<sup>76</sup> Erik Brattberg and Tim Maurer, ‘Five European Experiences With Russian Election Interference’, RUSSIAN ELECTION INTERFERENCE (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21009.6>.

<sup>77</sup> Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose, eds., *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War* (London: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770734>.

Organisation for Security and Co-operation Europe and the US news channel CNN concluded that there is indeed a large chance that this missile attack was conducted by the Ukrainian Airforce, the actual number of victims was twenty, not 181. The program also covers the 2014 European Parliament elections, featuring an interview with University of Massachusetts economics professor Richard Wolff. He argues that the West provoked or could have prevented the war in Ukraine, viewing NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, as part of a broader goal to isolate Russia.<sup>78</sup> He reasoned that the cause why people in the European Union want to go back to "traditional values" can be linked to the European economic system and the collapse of Western society. Therefore, he says, people want to go back to the former society and "traditional values".<sup>79</sup> In this election of the European Council, Eurosceptic parties gained unprecedented support amongst European voters.<sup>80</sup> It is in the interest of Russia to have Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament as they are often found being pro-Russian.<sup>81</sup>

Because this section covers 5 years, multiple elections in Western countries have been held during this timespan. The RT broadcast covering international issues, "World Apart" of September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, covers the German elections of September 24<sup>th</sup> of that year. In this election, the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland made their debut in the German Bundestag. In this broadcast of "Worlds Apart", the former chief editor of the German newspaper die Zeit Theo Sommer was interviewed as a guest. The presenter of the television program asks Sommer about the German and European Union's stance on "traditional values". Drawing upon LGBT rights and abortion she argues that those values cannot be discussed on the same foot as liberal values. She notes that "not agreeing with those liberal traditions was assumed socially backwards". Sommer does not agree with this. Here, conventional European political parties are framed as the attackers of these "traditional values", and the far-right political parties are framed as the parties that protect these "traditional values".<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> RICHARD WOLFF | 14339pt March 15 and 2024, 'The Source: Economics of the Ukraine and Gaza Wars & the Rise of Artificial Intelligence', RDWolff, accessed 25 February 2025, [https://www.rdwolff.com/the\\_source\\_economics\\_of\\_the\\_ukraine\\_and\\_gaza\\_wars\\_the\\_rise\\_of\\_artificial\\_intelligence](https://www.rdwolff.com/the_source_economics_of_the_ukraine_and_gaza_wars_the_rise_of_artificial_intelligence).

<sup>79</sup> 'Interviews Culture Art Documentaries and Sports : RT : June 3, 2014 2:00pm-5:01pm EDT', 3 June 2014, [http://archive.org/details/RT\\_20140603\\_180000\\_Interviews\\_Culture\\_Art\\_Documentaries\\_and\\_Sports](http://archive.org/details/RT_20140603_180000_Interviews_Culture_Art_Documentaries_and_Sports).

<sup>80</sup> Oliver Treib, 'The Voter Says No, but Nobody Listens: Causes and Consequences of the Eurosceptic Vote in the 2014 European Elections', *Journal of European Public Policy* 21, no. 10 (26 November 2014): 1541–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.941534>.

<sup>81</sup> Maria Snegovaya, 'Fellow Travelers or Trojan Horses? Similarities across pro-Russian Parties' Electorates in Europe', *Party Politics* 28, no. 3 (May 2022): 409–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068821995813>.

<sup>82</sup> 'World Apart With Oxana Boyko : Russia Today : September 30, 2017 10:29pm-11:02pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer', accessed 26 February 2025, [https://api.gdeltpproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20171001\\_022900\\_World\\_Apart\\_With\\_Oxana\\_Boyko](https://api.gdeltpproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20171001_022900_World_Apart_With_Oxana_Boyko).



The focus on “traditional values” and European politics is also present in the “Headline News” broadcast on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2014. Here, there is no direct link made to either Russian interests in Europe, or the real protection of “traditional values” because this part of the broadcast covers the threat of Islamic terrorism to Britain at this self, and the increasing number of Islamic extremists travelling to the Middle East to fight with Islamic extremists.<sup>83</sup> In the summer of 2014, the conflict in Ukraine did receive a lot of attention due to the downing of flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur over the Donetsk Oblast in Eastern Ukraine, one of the areas that was self-proclaimed “People’s Republic”. Shortly after this incident, the assumption that Russia participated in some or another way was already present. And while the investigation into who was responsible for the incident would take years to finish, Russian disinformation was quickly filling the gap in what was known about the downing of MH17. These disinformation efforts can also be seen as strategic narratives, laying the responsibility for the crash with the Ukrainians, portraying Russia as a victim of international efforts to demonize the country and the narrative that the downing of MH17 was the result of a mistake. A news medium that was often used to spread these narratives was RT.<sup>84</sup> The use of strategic narratives around the MH17 crash shows that Russia was already involved in spreading strategic narratives at the time.

### 2.1.2 AIDS and Ideology

A month later, on October 29<sup>th</sup> an RT “Worlds Apart” broadcast about HIV/AIDS, the notion of “traditional values” was mentioned in a similar matter. In these broadcasts, progressive rights are said to be a threat to public health because by promoting “traditional values” you can “drive the number of children being born, and you can decrease the disease”.<sup>85</sup> Progressive rights are indeed connected to decreasing fertility in the West, and if “traditional values” entail abstinence until marriage, meaning that fewer people would get AIDS, this statement has its backing.<sup>86</sup> However, this does not explain why these rights are a “threat to public health”. The HIV AIDS

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<sup>83</sup> ‘Headline News : Russia Today : August 30, 2014 4:00am-4:30am EDT (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 30, accessed 25 February 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20140830\\_080000\\_Headline\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20140830_080000_Headline_News).

<sup>84</sup> Sebastiaan Rietjens, ‘Unraveling Disinformation: The Case of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17’, *The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs* 21, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 195–218, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23800992.2019.1695666>.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : October 29, 2017 7:29am-8:01am EDT (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 28, accessed 20 May 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20171029\\_112900\\_Documentary](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20171029_112900_Documentary).

<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Anomaly and Filipe Nobre Faria, ‘Can Liberalism Last? Demographic Demise and the Future of Liberalism’, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 40, no. 2 (December 2023): 524–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052524000189>.

issue is linked to the geopolitical situation with Ukraine, by saying that Russia is being pushed out of global society, except for the HIV AIDS issue. The host of this broadcast, Oksana Boyko notes that she thinks the role of the Netherlands is interesting because it invites Russians to the HIV AIDS conference in Amsterdam but is very connected with Crimea and “because of the plane”. Boyko did not lie that there were tensions between Russia and the West. This moment in time marked a low point in the diplomatic relations between the West and Russia, with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stating that the amount of “Russophobia” was higher than during the Cold War.<sup>87</sup> While linking geopolitical initiatives to such a specific point in time is difficult, it can be said that overall this was a time of large tensions between the West and Russia, also keeping in mind that the downing of MH17 was still relatively fresh in the minds of Western politicians. This was not the only event sparking tensions between Russia and Europe. The association treaty between Ukraine and the European Union, and the refusal to sign the treaty by Ukrainian President Yanukovich can be seen as an event that triggered the annexation of Crimea. However, this treaty was eventually signed in 2017.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, the number of Russian troops and equipment was increasing in Crimea, and the conflict in Ukraine remained unresolved.<sup>89</sup>

The differences between Russia and the West were also enlarged at the beginning of 2018, when the book writer and former Australian diplomat Tony Kevin, who wrote the book “Return to Moscow” (2017) was seated at the table of RT for an interview about the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>90</sup> Kevin explains the “Western propaganda machine against Russia”.<sup>91</sup> He claims that Russia is the “most morally conscious country in the world”, noting that Russians are afraid of

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<sup>87</sup> Taras Kuzio, ‘Russia–Ukraine Crisis: The Blame Game, Geopolitics and National Identity’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 3 (16 March 2018): 462–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1443643>.

<sup>88</sup> Leonid Litra, Ivan Medynskyi, and Kateryna Zarembo, ‘Assessing the EU’s Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Interventions in Ukraine’, 23 March 2017, [https://www.woscap.eu/documents/131298403/131299900/D3.4\\_Case+Study+Report+Ukraine\\_PU\\_11042017.pdf/D3.4\\_Case%20Study%20Report%20Ukraine\\_PU\\_11042017/index.pdf](https://www.woscap.eu/documents/131298403/131299900/D3.4_Case+Study+Report+Ukraine_PU_11042017.pdf/D3.4_Case%20Study%20Report%20Ukraine_PU_11042017/index.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross, ‘Russia, China, and Contemporary International Conflicts: Ukraine and Syria’, in *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, ed. Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross (Oxford University Press, 2018), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198719519.003.0004>.

<sup>90</sup> Anthony Charles Kevin, *Return to Moscow* (UWA Publishing, 2017).

<sup>91</sup> Kevin argues that the believes about Russia in Western countries are changed because what he explains to be the result of the way Russia is portrayed in the news. See Kevin’s X account: tony kevin [@tonykevin], ‘To Die . Ukrainian Young Men Snatched by Force off the Street to Go to Front Outnumbered , Badly Armed and without Training, to Die. All Zelensky’s Work. & pro-Kiev Anti-Trump Woke Liberal Dopes Here Think This Is Cool, Zelensky Is Hero and Trump Is Devil . Go Figure . @tonykevin’, Tweet, *Twitter*, 2 March 2025, <https://x.com/tonykevin/status/1896080354114748672>; ruRussia is not Enemy [@RussiaIsntEnemy], ‘👉 "If Everyone Wants Peace, Tranquility, Prosperity, and Trust, What’s Wrong with Not Placing Strike Systems near Russia’s Borders? Can Anyone Answer? Or, If NATO Is a Peaceful Organization, What Is Wrong with Returning to the NATO Infrastructure as It Was at the Time of the https://t.co/SBp5w0Dh3j’, Tweet, *Twitter*, 2 March 2025, <https://x.com/RussiaIsntEnemy/status/1896079223221059732>.

war because of its World War 2 past. Aside from questioning Western moral capabilities, Boyoko and Kevin also touch upon “traditional values”. Russian attitudes against the gay population are also touched upon, noting that women empower Russian society and that there are a lot of single mothers in Russian society.<sup>92</sup> Claiming the moral high ground in the context of the war with Ukraine is a Russian narrative that has been identified by Bliuc and Muntele-Hendreş in the case of pro-Russian narratives in Romania and Moldavia.<sup>93</sup> In their study, they found that pro-Russian groups in these countries portrayed Russian actions as morally superior by emphasising the in-group and dehumanizing the out-group, which can be seen as a form of othering. Furthermore, this shows that the narrative has an ideological factor of the morally good ideology against the morally bad ideology.<sup>94</sup> What is interesting about this broadcast is that Boyoko mentioned that the Russian elites are “perhaps exploiting the notion of traditional values” and that these values have no place in Russian society. This is unexpected, given the assumption that the narrative of “traditional values” originates from political discourse and that RT, as state media, would promote this narrative without resistance.<sup>95</sup>

This section has marked the beginning of the period that is analysed in this thesis. It is found that the narrative around “traditional values” is coming forward around elections in Europe, focussing on the support of “traditional values” in the case of Hungarian elections, and the critique on the declining “traditional values” in the case of European and German elections. While the amount of RT broadcasts covering this narrative during elections is scarce, the moment that the narrative comes forward in RT broadcasts has some significant value, as elections are moments when countries are choosing a new political leadership, and therefore it makes more sense to manipulate public opinion during election time. However, the narrative has not been present enough within RT broadcasts to be considered a strategic narrative. It lacks the repetitive and consistent presence necessary for a strategic narrative to effectively influence public behaviour.<sup>96</sup> While the construct of “traditional values” during elections in foreign countries remains quite unclear, section 2.1.2 has shown that “traditional values” are opposed

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<sup>92</sup> ‘Worlds Apart : Russia Today : February 10, 2018 10:30pm-11:01pm EST (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 6 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20180211\\_033000\\_Worlds\\_Apart](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20180211_033000_Worlds_Apart).

<sup>93</sup> Ana-Maria Bliuc and Daniela Muntele-Hendreş, ‘Narratives of Moral Superiority in the Context of War in Ukraine: Justifying pro-Russian Support through Social Creativity and Moral Disengagement’, *British Journal of Social Psychology* 64, no. 2 (2025): e12878, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12878>.

<sup>94</sup> Bliuc and Muntele-Hendreş.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Worlds Apart : Russia Today : February 10, 2018 10:30pm-11:01pm EST (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>96</sup> Laura Roselle, Ben O’Loughlin, and Alister Miskimmon, ‘3 | Strategic Narratives and Great Power Identity’, in *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), 56–84, [https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/166/edited\\_volume/chapter/1929445](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/166/edited_volume/chapter/1929445).

to liberal values in the West. In line with othering theory, the “traditional values” can be understood as not being liberal values. However, these liberal values are left rather vague, focusing on AIDS policies in the West, but claiming moral superiority because of the “traditional values” that are adhered to in Russia. The broadcast of 2018 stands out because its critique of the decay of European “traditional values” shows a resemblance with an ideological conflict, while the presenter discredits the narrative by stating that Russian politicians misuse it. An unusual moment of clarity that stands out in comparison to other broadcasts and the existing literature on “traditional values” within Russian media stresses that Russian media outlets like RT are used to communicate the Russian government’s strategic narrative regarding “traditional values”.<sup>97</sup>

## 2.2 2019 - 2022: Increasing Tensions

In 2019, the person who later turned out to become the Ukrainian wartime president, Volodymyr Zelensky had been elected president of Ukraine. The election results were clear: Zelensky earned 73 per cent of the votes. The former actor has been credited with driving the shift in Ukrainian politics, particularly following the Russian invasion in 2022.<sup>98</sup> During this period, the COVID-19 pandemic spread globally, persisted through the Russian invasion of 2022, and ultimately came to an end in 2023.<sup>99</sup> Between 2019 and 2022, Ukraine made some steps towards NATO membership by becoming a NATO Enhanced Opportunity partner status, and Zelensky approving the National Security Strategy. Especially in the year 2021, Russia has started to build up its troops at the Ukrainian border. This is a moment where tensions between the West and Russia have been rising towards the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia.<sup>100</sup>

In 2019, Zelensky, along with other world leaders, tried to put an end to the conflict that was still present in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. For this reason, they came together on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December for the Normandy 4 Summit between the leaders of Russia, Germany and France. This was the first time that the newly elected Ukrainian President met the Russian President Putin. The goal was to stop the fighting in the Donbas region in Ukraine that had been going on, regardless of the agreements of the Minsk agreements. While multiple agreements between the parties were made, only a prisoner swap succeeded. RT covered this meeting in a news

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<sup>97</sup> Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives*.

<sup>98</sup> Jessica Pisano, ‘How Zelensky Has Changed Ukraine’, *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3 (2022): 5–13.

<sup>99</sup> Jennifer Rigby et al., ‘WHO Declares End to COVID Global Health Emergency’, *Reuters*, 8 May 2023, sec. Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/covid-is-no-longer-global-health-emergency-who-2023-05-05/>.

<sup>100</sup> Walker, ‘Conflict in Ukraine’, 18 February 2025.

broadcast. Although the content of the Normandy 4 summit was not fully explored, three times more airtime was devoted to discussing a German fairytale revised to align with feminist rights. The presenter emphasized knowing women who favour traditional family roles and questioned the promotion of modern Western values where everyone works. However, these remarks were not directly tied to Russia's geopolitical stance or its defence of such values.<sup>101</sup>

### 2.2.1 Identity Politics and Elections

Identity politics at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 where a reason for RT to engage in a “crosstalk” broadcast, where they invited European scholars to talk about this yearly event. The topic of the discussion was “Westlessness”, a concept discussed at the Munich Security Conference described as “a widespread feeling of uneasiness and restlessness in the face of uncertainty about the enduring purpose of the West”.<sup>102</sup> The RT broadcast describes the reason for this “Westlessness” as the “destruction of religion, the structure of the family, the Wokeness, the identity politics”, saying that this all comes from neo-liberal thought.<sup>103</sup> The presenter states that the West blames Russia or China for this “Westlessness” and argues that while many believe the world desires traditional Western values, the West no longer upholds those values. This broadcast shows the globalist political elites present at the Munich Security Conference of 2020 as the people who are fighting against their own values, and China and Russia as countries that still have “traditional values”.<sup>104</sup> While this seems like another example of how Russia “others” the “other”, it is notable that the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, were present at the Conference.<sup>105</sup> This shows that the process of othering is a process of constructing a “self” by constructing the “other” therefore, the importance does not lay in the image of the “other” but in the image of the “self” that is created through this narrative.<sup>106</sup> Which in this case is the alignment of Chinese traditional values with Russian traditional values.

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<sup>101</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : December 9, 2019 5:00pm-5:30pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 9, accessed 6 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20191209\\_220000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20191209_220000_News).

<sup>102</sup> ‘Munich Security Report 2020’, 14 February 2025, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2020/>.

<sup>103</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : February 17, 2020 11:00pm-11:30pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 6 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20200218\\_040000\\_CrossTalk](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20200218_040000_CrossTalk).

<sup>104</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : February 17, 2020 11:00pm-11:30pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>105</sup> ‘MSC 2020: Participants’, 14 February 2025, <https://securityconference.org/en/msc-2020/participants/>.

<sup>106</sup> Brons, ‘Othering, an Analysis’.

The Russian Duma election in the fall of 2021 has received a significant amount of attention in RT news broadcasts. In these elections, “traditional values” are a theme: the Rdyna party, place emphasis on “traditional values”, patriotism and healthcare.<sup>107</sup> At the time, Russia had taken great steps in 2021 towards the invasion of Ukraine. The tensions between Russia and Ukraine were at an all-time high, while other states and heads of state tried to calm down the conflict. The number of troops at the Ukrainian border was already exceptionally high during the spring of 2021. The Russian Minister Shoigu claimed that the number of troops was due to the NATO exercise Defender Europe 2021, in which Ukraine did not take part, but this later turned out to be troops meant to invade Ukraine in 2022. Russian disinformation was flooding Europe, and especially Ukraine and the countries supporting it.<sup>108</sup> In November 2021, the tensions increased even more as the troop buildup increased again after dropping down during the summer. The sanctions that the West had implemented since the invasion of Crimea in 2014 did not seem to put much pressure on Russia’s economy to stop Russia from invading Ukraine. Moreover, the North Stream 2 pipeline was just completed in the fall of 2021, and European countries were still very reliant on cheap Russian gas exports.<sup>109</sup> Peace talks between Ukraine, Russia and the United States were at a standstill. Russian leadership was not content with Zelensky’s leadership and wanted a more malleable president who would comply more with the wishes of Russia. Russia denied that it was planning to invade Ukraine but the buildup of military forces at the Ukrainian border was so high and unusual that Western leaders did not believe this.<sup>110</sup> After all, already in the fall of 2021, intelligence reports from Western countries and Ukraine suggested that a Russian attack was imminent.<sup>111</sup>

As the tensions were rising, an increase in the amount of RT broadcasts in the database that use the selected criteria was visible. As was visible before, the news broadcast often does not link the tensions between Russia and Ukraine to “traditional values”. However, it frequently

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<sup>107</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : September 15, 2021 11:00am-11:31am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 15, accessed 6 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20210915\\_150000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20210915_150000_News).

<sup>108</sup> Ivan Ablazov and Mariia Karmazina, ‘Disinformation as a Form of Aggression: Ukraine and Its Partners amidst the Russian Fake News (Early 2021)’, *Political Science and Security Studies Journal* 2, no. 2 (30 June 2021): 65–72, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4959700>.

<sup>109</sup> Michael Kimmage and Michael Kofman, ‘Russia Won’t Let Ukraine Go Without a Fight’, *Foreign Affairs*, 22 November 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-11-22/russia-wont-let-ukraine-go-without-fight>; Carole Nakhle, ‘Decline of Russian Gas Dominance in Europe – GIS Reports’, 5 February 2025, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/t/russian-gas/>.

<sup>110</sup> International Crisis Group, ‘Responding to Russia’s New Military Buildup Near Ukraine’ (International Crisis Group, 2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep38186>.

<sup>111</sup> Kristian Gustafson et al., ‘Intelligence Warning in the Ukraine War, Autumn 2021 – Summer 2022’, *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (15 April 2024): 400–419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2322214>.

discusses topics in Western countries, illustrating how the discourse around “traditional values” evolves in the Western world, such as the 2021 elections in the U.S. state of Virginia. The RT broadcast focused on Joe Biden’s declining popularity and the Republican Party’s increasing support in the state, contrasting Republican “traditional values” with the Democratic Party’s left-liberal agenda. It also portrayed Biden as a leader facing challenges and waning support. This recurring emphasis on “traditional values” and Biden’s unpopularity reflects the broader narrative often employed by RT to critique Western policies and leadership.<sup>112</sup> Liberality is used as the “other” here, which is a different construct of traditional values than was the case in the 2021 French elections. The election broadcast discussed French identity and the conflict between Muslim and Christian citizens. Similar to U.S. elections, the RT presenter noted that “67% of the French population see immigration as a possible threat” and that fears of losing “traditional values” are widespread. The broadcast also claimed that “Christians are becoming extinct due to Muslim immigration”.<sup>113</sup> The focus on Muslim immigration as a threat to “traditional values” is a different construct than the threat of “a liberal agenda” to traditional values. Czymara and Eisentraut found that Muslims generally score higher on traditionality than Christians.<sup>114</sup> This would mean that Muslims would not be a threat to “traditional values”. As the narrative around the “other” explains the “self” it can be concluded that traditional values do in this case does not include Muslim values, and thus logically refer to traditional values.

The focus on Western democracy and the criticism that the RT broadcasts reflect on these democracies becomes more apparent in the “Crosstalk” program on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2021. There are three guests in this show, who engage in a discussion with each other, led by the host Peter Lavelle, who is an American RT journalist. The guests include Scott Ritter, a former United Nations weapons inspector who is a defender of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>115</sup> Ritter was accompanied by Fiorella Isabel, who is an “independent journalist”, discussing international politics. And lastly, Alexey Naumov, who is a professor at the Lomonosov

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<sup>112</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : November 2, 2021 12:00pm-12:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 8 March 2025, [https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20211102\\_160000\\_News](https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20211102_160000_News).

<sup>113</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : November 2, 2021 12:00pm-12:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Christian S. Czymara and Marcus Eisentraut, ‘A Threat to the Occident? Comparing Human Values of Muslim Immigrants, Christian, and Non-Religious Natives in Western Europe’, *Frontiers in Sociology* 5 (23 October 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.538926>.

<sup>115</sup> Ritter’s passport has been revoked in 2024, according to himself because he was a person establishing relations with Russia. The US State department could not give further information about this matter. In 2011 Ritter was convicted in an online sex case. He served three years in prison: Patrick Tine, ‘State Department Seizes Passport of Delmar’s Scott Ritter before Flight to Russia’, *Times Union*, 6 June 2024, <https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/state-dept-seizes-scott-ritter-s-passport-flight-19498991.php>.

Moscow State University.<sup>116</sup> Although this show does not fully address the concept of “traditional values”, it does address Western values, as the topic of the show is the US-initiated “Summit for Democracy” which was one of the key points in US President Biden’s presidential programs. The goal of this summit was to show the threat that then former US President Trump posed to the democracy of the US and to strengthen international cooperation on keeping a democratic world order.<sup>117</sup> The Crosstalk program criticized the summit as U.S. propaganda aimed at building an alliance against Russia and China. It deemed it unfair that Hungary and Turkey were excluded while Ukraine was invited. Echoing RT’s 2020 Munich Security Conference coverage, the program claimed U.S. democratic values were a “mask for neo-liberalism,” framing the Summit for Democracy as a “farce”.<sup>118</sup>

The Russian narratives in RT broadcasts around various elections thus have had three main constructs, one focussed on the similarity between Chinese and Russian “traditional values”, a construct focussing on liberalism versus “traditional values” and a construct focussing on Muslim immigration against “traditional values”.

## 2.2.2 The conflict in Ukraine

At the end of each year, Russian President Putin holds a press conference with national and international journalists. This event is covered by RT, which highlights and discusses some of the questions raised during the session. One such question addressed cancel culture and the “Wokeness that has pervaded Western politics, sometimes in very extreme forms,” asking whether these trends might also influence Russia. Putin responded as follows:

“The peculiarity and strength of our millennial society lies in the fact that Russia has evolved as a multinational and multi-confessional state. And we’ve learned to respect each other. And this means to respect the basis of our traditional spiritual culture, him, or the peoples of the Russian Federation of a certain internal moral protection against such retrogression. And well, this must be fought not by direct instructions and shouts, but by the support of our traditional values”.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> ‘Наумов Алексей Александрович’, Alexey Naumov, accessed 10 March 2025, <https://www.hse.ru/en/staff/anaumov/>.

<sup>117</sup> Yascha Mounk, ‘The Faltering Fight for Democracy’, *Foreign Affairs*, 7 December 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-12-07/faltering-fight-democracy>.

<sup>118</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : December 10, 2021 7:30pm-8:00pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 10, accessed 10 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20211211\\_003000\\_CrossTalk](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20211211_003000_CrossTalk).

<sup>119</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : December 23, 2021 1:00pm-1:31pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 10 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20211223\\_180000\\_News&play=1640282784](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20211223_180000_News&play=1640282784).



Promoting the narrative of “traditional values”, particularly in contrast to Western values, is often attributed to politicians. Both secondary research, such as the study of Pupcenoks and Seltzer, and RT’s presenters (Boyoko on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018) have emphasized that the political elite use this term.<sup>120</sup> Within the timespan of this thesis, this is the first time that a Russian politician has used this term in an RT news broadcast. The end-of-year news conference is not the only topic of this RT broadcast, the geopolitical situation between Ukraine and Russia is discussed too. Anthony Webber, a “political strategist and campaigner”, who believes that the war between Russia and Ukraine is a miscalculation of NATO because NATO “should not have interfered with this area of the world” is the guest in this broadcast.<sup>121</sup> RT gave the room for Webber to explain that “Russia has not been causing any problems in the Ukraine”.<sup>122</sup> And that each country should keep its value system, referring to the Westernization of Ukraine. The narrative in this broadcast is increasingly anti-Western. With the geopolitical situation at that moment, it is not unexpected, however. December 2021 has been a month where Russia has set some ultimatums towards the West, in which they stated that there should be no expansions of NATO. Russia uses its narrative that NATO “promised” Russia that it would not expand in 1990. However, this “promise” is not true, even Gorbachev has confirmed this.<sup>123</sup> In this broadcast, Webber also questions Western commitment to this “promise”. In the broadcast on the same day, this was again emphasized.<sup>124</sup>

The expansion of NATO remains a topic in the RT broadcast at the end of 2021. On Boxing Day, the RT news broadcast covered the initiative of NATO to plan a NATO-Russia Council meeting at the beginning of January 22 regarding the situation in Ukraine.<sup>125</sup> This broadcast revisited Putin’s annual end-of-year press conference held before Christmas, focusing on specific highlights. A clip summarizing the conference juxtaposed Putin’s remarks on NATO’s expansion and his argument that Ukraine must unconditionally comply with Russia’s

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<sup>120</sup> Pupcenoks and Seltzer, ‘Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the “Near Abroad”’; ‘Worlds Apart : Russia Today : February 10, 2018 10:30pm-11:01pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>121</sup> Anthony Webber, ‘UK Policy on Ukraine Must Change before the Public Suffer Any More’, The Conservative Woman, 5 August 2022, <https://www.conservativewoman.co.uk/uk-policy-on-ukraine-must-change-before-the-public-suffer-any-more/>; ‘About’, *AnthonyWebber.Com* (blog), accessed 10 March 2025, <https://anthonywebber.com/about/>.

<sup>122</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : December 23, 2021 1:00pm-1:31pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 23.

<sup>123</sup> Dmytro Kuleba, ‘Don’t Sell Out Ukraine’, *Foreign Affairs*, 10 December 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-12-10/dont-sell-out-ukraine>.

<sup>124</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : December 23, 2021 3:00pm-3:31pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 23, accessed 10 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20211223\\_200000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20211223_200000_News).

<sup>125</sup> See: NATO, ‘NATO-Russia Council Meets in Brussels’, NATO, accessed 10 March 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_190643.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_190643.htm).

future security concerns with a segment on “traditional values.” Putin’s stance on these “traditional values,” referred to in the press conference as a “traditional approach,” becomes clear:

“I take the traditional approach, which is a woman, is a woman, a man is a man, a mother is a mother, a father is a father, or she is not all the peoples of the Russian Federation have a certain internal moral protection against such obscurity. Let them in the West do whatever they want borrowed for fit and well, this must be fought, not my direct instructions and shouts the by the support of our “traditional values” of them.”<sup>126</sup>

This broadcast clearly shows a link between the war in Ukraine, and “traditional values”. The narrative of President Putin shows that he positions himself not only as a competitor to the West, which gets even more clear when he critiques the West for their actions in Afghanistan in this broadcast but also as a protector of “traditional values” by confirming the gender roles as a form of “moral protection”.<sup>127</sup> The contradiction between a Christian Russian society and a “sinful” Western society that Stepanova described in her study is visible here. By portraying the West as being obscure, Putin is automatically portraying Russia as being faithful to the “traditional values”.<sup>128</sup>

The conflict in Ukraine is connected to “traditional values” more directly in the months coming up to the full-scale war. On December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the relationship between Russia and the West was discussed in an RT episode. The guests were Glenn Diesen, who is criticised by Norwegian media for being a Russian propagandist, and Patrik Hemmington, who is the owner of the pro-Russian media outlet 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wire.<sup>129</sup> The guests analyse the question of what the chances of an armed conflict happening soon are. NATO’s “freedom to expand” is in question here. Putin’s demands that he stated in December 2021 were discussed. These demands included the drawback of NATO troops to the pre-1997 positions, which was before the Balkans and Poland joined NATO. Furthermore, they included a ban on Ukraine entering NATO. The

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<sup>126</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : December 26, 2021 8:00pm-8:30pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 10 March 2025, [https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20211227\\_010000\\_News&play=1640567104](https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20211227_010000_News&play=1640567104).

<sup>127</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : December 26, 2021 8:00pm-8:30pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 26.

<sup>128</sup> Elena Stepanova, “The Spiritual and Moral Foundation of Civilization in Every Nation for Thousands of Years’: The ‘traditional values’ Discourse in Russia”, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16, no. 2–3 (3 April 2015): 119–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2015.1068167>.

<sup>129</sup> Lina Christensen, “I fjor skrev den norske professoren over femti artikler for den statlige, russiske nyhetskanalen RT”, 3 March 2022, <https://www.forskerforum.no/i-fjor-skrev-den-norske-professoren-over-femti-artikler-for-den-statlige-russiske-nyhetskanalen-rt/>; Lukas Andriukaitis et al., ‘Disinformation’, *Breaking Ghouta* (Atlantic Council, 2018), 73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30699.12>.

demands have been viewed very negatively by Western NATO members and Ukraine.<sup>130</sup> Diesen argued that he thinks that the chance of a conflict between Russia and Ukraine has become more probable to happen, but he thinks it is not going to happen yet. Hemmington meanwhile warned for a “false flag, or another MH17”. Furthermore, he concluded that the sanctions against Russia were part of the “Globalist Agenda”. Responding to a question regarding “corporatism” and “neo-liberal Wokeism” Diesen argues that the West is waging a culture war, and “why do they talk about the economic inequality becoming of the sustainable when they come to talk about transgender toilets and are, you know, men competing us women in sports all this nonsense?”.<sup>131</sup> This “culture war” is connected to Western interventions in the Middle East, claiming that the West aims to destabilize countries like Iraq, Syria and Iran.<sup>132</sup> Claiming that the fight against Wokeism is a culture war makes this fight an ideological fight just as was described in section 2.1, showing some consistency in this narrative throughout the years.

Along with the rising tensions between the West and Russia, an increase in the interest in the differences between the two power blocks is visible. In retrospect, the war between Russia and Ukraine was at its breaking point at the end of January 2021. In an RT broadcast completely devoted to the tensions between Russia, Ukraine, the US and the West as a whole the direct link to Russia being the defender of “traditional values” is made.<sup>133</sup> The narrative about the tensions with Ukraine in this session a first seems quite mild, stating that, according to the guests, the US does not cooperate with Russia, and that the US is using Ukraine as a “weapons depot near Russia”. What stands out in this session is that the focus on the country that according to the guests is the provoker, namely the United States. The rest of the Western countries are not discussed in this session. The direct link to Russia as the defender of “traditional values” is then made by John Varoli: “So what’s happening here? Well, we have a sort of liberal regime, Biden’s administration, and they want to promote their liberal values across the world. And of course,

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<sup>130</sup> Andrew Roth, ‘Russia Issues List of Demands It Says Must Be Met to Lower Tensions in Europe’, *The Guardian*, 17 December 2021, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>.

<sup>131</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : December 29, 2021 10:30am-11:01am EST (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 29, accessed 11 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20211229\\_153000\\_CrossTalk](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20211229_153000_CrossTalk).

<sup>132</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : December 29, 2021 10:30am-11:01am EST (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 29.

<sup>133</sup> Peoples Dispatch, ‘Understanding the Conflict in Ukraine and Perspectives for the Anti-War Movement’, *Peoples Dispatch* (blog), 1 March 2022, <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/03/01/understanding-the-conflict-in-ukraine-and-perspectives-for-the-anti-war-movement/>; NATYLIESB, ‘John Varoli: NATO Summit: A Shocked Kiev Realizes It’s Been Played like a Fiddle’, *Natylie’s Place: Understanding Russia* (blog), 26 July 2023, <https://natyliesbaldwin.com/2023/07/john-varoli-nato-summit-a-shocked-kiev-realizes-its-been-played-like-a-fiddle/>.

Russia is what Russia is, the defender of ‘traditional values’, which means it’s the archenemy of the liberal group that runs Washington, that runs the United States.”<sup>134</sup> Again, this construct of “traditional values” is opposed to liberal values in the West. This is something which has been seen before in this section, such as after the Munich Security Conference of 2021.<sup>135</sup>

The end of this section marks a period of increasing tensions between the West, Ukraine and Russia. The beginning of the period analysed in this section is marked by the election of the Ukrainian war president, Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019. Discussing the topics that are under analysis in this Master’s thesis in the period of this section is mostly done in the context of elections, identity politics, and considering the war in Ukraine.

Within these contexts, different constructs of “traditional values” have been used. Such as the argument where the “traditional values” of Russia and China are equated during the Munich Security Conference of 2020.<sup>136</sup> As China is originally not a Christian country, this would mean that these “traditional values” are not considered Christian values in this instance. The case of the French elections of 2021 however, and Muslims as a threat to traditional values is again a different construct because even though Muslims are considered quite traditional, their “traditional values” are not equal to the “traditional values” that are touched upon in this narrative.<sup>137</sup> From 2021 onwards, a shift in the context around “traditional” values can be seen. The geopolitical tensions that were rising meant that the narrative around “traditional values” was focussing on these tensions between the West, Ukraine and Russia. The broadcasts that covered Putin’s speeches showed that the narrative has been moving towards a narrative that shows Russia as the protector of “traditional values” and Western countries and Ukraine as a threat to these values. Neo-liberal policies, and “Wokeism” that is forced upon the world by a “globalist elite” are argued to be the cause of this threat. Arguments on the “root causes” of the conflict in Ukraine were combined with this critique on decaying “traditional values” leading to a more consistent narrative.

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<sup>134</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : January 25, 2022 8:30pm-9:00pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 12 March 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20220126\\_013000\\_CrossTalk](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20220126_013000_CrossTalk).

<sup>135</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : February 17, 2020 11:00pm-11:30pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 17.

<sup>136</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : February 17, 2020 11:00pm-11:30pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>137</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : November 2, 2021 12:00pm-12:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

## 2.3 Conclusion

This first chapter of the thesis analysed RT broadcasts between 2014 and 2022 to assess how Russia has positioned itself as the protector of “traditional values” from the invasion of Crimea until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. This period is characterized by the annexation of Crimea, and the self-declared independence of the People’s Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, a period where Russia backed the separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine, even with military involvement.<sup>138</sup>

The narrative on “traditional values” came forward in RT broadcasts sporadically in section 2.1, mainly in the context of elections in European countries and in the United States. Consistent in these broadcasts was that the countries who are supportive of Russia are shown to be adhering to “traditional values” and non-supportive countries are a threat to these “traditional values”. This narrative was thus already present in RT broadcasts at the beginning of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014, but it was not consistent enough to serve a strategic function. It is important to note that Russia a large part of the population of Russia is conservative, so criticism of Western policies affecting “traditional values” therefore does not necessarily constitute strategic narratives.<sup>139</sup> However, the narratives on “traditional values” have come forward at moments where they could have strategic use. Such as in sub-section 2.1.1, where Western populist parties, such as the Alternative Für Deutschland (AfD) and Orbán in Hungary were portrayed as being supportive of “traditional values”.<sup>140</sup> This is then contradicted by the “other”, which are liberal elites, or liberal parties, who are presented as being responsible for driving the West away from these “traditional values”. The strategic use of supporting these populist parties has also been recognised in academic literature before, and especially during the first period of this thesis when numerous European populist political parties still had ties to Russia.<sup>141</sup> Section 2.1.2 has shown that the narrative at the time was still somewhat inconsistent. Although Russia is often described as “the most morally conscious country in the world” in contrast to Western nations, this narrative appeared sporadically and

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<sup>138</sup> Pål Kolstø, ‘Crimea vs. Donbas: How Putin Won Russian Nationalist Support—and Lost It Again’, *Slavic Review* 75, no. 3 (October 2016): 702–25, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.75.3.0702>.

<sup>139</sup> Marlene Laruelle, ‘A Grassroots Conservatism? Taking a Fine-Grained View of Conservative Attitudes among Russians’, *East European Politics* 39, no. 2 (3 April 2023): 173–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2045962>.

<sup>140</sup> Such as in the case of the 2017 German elections for the Bundestag: ‘World Apart With Oxana Boyko : Russia Today : September 30, 2017 10:29pm-11:02pm EDT (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>141</sup> Glenn Diesen, ‘Russia as an International Conservative Power: The Rise of the Right-Wing Populists and Their Affinity towards Russia’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28, no. 2 (2 April 2020): 182–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1705770>.

lacked sufficient recurrence over the three years discussed in sub-section 2.1.2 to be considered as a strategic narrative. It is important to note that the absence of RT broadcasts from 2015 and 2016 in the archive may have contributed to this inconsistency. Whether the broadcasts from these years would have strengthened the narrative of Russia as the protector of “traditional values” remains unclear. In conclusion, section 2.1 has shown the grassroots of the narratives that later construct a strategic narrative within RT broadcasts.

During the period covered in section 2.2, the geopolitical tensions between Russia and Ukraine were rising. The beginning of this period is characterised by a continuation of the rather incoherent narrative around “traditional values”. Different constructs of “traditional values” were formed that do not immediately show much similarity. They primarily define Russian “traditional values” by what they are not: neither liberal nor Muslim values. The “traditional values” relate to the “traditional values” of China. This shows that the “traditional values” do not have a fixed definition, but are really opposed to Western values (mostly liberalism), with the help of othering techniques.

From 2021 onwards, a shift in the consistency of this narrative is seen. With the geopolitical tensions reaching a breaking point in 2021, the narrative on “traditional values” shifted, towards critiquing Western actions that are supportive of Ukraine. In the months leading up to the full-scale invasion covered in sub-section 2.2.2, Russia is directly argued to be the protector of “traditional values”. In that last year before the full-scale invasion, the construct of “traditional values” was more consistent going against the Western liberal values and “Wokeism”. With this constant appeal to adhere to “traditional values”, an ideological dichotomy is formed, and the other ideology is argued to be an inferior ideology. Furthermore, RT showed that the US was imposing these liberal values on other countries in the world, and this created an image of Russia still being a stronghold of “traditional values”, without explaining what these values entail. In the changing context towards the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was more strategic use for othering based on ideologies.<sup>142</sup> This holds strategic potential, as political groups in Europe that place a higher emphasis on “traditional values”, like populists and conservatives, may be less inclined to support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. Especially when taking in mind their actions after the downing of the MH17 plane in 2017 and

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<sup>142</sup> Milan van Berlo and Michal Natorksi, ‘When Contestation Is the Norm: The Position of Populist Parties in the European Parliament Towards Conflicts in Europe’s Neighbourhood’, in *European Union Contested* (Springer, Cham, 2020), 199–202, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33238-9\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33238-9_11).

the Association Agreement in the same year, where the populist parties in Europe proved to be more critical of the European Union than of Russia.<sup>143</sup>

The research question analysed in this chapter, *“How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of “traditional values” since its invasion of Crimea in 2014 until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?”* can be answered as follows: until the start of the 2020’s it can not be concluded that Russia has positioned itself firmly as the protector of “traditional values” through RT. Mainly due to the lack of consistency and recurrence of the narrative within RT broadcasts. However, strategic elements, mainly the narrative being supportive of Western populist parties in Western countries, mostly during elections, were visible. In 2021 a change is noted, as geopolitical tensions were rising. Within RT broadcasts the narrative around “traditional values” is increasingly used as a means of emphasizing ideological differences between Russia and the West. Within this narrative, the West (mostly the US) being portrayed as being “responsible” for forcing these liberal values upon other countries, and therefore being a threat to “traditional values”.

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<sup>143</sup> Cees van Doorn and Theo Brinkel, ‘Deterrence, Resilience, and the Shooting Down of Flight MH17’, in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020* (T.M.C. Asser Press, The Hague, 2021), 365–83, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8_19).

### Chapter 3: An Established Strategic Narrative (2022-2024)

“Billions of people see in you the hope for global justice, for protecting human dignity, for protecting traditional values”, remarked RT television presenter Dmitry Kiselyov in an interview with Russian President Putin in 2024.<sup>144</sup> The portrayal of Putin as a defender of human dignity is deeply troubling considering the atrocities committed by Russian forces in Ukraine over the past years. On February 24, 2022, Europe faced a harsh reality: Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, claiming the goal of “denazifying” its government.<sup>145</sup> Around 4 a.m. that morning, the first Russian troops were observed advancing toward Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital.<sup>146</sup> Although the attack on Kyiv ultimately failed, Russian forces have, over three years, seized significant territories in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>147</sup>

The start of the full-scale invasion was a shock for Western countries. Discourse between Russia and the West became increasingly hostile, especially within contexts such as weapon deals between Ukraine and European countries or the United States. Building on the analysis in Chapter 1, this chapter explores how the narrative around traditional values was further refined and expanded following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By examining the connections between RT’s portrayal of “traditional values” and Russia’s broader geopolitical initiatives, this chapter elucidates the strategic framework underpinning this narrative and its implications for Russia’s geopolitical relations with Western countries.

This chapter is divided into two time periods, with the first 24 February 2022 until December 2023, and the second being January 2024 until the end of the Dataset, October 2024. This division is used because “traditional values” are a central theme in the presidential elections of 2024, and 2024 which has been declared the “Year of the Family” by President Putin. Within each section, multiple different constructs of “traditional values” are analysed within their geopolitical contexts, including liberal values, multipolarity, Woke, LGBTQ+,

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<sup>144</sup> ‘News : RT : March 13, 2024 4:00am-4:30am EDT: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 133, accessed 2 April 2025, [https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240313\\_080000\\_News](https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240313_080000_News).

<sup>145</sup> Al Jazeera Staff, “‘No Other Option’: Excerpts of Putin’s Speech Declaring War”, Al Jazeera, accessed 2 April 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts>.

<sup>146</sup> Laurien Crump, ‘The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Its Origins and How Will It Advance? - In the Media - Utrecht University’, 24 February 2023, <https://www.uu.nl/en/in-de-media/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-its-origins-and-how-will-it-advance>.

<sup>147</sup> Daily updates on the Russian offensive in Ukraine are available on the website of the Institute for the Study of War: Angelica Evans et al., ‘Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 1, 2025’ (ISW Press, 1 April 2025), <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>.



Foreign politics, and the (orthodox) church. After which an answer can be given to the research question of this section:

*How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of “traditional values” from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 until October 2024?*

### **3.1 February 2022 - December 2023: Start of the War**

As is typical with the promotion of strategic narratives, these narratives are not constructed instantaneously but develop gradually. The previous chapter has shown that the strategic narrative on “traditional values” had its grassroots RT broadcasts before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 but only gained prominence leading up to the full-scale invasion. This section analyses the strategic narratives in RT broadcasts during the first eight months of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine. Geopolitical tensions were prominently featured in these broadcasts. Consequently, a connection can be drawn between “traditional values” and Russian geopolitical initiatives. This section is organised around three main constructs of “traditional values” that were identified in this period and their strategic use. Namely, liberal values as opposed to multipolarity, Woke and LGBTQ+, and “traditional values” being used as a construct considering foreign politics.

#### **3.1.1 Liberal Values and Multipolarity**

Weapon deals between Western countries and Ukraine have led to tensions between the countries supportive of Ukraine and Russia. Connecting these arms shipments to the concept of traditional values might appear tenuous. However, this connection is seen in the “Crosstalk” program on 22 April 2022, only two months after the full-scale invasion. This talk show was led by presenter Peter Lavelle and guests were Marko Gasic and Daniel McAdams.<sup>148 149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Marko Gasic is a self-proclaimed international affairs commentator and the president of the Church Council of a Serbian church in London: ‘Education Board’, accessed 2 April 2025, <https://spclondon.org.uk/en/school/education-board/>; ‘(8) Marko Gasic | LinkedIn’, accessed 2 April 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/marko-gasic-9a0a97b/>; NATYLIESB, ‘John Varoli’.

<sup>149</sup> Daniel McAdams works for the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity, an institute established by US Republican representative Ron Paul. McAdams exclusively contributes to articles of the institute itself. For more information on his career, see his LinkedIn page: Daniel McAdams, ‘Who Is “Taking” The Panama Canal? Trump Flip-Flops (Again) On Russia...and More! - The Ron Paul Institute for Peace & Prosperity’, <https://ronpaulinstitute.org/>, accessed 3 April 2025, <https://ronpaulinstitute.org/who-is-taking-the-panama-canal-trump-flip-flops-again-on-russiaand-more/>; ‘Daniel McAdams | LinkedIn’, accessed 3 April 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/daniellmcadams/>.

Criticism of the U.S. actions emerged clearly when focusing on the conflict in Ukraine. McAdams argued that the U.S. military-industrial complex was the primary beneficiary of American support for Ukraine. Meanwhile, Varoli claimed that “Ukraine is a tool to strike at Russia” and portrayed Russia as the protector of traditional values, standing in opposition to the “globalist liberal order,” which he accused of seeking to destroy Russia.<sup>150</sup> In earlier broadcasts, as discussed in the previous chapter, Varoli similarly framed Western liberalism as the “arch-enemy” of Russia’s “traditional values”, highlighting a consistent line of reasoning among RT’s contributors.<sup>151</sup> Academic research on strategic narratives emphasizes the importance of this consistency within strategic narratives, as narratives that frequently shift lose their credibility.<sup>152</sup> This episode aired at the moment when Russia shifted from its offensive on Kyiv to focusing on eastern Ukraine and the “liberation of the Donbas” a pivot which can be seen as strategic loss for Russia, but also as a reason to intensify the strategic narratives.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, the strategic narrative stating that the “liberal elite” in the West is responsible for the war in Ukraine was beneficial for the support of the war that Russia had started, especially at this moment when Russia had expected to have annexed the Ukrainian capital city already.<sup>154</sup>

RT presenters and guests frequently portray Western liberal values as a threat to their “traditional values”, a sentiment also reflected in President Putin’s repeated communication of this narrative. Putin frames neo-liberal values as constructs designed to assert global dominance. In a speech at a discussion club, Putin described a “doctrinal crisis” afflicting the “American-style neo-liberal world order”.<sup>155</sup> This RT News broadcast featured French researcher Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann analysing Putin’s speech. Thomann is an advocate for a Russian victory in the war with Ukraine.<sup>156</sup> Thomann intertwined criticisms of the West with

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<sup>150</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : April 22, 2022 10:30am-11:00am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 22, accessed 3 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20220422\\_143000\\_CrossTalk&play=1650637920](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20220422_143000_CrossTalk&play=1650637920).

<sup>151</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : December 10, 2021 7:30pm-8:00pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>152</sup> Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose, *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War*, 10–11.

<sup>153</sup> “Russia to Respond Properly If Ukraine Receives Combat Planes, Air Defense Systems from NATO Countries - Shoigu”, accessed 3 April 2025, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/77540/>; Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, “Why Putin Underestimated the West”, *Foreign Affairs*, 7 April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-04-07/why-putin-underestimated-West>.

<sup>154</sup> Zvi Magen and Shimon Stein, ‘The Ukraine Crisis: An Interim Analysis’ (Institute for National Security Studies, 2022), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39807>.

<sup>155</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : October 27, 2022 10:00pm-10:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 27, accessed 17 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20221028\\_020000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20221028_020000_News).

<sup>156</sup> ‘Eurocontinent – European and global geopolitical issues’, accessed 3 April 2025, <https://www.eurocontinent.eu/>; Célia Belin,

Scholars do not agree with this, Macron has consistently supported Ukraine: ‘Macron the Hawk’, *Foreign Affairs*, 5 April 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/macron-hawk>.

themes of multipolarity, traditional values, and balance of power. He argued that while some nations resist multipolarity, others embrace it alongside traditional values and a balanced power structure.<sup>157</sup> In his argumentation, as well as that of Putin, traditional values are being constructed as values of sovereignty and balance of power. This link of “traditional values” to worldwide power structures shows the strategic intent to promote a new Multipolar world which is done via RT broadcasts. This aligns with the widely held belief about Putin’s motivations for starting the war in Ukraine. Many argue that the war represents his ultimate challenge to the post-World War II world order dominated by the United States.<sup>158</sup>

The link that is created between “traditional values” and geopolitical events shows that this narrative is used to shape beliefs of world structure. The RT “Crosstalk” episode on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2022 shows this link between the narrative on “traditional values” and how the Western threat to these values influences international orders. The attending guest George Szamuely explained argued that neo-liberal ideology is imposed by a Western elite, and that it is disconnected from the values of ordinary citizens.<sup>159</sup> He claimed that a culture war is underway, stating, “Those who do not adhere to these values are subjected to sanctions, colour revolutions, and bombs”.<sup>160</sup> Szamuely’s argument incorporates several layers: (1) Western neo-liberalism opposes traditional values; (2) elites in the West impose neo-liberalism on their own citizens; and (3) countries resisting neo-liberalism face punitive measures. The notion that Western neo-liberalism is at odds with traditional values has been a recurring narrative in RT broadcasts for over a decade and was identified in 2014 already in Chapter 2 of this study. Similarly, the idea that neo-liberalism is forced upon Western populations is not novel.<sup>161</sup> What is new in Szamuely’s argument is the framing of consequences for non-compliance with neo-liberalism, including the characterization of colour revolutions as a negative phenomenon. The portrayal of colour revolutions, which were relatively peaceful pro-Western movements in post-Soviet states as inherently negative is particularly striking. Ukraine was one of the countries

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<sup>157</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : October 27, 2022 10:00pm-10:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>158</sup> Ingrid (Wuerth) Brunk and Monica Hakimi, ‘Russia, Ukraine, and the Future World Order’, *American Journal of International Law* 116, no. 4 (October 2022): 687–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2022.69>.

<sup>159</sup> George Szamuely is a researcher who is critical of NATO’s involvement in the Yugoslav wars. Szamuely wrote the book “Bombs for Peace” on the war in Yugoslavia, critiquing NATO’s actions in the country, and downplaying the genocidal actions of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic’s: Burim Mexhuani, ‘Questioning the “Humanitarian” Narrative?’, *Amsterdam University Press*, 2021, <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2352087>.

<sup>160</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : October 30, 2022 10:30pm-11:01pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>161</sup> Both come forward in one of the first RT broadcasts analysed in this thesis: ‘Interviews Culture Art Documentaries and Sports : Russia Today : April 7, 2014 5:00am-8:01am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 7.

that tried to break ties with Russia during the colour revolutions at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>162</sup> By grouping these revolutions alongside sanctions and military interventions, RT casts them as a direct result of Western neo-liberal policies, while framing these colour revolutions as negative events. This structural narrative underscores the idea that resistance to neo-liberalism is both justified and necessary to preserve traditional values.

RT reinforces this narrative by amplifying voices aligned with its ideological framework, such as Alexander Dugin, who appeared on the broadcast on 30 December 2022.<sup>163</sup> Alexander Dugin is considered a prominent Russian philosopher and is often referred to as “Putin’s brain”.<sup>164</sup> Dugin is an influential philosopher, with a link to Western thinkers. He is primarily associated with theoretically and intellectually driven conservative circles and individuals, many influenced by Russian Eurasianism or the German conservative revolution. He is considered an important contributor to the “New Right” conservative movement in Europe, which is a political movement or philosophy that has been prevalent across Europe since the late 20th century and is distinguished by a combination of culturally conservative, nationalist, and anti-globalist viewpoints.<sup>165</sup> Dugin, whose daughter had been killed by a car bomb in the summer of 2022, drew connections between the Soviet Union and modern Russia in the Interview. He argued that Russia represents the continuation of the Soviet Union.<sup>166</sup> Echoing themes presented by other RT guests throughout 2022, Dugin characterized “Liberal Globalism” as a racist ideology. He emphasized the need for Russians to rediscover pre-Western traditional values, arguing that Western ideology has deeply influenced and weakened Russian society. For Dugin, opposing “open society and liberal democracy” is essential for Russia to reclaim its identity and establish a new ideological foundation.<sup>167</sup> Dugin’s call for a unifying ideology resonates with broader academic discussions about the role of ideology in conflict. Literature on the subject highlights that ideology profoundly impacts conflict dynamics, often

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<sup>162</sup> Dmitri Trenin, ‘Russia Leaves the West’, *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2006): 87–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20032043>.

<sup>163</sup> ‘Interview : Russia Today : December 30, 2022 8:30pm-9:00pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 9 May 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20221231\\_013000\\_Interview](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20221231_013000_Interview).

<sup>164</sup> Alexander Dugin is known to be “Putin’s Brain” because of his influence on Russian politics: Who Is Alexander Dugin? “Putin’s Brain” Who Just Endorsed Donald Trump”, *The Independent*, 2 April 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/alexander-dugin-russia-trump-cnn-b2726002.html>.

<sup>165</sup> Jussi Backman, “A Russian Radical Conservative Challenge to the Liberal Global Order: Aleksandr Dugin”, in *Contestations of Liberal Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020), 289–314, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22059-4\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22059-4_11).

<sup>166</sup> ‘Who Is Alexander Dugin?’

<sup>167</sup> Jonathan Leader Maynard, ‘Ideology and Armed Conflict’, *Journal of Peace Research* 56 (2019): 635–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319826629>.

shaping them through shared histories and values.<sup>168</sup> The ideological appeal that is argued by Dugin, has been recognized in strategic narratives during the Cold War, where both Russia and the United States claimed their ideological superiority.<sup>169</sup> This shows that the strategic narrative around “traditional values” is used to create an “other” by Russia, to claim its own ideological superiority.

These RT broadcasts reveal a recurring narrative that Western liberal values threaten Russian “traditional values”, with various presenters and guests conveying this message. This narrative aligns with the start of the war in Ukraine because Putin can use this to reason why Russia needs to protect the Ukrainians from the decay of “traditional values” that the West is accountable for.<sup>170</sup> Othering techniques are used within this strategic narrative to stipulate the differences between these two power blocs and to show the need for a new multipolar world system because of decaying “traditional values” under the US-led current system.<sup>171</sup>

### 3.1.2 Woke, LGBTQ+

While the broadcasts in this section regularly connect “traditional values” to opposition against liberalism, the exact construct of “traditional values” is often vague. However, the critique of the far-reaching LGBTQ+ politics in Europe is consequent. As LGBTQ+ ideals are portrayed as opposing “traditional values,” including constructs such as traditional gender roles and Christianity, this becomes an easy target for critique by Russians seeking to create further distance between Russia and the West. A notable example of this critique is Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov’s interview in the summer of 2022, where he accused the European Commission of “propagating nontraditional values” without elaborating what he meant.<sup>172</sup> He was likely referring to the legal dispute between Hungary and the European Commission over a controversial Hungarian law passed in 2021. While Hungary claimed the law was aimed at fighting paedophilia, it also included measures that banned LGBTQ+ advertising to minors and restricted sex education on LGBTQ+ topics.<sup>173</sup> This sparked significant controversy within the

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<sup>168</sup> Fabrizio Coticchia and Andrea Catanzaro, ‘The Fog of Words: Assessing the Problematic Relationship between Strategic Narratives, (Master) Frames and Ideology’, *Media, War & Conflict* 15, no. 4 (1 December 2022): 427–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635220965622>.

<sup>169</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*, 56.

<sup>170</sup> Pupcenoks and Seltzer, ‘Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the “Near Abroad”’.

<sup>171</sup> Brons, ‘Othering, an Analysis’.

<sup>172</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : July 20, 2022 6:30am-7:01am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 4 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20220720\\_103000\\_Documentary&play=165831465](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20220720_103000_Documentary&play=165831465).

<sup>173</sup> European Parliament Research Service, ‘LGBTI Rights in the EU, Recent Developments Following the Hungarian Law’ (European Parliament, July 2021).

European Union.<sup>174</sup> Lavrov's comments align "traditional values" with opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, which are framed as conflicting with traditional Christian values. From this perspective, the European Commission's efforts to uphold LGBTQ+ rights in Hungary were indeed "propagating nontraditional values".<sup>175</sup>

This criticism of Woke ideals in the West is recurring, but it is not entirely one-sided. Such as in the case of a diplomatic dispute between Russia and Canada, when the Russian ambassador to Canada was summoned by the Canadian Prime Minister to explain a tweet about a new law in Russia aimed at fighting "propaganda promoting same-sex sexual relations or preferences, as well as paedophilia." In an RT broadcast, the ambassador explained that the law was meant to defend traditional Russian values, emphasizing the ideological differences between Russia and Canada.<sup>176</sup> In this case, the criticism started to come from the Canadian Prime Minister, and not from the Russian side. However, this was an opportunity to promote the narrative on "traditional values". The initiative was more clearly on the Russian side at his year-end press conference in 2023 however, when Putin elaborated on the differences between Russia and the West, portraying Western LGBTQ+ ideals in children's education as "indoctrination".<sup>177</sup> Woke policy in the United States has been the topic of a full RT broadcast before, posting criticism on the liberal transgender legislation in the US, where teenagers are allowed to go into transition. Countries that are traditional in their gender roles are emphasised and are said to be the protector of traditional values.<sup>178</sup> Emphasizing countries that are on the line with Russia in the fight for "traditional values" is something that is done repeatedly. Examples of countries protecting these traditional values according to RT are Zimbabwe, Moldova, and Iran.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Kyriakos Klossidis and Nicolas Delaleu, 'European Parliament Vehemently Opposed to Hungarian Anti-LGBTIQ Law | News | European Parliament' (European Parliament, 8 July 2021), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210701IPR07502/european-parliament-vehemently-opposed-to-hungarian-anti-lgbtqi-law>.

<sup>175</sup> Grishaeva, "Making Europe Great Again": Anti-Western Criticism from Orthodox Conservative Actors Online', 251.

<sup>176</sup> 'News : Russia Today : November 29, 2022 10:00pm-10:31pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer', accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20221130\\_030000\\_News&play=1669778808](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20221130_030000_News&play=1669778808).

<sup>177</sup> 'Documentary : Russia Today : December 14, 2023 6:30am-7:01am EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer', accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20231214\\_113000\\_Documentary&play=170255477](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20231214_113000_Documentary&play=170255477).

<sup>178</sup> 'The 360 View : Russia Today : December 5, 2022 11:30pm-12:01am EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer', accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20221206\\_043000\\_The\\_360\\_View&play=1670301840](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20221206_043000_The_360_View&play=1670301840).

<sup>179</sup> 'News : Russia Today : March 1, 2023 10:00am-10:31am EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer', accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20230301\\_150000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20230301_150000_News); 'Interview : Russia Today : January 30, 2023 4:30pm-5:01pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual

This narrative might appeal to conservative groups in Europe as a logical argument, but the timing of its release shows it is more of a strategic move. This is especially clear during events like the Russian annexation of Crimea, where the narrative around “traditional values” played a noticeable role. The official annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions on October 4, 2022.<sup>180</sup> This annexation, covering around 18% of Ukraine’s territory, was declared after referenda in the occupied territories, where Russia claimed up to 98% of voters supported joining Russia.<sup>181</sup> However, these referenda were widely condemned by international bodies like the OSCE and the UN, with 143 countries in the UN General Assembly denouncing them as illegal and invalid following the annexation, Putin gave a speech sharply criticizing the West. He argued that the “neocolonial model” of the West is doomed to fail, accusing it of denying justice and freedom of choice. He linked this criticism to what he described as the West’s “radical denial of traditional values, religion, and family”.<sup>182</sup> Putin went further, claiming that Western societies impose “perverted values” on their children.<sup>183</sup> This echoes Lavrov’s earlier statements on nontraditional values in Hungary and reinforces a consistent Russian narrative framing the West as hostile to “traditional values”.<sup>184</sup> The alignment of narratives from high-ranking officials like Putin and Lavrov with those seen in RT broadcasts, such as “Crosstalk” episodes, suggests a broader strategy. This consistency shows that these narratives are not just isolated opinions, but part of a larger framework designed to appeal to both domestic and international audiences.

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Explorer’, accessed 7 April 2025,

[https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20230130\\_213000\\_Interview](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20230130_213000_Interview); ‘News : Russia Today : December 15, 2022 10:00am-10:31am EST (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 7 April 2025,

[https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20221215\\_150000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20221215_150000_News).

<sup>180</sup> Team of the Official Website of the President of Russia, ‘Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia’, President of Russia, 4 October 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

<sup>181</sup> ‘Russia’s Federation Council Ratifies Annexation of Four Ukrainian Regions’, *Reuters*, 4 October 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-federation-council-ratifies-annexation-four-ukrainian-regions-2022-10-04/>.

<sup>182</sup> “Documentary : Russia Today : September 30, 2022 8:30am-8:59am EDT (Russia (English Language))”: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer”, accessed 4 April 2025,

[https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20220930\\_123000\\_Documentary&play=1664542080](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20220930_123000_Documentary&play=1664542080)

<sup>183</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : September 30, 2022 8:30am-8:59am EDT (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>184</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : July 20, 2022 6:30am-7:01am EDT (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’; ‘Documentary : Russia Today : September 30, 2022 8:30am-8:59am EDT (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

### 3.1.3 Foreign Politics

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, foreign politics, and most notably elections were often moments where the narrative around “traditional values” came forward. This trend continues after the full-scale invasion. Internally in Russia, the “traditional values” values relate to Russian patriotism. As was the case on National Flag Day when Putin stated that the Russian flag represents traditional values, but left the exact definition of these words unclear.<sup>185</sup> This narrative is not only portrayed internally in Russia but is extended, and connected to patriotism in countries that Russia supports. During discussions of the 2023 Slovakian elections, the similarities between the Slovakian conservative candidate’s values and Russian traditional values were emphasized. However, often, “traditional values” are used to describe what Russia should not become.<sup>186</sup> As was the case before the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine already, elections in Europe and the United States are often moments where these differences are emphasized. When these elections are in countries that Russia has a connection with, such as Serbia, the similarity of traditional values in the country is emphasized.<sup>187</sup> Notably, in 2022, there were no elections in Europe, as the last ones were in Germany (2017) and the European Union (2015), so these topics did not come up in RT broadcasts. However, it is striking that RT did not cover the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, given that previous U.S. elections were mentioned in RT broadcasts, as shown in Chapter 1.

Foreign elections are not the only events where Russia can establish a strategic narrative framing itself as the protector of “traditional values”, geopolitical initiatives like the Russia-Africa Summit of 2023 are an obvious opportunity to create this narrative. This summit serves as a key example of how Russia uses the narrative of traditional values in its geopolitical efforts. Russian President Vladimir Putin was attending the Russia-Africa Summit. Held annually, this summit allows Russia to strengthen its ties with African countries, where Russia is involved in defence through paramilitary groups. Following the 2022 war with Ukraine, Russia has

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<sup>185</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : August 22, 2022 5:00pm-5:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 4 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20220822\\_210000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20220822_210000_News).

<sup>186</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : September 30, 2023 4:00pm-4:30pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20230930\\_200000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20230930_200000_News); ‘News : Russia Today : October 1, 2023 10:00am-10:31am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20231001\\_140000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20231001_140000_News).

<sup>187</sup> As is the case with the Serbian Elections of 2022: Protests in Serbia where reason to wave Russian flags, and to show support for traditional values in the country. ‘News : Russia Today : August 28, 2022 11:00pm-11:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 5 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20220829\\_030000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20220829_030000_News).



increased their engagement with Africa, and the Russia-Africa summit is a symbol of this engagement.<sup>188</sup> Putin emphasized that Russia and the African countries are protectors of “traditional values”, and that Western countries are against these values. Furthermore, Putin said that Russia was the country supporting African nations the most since they became official countries. Through this, he tries to win support within African countries at the cost of Western countries.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, at the BRICS Xiamen summit, the Russian President criticized the declining traditional values in the West, framing this critique within the context of an emerging multipolar world order, where the United States would no longer be the sole hegemon.<sup>190</sup> The frame in these two summits is aimed at pulling these countries to the Russian side, while at the same time pushing away the West and their values as the “other”. While Putin tries to create a multipolar world order by othering the West in its strategic narrative, the question is if this is even possible, as he pulls himself towards the Chinese block, and therefore in essence helping towards a Sino-US bipolar world order. While this is outside the scope of this thesis, this changing world order is discussed thoroughly in academic literature.<sup>191</sup> The attention that is given to the narratives within these summits by RT shows that the narratives are significantly important to be aired outside of Russia too. Showing that there is a strategic element to these narratives.

The final broadcast in this section marks a significant moment when the narrative surrounding “traditional values” becomes an official topic in the Russian presidential elections. In a speech about the upcoming elections in Russia, Putin emphasized that Russians should protect traditional values. The presenter of this news broadcast highlighted that sovereignty, and “traditional values” would be key themes in the upcoming presidential election. While not covered in the RT broadcast, Putin emphasised in his speech that 2024 would officially be declared the “Year of the Family”.<sup>192</sup> This theme of the year is an internal narrative, focusing

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<sup>188</sup> Elias Götz and Jonas Gejl Kaas, ‘Russia’s Influence-Seeking Efforts in Africa: Tools and Tactics’, Russia’s Quest for Influence in Africa after the 2022 Ukraine Invasion (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2024), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep58116.5>.

<sup>189</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : July 28, 2023 12:00pm-12:30pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20230728\\_160000\\_News](https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20230728_160000_News).

<sup>190</sup> ‘Documentary : RT : August 24, 2023 4:30am-5:01am EDT: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20230824\\_083000\\_Documentary](https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20230824_083000_Documentary); ‘News : Russia Today : August 25, 2023 3:00pm-3:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20230825\\_190000\\_News](https://api.gdelproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20230825_190000_News).

<sup>191</sup> Michael A. Peters, “The Emerging multipolar World Order: A Preliminary Analysis”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55, no. 14 (6 December 2023): 1653–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2151896>.

<sup>192</sup> Team of the Official Website of the President of Russia, ‘United Russia Party Congress’, President of Russia, 18 December 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73013>.

on demographic challenges within Russia of declining birth rates, and therefore is not as important as the strategic narrative around “traditional values” for RT.<sup>193</sup> This then explains why the declaration of 2024 as the “Year of the Family” is not featured in an RT broadcast. The fact that “traditional values” as a theme in the presidential campaign is given its airtime on RT shows that this strategic narrative is one Putin has intentionally chosen to promote, in his presidential campaign. However, the “Year of the Family” and the narrative around “traditional values” are closely related, as the “Year of the Family” revolved around “our values, and unique traditions of the harmonious development of different ethnicities, cultures, languages, and religions”, Putin stated.<sup>194</sup> Section 3.2 will further explore how this narrative develops in the year following.<sup>195</sup>

With “traditional values” being selected as a main theme in the Russian presidential elections, and the “Year of the Family” being declared for 2024, the narrative has thoroughly integrated into Russian politics. The period analysed in this section has seen the narrative around “traditional values” that can be split up into three main themes, wherein each different theme, the construct of “traditional values” differs slightly. Shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the narrative mostly revolved around the critique of neo-liberal values, as a threat to “traditional values”. Within this narrative, “traditional values” were opposed to liberalism, as a means of othering and therefore constructing the “self”. This framed is Russia’s “traditional values” against the “other”, which is the West and its liberal values. Furthermore, this narrative connected “traditional values” to a broader world order, framing countries that uphold these values as supporters of a multipolar world order, while portraying liberalism as a tool used by the West to impose its power on other nations. This is done by directly opposing the “American-style neo-liberal world order” to a multipolar world order, where countries adhere to “traditional values”.<sup>196</sup> The direct interview of Alexander Dugin by RT, shows the attempt to make a connection between this narrative and European conservatives. Dugin has strong connections to European conservatives, and in this interview, he echoed the narrative on “traditional values” that RT promotes in its broadcasts. Furthermore, the strategic narrative around “traditional values” is aired on RT broadcasts at strategic moments, such as around the official annexation

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<sup>193</sup> Smolevskaya, ‘Putin’s “Year of the Family”’.

<sup>194</sup> Russia, ‘United Russia Party Congress’.

<sup>195</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : December 17, 2023 9:00pm-9:31pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 11 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20231218\\_020000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20231218_020000_News).

<sup>196</sup> ‘CrossTalk : Russia Today : December 10, 2021 7:30pm-8:00pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

of multiple Ukrainian regions, geopolitical conferences, and the interview of Alexander Dugin which was aired at a moment when the military progress had stalled.<sup>197</sup>

The focus on LGBTQ+ rights as opposed to “traditional values” is a logical step made by Russia. Mostly focussing on European Politics in Hungary, and the dispute between the Russian ambassador in Canada, the RT broadcast made clear that LGBTQ+ rights are what “traditional values” are not. In line with othering literature, the construct of the “other” here tells what the “self” is not.<sup>198</sup> Quite logically, the LGBTQ+ movement in the West, and “traditional values” that revolve around family and Christianity, contradict each other.

A third topic that is identified in this section, is that of “traditional values” in foreign elections and politics. As was concluded in Chapter 2, foreign elections are moments where the narrative of Russia as the protector of “traditional values” often comes forward. In this timespan, international summits like the BRICS Xiamen summit, and the Russia-Africa Summit were moments where this narrative was used to divide the world into two blocs: one that is supportive of “traditional values” and one as a threat to these values. These moments add value to the strategic elements of this narrative, as they add to the reach of this narrative.

Viewing the narrative through the lens of othering the liberal West helps clarify its strategic purpose. By positioning the neo-liberal West as the antagonist, Russia’s approach becomes more defined. Additionally, by framing the neo-liberal elite in the West as the enforcers of these values, space is created for individuals in Western countries who align with traditional values to feel included in the “us” group. This allows the narrative to be critical of Western policy while othering those who subscribe to liberal ideas, simultaneously drawing in those who reject liberalism. It is important to recognize that strategic narratives are not created in a vacuum. They are persuasive tools, and for them to be effective, they must resonate with existing sentiments.<sup>199</sup> These sentiments are found within conservative and popular parties in the West, which typically value traditional values and oppose liberalism. As conservative parties

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<sup>197</sup> ‘Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 29, 2023’ (Institute for the Study of War, 29 January 2023), <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>; ‘Interview : Russia Today : December 30, 2022 8:30pm-9:00pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 30; ‘Documentary : Russia Today : September 30, 2022 8:30am-8:59am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 30; ‘Documentary : RT : August 24, 2023 4:30am-5:01am EDT: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’; ‘News : Russia Today : August 25, 2023 3:00pm-3:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’; ‘News : Russia Today : July 28, 2023 12:00pm-12:30pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>198</sup> Brons, ‘Othering, an Analysis’.

<sup>199</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*.

gain support in the West, Russia capitalizes on this momentum, incorporating these ideas into their strategic narratives.<sup>200</sup>

### **3.2 December 2023 - October 2024: “Year of the Family”**

The final section examines a war that, by 2024, appears to be losing momentum. While both Russia and Ukraine continue to engage in fierce combat, the front lines remain static. In 2024, Russia gained 4,168 square kilometres of territory in Ukraine and the Kursk Oblast, primarily comprising agricultural land and small communities. Despite the limited territorial advances, the fighting was exceptionally bloody: Russia suffered 102 casualties per square kilometre of territory gained.<sup>201</sup> In anticipation of the Russian parliamentary elections of 2024, traditional or family values became a central theme to mobilize voters.<sup>202</sup> This means that the narrative around “traditional values” is not only used as an external narrative to justify the war with Ukraine but also an internal narrative to push for certain values within Russia. However, the coverage by RT shows the strategic use of this narrative for the public outside of Russia.

This section examines four constructs of “traditional values” in which the strategic narrative was shaped. Namely, the Orthodox church, Woke, the decay of liberal values, and elections. A continuation of the strategic narrative revolving around “traditional values” is seen, with an increased emphasis on othering the West concerning Russia. Western influences in Ukraine are depicted by Russia to be part of the reasons for the Russo-Ukrainian war.

#### **3.2.1 Orthodox Church**

As has been identified multiple times in this thesis, the Russian Orthodox Church is an important aspect of the Russian identity, which is also seen in the “strategic partnerships” between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>203</sup> This section discusses the narratives within RT that link to Christian values. Starting with a highly controversial interview between the Russian president and the American presenter Tucker Carlson.<sup>204</sup> Carlson, who was

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<sup>200</sup> Oren Cass, ‘A New Conservatism’, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-12/new-conservatism-free-market>.

<sup>201</sup> Institute for the Study of War, ‘Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 31, 2024’, Institute for the Study of War, 31 December 2024, <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>.

<sup>202</sup> ‘Analysis: How Vladimir Putin Defends “family Values” to Mobilise Voters – BBC Monitoring’, accessed 7 April 2025, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c20515fv>.

<sup>203</sup> Zoe Knox and Anastasia Mitrofanova, ‘The Russian Orthodox Church’, in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>204</sup> Zelensky accused Carlson of working for Putin: Abbey Fenbert, “He Works for Putin” — Zelensky Slams Tucker Carlson’s pro-Russian Commentary’,

fired from the right-wing news medium Fox News because of his behaviour, gave Putin a podium to disseminate his narratives with little opposition.<sup>205</sup> In this interview, in which they mostly spoke about the war with Ukraine, the traditional values of Russians were connected to Russian orthodoxy.<sup>206</sup> Putin argues that Russians are accepting of other religions and that all these religions feel Russia is their motherland. The connection between Russia and Ukraine is accustomed to the orthodox religion by Putin, the tradition that a large part of the population follows in both countries.<sup>207</sup> In addition to the RT coverage of the 2-hour long interview, the transcript of this interview was also published on the site of the President of Russia, which shows that Putin was satisfied with the way he was interviewed by Carlson.<sup>208</sup> The use of media has become important in establishing a strategic narrative in the past decade. While this thesis mostly focuses on the formation of strategic narratives, meaning the way narratives are formed, it is useful to know how these narratives are projected; the projection of strategic narratives.<sup>209</sup> Concerning the interview that Putin gave to Carlson, the projection involved a large audience. Assumably, Putin knew that many traditional media would pick up the interview, because of Carlson's history working for Fox News, therefore, Putin knew that he would reach a large audience by giving this interview. This is especially useful because of the public that Tucker Carlson reaches, which is mostly right-wing conservatives in the United States, the people that have the potential to take over the narrative of declining "traditional values" in their country.

The observation that "traditional values" are connected to the Orthodox Church in the interview with Putin by Tucker Carlson is not novel. In line with existing research and the analysis in this thesis, "traditional values" are matched with Christianity in RT broadcasts.<sup>210</sup> However, this narrative gained more weight on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2024, when Ukraine banned the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOCMP), a

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*The Kyiv Independent*, 4 February 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/he-works-for-putin-zelensky-slams-tucker-carlsons-pro-russian-commentary/>.

<sup>205</sup> Richard Luscombe, 'Tucker Carlson Fired by Fox News for Getting "Too Big for His Boots", Book Says', *The Guardian*, 31 October 2023, sec. Media, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/oct/31/tucker-carlson-fox-news-book-brian-stelter>.

<sup>206</sup> 'News : Russia Today : February 8, 2024 8:00pm-8:31pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer', accessed 7 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240209\\_010000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240209_010000_News).

<sup>207</sup> 'Tucker Carlson Interviews Vladimir Putin Transcript', accessed 7 April 2025, <https://www.rev.com/transcripts/tucker-carlson-interviews-vladimir-putin-transcript>.

<sup>208</sup> Team of the Official Website of the President of Russia, 'Interview to Tucker Carlson', President of Russia, 14 February 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411>.

<sup>209</sup> Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*, 9.

<sup>210</sup> Elena A. Stepanova, "'Everything Good against Everything Bad": Traditional Values in the Search for New Russian National Idea', *Zeitschrift Für Religion, Gesellschaft Und Politik* 7, no. 1 (1 May 2023): 97–118, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-022-00123-2>.

church with close ties to Russia.<sup>211</sup> This event resulted in three RT broadcasts where the decision was criticized and argued to be a threat to Christian identity and “traditional values”.<sup>212</sup> The broadcasts also mentioned groups within the US and Britain that are considered fighters for “traditional values”, but about whom the RT presenter remarked that nothing is heard. This reaches its climax when Angelo Giuliano states the following: “You know, there is a broad agenda here, it is important to understand that this globalist agenda is about the destruction of nation-state, destruction of family, traditional values, the gender identity, everything that people cherish”.<sup>213</sup> From the narrative that groups within the US and Britain are quiet about the banning of the UOCMP, and the narrative of Angelo Giuliano it can be deduced that, within this narrative, Western countries are guilty of the destruction of “traditional values” in Ukraine.<sup>214</sup> Within this narrative, the “traditional values” in Ukraine are very tangible through the UOCMP, and the decay of these “traditional values” is represented by the banning of this patriarch.

### 3.2.2 Woke

The recurring topic that Woke ideals in the West are a threat to Russian society is seen in a more extreme sense in these times of war. RT broadcast coverage of narratives underscoring this idea is prominent in this period. At the forum “Strong Ideas for the New Times” Putin emphasises. His emphasis on people who adhere to traditional values and live outside of Russia is surprising. However, this broadcast had a guest who emphasised the difference between Russia and the West even more. The guest was Christopher Emms, who is wanted by the FBI for helping the North-Korean government with information about cryptocurrencies.<sup>215</sup> Emms makes a link between traditional values and homophobia in Russia: he stated that “most people in the West

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<sup>211</sup> ‘Ukraine’s Ban on Moscow-Linked Church Will Have Far-Reaching Consequences’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed 14 April 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2024/08/zapret-upc-v-ukraine?lang=en>.

<sup>212</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : August 18, 2024 3:00pm-3:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 16 May 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240818\\_190000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240818_190000_News); ‘News : RT : August 18, 2024 1:00pm-1:31pm EDT: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 16 May 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240818\\_170000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240818_170000_News); ‘News : Russia Today : August 20, 2024 10:00am-10:31am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 14 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240820\\_140000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240820_140000_News).

<sup>213</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : August 18, 2024 3:00pm-3:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>214</sup> Angelo Giuliano is a “geopolitical/financial analyst “ who mostly posts about the war in Gaza: ‘Angelo Giuliano CHIT ▼ ▼ ▼ (@angeloinchina) / X’, X (formerly Twitter), 9 February 2025, <https://x.com/angeloinchina>.

<sup>215</sup> ‘Christopher Douglas Emms’, Person, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed 10 April 2025, <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/counterintelligence/christopher-douglas-emms>.

think that Russians are homophobic” but that the only difference is that in Russia parents do not have to worry about what their kids see on television. His narrative shows the connection between “traditional values”, and sexual orientation and relationships. Within this narrative, the focus lies on the fact that children are taught wrong ideas on these relationships via television. This ties into a discussion present in many Western countries between the left and the right on whether the influence of Woke politics in the education system is rightful or not.<sup>216</sup> Emms, being born in Great Britain, is invited because of his knowledge of this Western country. The presenter emphasised that Britain has a set of traditional values, but Emms argues this to be eroded. The emphasis that there are parts of the West, or that there have been parts of the West which adhere to “traditional values” is something that we have seen before but is increasingly present in the narratives in RT broadcasts.<sup>217</sup> This connects to othering theory and creates room for people within “unfriendly” states to still feel connected to the “in” group. When emphasising that people are adhering to these traditional values outside of Russia, especially within a program that is narrated in English and available on a Western-oriented web page, non-Russians can feel attracted to this Russian narrative. Therefore, not everyone outside of Russia is automatically part of this “other” group. Instead, those who share an appreciation for “traditional values” can still feel a sense of belonging to the “us” group. This dynamic allows Russia to garner support for its politics beyond its borders.<sup>218</sup>

Concerning Woke ideals, the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games served as an opportunity for Russians to emphasize their stance on “traditional values”. This ceremony included a scene that many described as a mockery of the biblical story around the Last Supper.<sup>219</sup> While this was denied by the organisers of the opening ceremony, the comparisons to Da Vinci’s depiction of the Last Supper were easily made. The New York Times described the scene as follows: “In the performance broadcast during the ceremony, a woman wearing a silver, halo-like headdress stood at the centre of a long table, with drag queens posing on either

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<sup>216</sup> Katherine Thurlow, ‘The Death of “Woke” Culture: How Florida’s Attack on Progressive Policies Has Created a History Curriculum That Indoctrinates the Youth’, *International Public History* 6, no. 1 (1 June 2023): 25–29, <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2023-2005>; Eric Kaufmann, ‘Left-Modernist Extremism’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Left-Wing Extremism, Volume 2* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023), 295–311, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36268-2\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36268-2_16).

<sup>217</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : February 23, 2024 12:00pm-12:31pm EST (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer, accessed 10 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240223\\_170000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240223_170000_News).

<sup>218</sup> Lawrence Freedman, ‘The Possibilities and Limits of Strategic Narratives’, in *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War* (Routledge, 2015).

<sup>219</sup> Yan Zhuang, ‘An Olympics Scene Draws Scorn. Did It Really Parody “The Last Supper”?’’, *The New York Times*, 28 July 2024, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/28/sports/olympics-opening-ceremony-last-supper-paris.html>.

side of her. Later, at the same table, a giant cloche lifted, revealing a man, nearly naked and painted blue, on a dinner plate surrounded by fruit. He broke into a song as, behind him, the drag queens danced”.<sup>220</sup> As could be expected from a conservative country, the reactions on RT were scathing: “It was a sort of combination of a gay pride march and death cult”.<sup>221</sup> Furthermore, the Olympic Games opening ceremony has received extensive criticism from conservatives and Christians internationally.<sup>222</sup> Therefore, the commotion around this event is a matter of taste and respect, and is difficult to link this directly to strategic narratives. However, As Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle argue, research into strategic narratives can remain independent, as long as researchers make systematic inferences. The opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics can thus be viewed as a contribution to the strategic narrative surrounding “traditional values” and their perceived decay in the West. Its alignment with this narrative was evident in the controversy and differing opinions it sparked, making it a fitting moment for the narrative to resurface.<sup>223</sup>

### 3.2.3 The Decay of Western Values

Western Liberal values as opposed to the “traditional values” that Russia argues to protect are a recurring topic within RT broadcasts. This section analyses the increasing emphasis on the decay of the Western Liberal values, and “traditional values” as an alternative to the Western liberal values. This was evident in Putin’s appeal to those who value traditional values during the “Strong Ideas for the New Times” event, which was extensively covered by RT. As the presenter of this news broadcast explains, most of Putin’s speech revolved around domestic affairs, but only the block that revolved around international affairs was given attention by RT. At the time of Putin’s speech, 29 February 2024, the start of the War in Ukraine was almost two years ago. Meanwhile, Ukraine has gotten dedicated support from Western countries. Leaders of Western countries have held visits to the country’s capital, Kyiv, and military and financial support was flowing.<sup>224</sup> Expectedly, Putin’s speech was not positive about Western efforts to support Ukraine in the war, and the language used was increasingly hostile towards the West:

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<sup>220</sup> Angela Giuffrida, ‘Paris Olympics Organisers Apologise to Christians for Unintentional Last Supper Parody’, *The Guardian*, 28 July 2024, sec. Sport, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/article/2024/jul/28/paris-olympics-organisers-apologise-to-christians-for-last-supper-parody>.

<sup>221</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : July 27, 2024 12:00pm-12:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 10 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240727\\_160000\\_News&play=1722096904](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240727_160000_News&play=1722096904).

<sup>222</sup> Giuffrida, ‘Paris Olympics Organisers Apologise to Christians for Unintentional Last Supper Parody’.

<sup>223</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*.

<sup>224</sup> Nigel Walker, ‘Conflict in Ukraine: A Timeline (Current Conflict, 2022 – Present)’, 10 April 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9847/>.



“We will not allow anyone to interfere in our internal affairs. The so-called West, with its colonial habits, habits that inside national conflicts around the world, strives not only to hold back our development. Instead of Russia, they need a dependent, fading, dying state, a place where you can create whatever is beneficial. In essence, they would like to do to Russia the same thing they did in many other areas of the world, including in Ukraine.”<sup>225</sup>

In this speech, the intent to “other” Western countries is evident. When discussing the war in Ukraine, this is to be expected. Two countries fighting each other would logically not speak well of one another. However, traditional values, which are being presented as a national topic, are also being used to critique the West:

“We see what is happening in some countries where moral norms and family institutions are being deliberately destroyed, and entire nations are being pushed towards extinction and degeneration, and we choose life. Russia has been and remains a stronghold of traditional values on which human civilization is built. Our choice is shared by most people in the world, including millions of citizens in Western countries.”<sup>226</sup>

The similarities between both paragraphs within the same speech are striking. Where Putin argued that Western countries want Russia to be a dying state when talking about the conflict in Ukraine, the opposite is seen in his argumentation on traditional values. Here, he says that “family values and institutions are being deliberately destroyed” in some countries.<sup>227</sup> Given past arguments, we could assume that Putin means Western countries by saying “some counties”. In line with Pan, Isakhan, and Nwokora, what has not been said should be examined.<sup>228</sup> Then the argument can be made that both parts of the speech say the same thing. This includes the argument that the West is depriving its values and wants to undermine Russia wants to portray the image of protecting these values and that it is still a strong state. This is in line with what Russia-supporting scholars argue, namely that the liberal system in the West is

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<sup>225</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : February 29, 2024 10:00am-10:31am EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 10 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240229\\_150000\\_News](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240229_150000_News).

<sup>226</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : February 29, 2024 10:00am-10:31am EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

<sup>227</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : February 29, 2024 10:00am-10:31am EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 29.

<sup>228</sup> Chengxin Pan, Benjamin Isakhan, and Zim Nwokora, ‘Othering as Soft-Power Discursive Practice: China Daily’s Construction of Trump’s America in the 2016 Presidential Election’, *Politics* 40, no. 1 (1 February 2020): 54–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395719843219>.

depriving, and that the Conservative Russian system arises as an alternative to this system.<sup>229</sup> Moreover, this line of reasoning also finds its support with influential Western International Relations scholars such as John Mearsheimer, which adds to the strategic value of this narrative.<sup>230</sup>

### 3.2.4 Elections

As is visible in Putin's speech, the Russo-Ukrainian war has resulted in increased tensions between the West and Ukraine on a geopolitical scale. The othering that is seen concerning Woke ideals in the West and the assumed decay of Western values therefore also made its way into the narrative surrounding the Russian Presidential Elections, which were held between 15 to 17 March 2024. President Putin made another television appearance short before the elections on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2024. The president gave a private interview on for RT. This is remarkable, as RT is a news medium that focuses on news production in foreign countries as a way of exercising soft power.<sup>231</sup> The interview revolved around different topics, such as the elections in the United States, the possibility of a nuclear war, and traditional values. Putin frames the "fight for traditional values" as a fight for Russian independence and sovereignty, emphasising that Western countries have been colonial powers. Traditional values and the fight for Russian sovereignty are exactly the two topics that were expected to become the main topics for the Russian Presidential campaign of 2024.<sup>232</sup> The news ticker reads "Putin: Western elites have a strong desire to freeze current unfair system in the world" which emphasises the narrative of Russia, that the Unipolar world order is unfair and forced upon by Western elites, and that the world should move to a multipolar world order. The question is why the topics of multipolarity, and traditional values are linked by Putin. It is often argued that Western countries resist accepting a multipolar world, which means a global order with multiple hegemons rather than a single dominant power, the United States. In this envisioned multipolar system, two primary blocs emerge: the collective West and the Russia-China bloc, with India rising as an additional influential power. While there is ongoing debate about whether the world has already transitioned into a multipolar structure, Russia favours such a system because it allows it to

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<sup>229</sup> Glenn Diesen, *The Decay of Western Civilisation and Resurgence of Russia: Between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (London: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351012638>.

<sup>230</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 August 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

<sup>231</sup> Hutchings et al., 'What Is Rt?'

<sup>232</sup> 'News : Russia Today : December 17, 2023 9:00pm-9:31pm EST (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer', 17.

operate independently of the former hegemon, the United States.<sup>233</sup> In the academic community of International Relations, there is an ongoing discussion about the importance of cultural identity, which was sparked by Samuel Huntington's book "The Clash of Civilizations" in 1993. His thesis is that the post-Cold War world would be divided into cultural blocks. Shared values are important in his theory because this is what makes these cultural blocks. While Huntington believes that these blocks are already divided forming traditional blocks like the West, Slavic Countries, Islamic countries, etc., the idea of forming power blocks with countries having similar values can be used to explain Putin's narrative.<sup>234</sup> Traditional values are used by Putin to explain which countries are "the good" countries, and which countries are "the evil" countries. This creates a dichotomy between "good" countries adhering to traditional values, and "bad" countries who do not adhere to these values. Striving for a multipolar world would mean that countries which he believes are fighters for "traditional values" (read China, and India for example) would need to become major world powers together with Russia, and Western countries, who are not fighters would need to step down to give room for other countries to become major world players.

Following this line of reasoning, it is important to underscore the differences between countries that are framed to be a threat to "traditional values" and countries that are supporters of these values according to Russia. The practice of othering within the narratives in RT broadcasts can be used to underline these differences. In this section, as was the case in section 3.2 and chapter 3, we see RT news broadcasts covering elections in other countries. These can be divided into two types of elections: (1) elections in states supportive of "traditional values" and (2) elections in states not supportive of "traditional values". In the second type, these states are exclusively Western states. The German elections in 2024 fall into the second group. In a broadcast covering the Russian elections, which were held the day before the broadcast, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2024. Elections in multiple European countries were criticized by the presenter:

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<sup>233</sup> Mher Sahakyan, ed., *China and Eurasian Powers in a Multipolar World Order 2.0: Security, Diplomacy, Economy and Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003352587>.

<sup>234</sup> Vincenzo Bove and Gunes Gokmen, 'Cultural Distance and Interstate Conflicts', *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 4 (October 2017): 939–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000551>.

“The United States where you have President Biden using administrative resources to crush his opponent and to deny him the chance of appearing a ballot, teaching us about democracy, yeah, you have the Germans, the Germans who are trying to label their biggest opposition party as a terrorist organization, teaching us about elections in France where they have maligned the national front in every way possible using state resources, they are trying to tell us how to run elections, it’s a joke, the masks are off, there is nothing they can teach Russians.”<sup>235</sup>

After which is noted that “Russians are a separate civilization, with their own values”. All aspects of the strategic narrative analyses within this thesis, revolving around “traditional values” are being covered in this broadcast, including the balance of power which according to the guest in this talk show is shifting:

“Cultural, as well as traditional values are once again preserving, and taking the upper hand over the chase, the eternal chase for money, for profit, over the American dream basically”.<sup>236</sup>

This broadcast shows that elections in Western countries are approached negatively, to establish a narrative of the “evil West”, which adheres to “wrong values”. Consequently, when it comes to elections in states that Russia sees as protectors of traditional values, it is seen that the narrative turns around. Where the narrative around Western elections revolves around what goes wrong in these elections, and what values these countries do not protect, the narrative regarding countries that Russia sees as protectors of “traditional values” does often not cover the elections in these countries themselves. Georgia, a country that had been invaded by Russia already before Russia invaded Ukraine, held elections in October 2024. In the summer of that year, two RT broadcasts covered the politics of Georgia. As we have seen with the German elections, these elections in Georgia are used to criticise Europe and the United States. In this case by claiming that “Europe and the US are two American arms moving West”, and that Putin is the “hope for global justice” and the “protector of traditional values”.<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, protests in Georgia in the end of July 2024 are used to claim that becoming a member of the European

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<sup>235</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : March 18, 2024 4:30am-5:01am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 11 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltpoint.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240318\\_083000\\_Documentary&play=171075083](https://api.gdeltpoint.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240318_083000_Documentary&play=171075083).

<sup>236</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : March 18, 2024 4:30am-5:01am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 18.

<sup>237</sup> ‘Direct Impact : Russia Today : July 9, 2024 3:30pm-4:00pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 14 April 2025, [https://api.gdeltpoint.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240709\\_193000\\_Direct\\_Impact](https://api.gdeltpoint.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240709_193000_Direct_Impact).

Union comes at the expense of sovereignty, independence and traditional values.<sup>238</sup> It can be concluded that regardless of which category the elections fall into, they are utilized as a means to critique the West and its influence.

In this section, three main constructs of “traditional values” were analysed within their context. The construct of “traditional values, revolving around Christian Orthodox values was the clearest with the Ukrainian ban on the, UOCMP. The interview that Putin gave to Tucker Carlson also promoted this image of “traditional values” as Christian Orthodox values. In addition, the interview with Tucker Carlson shows that this narrative is carefully constructed to be spread to Western countries. As Carlson is an influential conservative within the United States, this interview can be a link between the Russian narrative and American conservatives.<sup>239</sup> The narrative on “traditional values” that was a main theme in the 2024 Russian Presidential elections have shown that this strategic narrative is not only an external, but also an internal strategic narrative. However, similar arguments have been made, and the RT broadcast being in English, showed that this narrative within RT was still meant to be an external narrative. Sub-section 3.2.4 has shown that the narrative on “traditional values” in 2024 keeps coming forward during foreign elections too, where the narrative is mostly supportive of countries that in Russia’s view adhere to “traditional values”. The othering of countries that according to RT do not adhere to “traditional values” is visible, with Russia being portrayed as a country that protects these values.<sup>240</sup> While the narrative on “traditional values” often emerges at strategically chosen moments, such as elections or international summits, controversial events like the 2024 Paris Olympics Opening Ceremony are also used to enforce the narrative on “traditional values”. This strategy constructs an “other” by highlighting those who do not adhere to “traditional values”, while creating space for individuals in the West to feel attracted to the “us” group. Furthermore, these events add to the argument that Western values are decaying, due to Woke-ideology, which is discussed in section 3.2.2.

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<sup>238</sup> ‘News : Russia Today : July 24, 2024 1:00pm-1:31pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, accessed 14 April 2025,

[https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT\\_20240724\\_170000\\_News&play=1721841832](https://api.gdeltproject.org/api/v2/tvv/tvv?id=RT_20240724_170000_News&play=1721841832).

<sup>239</sup> Charlotte Alter, ‘Talking With Tucker Carlson, the Most Powerful Conservative in America’, TIME, 15 July 2021, <https://time.com/6080432/tucker-carlson-profile/>.

<sup>240</sup> ‘Direct Impact : Russia Today : July 9, 2024 3:30pm-4:00pm EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’.

### 3.3 Conclusion

This chapter had analysed RT broadcast over a time span of almost two years of full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine. With around 413.000 casualties (dead and wounded) on the Ukrainian side, and 600.000 casualties (dead and wounded) on the Russian side in December 2024, the scale of this conflict is immense.<sup>241</sup> During these two years, the war has not only led to over a million casualties, but it has also changed geopolitics. We have seen former neutral countries Finland and Sweden join NATO.<sup>242</sup> And Western countries, alongside their partners have given billions of euros in financial and military aid to Ukraine.<sup>243</sup> With these developments came a whole new discussion within Western politics and societies on what to do with this war. In the timespan of this chapter, 24 February 2022 - 22 October 2024, the Russian narrative around “traditional values” has intensified too. The RT presenter recognising Putin’s focus on “traditional values” as an official standpoint for his campaign for the presidential election of 2024 marks a period in which the narrative around “traditional values” is openly recognised to be an official narrative. But this on its own does not make a narrative a strategic narrative. Strategic narratives are narratives where foreign policy and international relations come together. They are constructed as a means of exercising soft power and have underlying claims about how the international system is structured and works.<sup>244</sup>

This chapter has seen an increasing hostility towards the West in the strategic narratives on “traditional values”, while consistently being focused on specific themes and constructs. Section 3.1 has shown that there have been three main constructs on which “traditional values” have been based in the period analysed in that chapter. Starting with “traditional values” which were opposed to liberal values as the “other”. The frame then evolves around the reasoning that liberal values are a means of forcing unipolarity onto the world by Western elites. Adhering to “traditional values” is framed as an alternative, with the possibility of forming a multipolar world order. Russia’s war in Ukraine is seen by scholars as its attempt to break the unipolar world order to force a multipolar world order.<sup>245</sup> This narrative therefore aligns with its

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<sup>241</sup> A casualty count during a war is never fully independent. These are Ukrainian estimates.

‘Kyiv Reveals Total Ukraine Casualties in Putin’s War for First Time’, POLITICO, 8 December 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-announces-its-total-military-casualties-first-time/>.

<sup>242</sup> ‘A Safer Europe: “Finland and Sweden Join NATO as Contributors” | Militaire Spectator’, accessed 14 April 2025, <https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/safer-europe-finland-and-sweden-join-nato-contributors>.

<sup>243</sup> ‘Total Bilateral Aid to Ukraine by Donor & Type 2024’, Statista, accessed 14 April 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1303432/total-bilateral-aid-to-ukraine/>.

<sup>244</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, ‘Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy’, 2024.

<sup>245</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, ‘The Myth of Multipolarity’, *Foreign Affairs*, 18 April 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth>.

geopolitical initiative regarding the war in Ukraine. The criticism on Western Woke and LGBTQ+ policy seemed unabated in the period analysed in sub-section 3.1.2. These policies were used to create an “other” and therefore define “traditional values” as something which is not Woke and not LGBTQ+. Within this narrative on “traditional values” the West is framed to be in denial of “traditional values” because of its policies regarding this matter. A link to Ukraine is made by Putin by arguing that the West is forcing “perverted values” upon Ukraine, and therefore imaging Russia as the country that protects Ukraine’s “traditional values”.<sup>246</sup>

Section 3.2, which focused on “traditional values” as an official narrative in the Russian presidential elections, showed a continuation and acceleration of the narrative that was identified in section 3.1. Notable was the frame that Western influence was a threat to orthodox values, and therefore “traditional values”. This was emphasised in the interview that Putin gave to Tucker Carlson, which had a great reach with Western conservatives. The Ukrainian ban on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which is closely related to Russia served as a perfect example of this threat within the narrative in the RT broadcast. Liberal values in the West were a prominent topic in 2024 too, but more emphasis was placed on the “decay” of these liberal values, and by the means of othering, an alternative image of “traditional values” was created, albeit through more hostile language towards the West. This narrative connects to the narratives within populist parties in the West, which often frame “neo-liberal elites” of being responsible for the supposed decline of Western values. As is the case with the othering of Woke and LGBTQ policy that came forward in the RT broadcasts within section 3.2, Western conservative populists use this to establish an image of the threat of this elite to Western civilizations.<sup>247</sup> This narrative can, therefore, be seen as reinforcing Western populist discourse. It emerges both strategically during pivotal moments, such as the 2024 German elections, and opportunistically during events like the Opening Ceremony of the 2024 Paris Olympics, where liberal values became a focal point of public discourse due to the ceremony's controversy.

A comprehensive answer to this chapter’s research question “*How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of ‘traditional values’ from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 until October 2024?*” can be given as follows: Russia has increasingly positioned itself through RT as a

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<sup>246</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : September 30, 2022 8:30am-8:59am EDT (Russia (English Language))’: GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 30.

<sup>247</sup> Benedetta Carlotti, ‘A Divorce of Convenience: Exploring Radical Right Populist Parties’ Position on Putin’s Russia within the Context of the Ukrainian War. A Social Media Perspective’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 4 (2 October 2023): 1452–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2171969>.

protector of “traditional values” from the moment of invasion of Ukraine until October 2024 by othering the West, emphasizing the decay of “traditional values” in the West. Through flexible, but consistent constructs based on purportedly liberal values, including Woke and LGBTQ+ politics as the “other”, and Christian values as the “self”, Russia has emphasised itself as the protector of “traditional values”. The ambiguity of the construct of “traditional values” suggests that it can function as an “empty signifier”, a concept often employed in populist discourse to amplify social frustration by reinforcing stereotypes.<sup>248</sup> Utilising strategic moments such as elections and geopolitical summits, as well as moments that gave opportunity to strengthen promote the narrative, such as the 2024 Paris Olympics Opening Ceremony. A link to Western conservatives and populists can be seen both in the content of the narrative within RT, as well as in the invited guests. The content, focussing on the “liberal elite” as responsible for forcing liberal values upon countries (both Western as non-Western) feeds into Western populist discourse that frames the “liberal elite” and liberal values as a threat to “traditional values”.<sup>249</sup> In addition, guests like Tucker Carlson and Alexander Dugin provide a link to Western conservatives, and conservative thinkers.<sup>250</sup> These links in the content of the narrative, as well as the people involved in spreading the narrative show the intent to feed Western discussions on “traditional values”.

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<sup>248</sup> Felipe Rafael Linden, ‘How “Empty” Is the Signifier “the People”? Impasses of the Poststructuralist Approach in Ernesto Laclau’s Political Ontology’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 30, no. 2 (4 May 2025): 327–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2230449>.

<sup>249</sup> Peter Dorey, ‘The Conservative Right’s “War against Woke”: Fighting the Latest “Enemies Within”’, in *Towards a Very British Version of the “Culture Wars”* (Routledge, 2024).

<sup>250</sup> Backman, ‘A Russian Radical Conservative Challenge to the Liberal Global Order’; Alter, ‘Talking With Tucker Carlson, the Most Powerful Conservative in America’.



## Chapter 4: Conclusion

This thesis has examined the following research question: *How has RT functioned as an instrument of Russian strategic narrative building to construct and promote its image as a protector of “traditional values” since its invasion of Crimea in 2014 and how do these narratives fit with Russia’s larger geopolitical initiatives?*

To answer the research question of this thesis, narrative analysis has been conducted on a selection of RT broadcasts that have been aired from the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2014 until the end of the dataset: the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2022. The analysed broadcasts were selected based on the search criteria “West”, “Ukraine” and “traditional values”. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle’s theory of strategic narratives, and their corresponding method of narrative analysis was used to create a solid basis for the theory and method of this study.<sup>251</sup> In two analytical chapters, the respective sub-questions are addressed: the first examines the period from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, while the second focuses on the period from the full-scale invasion in 2022 to the end of the dataset that same year.

Chapter 2, covering the first period of conflict showed that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that a strategic narrative portraying Russia as the protector of “traditional values” was present in RT’s coverage during this phase of the conflict. The narrative on “traditional values” within the selected broadcasts during this period lacked consistency. However, strategic elements within the narrative are identified, primarily linked to its timing. In RT broadcasts covering elections in Western countries, support for conservative and populist parties was evident. These parties were framed as protectors of “traditional values” and part of the “self”, while Western liberalists were portrayed as the “other” in a narrative of othering.<sup>252</sup> At the time, Western populist parties still had significant ties to Russia. In 2021, shortly before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the narrative became more established, focussing on “traditional values” opposing to Wokeism, liberal values, and Muslim values. The flexibility of the construct of “traditional values” is evident here, and these constructs largely align with populist discourse in the West.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Forging the World*.

<sup>252</sup> Brons, ‘Othering, an Analysis’.

<sup>253</sup> Rogers Brubaker, ‘Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (21 June 2017): 1191–1226, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700>.

In Chapter 3, covering the period of conflict after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the strategic narrative revolving around “traditional values” became increasingly consistent and hostile towards the West. The practice of othering was also identified within this period where the strategic narrative around “traditional values” mostly focused on the decay of Western values, and Russia as an alternative with “traditional values” being protected in Russia.<sup>254</sup> The argument that liberal elites in the West were enforcing “perverted” values on Ukraine is identified in this narrative, linking to the narrative of Russia protecting Ukraine from these Western influences.<sup>255</sup> The responsibility to protect “traditional values” within Russian strategic narratives also corresponds to similar narratives explored in other media, as discussed in the literature review of this thesis.<sup>256</sup> The narrative around “traditional values” is therefore identified as a strategic narrative within RT broadcasts in the period covered in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The connection between the narrative within RT broadcasts mostly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, framing a Western neo-liberal elite to be responsible for forcing non-traditional values on the West, and populist discourse in the West is evident. Western populist discourse has a very similar discourse.<sup>257</sup> RT’s effectiveness of spreading this narrative towards Western discourse becomes greater by inviting influential Western thinkers and journalists, such as Alexander Dugin and Tucker Carlson. This has a strategic use as they serve as a bridge between the Russian and Western conservative and populist movements. Additionally, inviting Russia-aligned researchers as frequent RT guests helps enhance the credibility of this narrative. Russia’s goal to weaken the Western liberal world order by supporting populist parties can also be seen in the link between a multipolar world order and countries that adhere to “traditional values” that was made in RT broadcasts throughout the analysed period. As Russia strives for a multipolar world, this goal is achievable only if Western liberal hegemony is weakened.<sup>258</sup> By promoting the narrative that neo-liberal elites are steering Western countries away from “traditional values”, as identified in this thesis, Russia strategically aims to create internal tensions within these nations and within the EU. This, in turn, serves a significant strategic purpose. The development of a strategic narrative within the RT broadcasts analysed in this

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<sup>254</sup> Brons, ‘Othering, an Analysis’.

<sup>255</sup> ‘Documentary : Russia Today : September 30, 2022 8:30am-8:59am EDT (Russia (English Language)): GDELT TV News Visual Explorer’, 30.

<sup>256</sup> Brons, “Othering, an Analysis”; Pupcenoks and Seltzer, “Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the “Near Abroad””.

<sup>257</sup> Zdzisław Mach, ‘Right-Wing Populism, Euroscepticism, and Neo-Traditionalism in Central and Eastern Europe’, in *The Right-Wing Critique of Europe* (Routledge, 2022).

<sup>258</sup> Russia attempts to weaken Western liberal hegemony by supporting Western populist parties: Anton Shekhovtsov, ‘Introduction’, in *Russia and the Western Far Right* (Routledge, 2017).

thesis appears to be a continuous process, beginning with the escalating tensions between Russia and Ukraine in 2021, with increasing hostility. The focus on strategic moments of presenting the narrative, and relevant guests within the RT broadcasts to link to the public in Western countries give the strategic narrative on “traditional values” the possibility to shape the behaviour of international actors opinion in favour of Russia’s larger geopolitical strategy.

With regards to the various constructs of “traditional values” that are identified in this study, the conclusion can be made that an exact definition of these “traditional values” cannot be explained within this strategic narrative. While these values are often opposed to other values, including Wokeism, liberal values, and Muslim values, and are sometimes defined as being Christian values, the exact definition of these values are left unexplained. The ambiguity around what these “traditional values” entail can be of strategic use. No significant changes within the constructs of “traditional values” are identified between the two periods analysed in this chapter. The primary construct of “traditional values” identified in the RT broadcasts analysed in this study is one that defines itself in opposition to liberal values. These constructs of “traditional values” likely serve as an “empty signifier”, which is common in populist discourse, and has as goal to strengthen social frustration by promoting stereotypes.<sup>259</sup> This naturally enhances the appeal of this narrative to European populists.

The findings of this thesis link to the existing literature on both strategic narratives and Russian soft power due to its sole focus on English-language RT broadcasts. Where existing literature often focuses on the Russian strategic narratives with respect to “traditional values” in one Western country, or post-soviet countries, this thesis has analysed the process of strategic narrative building within one medium, and due to the English-language RT episode, the public of these episode can be considered the West as a whole. Societal relevance is furthermore gained by grasping how Russian soft power in the form of strategic narratives works in times of war.<sup>260</sup> While hybrid warfare is a popular term in today’s political playing field, and Western citizens are warned of Russian disinformation, the way that the strategic narratives are built that is identified in this thesis shows the strategic sophistication of the Russian information campaign. This adds to the existing literature reviewed in the introduction of this thesis, where strategies were argued to be part of Russian hybrid warfare.<sup>261</sup> In the current geopolitical climate, Western

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<sup>259</sup> Ondřej Stulík, ‘Do We Have All the Necessary Data? The Challenge of Measuring Populism through Metaphors’, *Quality & Quantity* 53, no. 5 (1 September 2019): 2653–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-019-00878-6>.

<sup>260</sup> Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives*; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, ‘Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy’, 2024.

<sup>261</sup> Dov Bachmann, Putter, and Duczynski, ‘Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation’.

policymakers can benefit from the knowledge of how the Russian government aims to influence their electorate. It is up to these policymakers to decide how to react to this form of Russian soft power.<sup>262</sup>

Concerning the limitations of this study, two main aspects can be identified. The comprehensiveness of the source material, and the lack of knowledge of the reception of the strategic narrative within Western populations and thinkers. Firstly, while the amount of primary material within the selection of this thesis was comprehensive enough for an MA thesis, a broader selection of sources could have led to a further understanding of different narrative strategies. Especially primary source material covering the first period was scarce, especially considering the gap in primary sources in regarding 2015 and 2016. Secondly, this thesis has mostly focussed on the strategic narrative itself. However, to determine its effectiveness, it is essential to measure how this narrative is perceived, such as by studying the reception of the “empty signifier” concept of “traditional values”. This would lead to a more comprehensive societal impact of this research. Furthermore, the effect of the 2022 ban on RT within the European Union is unclear. Studying how the strategic narrative has been perceived by European audiences would measure the effects of this ban.

Further research could enhance the findings of this thesis by examining the extent to which the strategic narratives identified herein are accepted by the Western public and scholars. Recent elections in Romania, and the conservative and populist CPAC event have seen similar narratives as identified in this thesis, raising questions about whether these strategic narratives have effectively been adopted in European countries.<sup>263</sup> Additionally, the dataset of RT transcripts used in this study was centred on a combination of specific concepts. While these concepts were carefully selected, focusing on “traditional values” within RT broadcasts in conjunction with other concepts could yield alternative insights.

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<sup>262</sup> There is academic discussion on whether RT can be considered a “soft power” or a “sharp power” instrument of the Kremlin. Because of Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle’s definition of strategic narratives being the leading theory for this thesis, I chose to see the Strategic Narratives within RT as a means of exerting “soft power”. See: Glazunova et al., ‘Soft Power, Sharp Power?’; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, ‘Strategic Narratives, Soft Power, and Foreign Policy’, 2024.

<sup>263</sup> ‘Who Is Winning the Romanian Election?’, POLITICO, 16 May 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/romanian-presidential-election-george-simion-nicusor-dan/>; Javier Villamor, ‘CPAC Hungary: Patriotism Is Not About Nostalgia but About the Future’, 2 June 2025, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/cpac-hungary-patriotism-is-not-about-nostalgia-but-about-the-future/>.

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