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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Russian future thinking during its war in Ukraine

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Abstract

This article examines Russian national future thinking during the war in Ukraine. It views future thinking as a form of mediated action that is dependent on narrative tools and explores the structure and function of various types of narratives that play a role, including schematic narrative templates and national narrative projects. The first section of the article goes into conceptual issues on plot, the sense of an ending and other features of narrative logic that assign meaning to events. The second part of the article goes into how these issues play a role in shaping Russian ideas about the war in Ukraine. Using sources such as Russian social media, we examine how the narratives used by Putin and widely accepted by the broader population have changed over the course of the war in Ukraine. After initially focusing on denazification and other issues specific to Ukraine, the Russian narrative has moved on to more established and general themes about existential threats from military threats and alien ideas from the West. To recognize what has changed and what has not, we harness the notion of a national narrative project, which is an underlying code in the form of a national autobiography for Russia. The sense of an ending for this national narrative template has religious overtones and a telos about redemption that follows suffering. It is narrative with a sense of an ending in the future, which means using it has the future and future thinking built into it.

Keywords: future thinking; narrative; schematic narrative template; national narrative project; Russia; social media; narrative tools; national narrative; narrative logic

Introduction

After 4 years of Putin's 'special military operation' in Ukraine, Russia had suffered more than a million casualties, yet Putin and much of the Russian public remained committed to the brutal campaign. The tenacity of their commitment remained so pronounced that Western observers often viewed it as nonsensical, if not bizarre or even pathological.

What is the Russian worldview that made this possible? This is a question that has stumped Western observers for decades. In 1939, for example, Winston Churchill famously quipped that Russian is a 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside, inside an enigma'. More recently, Angela Merkel was reduced to saying that Putin may simply be 'living in a different world'. In 2025, NATO chief Mark Rutte seems to have reached a similar dead end when he said that after Putin's takeover of Crimea, 'I stopped trying to understand the guy'.

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In their struggle to understand the Kremlin's actions, analysts have often turned to standard international relations (IR) theory, especially realism. From this perspective, states exist in an anarchic world where they are forced to act alone or form coalitions to survive in a constant struggle for power and security. Despite the existence of the UN and other international organizations, it is a world where there is no 'global 911' to call when a state is threatened. In the Russian case, realists such as John Mearsheimer (2001) see the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine as a natural response to a menace from the West that led them to do what any state would do in similar circumstances. This involves risk calculations based on hard-headed, realistic assessments of the destructive capabilities of others rather than culture and intention.

Another less widely used paradigm in IR theory, 'constructivism', takes a somewhat different tack. Constructivists such as James Wendt (1999) argue that states' responses to threats depend on how the meaning of these threats is understood, a process that involves using identity and culturally based perceptions in the interpretation of dangers and self-interest. This would appear to get us a step closer to addressing the enigma of Russia, but most constructivist accounts remain limited by their assumptions of how threat perception works. While recognizing cultural factors, they have less to say about just what these are and how they shape decision-making.

We propose that narrative analysis provides a way to take these issues on. This approach reflects a broader sociocultural approach that takes mental functioning to be a form of 'mediated action' (Wertsch, 1998; Erll, 2011). In this view, narratives are 'cultural tools' (Wertsch, 1998) or 'cognitive instruments' (Mink, 1978) used by individuals as members of groups to make sense of the world. Instead of being products of individual creativity, these narrative tools are largely drawn from what Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) called the 'stock of stories' provided by collectives such as nations.

The shared use of these narrative tools is a crucial force that binds together 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) such as Russia. Members of these communities do not function as 'unencumbered' agents but instead are 'individuals as members of a group' (Bartlett, 1932) who rely on shared narrative tools in discourse and thought. This reliance can be so great that these narrative tools do some of their speaking and thinking for them (Wertsch, 2021). Along with cognitive functioning, this also applies to identity projects and moral decisions, a point made by MacIntyre when he asserted, 'I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part"' (MacIntyre, 1984, 216).

Like any other imagined community, the Russian nation relies on narrative tools in the construction of its collective memory (Wertsch, 2021). Discussions of this are part of the broader topic of 'mental time travel' (Topçu and Hirst, 2020; Topçu and Hirst, 2022) that extends to collective future thinking (Yamashiro and Roediger, 2019). Studies have revealed negative and positive biases in future thinking as well as cultural differences (Wang and Mert, 2025). Our argument builds on this tradition by approaching future thinking as a form of mediated action that takes narratives as cultural tools for imagining the future. As such, it involves offloading some of the burden of future thinking onto narrative tools, which often have imagining the future built right into them.

National Narrative and Worldviews

As used here, the term narrative does not mean general discourse as is often assumed. Instead, the term is used in a stricter sense that builds on scholarship that stems from Aristotle's *Poetics* (1996) and has been elaborated by contemporary figures such as Paul Ricoeur (1984) and Peter Brooks (1984). This tradition emphasizes that narratives involve a unique logic that grasps together a temporally distributed set of events into a coherent,

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meaningful whole. Aristotle's seemingly simple observation that a narrative involves a beginning, middle, and end actually points to a complex narrative logic that is distinct from logico-deductive reasoning, such as that found in syllogisms and mathematical proofs, which involve neither time nor plot.

This line of reasoning can be elaborated by introducing a distinction between 'specific narratives' and underlying 'schematic narrative templates' (Wertsch, 2021). Specific narratives appear in overt surface form in speech, writing, films, or other media and hence can be read, heard, or otherwise sensed. A second property of specific narratives is that they include concrete information about actors, times, and places. For example, a specific narrative of an historical event widely used in Russian history textbooks and instruction concerns the 'Great Patriotic War' (June 22, 1941–May 9, 1945), which can be summarized as follows:

> Despite Stalin's efforts to maintain peaceful relations and avoid war with Hitler, the Germans launched a massive unprovoked attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Initially, the USSR experienced huge losses, but the Red Army stopped the advance of the Hitlerite fascists at the gates of Moscow in the winter of 1941. The Red Army went on to smash the German invaders at the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943 and defeat them at the Battle of Kursk in 1943. It then proceeded to fight its way westward, culminating in the Battle of Berlin and Germany's surrender.

This text may be simple, short, and one-sided, but it qualifies as a specific narrative because it: (a) appears in overt form in speech, history textbooks, and social media and (b) includes concrete information about actors, dates, and places. It can be criticized for glossing over 'blank spots' of history (Wertsch, 2008) and being biased in other ways, but it nonetheless is a coherent specific narrative.

In contrast, schematic narrative templates are underlying unconscious cultural codes that emerge in members of a group from countless shared experiences with specific narratives. In contrast to specific narratives, they are 'schematic' because they are largely devoid of information about concrete actors, times, and places, a property that allows them to remain largely undetected by those who use them. They can, however, be unearthed by close analysis of the discourse and actions of a group.

An example of a Russian national narrative template is the 'Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies' plot. As an underlying code, it is not overtly discussed in Russian schools, the media, or at commemorative events such as the Day of Victory on May 9. Rather, it is posited by investigators to make sense of general patterns of thought and discourse and can be summarized as follows:

1. Russia is existing peacefully and not interfering with others.
2. Trouble appears in the form of an alien enemy that viciously and wantonly attacks Russia without provocation.
3. Russia almost loses everything in defeat as it suffers from the enemy's attempts to destroy it as a civilization.
4. Through heroism and exceptionalism, and acting alone against all odds, Russia smashes and expels the alien enemy from its territory.

In contrast to specific narratives about events such as the 'Patriotic War' of 1812 against Napoleon or the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, this generalized plot does not include information about the location and time of events, and only minimal information about actors. It is a 'cookie-cutter' plot (Bruner, 2002, 6) that gives shape to multiple specific narratives about events from the past (eg, invasions by Mongols, Swedes, Germans) as well

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as from the present and imagined future. The one exception to this is the mention of Russia, which injects an element of 'egocentricity' (Trubetskoy, 1990) or 'national narcissism' (Putnam et al., 2018) into accounts of the past, something that is a part of any national narrative template.

Like national narrative templates in general, the Expulsion-of-Alien Enemies plot has mythic overtones. One can almost hear 'once upon a time' as part of the setting that makes up the first item in this generalized plot. These mythic overtones contribute to the power and longevity of stories used to recount the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future. An additional property of myths that characterizes narrative templates is that their plots involve strong, distinct characters in the form of good and bad actors whose actions lead to the success of a quest or to a stark tragic downfall. Instead of dealing with mundane life devoid of striking events, mythic plots emphasize bold actions by courageous, sometimes misguided actors[1].

In the 'strange logic' of narrative (Brooks, 1984), the beginning sets the stage for the events that follow, the middle typically involves reversals of events and denouement, and the end rounds things up in a way that often gives meaning to preceding events. This logic relies on the process of 'emplotment' including an 'anticipation of retrospection' that comes with the end of a story and gives meaning to events that went before. In a detective story, for example, it is only at the end, when the sleuth calls all the characters together in the parlour to shed light on events, that we understand what the real meaning of events and the true motives of characters were.

This narrative logic creates an internal coherence and structure to the packets of meaning we use to tell about the social and political world. Of course, these stories reflect institutional and political forces such as state efforts in political propaganda and schooling, but their internal structure allows them take on a kind of independent existence and influence in their own right. Jeffrey Alexander (2003) alludes to this in his cultural sociology, which places meaning systems such as narratives at the centre of inquiry. From this perspective, narratives have 'cultural autonomy' (11) similar to linguistic grammars. Building on the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955), Alexander asserts:

> Because meanings are arbitrary and are generated from within the sign system, they enjoy a certain autonomy from social determination, just as the language of a country cannot be predicted from the knowledge that it is capitalist or socialist, industrial or agrarian. Culture now becomes a structure as objective as any more material social fact. (24)

In this view, narratives operate as a kind of independent variable 'that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces' (12). Instead of being simply determined by extralinguistic events or dictated by the whims of powerful actors in the media or state, narrative tools come with their own autonomy and power for members of a group such as a nation. The resulting shared narrative habits are reinforced by norms in the form of encouragement or sanctions by community members. In Russia, for example, any suggestion that the story of the Great Patriotic War is about the occupation rather than liberation of territories such Ukraine or Georgia is likely to be met with strong negative sanctions.

The narrative logic involved in retrospective reassessment of events in a story might seem to require complex mental processes that take years and great effort to master. In fact, however, narrative logic is 'natural', both in the sense that children develop it at a young age

[1] Cf. Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the folktale.

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without formal instruction such as that required to learn algebra and in the sense that narratives have been used in every culture, including preliterate ones encountered by explorers and anthropologists. The ease with which people master them makes narratives a ubiquitous part of everyday life. This includes telling extended narratives such as the *Iliad* by nonliterate 'singers of tales' to narratives that underpin the quick process of 'sizing up' (Burke, 1998) a situation or individual as when we say someone is 'a real Babbitt'. Sizing up a person in such cases does not require running through Sinclair Lewis's novel in its entirety but instead involves narrative-based mental habits of fast thinking (Kahneman, 2011).

This line of reasoning applies to the fairly simple and often biased stories used in collective memory and future thought, as well as to more complex plots found in literature or historiography. The simple narratives of collective memory and future thinking rely heavily on mental habits (James, 1890) and fast thinking, whereas analytic history relies on carefully vetted empirical evidence and rational argument that considers alternative accounts. Narrative templates serve as efficient cognitive instruments for organizing information into bounded, structured, and self-contained packets of meaning, a combination of properties that contributes to resistance to change in the face of contradictory evidence or rational argument.

In the cases we have examined so far, the sense of an ending takes the form of a concrete outcome. We now turn to another category of national narrative where the ending is a 'telos' rather than a concrete conclusion. National narratives of this sort are autobiographical stories of a nation in which an imagined future guides the interpretation of the present and the past. As in the case of individual autobiography as examined by MacIntyre (1984), narrative logic is such that 'There is no present which is not informed by some image of the future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos* – or a variety of ends or goals – towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present' (215–216). For individuals, this telos may take the form of an aspiration to be a good parent or a respected community leader, and for nations, it may take the form of being a 'City on a Hill' or being a powerful and respected nation that preserves traditional values.

An important telos for the Russian community is part of an aspirational narrative about its identity based on a messianic role in human history. As such, it is a 'National Narrative Project' (NNP; Wertsch, 2021) for the nation's future. The historian Stephen Kotkin (2016) touches on this when he writes about Russia's 'abiding sense [of being] a providential country with a special mission', suggesting the idea that Russia is a leader in building 'true justice'. This idea is often invoked in Russian discourse as something the West has failed to live up to, or never truly intended to pursue, and it underpins a sense of continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet Russia as a project with a broad mission that goes beyond religion and can provide grounds for expanding the horizons of Russian influence.

This aspirational narrative of Russia as a providential country has roots in its self-image as the universal leader of true Christianity and traditional values. It is a status that requires constant efforts to ward off the infiltration of ideas that threaten Russia's mission. For those who lived through the Cold War, this may sound jarring in light of the official 'scientific atheism' promulgated in the USSR. At the level of an underlying code of Russia's culture, however, the Soviet and post-Soviet aspirational narratives have striking similarities. In both cases, Russia is depicted as the one true leader of humanity and purveyor of social justice and should be recognized and appreciated as such, a story that pits it against the corrupt West.

This is a vision of Russia that has deep historical roots, giving it time to become firmly entrenched in the mental habits of the nation. It surfaced in the claim that Moscow is the one genuine successor of Rome's Christianity, first espoused by the sixteenth-century Monk Filofei in his reflections on 'Moscow as the Third Rome' (Mayhew, 2021) It is also part of the message of authors such as Dostoevsky (1994), who wrote of 'demons' in the form of Western ideas that infiltrated and corrupted Russian culture, as well as more recent nationalists and Christian fascists such as Ivan Nykl (2024) and Alexander Dugin (2022).

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All this is not to say that military invasions and the infiltration of alien ideas are mere figments of the Russian imagination. The nation clearly has been invaded, at least militarily, on several occasions. However, there are alternative ways to tell the story of many of these events, ways to which Putin and others are blinkered by their commitment to their own national narratives. This commitment reflects the habits or grooves of thought that lead the Kremlin to see menaces where others do not. When Putin sees threats to Russia, other nations such as Estonia and Ukraine see episodes of brutal colonial expansionism on the part of their giant neighbour.

War and competing futures in Russia

With these ideas about narrative tools as background, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine can be understood not only as a military campaign but also as an attempt to reorganize the narrative field through which Russians interpret their collective destiny. The war did not produce a single national narrative. Rather, it activated and recombined several narrative templates already deeply embedded in Russian political culture – stories of humiliation, encirclement, civilizational mission, sacrifice, and historical revenge, and it also highlighted a few key NNPs.

In his speech announcing katethe 'special military operation' on February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin offered an outline of these narratives. He named two principal threats. The first – and central threat – was the United States, NATO, and the 'Greater West', which he portrayed as forcing their rules and values on other countries through pressure and coercion. The second was the Ukrainian government, described as a Western puppet intended to turn Ukraine into 'anti-Russia' (Putin, 2022a). According to Putin, the West had spent decades trying to weaken Russia and 'finish it off', while Ukraine had become a platform for that project.

Yet this initial speech contained only fragments of a plot. The goals he had for Ukraine – 'denazification', 'demilitarization', and the 'liberation' of Donbas – remained vague. The confrontation with the West offered even less of a narrative direction. Putin insisted that Russia would 'not allow' Western domination and would defend its sovereignty, but the speech did not articulate what future order would emerge from this confrontation. It identified enemies and grievances but offered little in the way of a sense of the ending towards which the war was meant to move.

This absence quickly became visible even among Russian soldiers. As the volunteer fighter Daniil Tulenkov later remarked, 'people understand there are 'us' and 'them', but that kind of rhetoric works for street fights, not for global events. People need something else' (Tulenkov, 2024). What was missing was not simply information but narrative coherence – a story that could explain what the war meant and what kind of future it was supposed to create.

In the absence of such a story, many Russians relied on familiar narrative templates to interpret the conflict. Some imagined catastrophic scenarios in which the Motherland had to defend itself against another attempt to dismember Russia, recalling Yugoslavia. Others revived family memories of the Second World War and believed they had been given a chance to defeat the same enemy their grandfathers had fought. Some interpreted the invasion as the delayed continuation of the Donbas conflict that has remained unresolved since 2014. And still others approached the war through more personal narratives – escape from routine, adventure, or the opportunity to prove masculinity (Kurbak, 2026). Rather than inventing new plots, actors inserted the ongoing conflict into stories already available in Russia's cultural repertoire.

The demand for a more coherent narrative intensified once the promise of a short war collapsed. During the first months of the invasion, contradictory interpretations could coexist only so long as the conflict was imagined as brief. However, once the attempt to

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seize Kyiv failed, casualties mounted, and partial mobilization began, the war demanded a clearer telos. A prolonged conflict required an answer to a simple question: what future was all this sacrifice meant to serve? A more developed narrative appeared in the autumn of 2022, a half year after Russia's all-out invasion. Speaking on September 30 in St. George's Hall of the Kremlin during the ceremony marking the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, Putin framed the war as a civilizational confrontation between Russia and a morally corrupt Greater West. In this speech, he described Western elites as 'Satanists' and accused them of imposing 'false values' that threatened humanity itself. Quoting the Sermon on the Mount – 'By their fruits ye shall know them' – he argued that the West's 'poisonous fruits' were already visible to the world. Thus, he declared, 'the battlefield to which destiny and history have called us is a battlefield for our people, for the great historical Russia, for future generations... We must protect them against enslavement and monstrous experiments that are designed to cripple their minds and souls' (Putin, 2022b).

This speech did not clarify military objectives. Instead, it reinforced a more general NNP: humiliation in the past, existential struggle in the present, and moral redemption in the future. Precisely because it combined multiple symbolic traditions – biblical imagery, imperial mission, Soviet memory, and anti-colonial rhetoric – it resonated with a wide range of audiences, and its strength lay not in consistency but in flexibility.

Among radical supporters of the war, this narrative was interpreted as a call for a decisive confrontation with the West. 'We have entered the decisive phase of the deepest confrontation and the struggle of ideas', argued the nationalist Alexander Dugin. 'In a sense, this is the Last Judgement: some are heading into the mouth of the satanic West, while others choose salvation and the multipolar world' (Dugin, 2022).

Pro-war media quickly echoed similar themes. The day after Putin's speech, the outlet Tsargrad, owned by the Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, published an editorial titled 'The Apocalypse of Vladimir' (Tyurinkov, 2022). The article celebrated the arrival of the 'day and hour of Russian courage', invoking Anna Akhmatova's wartime poem 'Courage'. In its original context, however, Akhmatova (1942) called for courage in the face of Nazi aggression against the Soviet Union – not for courage in launching a war against another state. The appropriation is revealing: the symbolic language of defensive sacrifice is repurposed to narrate an offensive war as a moral necessity, undertaken in the name of cleansing the world of 'evil' and purifying the soul.

Among soldiers and military correspondents, the narrative often acquired an explicitly sacrificial form. Here, the war is interpreted not only as geopolitical struggle but also as moral purification for the sins of the post-Soviet decades. 'The SMO [Special Military Operation] is the Russian Golgotha', wrote RT correspondent Alexander Kharchenko in July 2025. 'For too long we indulged in hedonism and compromised with our conscience... Russia faces a choice: to understand itself, unite, and cast off the ballast, or once again immerse itself in sweet dreams that this time will end with collapse' (Kharchenko, 2025).

Soldiers' social media texts repeat the same imagery. A volunteer fighter, Stanislav Bukatkin, described war as a sacred burden: 'War is our cross... You were given a cross, and you should carry it to Golgotha' (Bukatkin, 2023).

In a poem written in 2023, Vladimir Pushkarev, a former officer of the Ministry of Internal Affairs from Yakutia, addressed Russian soldiers with the following lines:

We made our choice and now fulfill our debt.

We cleanse our souls with dirt and blood –

Whose does not need cleansing? (Pushkarov, 2023).

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Other interpretations drew on different cultural references while preserving the same narrative structure. The writer and Donbas fighter Andrey Korobkov-Latyntsev (2025) offered one such example in his article 'Star Wars and the Unbearable Russianness of Being', published on the Telegram channel *WarGonzo.* Comparing the war in Ukraine with the narrative arc of the Star Wars saga, he wrote that the conflict had long been developing invisibly and that 'only a few sensed the hidden threat. He went on to say, "My entire youth passed in the expectation of this big war," he wrote. "The evil raises its hand, reveals its real face, and finally goes into decisive attack, after which dark times begin.'"

Yet the analogy also contains a contradiction that the author openly acknowledges. 'When I hear the word "rebels," I think not only of those in *Star Wars*, but also of the rebels of Donbas. When I hear 'empire', I think of our Eurasian Empire, our *katecho*[2], our Third Rome...' (Korobkov-Latyntsev, 2025). The katechon (at issue here lawlessness and the collapse of traditional values. The tension is straightforward: in *Star Wars*, rebels fight against an evil Empire, whereas in the Donbas narrative the Kremlin-backed 'rebels' are associated with an imperial project directed against a godless West.

Korobkov-Latyntsev does not resolve this contradiction. Instead, he accepts it and preserves the narrative structure. The roles are simply reassigned: the figure of evil shifts to the West, while the familiar elements of the plot remain intact – the hidden threat, the decisive battle, and the coming dark times. In this sense, logical inconsistency does not undermine the narrative. On the contrary, it is absorbed into it and even reframed as something intrinsic to what the author calls 'the unbearable Russianness of being': 'Is there some cognitive dissonance here? Perhaps there is... The unbearable Russianness of being – I cannot help it'.

The idea that the anticipation of dark times that could accompany even a military victory also appears in discussions within the broader so-called Z-community.[3] Collective emotions in this milieu tend to shift rapidly. Moments of excitement and even euphoria following perceived military successes – such as the capture of a settlement or announcements of new support for the front – can quickly give way to frustration or defeatism when events contradict expectations. More persistent than these emotional swings, however, is a deep sense of anxiety and mistrust towards political and military elites, although this mistrust rarely extends directly to the national leader himself. As the war continues, conspiracy-like interpretations have become increasingly common. Many supporters fear that even a military victory may fail to deliver the sense of an ending they had hoped for: genuine independence from the West, recognition of Russia's status as a great power, or proper privileges and respect for ethnic Russians and war veterans whose sacrifices are seen as foundational to that future.

As a result, the end of the war is imagined with a certain ambivalence. Victory and peace are simultaneously desired and feared, since both are often expected to usher in a new period of uncertainty rather than stability. As Alexander Kartavykh, founder of the FPV-drone training school *Falcons of Horus* and a popular pro-war blogger, wrote:

> I realize that when the SMO ends, we will all be 'gotten rid of'. This is the unavoidable prose of life. I have even come to terms with it. I will accept it with dignity – as a reward for the righteous path. Just hold on. We have not yet won. Let us at least reach the finish line. After that, you can send to Golgotha those you no longer need. (Kartavykh, 2024)

[2] The *katechon* (Greek: 'restrainer') is a theological concept referring to a force that delays the coming of the Antichrist and the end times. In certain strands of Russian religious and geopolitical thought, Russia is interpreted as the *katechon*—a civilizational power restraining Western 'lawlessness' or the forces associated with the Antichrist.

[3] Russia's Z-community is a network of pro-war, nationalist Telegram channels and online groups that use the stylized 'Z' symbol as a rallying emblem

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Beyond the Z-community, similar tensions appear in how ordinary Russians imagine the future. Given the political constraints of the current environment and the increasing atomization of Russian society, it is difficult to speak of a single collective vision of what lies ahead. What can be observed instead are dispersed discussions and fragments of interpretation that circulate in semi-public spaces – *Telegram* channels, *VKontakte* communities, and *Pikabu* – as well as in qualitative material gathered through face-to-face interviews conducted by the independent Levada Center. These conversations do not reveal a coherent narrative about Russia's future so much as a field of partially overlapping interpretations through which people attempt to make sense of the war and its possible outcomes.

One narrative that appears particularly resilient frames the conflict not as a war with Ukraine but as a confrontation with a much larger hostile force and existential threat. As Alexey Levinson (2022) has noted in discussions of Levada Center fieldwork, many respondents interpret the war precisely through this lens. From this perspective, Ukraine appears less as an independent actor than as an instrument of external powers. Such a narrative offers a convenient interpretative structure in which unfolding events acquire a broader historical significance.

Levinson summarized this logic in this way: 'We are not fighting a country that is known in advance to be weaker than ours, but the world's evil' (Levinson, 2022). Within such a narrative, a decisive military victory becomes almost impossible by definition. Yet even limited success acquires symbolic meaning simply because Russia has dared to confront such a powerful adversary. 'We slapped the West – and that itself is already something', Levinson remarked. This interpretation should not necessarily be understood as defeatism. Rather, it functions as a mechanism through which individuals preserve a sense of dignity and national self-respect.

A similar logic appears in the rhetoric of some Russian commanders and political figures. One expression of this is the repeated claim that Russia has 'already won', referring not to a military outcome but to a moral or symbolic victory achieved simply by confronting the West. For example, Apty Alaudinov, lieutenant general of the *Akhmat forces*, has repeatedly argued that Russia secured victory the moment it challenged Western dominance (Alaudinov, 2024, 2025).

Among the various interpretations of the present and future circulating within Russian discourse, this narrative of moral victory appears to be one of the few that offers a relatively positive outlook – one that does not necessarily depend on further escalation of external aggression or intensified internal repression. If the act of challenging the West itself is understood as sufficient to restore national dignity, the ultimate military outcome becomes less crucial. Within this framework, even a limited success can be interpreted as meaningful. In this view, the future can be imagined not as a decisive resolution of the conflict but as the continuation of a prolonged confrontation – potentially resembling a renewed Cold War, including the possibility of détente.

Other narratives circulating within Russian discourse combine the idea of moral victory with expectations of prolonged – or even permanent – conflict with the West. These interpretations tend to generate two general future scenarios. One is radical and active, envisioning further escalation and decisive confrontation. The other is more pessimistic and passive, accepting a long period of hardship without a clearly defined end.

The radical scenario is often articulated through criticism of Vladimir Putin for perceived indecisiveness, and it frequently invokes his own phrase that 'we haven't even started yet'. This interpretation appears most clearly among radical military bloggers and activists, including figures such as Igor Strelkov (Girkin)[4]. Although Strelkov supported the full-scale invasion, he also became one of the Kremlin's most outspoken critics for not pursuing the war more aggressively, leading to his eventual imprisonment. From detention, he has

[4] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/29/russia-upholds-prison-sentence-for-nationalist-girkin-a85259.

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continued to call for 'total mobilization of the entire state and economy' as the only path to a 'decisive and full victory', rejecting any negotiated compromise (Strelkov, 2025).

Among prominent advocates, this scenario sometimes takes the form of elaborate geopolitical projects – restoration of imperial or Soviet borders, decisive weakening of the West, or the creation of a highly centralized authoritarian state. Among many ordinary supporters, however, the imagined future remains far less articulated. Narrative projections often stop at symbolic images: the Russian flag over Kyiv or Odesa, Russian tanks entering Poland, or even the destruction of the Pentagon. What might follow such victories – and what kind of political or social order they would produce – remains largely unspecified.

This absence of a clearly articulated endpoint reflects a broader feature of contemporary Russian discourse. As Levinson notes, interviews frequently reveal striking forms of cognitive dissonance that respondents themselves do not consciously experience as contradictory. Within the same conversation, an individual may express the desire to see the United States destroyed and moments later suggest that cooperation – or even friendship – might be possible under different political circumstances. Such contradictions do not necessarily weaken the narrative framework through which people interpret the war. Rather, they demonstrate the flexibility with which narrative templates can absorb inconsistent expectations while preserving a sense of meaning (Levinson, 2024). The absence of a coherent image of the future in this case does not necessarily indicate the inevitability of chaos or disintegration. It may also signal a form of openness – a space in which multiple possibilities remain imaginable, depending on how future political developments unfold.

In the second, more pessimistic and passive scenario – one that may at times coexist with the more radical vision – the future appears less as a concrete outcome than as a prolonged historical process. Within this framework, the war is imagined as an NNP in which a trial that must be endured rather than as a conflict leading to a clearly defined resolution. For many, this interpretation gives present hardships a moral significance. In Orthodox rhetoric, the war is framed as a period of ascetic purification of the soul and body; in more secular civic language, it appears as the idea that suffering strengthens both individual character and national resilience.

Although the vocabulary differs, the narrative logic remains largely the same. University cafeterias and workplace canteens increasingly offer fasting meals, while public billboards display biblical quotations that frame sacrifice as the highest expression of love and promote Christian imagery. Together, these practices contribute to a form of limited everyday asceticism that gradually becomes normalized without significantly disrupting daily routines. Rather than a radical transformation, it appears as a light, almost fashionable layer added to ordinary life – a new moral aesthetic rather than a strict discipline. As one commenter put it, responding to the question of how Moscow is living now: 'Everything is awesome here... Muslims and Russians are fasting, visiting one another for iftars[5] and fast dinners, preparing for the holiday[6]. Hoping to fly to Dubai in April, as planned[7]'.

At the same time, such narratives coexist with widespread scepticism towards official promises about the future. Even on social media platforms widely known to be monitored by Russian security services, discussions often reveal frustration with the absence of a clear image of what victory would actually bring. Posts that attempt to articulate optimistic

[5] Iftar is the evening meal that breaks the daily fast during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month observed from dawn until sunset.

[6] The 'holiday' likely refers to Eid al-Fitr and/or Orthodox Easter, which often occur in close proximity in the spring.

[7] https://www.threads.com/@by_alfiya/post/DWAHLaJDTbd?xmt=AQF0Hb0W-vpDxBCzRW8lAYLozZ1LIpvTGI9HxZ8h1e6eXg.

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visions of Russia's future frequently attract large numbers of responses ranging from patriotic support to cynicism and irony.

One example illustrates this dynamic. In January 2026, the *VKontakte* group Russian Truth. Crossroads of History shared an article by the historian of conservative thought Mikhail Smolin titled 'Does Russia Have a Future?' Smolin (2026) argued that Russia's historical survival through repeated crises demonstrates a providential mission and suggested that renewal would require redefining the country as a Christian civilization – ideally under monarchic rule.

A similar pattern appeared in March 2024 when the VKontakte page of the media outlet *LIFE.ru* posted excerpts from Vladimir Putin's speech on 'The Foundations of Russia's Bright Future'.[8] Once again, the majority of comments expressed distrust. Some criticized the government's emphasis on technological modernization while ignoring everyday social needs. Others remarked that similar promises had been repeated for decades, observing that 'our entire lives we have been living in the future that never arrives'.

More reflective responses occasionally appear as well. One *Pikabu* commenter summarized the central uncertainty:

> The price of defeat is easy to imagine. But what exactly would victory look like? What territory are we talking about? How are we supposed to build relations with a world where most countries are hostile to us? What will happen to our social system after the war, when hundreds of thousands of veterans will expect compensation and privileges? And what is the essence of this victory anyway? During the Great Patriotic War the goal was clear – drive the enemy from our land. Here it is completely unclear whose land we are supposed to be clearing and who exactly the enemy is.[9]

This comment captures a broader tension within contemporary Russian discourse. Narratives of apocalypse, sacrifice, and historical mission promise that present hardships will ultimately prove meaningful – whether for national salvation, the defeat of global evil, or the restoration of historical justice. Yet these promises coexist with deep scepticism.

In this respect, contemporary Russian society resembles the late Soviet one. The socialist system continued to function even when only a minority still believed in the global triumph of socialism. Most people adapted to this reality by developing forms of 'double thinking' and parallel lives: raising their hands in support during meetings, carrying flags in official parades, and repeating ideological formulas in public, while privately maintaining doubts about the system's future. Many sensed that something – perhaps everything – was fundamentally wrong, yet it remained difficult to imagine an entirely different social and political order.

Paradoxically, that late Soviet period is now remembered by some Russians, particularly younger generations, as a time that still contained elements of hope. This nostalgia is reflected in contemporary popular culture. One of the most widely circulated songs on Russian social media in recent years is the track *Kukhni* [Kitchens] by the young folk-rock band *Bond s Knopkoi* [Bond with a Button]. The song evokes the kitchens of Soviet apartment buildings – the intimate spaces where people gathered late at night to speak freely and share their most personal thoughts and dreams. In the band's interpretation, those kitchens represented a repository of hope that seems largely absent today:

[8] https://vk.ru/wall-24199209_20641471.

[9] https://pikabu.ru/story/prekrasnaya_rossiya_bez_budushchego_9613912?cid=254864215.

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To weep quietly, to weep softly...

When you grow weary – come, –

To the kitchens, in the tender Khrushchevkas[10],

A storehouse of hope for generations to come...

It all might have turned out not bad...

Conclusion

Russian future thinking in general is heavily dependent on national narratives, both overt specific narratives and unconscious underlying codes in the form of narrative templates and national narrative projects. These narratives do not simply report on events but act as independent variables that provide the interpretive lens through which Russians understand the actions of themselves and others. NNPs are especially important in this respect because they assume a telos in the future, which means they have future thinking built right into them. This narrative logic plays out largely on an unconscious level through underlying cultural codes that set national communities apart in ways that make it difficult for them to comprehend the actions of one another.

The material discussed here suggests that NNPs do not produce a clear or stable image of what lies ahead. The future appears less as a defined outcome than as an imagined future to be approached that gives meaning to events in the present. An important NNP for Russia has a narrative arc of humiliation in the past, existential struggle in the present, and moral redemption in the future. The sense of an ending remains vague, but this does not weaken the power of this underlying plot. It allows it to remain open, adaptable, and capable of accommodating different expectations.

The future imagined in NNPs often involves 'moral victory'. In this framing, meaning is no longer tied to a concrete military or political outcome. The very act of confrontation – understood as resistance to a hostile and more powerful West – can itself suffice. The future, in this sense, is not something that must be clearly achieved; it is something that is already partially realized in the present.

From this perspective, the narrative tools that shape Russian understandings of events in the present do more than shape expectations about what is to come. They make it possible to continue acting – and enduring – under conditions where the future itself remains indistinct.

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[10] *Khrushchevka* refers to the mass-produced five-story apartment blocks constructed throughout the Soviet Union during the housing campaign initiated under Nikita Khrushchev in the late 1950s and 1960s.

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